

Unique Needs and Expectations of ELs

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This chapter explores research to better understand second-language acquisition along with benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy. Critical questions include:

- What is the difference between social and academic language and what is the impact of each on students whose native language is not English?
- Why is it important to encourage the development of students' native language, in both oral and written form, even if they are in a primarily English-oriented classroom?
- Why is it essential within second language development to intentionally support student academic language through all four language domains—reading, writing, speaking and listening?
- What does the research say about bilingualism and biliteracy?



Understanding the Difference Between Social Versus Academic Language

As mentioned in the previous chapter, academic language includes the specific vocabulary and rhetorical styles of the classroom that all students must master to effectively read, write, speak, understand and engage with academic content. Textbooks, tests and other texts are written in academic language,²² which is characterized by low-frequency words and content vocabulary, complex sentence structures, more abstract meaning and less context. Social language, on the other hand, used in everyday conversation, has many high-frequency words, simple sentences, is less cognitively demanding and is assisted by everyday familiar context.

Educators should understand that ELs who have acquired fluency to function in everyday conversations may struggle with the academic demands of the classroom. Substantial research indicates that transitioning ELs into general education classrooms too early is detrimental to their academic and second language development and that educators' lack of information about differences between social and academic language development may result in ELs being inappropriately identified as having a learning disability.²³

Understanding Language Transfer and the Relationships Between ELs' First and Second Languages

Oral and literacy proficiencies in a student's native language enhances English language development. While exposure to English is essential, optimal achievement requires continued development in the native language. When both languages are supported in the classroom, they serve to reinforce each other.²⁴

A critical example is the use of cognates—words that have related meaning and spelling in two languages, like *program* in English and *programas* in Spanish. Teacher training can involve skills and strategies to build bridges between what students speak in their homes and their growing understanding of the language of the classroom.²⁵

ELs who are more advanced in their native language are likely to have oral and literacy skills along with conceptual knowledge that transfers to developing English proficiency. By cultivating the native language, students continue to build skills in the language they know best. This practice nurtures academic development in English (e.g. the concept of telling time in one language transfers to another language). Extended instruction to students in their native language develops a sound foundation to later demonstrate more advanced academic English and conceptual skills.²⁶

For example, good instructional practice incorporates native language development in the classroom—songs and videos can be highly effective for teachers who do not speak a student's native language. Teachers can also reinforce parent-child language and literacy development by encouraging parents of young ELs to teach rhymes, songs and word games and use storybooks in the native language. English language acquisition will be enhanced—not stalled—by trained educators adept at connecting what students understand in their native language with what they need to know in English.²⁷



Intentional Language Development Across the Four Language Domains: Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing

Techniques that make academic content accessible to ELs involve developing an ELs' *receptive* and *expressive* language.²⁸ It is not enough for students to understand the text they are reading, or the academic language used by the teacher. Students must also be able to communicate, both orally and in writing, using academic language.

Providing comprehensible input (reading and listening) just beyond a student's current language level is critical: "Classroom language should not be so challenging that ELs cannot access it at all, but, at the same time, it should stretch them beyond their current proficiency."²⁹ Cultivating speaking and writing by providing opportunities for social interactions is vital. Particular attention to speaking is very important for ELs. Too often they do not have opportunities to speak in class. Teachers might neglect to foster meaningful dialogue, with particular emphasis on academic language. A highly effective instructional approach for ELs is the use of cooperative learning, where students work in small diverse groups and ELs collaborate with English-proficient peers working together around shared academic activities. Cooperative learning allows ELs to negotiate meaning while refining, persuading and evaluating ideas with more capable peers.³⁰

While grammar and vocabulary development are important, the Illinois Learning Standards emphasize even more attention on the need for students to read, comprehend and interact with complex texts. Critical to this is oral language development for ELs as a foundation of literacy. As teachers and schools are pressured to boost test scores, ELs on their way to learning academic English too often are

placed in remedial reading classes together with native English speakers who struggle with reading. These approaches tend to emphasize decoding and discrete skills over vocabulary development and reading comprehension. By breaking words down into discrete parts that are devoid of meaning and focus solely on phonics, ELs' reading comprehension diminishes. These instructional approaches tend to be individualized, focused on solitary performance and diminish the critical role of social interaction to stimulate language learning.³¹ In addition, discrete skills-oriented reading interventions and their instructional materials have been designed for native English speakers and lack considerations of ELs language proficiency levels.

ELs can reach proficiency and be on par with native speakers when it comes to decoding, word recognition and spelling. They tend to struggle more often in what are referred to as text-level skills: reading, comprehension and writing. Creating learning environments that lower apprehension for ELs regarding testing and inspire their active participation are ideal ways to support them.³² Teachers should strive to guide students to engage all four language domains—reading, writing, listening and speaking. This includes opportunities for students to apply both subject-matter knowledge and growing academic language.

Additive Bilingualism and the Benefits of the State Seal of Biliteracy

Longitudinal research contends that support of a child's native language development over time not only builds English proficiency, but also provides enduring positive effects on academic achievement. By valuing the skills and content knowledge students possess in their native language, the educational focus moves away from remediating students' English language skills.³³

Those who receive instruction in their native language are likely to demonstrate long-term cognitive flexibility, exhibit higher high school graduation rates and show a greater likelihood of enrolling in post-secondary institutions.³⁴ Dual language programs more specifically, in which both the native language and English are nurtured over the long-term, are gaining significant popularity across the country due to their strong academic outcomes and the marketable benefit of being bilingual and biliterate in a diversifying global economy.³⁵

The college and career-readiness standards and assessment system, which drives instructional planning, should make pathways to bilingualism and biliteracy part of its definition. Nurturing multilingualism resonates with most global education standards where students are routinely required to demonstrate basic proficiency in two languages in order to graduate high school.³⁶ It is currently estimated that half of the world's population speaks at least two or more languages.³⁷ Achieving high levels of bilingualism and biliteracy is the new norm.

Efforts to cultivate bilingualism are also growing in the U.S. An increasing number of states, at this point more than thirty-five plus the District of Columbia, have passed legislation making the Seal of Biliteracy state law and providing graduating seniors the option of earning this distinction. **The Seal of Biliteracy recognizes high school seniors who graduate with college-ready skills in English and another language.** Students who pass a language proficiency exam earn the Seal of Biliteracy which is noted in their diplomas and school transcripts. The honor benefits both native English speakers who learn another language and ELs who maintain their native language while acquiring English.³⁸ There are multiple options for students to demonstrate their language skills, which are outlined on the ISBE website. Illinois also allows districts to confer the State Commendation toward Biliteracy. This recognition, according to ISBE, is provided to graduating high school students who have demonstrated significant

progress toward achieving a high level of proficiency in English and in reading, writing, listening and speaking in another language (for more information see: <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/seal-of-biliteracy-faq.pdf>).

States that have pushed ELs to acquire English quickly and to be reclassified—English-only models—have been passed into law in states like California and Massachusetts, although these laws were eventually revisited. Both California and Massachusetts have overturned their state ban on bilingual education and have reinstated native instruction programs. Pushing English language proficiency at the expense of having access to the core curriculum is deeply problematic. As Patricia Gándara (2015) contends: “one might ask why educators and policymakers don’t pay more attention to the quality of the programs offered to ELs, rather than simply focusing on the speed at which students escape them.”



Across Illinois, a groundswell of parents and educators have been promoting the Illinois State Seal of Biliteracy. Moving forward, school districts across the state need to develop better policies and practices that best support pathways to bilingualism and biliteracy for every student.

The Illinois State Seal of Biliteracy is a recognition given to graduating seniors who have demonstrated a high level of proficiency in English and in reading, writing, listening and speaking in another language. The Seal is affixed to the diploma and designated on the transcript.

Illinois Seal of Biliteracy 2017-18 Statistics

86 participating school districts (grew from 70 school districts in 2017)

5,756 Seal of Biliteracy awards were conferred on graduating high school seniors in 2018

- 4,444 Seal of Biliteracy awards given in 2017

EL Status

- Total students awarded the Seal: 5,643
- 184 of these students started High School as ELs (3 percent)
- 1,634 of these students started HS as former ELs (29 percent)
- 3,151 of the total students were never ELs (56 percent)
- 674 students had no responses (12 percent)

22 languages were recognized in 2018. There were 18 languages in 2017.

Illinois also has a Commendation Award for students who demonstrate significant progress toward achieving a high level of proficiency in English and in reading, writing, listening and speaking in another language.

Commendation towards Biliteracy 2017-18 Statistics

58 participating school districts (up from 47 in 2017)

3,057 Commendation toward Biliteracy Awards were given (up from 2,601 in 2017)

EL Status

- Total students receiving the commendation were 3,019
- 138 of these students started High School as ELs (5 percent)
- 622 of these students started HS as former ELs (21 percent)
- 1,854 of these students were never ELs (61 percent)
- 405 of the students did not respond (13 percent)

16 languages were represented in these awards (13 in 2017)

Seal of Biliteracy and Commendation Totals

8,813 awards

8,662 students

- 2,578 former ELs (30 percent)
- 5,005 never ELs (58 percent)
- 1,079 no responses (12 percent)

22 languages

86 school districts

District Highlight

Chicago Public Schools SD 299: State Seal of Biliteracy Program

Luis Narvaez, Director of Strategic Initiatives

When did the Seal of Biliteracy Begin?

The State Seal of Biliteracy is an official recognition bestowed upon a high school senior demonstrating advanced fluency and skills in English and a world language. The recognition is noted on the student's official high school transcript. Chicago Public School (CPS) District became interested in the Seal of Biliteracy as a way of acknowledging the college readiness of students who speak both English and a world language. **The State Seal of Biliteracy initiative honors and merges both ELs and world language students in a celebration of their linguistic and academic achievement.** Given that CPS is the third largest district in the nation and has over 200 high schools, a lot of dialogue and thought had to be a part of the process. CPS implemented the Seal of Biliteracy in 2015 under the leadership of then Chief Officer of Language and Cultural Education Karen Garibay-Mulattieri. The district formed a task force composed of educators, community members, consulates and non-profit organizations. The task force outlined a proposal for initiating and expanding the program. The first year involved a small pilot program with 12 high schools resulting in 92 student recipients of the State Seal of Biliteracy.

How many students have received the Seal?

To date, 4,571 students have been awarded the Seal of Biliteracy (92 in 2015, 1,113 in 2016, 1,382 in 2017 and 1,984 in 2018). When students apply to participate in the program, they fill out an application and a survey. Results from the student surveys reveal that many originate from homes where a language other than English is spoken and many express pride in their culture and language. The students themselves choose to highlight these linguistic skills.

How many of these students were former ELs?

Approximately two-thirds (60 percent) of all CPS Seal of Biliteracy recipients are former ELs. In FY 18, 62 percent of all recipients were former ELs, 2 percent were active ELs (still acquiring English) and 36 percent were never ELs. The latter group tended to be native English speakers participating in advanced world language programs.

What are some specifics for how you manage this program?

We work on identifying graduating high school seniors who meet the state's English proficiency requirements, which is college readiness score on SAT. We then analyze the World Language data that tells us how many years of World Language instruction high school seniors have had during their schooling. Lastly, we target former ELs whose native language proficiency can be assessed through the current assessment instrument we use (Language Testing International and Avant for Polish).

What are key lessons other districts could learn from what you are doing?

School districts should target eligible high school students based on the following:

- ✔ Students looking for ways to connect with their culture and heritage (for heritage/native speakers)
- ✔ Students who are proud of having been raised in families where both English and native language are used.
- ✔ Students who are interested in pursuing college majors and eventual careers in language-related professions, such as teaching and international business
- ✔ Students who are interested in studying abroad.
- ✔ English speaking students wishing to showcase how much they have learned throughout the years studying a world language.
- ✔ "DREAMers" (undocumented students), given that this is one of the few awards that they are eligible for due to their residency status. We have noticed this recognition boosts self-esteem.

What are the benefits for students receiving the State Seal of Biliteracy?

The State Seal of Biliteracy is printed on the students' official high school transcript, thereby noting to potential employers their biliteracy skills. CPS has been working with local colleges and universities to grant college credit in world language to students who have earned the Seal. Advocates continue to reach out to legislators on how to offer scholarships to Seal recipients to encourage their entrance into the teaching profession. These students could prove critical for addressing the state's bilingual teacher shortage.

Orientations to Language Education and Types of EL Programming

Two main orientations guide language education in the United States. While not always explicitly identified by practitioners and school leaders, these very different schools of thought drive the instructional and assessment practice for ELs in distinct ways and have long-term consequences on their academic achievement:

Additive bilingualism results from a program in which students maintain their first language and acquire their second language. This approach allows students to develop the dominant language and acquire the dominant culture while at the same time further developing the native language and maintaining their cultural heritage. The goal in an additive bilingual program (e.g. dual language, maintenance, heritage language) is biliteracy and bilingualism.

Subtractive bilingualism occurs when students lose their first language in the process of acquiring their second language [English]. This orientation pushes ELs to assimilate to the dominant language and culture as soon as possible while disregarding their native language and culture. The goal of subtractive bilingual education

programs (e.g. early exit, transitional bilingual education, transitional program of instruction, ESL-only) is academic English (Roberts 1995).

According to Illinois School Code Article 14C, districts are mandated to offer specialized programs to ELs in the form of either a Transitional Program of Instruction (TPI) or Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) program. This applies even if there is only one EL enrolled in a school. By state law when there are 20 or more ELs that speak the same native language enrolled at a school, a TBE program is required. TBE programs require that teachers be proficient in the target language of the program by passing a state language proficiency exam and holding a bilingual education endorsement. While school districts do not have a choice in whether schools with 20 or more students from the same language receive bilingual education services, districts do have a choice whether the programs are subtractive (short-term, as in early-exit TBE) or additive (long-term, as in dual language education).

Type of Program	Target population	Goal of program	Additive or Subtractive
Transitional Program of Instruction (TPI)	ELs only	Focus on ESL instruction to achieve English proficiency as soon as possible	Subtractive
Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) Early Exit	ELs only	Native language and ESL instruction to achieve English proficiency as soon as possible	Subtractive
Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) Late Exit	ELs only	Native language instruction and ESL to achieve bilingualism and biliteracy	Additive
Dual Language One-Way	ELs only	Native language instruction and ESL for instruction to achieve and continually develop bilingualism and biliteracy	Additive
Dual Language Two-Way	ELs and English-speaking students	Native language instruction and ESL to achieve and continually develop bilingualism and biliteracy	Additive

LOCAL CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- How do the schools in your district differ in orientation towards bilingual programs? Is there a rationale for offering different programs in different schools?
- How do misconceptions about ELs influence decisions on the types of programs implemented?
- How have your school and community explored research on the benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy for all students?
- Has your district adopted and implemented the State Seal of Biliteracy?
- How have your school and community discussed the desired EL outcomes and compared the various program models?