ENSURING EQUITY FOR ALL

How can schools support English learners?

In Oklahoma, English learners (ELs) – students so designated by the state's federally mandated identification process who have not yet demonstrated English language proficiency – comprise nearly 10% of public school enrollment. Many ELs struggled to access instruction in distance education programs during the 2020-21 school year, and re-engaging these students through effective instruction in a general education classroom will best address unfinished learning.

The information in this brief was developed to provide schools with clear, actionable practices to ensure instructional equity and academic success for students receiving English learner supports.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Generally, the most effective intervention for English learners is effective instruction in a general education classroom. Teachers of ELs should ensure that their practice presents content in a comprehensible manner and equips students with the tools necessary to effectively access learning.

Supplemental resources to address EL learning needs (e.g., English language acquisition software, a dedicated teacher's aide, etc.) are rarely sufficient to fully address EL student learning needs. These resources are specialized tools that work most effectively when incorporated into a comprehensive learning plan rather than being considered the sole solution to issues of limited English language proficiency.

Students receiving English learner supports exist on a spectrum of English proficiency and may appear to be native English speakers. Because the oral language skills of listening and speaking often develop through immersion in English-speaking environments, they tend to progress more rapidly than the literacy-related skills of reading and writing, which require active engagement to grow.

Many EL students, especially those with multiple years of education in U.S. schools, will demonstrate conversational English proficiency comparable to their native English-speaking peers. In these cases, teachers should note that 1) this conversational English proficiency may not reflect a similar level of academic proficiency necessary for classroom success and 2) may not reflect an equivalent level of literacy in English.

EL students must be provided tasks that are appropriately aligned to their English proficiency in the domains of reading, writing, listening and speaking and be assessed in the same context.

Additional information on effective instructional practices for EL students is available in the OSDE English Learner Guidebook.

ATTENDING TO EQUITY

Adopting an educational equity mindset encourages schools to create learning environments that ensure individual student circumstances do not impede access to instruction. In the classroom, teachers can foster greater educational equity for EL students by providing learning activities that allow EL students to engage with instructional content at their current level of English in a manner that furthers English language proficiency.

Additionally, schools can adopt best practices that ensure all classrooms embrace cultural diversity, acknowledge every student's cultural assets and actively promote a sense of belonging for all students.

RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

- Refer to EL students' English Language Academic Plans (ELAPs) to review recent WIDA assessment scores, norm-referenced test scores and learning goals for each language domain based on the WIDA Can Do descriptors.

- Implement formative assessment and pre-teaching processes that measure EL students' ability to engage in instruction and their mastery of content.

- Ensure that EL students clearly understand the expectations of a given learning activity and how to access the supports that will allow them to demonstrate success.

- Ensure learning tasks are appropriately aligned to the student's current domain-level proficiency. A learning activity should not exceed more than one level beyond the current level of demonstrated proficiency in any domain (e.g., it would be inappropriate to assign an EL student with a reading domain proficiency level of 1.5 a learning task that requires a reading domain proficiency level of 4.0).

- Ensure EL students develop English language proficiency with learning activities that challenge them to engage with instructional concepts through ongoing, repeated use of the four domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

- Foster greater engagement by allowing EL students to incorporate experiences and existing knowledge in instructional activities.

- Ensure that EL students' languages, cultures and experiences are respected and represented in the learning environment.

- Conduct appropriate EL-specific professional development and ensure the practices identified in those activities are implemented in the classroom.

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