Research to Support English Learner and Standard English Learner Students: An Assets-based Approach

What does research tell us about educating ELs and SELs? When children enter a classroom, they bring with them all of who they are—their lived experiences and rich, diverse backgrounds. A fundamental part of their identity and a vital asset is the language they speak, which connects them to family and culture.[1] English learners in English-only settings are much more likely to miss out on vitally important core content learning because they are focusing so much attention on understanding the *language*, rather than learning about math, science, social studies, language arts, and other subject areas. Moreover, compromised home language fluency impedes the process of overall language development.[2]

As noted in the California ELA/ELD Framework, "Simply immersing students in standard English and ignoring differences between standard English and the [varieties] of English that SELs use...is ineffective and not conducive to a positive and productive learning environment."[3] When educators recognize students' linguistic behaviors and the use of the rules of home languages as positives and not deficits, they can then begin to validate and affirm the students' languages.[4] Helping students maintain their heritage languages is crucial—use of the home language in various settings is associated with the development of a healthy ethnic identity in early childhood.[5] Heritage language maintenance also diminishes the potentially negative psychological effects of losing one's home language, which may result in weakened relationships with parents,

In an assets-based environment...

* Students' languages and cultures are valued, supported, encouraged, and enhanced.
* Schools serve as mechanisms for honoring and reaffirming students' home languages through prioritizing not only bilingualism and multilingualism, but also lifelong biliteracy.

family, and community members.[6] So, when we look to the future, we can't afford to undervalue the vast linguistic capital students bring with them to the classroom. Transformative change is necessary to ensure schools serve as mechanisms for honoring and re-affirming students' native languages through prioritizing, not only bilingualism and multilingualism, but also lifelong biliteracy.

What Is an Assets-based Approach?

Assets-based Approach to Teaching Language Learners

Adopting an assets-based mindset means valuing students' home languages and cultures and viewing them as foundations for classroom learning—for both language and content.[7] Educators with an assets-based mindset recognize, respect, and integrate into classroom instruction the assets that students bring to the classroom, including a variety of language skills, diverse cultural backgrounds, and existing skills and knowledge acquired both inside and outside of school. Further, an assets-based approach recognizes the sometimes-overlooked ways in which parents of ELs help their children and are critically involved in their children's education.[8]

An assets-based perspective honors students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and incorporates what students already know into teaching. To envision what an assets-based perspective looks like in the classroom, review the concepts presented in the following chart.

Assets-based Approach Learning Environments*

Educators and school staff
* Use culturally responsive teaching and acknowledge that translanguaging practices demonstrate highly operational cognitive abilities extending beyond those areas of the brain engaged by monolingual speakers
* Incorporate cultural, historic, and linguistic information about the students' culture into instruction
* Are aware of each student's interests and challenges outside of the classroom
* Show awareness and sensitivity to students' names and identities
* Put supports in place to help students overcome obstacles that may get in the way of their learning (e.g., snacks for students who may not have had breakfast, systems for catching up on missed work, and written agendas for ELs and SELs to follow)

For ELs
* Show interest in ELs' home languages by learning at least a few words or phrases
* Use instruction of home language cognates to reinforce vocabulary comprehension
* Use multiple means of communicating with EL families (e.g., translated notes, telephone calls, and use of an interpreter)
* Seek professional development opportunities to learn research-based practices for ELs

For SELs
* Show interest in SELs' home languages by learning that SEL languages are not slang but rule-governed languages that differ—in a few places—from standard English
* Use tiered vocabulary instructional strategies that help SELs connect academic vocabulary words to the vocabulary words they have conceptual understanding of
* Use multiple means of communicating with SEL families

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* Adapted from: Staehr Fenner, D. & Snyder, S. (2017). *Unlocking English learners' potential: Strategies for making content accessible.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Cultivating a Culturally Responsive Environment

A culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) classroom environment is the key to understanding the environmental-behavior relationship that enables teachers to organize and equip the classroom so that situationally appropriate behaviors are likely to occur.[9] The authors of the *Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education* describe a culturally sensitive environment as follows:

> Research on effective schools has consistently shown that students are more successful when they are engaged in a positive school that is orderly and safe, has a warm and caring community, and facilitates learning. Students and teachers benefit when the school (and each classroom) is a caring community, particularly in schools with a large number of ELs, ethnic minorities, or students who live in poverty.[10][†]

The following chart highlights elements of a culturally responsive environment and is derived from current research on this topic.

Culturally Responsive Learning Environments[11]

* There is equity among all groups; that is, all participants are treated with justice and fairness.
* Equity must be incorporated at many different levels—district, school, and classroom—and with respect to students, families, and teachers.
* Equitable treatment requires a clear understanding of the needs of culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students.
* There is integration of multicultural themes into instruction.
* Equity is crucial in the dual language program model with emphasis on integrating students of different ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.
* Effective schools have teachers and staff who are committed to equity.
* Educators and staff demonstrate awareness of the diverse needs of students.
* Educators and staff are trained in sociocultural understanding.
* Educators and staff use multiethnic curricular materials and integrate students' cultural values into the classroom.
* Educators and staff celebrate and encourage the use of all home language varieties.
* Educators and staff invite students to think critically and engage in learning activities that promote social justice, and, perhaps most important, believe that all children can learn.

The L.A. Unified Teaching and Learning Framework also reminds us of the need to create school-wide and systematic environments that promote inclusion, empathy, and support for all students. In particular, Standard 2a: *Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport* and Standard 2b: *Establishing a Culture for Learning* both speak to the need for the classroom environment to reflect

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[†] Excerpted from Howard, E. R., Lindholm-Leary, K. J., Rogers, D., Olague, N., Medina, J., Kennedy, D., Sugarman, J., & Christian, D. (2018). *Guiding Principle for Dual Language Education* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

the experiences of all students, including ELs and SELs. The classroom environment includes aspects such as the design and setup of the classroom, visuals hanging on the walls, as well as the books, materials, and examples used in the curriculum.

For more resources on implementing an assets-based approach and a culturally sensitive and welcoming environment in your school or classroom, please see the Master Plan Toolkit.

Incorporating Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Education

Educators who implement CLR instruction focus on numerous and varied opportunities for student-centered, collaborative learning that reflects students' backgrounds, assets, and strengths, and genuinely and consistently connects with students' families and communities. CLR education is an essential component of L.A. Unified's strategy for serving SELs (see Chapter 5). For both SELs and ELs, this type of instruction heralds that linguistic resources be prized, maintained, and nurtured; for example, one practical way for districts and schools to express the validity and value of multilingualism is by offering Seals of Biliteracy upon high school graduation. For further reading, please see the list of resources in the Master Plan Toolkit. In particular, please review the Sociocultural Competence School Checklist and Goal Setting form, which includes things to look for and four specific guidelines: (1) Culturally responsive teaching is assets-based; (2) Culturally responsive teaching places students at the center of the learning; (3) Culturally responsive teaching values students' languages, cultures, and backgrounds; and (4) Culturally responsive teaching simultaneously challenges and supports students.

Leveraging Partnerships

L.A. Unified is committed to partnerships in alignment with the adoption of the State Board Education EL Roadmap. Key partnerships are outlined below:

Loyola Marymount University - The Center for Equity for English Learners

The Center for Equity for English Learners (CEEL) enriches and supports the work of schools, school systems, educational/community partners, and policymakers. CEEL is responsive to the unique academic, social, and linguistic needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students in California and throughout the nation. In partnership with L.A. Unified's MMED and other local district leaders and partners, CEEL has led and facilitated systems-level and site-level work focused on advancing policy, programs, and practice for ELs.

One such partnership has included the oversight and implementation of a National Professional Development grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education - Project ROYAL: *Rigorous Opportunities for Young-children to Accelerate Language and Literacy: Effects of the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) Model (2016-2021).* As the lead agency in consortium with L.A. Unified and partnering with the Sobrato Family Foundation, the developer of the SEAL Model, CEEL's leadership team oversees, manages, and coordinates all aspects of the project with the partners, provides support to district and site leaders, and conducts classroom observations to study teacher development. Project ROYAL's purpose is to provide professional development to improve learning environments and classroom instruction for ELs in primary grades in four L.A. Unified schools—assisting educational personnel working with ELs to meet high professional standards.