

REL Mid-Atlantic Educator Effectiveness Webinar Series
Effective Instruction of English Language Learners
Q&A with Dr. Esther Geva
November 12, 2015

This webinar provided an overview of the research behind literacy for second language learners, the different variables that influence a second language learners' reading abilities, and strategies to improve instruction for these students. Drawing from her research and experience, Dr. Esther Geva discussed the different skills and variables that must be addressed when teaching literacy to English learners. The [PowerPoint presentation](#) and [webinar recording](#) are also available.

1. What resources and ideas can we provide to parents?

Educators can emphasize the importance of communication between parents and children and between parents and teachers. Through open communication, parents can monitor progress and support students in reaching their learning and academic goals. Parents can understand their child's academic goals by communicating with their child's teacher and understanding the types of support their child needs. Teachers can support their students and their students' families by providing appropriately differentiated support and resources.

Family literacy is a strong component of second-language reading comprehension. Parents can take their children to the public library and help their children select texts that are at the appropriate level (if a child does not know the meaning of 97 percent of the words, the text is too difficult). While reading, parents can support their children in reading frequently used words with ease (accuracy and then fluency), developing their language skills, and by asking comprehension questions. Parents should engage in meaningful conversations with their child in both their first language and English (if possible). Parents can also use assistive technology effectively to support students. Finally, if a child is having difficulty learning to read, parents should work with the child's teacher to determine how to address these challenges and not blame the challenges on bilingualism.

2. What is the role of direct instruction in teaching English to English language learners (ELLs)?

Direct instruction in reading skills and language components is crucial for ELLs. Instruction for ELLs (and all students) should include explicit and implicit language instruction, repetition of key ideas, and differentiated instruction based on students' needs. Direct instruction in language can be integrated with content area instruction. Teachers should be aware of students' background knowledge and first languages to ensure that they teach based on students' needs.

3. What are the best instructional strategies to use in teaching vocabulary to ELLs?

Teachers should be aware that vocabulary can take a long time to develop and that building vocabulary requires ongoing instruction and exposure. A crucial aspect of language development for ELLs is vocabulary rich in both breadth and depth. Building a broad and deep vocabulary is crucial for students to develop comprehension skills. Academic vocabulary should be taught to students

through meaningful contexts, and teachers should clearly differentiate between everyday and academic vocabulary. Teachers can use root words to support students' vocabulary development, as well as specifically teach students morphemes (including inflections, derivations, derivational awareness, compounds, and compound awareness). There is a common sequence of vocabulary development that teachers should follow. While teaching students vocabulary, teachers should consider students' first languages, as learning certain vocabulary words might be easier or more challenging depending on students' first languages.

4. How does vocabulary instruction fit into the big picture of language learning?

Vocabulary is key for ELL students in language development. Vocabulary supports students in comprehending what they read across content areas. Researchers found that there is a common sequence of academic vocabulary growth and created a list of root words acquired at different grade levels. Exposing ELLs to academic vocabulary as soon as possible is crucial, and introducing students to broad and deep academic vocabulary supports their language development. Teachers should use their understanding of each individual student and their student's first language to differentiate vocabulary instruction for students because the ease of developing specific academic vocabulary can vary depending on the student's first language.

5. What unique considerations should teachers have for ELLs in early childhood through first grade?

Teachers of students at all ages should build relationships with their students and their families and understand their students' languages, families, cultures, and educational backgrounds. Teachers can use their knowledge and understanding of students' experiences to effectively differentiate for students at various levels. Teachers in early childhood have a unique opportunity to engage students' families early on in the student's education. Teachers should have high expectations for all students, engage students in academic discussion, repeat key ideas, and teach language both explicitly and intensively. Finally, teachers should consider where their students are regarding the developmental benchmarks in learning to read. Most students in early childhood are still in the getting ready/pre-reading stage, so teachers should understand the level where their students are and support them in developing language and literacy skills based on that level.

6. What are specific tips for teaching reading and writing to ELLs at the high school level?

Teachers can compare the work of ELLs to the work of students who speak English as their first language to understand what reading and writing development looks like for students at certain ages and to develop and differentiate instruction based on these comparisons. Students in high school should be reading to learn content and reading sources from multiple viewpoints to understand content.

7. How can we support students who have graduated from ELL programs into mainstream classes, but are not at the same level as native English speakers? How can we support their parents as well?

Even when ELL students graduate from ELL programs into mainstream classes, they still know fewer words than their monolingual peers. Direct instruction remains essential for ELLs, even when they have transferred into mainstream classes. Teachers should encourage open communication between parents and teachers that focuses on students' academic goals.

8. How do we report progress towards mastery of grade-level standards? How do we appropriately assess ELLs on grade-level content?

ELLs must have an equal opportunity to learn the same rigorous academic content as students who speak English as their first language. Teachers can achieve this through differentiated instruction that accounts for ELLs' English proficiency, as well as other factors that impact learning. Teachers should assess ELL students on the known predictors and assess ELL students regularly to understand where they need support. Teachers should address their students' first language as well, when feasible. Teachers should not delay assessment until language proficiency is "adequate;" they should monitor progress each step of the way.

9. How can school districts overcome barriers to access to college for ELLs?

Districts and principals must provide appropriate professional development to teachers and create opportunities for general educators, ELL specialists, and other staff to collaborate on supporting ELLs in ways that differentiate and support students where they are with the goal of supporting language development and reaching grade-level standards. Districts can also develop programs so that principals and other leaders can build relationships with students, learn about their backgrounds, and support them in planning for their futures.

10. What strategies can we use for students to play Scrabble and other word games?

Scrabble and other games can be used as strategies for teaching literacy and language. Scrabble can specifically be used to support spelling and phonemic awareness, while other games can be used for various literacy and language purposes.

11. What recommendations do you have for sources of reading materials for ELLs?

There are four complementary perspectives to understanding the complexity of second-language reading comprehension: benchmarks in reading development, transfer, the simple view of reading, and a comprehensive framework. Reading materials must be appropriate for students' reading

levels. If a student does not know the meaning of 97percent of the words in a text, the text is too difficult for the student.

12. How do you appropriately integrate ELLs into a multi-tier system of supports?

It is possible to integrate ELLs into a multi-tier system of supports by differentiating for ELL students. Teachers can implement cooperative learning as a way to differentiate learning for their students, providing more opportunities to integrate language with content instruction.

13. How can we assess an international student's language ability and determine if there is a language challenge or a learning challenge?

Teachers must learn to differentiate between a student's learning English as a new language status and a student's potential learning disability. Teachers should begin explicit instruction in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and related language components as soon as possible and should monitor the student's progress in various language and literacy components. Teachers should assess in both the student's first and second language when possible and monitor students' development.

14. What are some ways to support students who have little knowledge of their first language?

All students benefit from high expectations, academic discussion, hearing key ideas multiple times, explicit and intensive language instruction, and engaging in language in a variety of ways. By differentiating instruction and implementing cooperative learning, teachers can support students where they are and integrate language with content.

15. What strategies can we use for ELLs who also have other learning needs?

Teachers should assess students in both their first and second languages when possible to understand what their students know and their students' language development in both languages.

16. What is the connection between reading and math for ELLs?

Students need to know certain words in English to understand math word problems. Even if a student understands how to solve the specific problem, the student needs to understand all of the words included in the question to successfully solve it.

17. How can a teacher support an ELL who is two grades below reading comprehension and mathematics in their first language?

The teacher should consider when the child arrived. If the student arrived recently, their achievement in their first language might be a useful indicator for comparison with their achievement in English, but if the student has been here for a few years, using the student's achievement in the first language might not be useful.