# LEAD THE WAY TO LITERACY

> **LEVERAGING BILITERACY**

## EMPOWERING **STUDENTS** TO **COMMUNICATE** WITH **CONFIDENCE**

**START**

The benefits of biliteracy in student achievement and the advantages of bilingualism in an increasingly interconnected world cannot be overstated—or their promise overlooked.

The Leveraging Biliteracy initiative is part of our commitment to enhancing language learning for all students. Join us as we seek to elevate language instruction and empower all students to communicate with confidence.

## *Access to Rigor for EL Success*
By Dr. Elena Izquierdo

## ▶ BACKGROUND

Educators have raised expectations for our schools that focus on college- and career-aligned state standards and more responsive accountability measures. Simultaneously, demographic trends clearly speak to the diverse composition of our schools today. The fastest-growing population in U.S. schools is English learners (ELs). With close to five million English learners (ELs) in our nation's schools today, instructional shifts in schools are necessary to ensure equitable and excellent education (Izquierdo, 2012).

## ▶ DIVERSITY AMONG ELs

The term English learner refers to students whose first language is not English, who are at various levels of proficiency in their English language learning, and who require specialized instructional support in order to fully access the academic curriculum and succeed in their schooling (Rivera, C., Collum, E., Willner, L.S., & Sia, J.K., Jr. 2006). The term English learner has led some to assume that all ELs have the same academic and linguistic needs. This could not be further from the reality.

ELs are highly diverse, beginning with their country of origin and their previous schooling experiences that account for their diversity in cognitive, academic, and linguistic skills in their native language, as well as in English (Izquierdo, 2011, 2012). Others may have had interrupted schooling in their native country, a phenomenon that impacts their ability to transfer literacy skills from their first language to English (Cummins, 1981). It is important to note, however, that most ELs in our schools are first, second, or third generation U.S. born, and have been in our schools for an extended amount of time and have not achieved academic English proficiency (Izquierdo, 2011, 2012).

## ▶ HOW DO WE INTERPRET THIS?

Traditionally and historically, the programmatic focus for ELs was on learning English—at the expense of their education. The question has always been, "How long does it take to learn English?" Responding to this as a time and language issue overlooks factors that affect schooling (Izquierdo, 2011, 2012). ELs need access to a rigorous literacy and content-based curriculum. Weak and inconsistent program models that have focused on learning English, coupled with limited access to a rigorous literacy and content-based curriculum have largely contributed to the formation of a subgroup of ELs. Olsen (2010) refers to these struggling students as Long Term English learners:

> English learner students who, despite many years in our schools and despite being close to the age at which they should be able to graduate, are still not English proficient and have incurred major academic deficits—the "Long Term English Learners." (Olsen, 2010, p. 1)

## ➤ HOW ARE WE DOING?

Whether you look at state or national data, the trend continues to show a significant achievement gap between ELs and their native English-speaking peers. The average scores for ELs on the National Assessment of Educational Progress 2013 reading and mathematics assessments in Grades 4, 8, and 12 were significantly lower than the average scores for non-ELs (OELA, 2015). Rising standards and accountability measures have underscored the weak academic progress of many ELs and the urgency for instructional shifts (Council of the Great City Schools, 2014).

The demographic shift over the last several decades, coupled with raised expectations, necessitates that all teachers have the tools to engage in teaching and learning that prepares ELs for successful career and college pathways. It's more than just learning English—it's learning IN English! To be successful in school, ELs need access to complex text and ample opportunities to interact with complex text and complex thought.

## ➤ INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFTS AND RIGOR

An instructional shift to intentionally and systematically plan for the language needed to support content and literacy development required in complex text is needed. More interaction with academic language in speaking, listening, reading, and writing is needed across the curriculum, through daily routines such as supported close reading of grade level text, listening and watching video/podcasts, and writing to summarize, gather evidence, or in preparation for interacting with others. These activities provide listening, speaking, reading, and writing opportunities through multimedia formats that motivate students. Everyday activities such as these support language, literacy, and conceptual development—across the curriculum. If we are to raise achievement for our ELs, we need to support them in reaching the levels of academic literacy that enable them to explain an answer, to present an argument, to persuade others, and to communicate evidence-based learning in a text.

Instructional shifts necessitate providing ELs with daily routines and ample opportunities to engage in content-specific interactive practices that are designed to develop conceptual knowledge and language competence in harmony. Teachers help students learn to use language for reasoning and understanding. By creating opportunities and daily routines that scaffold for interactions around complex text that are aligned thematically or topically, teachers support the development of academic skills needed to develop, communicate, and ultimately refine concepts, ideas, arguments, and thinking and reasoning skills. In doing this, motivation and rigor also increase.

## ▶ WHAT IS RIGOR?

Rigor is not the difficulty of the material, but the degree of learning that takes place. Rigor involves three features that work collectively to provide a context for the student to succeed (Blackburn, 2008).

| RIGOR… AN ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH EACH STUDENT IS EXPECTED TO: | **1** learn at higher levels. | **2** be supported so he or she can learn at higher levels. | **3** demonstrate learning at high levels. |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |

Rigor, then, is the expectation, opportunity, and support for ELs to learn and demonstrate their learning. As teachers of ELs, we need to be practiced in guiding and supporting rigor through frequent use of higher-level and open-ended questioning and dialogue while intentionally and systematically providing ELs with the opportunities and support needed to meet rigorous academic standards.

## ▶ SHIFTS IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development is compulsory and must be ongoing for these instructional shifts to take place. Working with ELs necessitates being grounded in second language acquisition foundations and methodologies that are integrated with literacy learning across the content areas (Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989).

Academic language differs in structure and vocabulary as you move between genres, or shift from one content area to another. In addition, teachers have to understand that ELs are at various levels of proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing—all in one classroom! Knowing how to plan for, manage, and support the development of English language development in harmony with academic literacy across the curriculum is absolutely critical.

Just as critical is understanding that supporting EL language development means intentional and systematic planning of the practice of integrating second language acquisition and language, literacy, and learning in complex text across the curriculum for every lesson.

While integrating all language domains within each of the content areas, we address interest and motivation levels of ELs who have previously been sheltered from the general curriculum because of language and how complex it becomes in academic text. Rather than focusing on what ELs can manage, the shift must go to integrating what is needed for effective language, literacy, and content teaching and learning. ELs can handle the rigor as long as they have the supports required of every lesson, every step of the way!

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Dr. Izquierdo is a linguist by training and an educator in practice. She is on faculty in Literacy/Biliteracy/Dual Language/ELL Education at the University of Texas, El Paso, and the principal investigator of Project LEAD, Leadership in English Acquisition and Academic Development, a National Professional Development grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which supports districts in transforming education for English learners. Dr. Izquierdo works with pre-service and in-service teachers, district leadership, and other educational professionals in multiple states, including Arkansas, Texas, and New Mexico, in developing the knowledge and skills critical to providing English learners with a rigorous curriculum focused on English language development and academic literacies across the content areas. Additionally, Project LEAD focuses on developing mentoring capacities across school districts in their efforts to transform instructional practices for English learners K–12. Dr. Izquierdo also directs a literacy camp for K–12 public school students at the university that focuses on supporting literacy for ELs.

Dr. Izquierdo consulted with HMH® on the development of Escalate English® ©2017, a comprehensive program for long-term English learners in Grades 4–8 who need accelerated support for acquiring the academic English needed for success with today's rigorous performance standards across the curriculum.

**Please visit** the Resources tabs on the *¡Avancemos!* or *Bien dit!*® pages for Part II of this white paper series, which will focus on the importance of putting communication first in the classroom and how that looks in practice.

## RESOURCES

**Escalate ◆ English**

hmhco.com/EscalateEnglish

**¡Avancemos!**

hmhco.com/Avancemos

**Bien dit!**

hmhco.com/Biendit

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