The Common Core Challenge FOR ELLS

English Language Learners

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The new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) currently being rolled out in 46 states give little specific acknowledgement of the challenges for English language learners (ELLs). The introduction to the CCSS states that identifying the supports needed to help ELLs (or any other population of students) is "beyond the scope of the Standards" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010b, p. 6). An ancillary document, available on the CCSS website (www.corestandards.org), gives some general guidelines for applying the standards to ELLs. Schools are recommended to provide:

- Appropriate instructional supports to make grade-level course work comprehensible
- Modified assessments that allow ELLs to demonstrate their content knowledge
- Additional time for ELLs to complete tasks and assessments
- Opportunities for classroom interactions (both listening and speaking) that develop concepts and academic language in the disciplines
- Opportunities for ELLs to interact with proficient English speakers
- Opportunities for ELLs to build on their strengths, prior experiences, and background knowledge
- Qualified teachers who use practices found to be effective in improving student achievement (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010a).

The suggested guidelines are reasonable—as far as they go—but are vague at best. School leaders and teachers are responsible for making the challenging academic standards accessible to students who must learn rigorous academic content while learning the language in which the content is taught. What is known about the instruction and instructional supports that will enable ELLs to participate in grade-level course work?

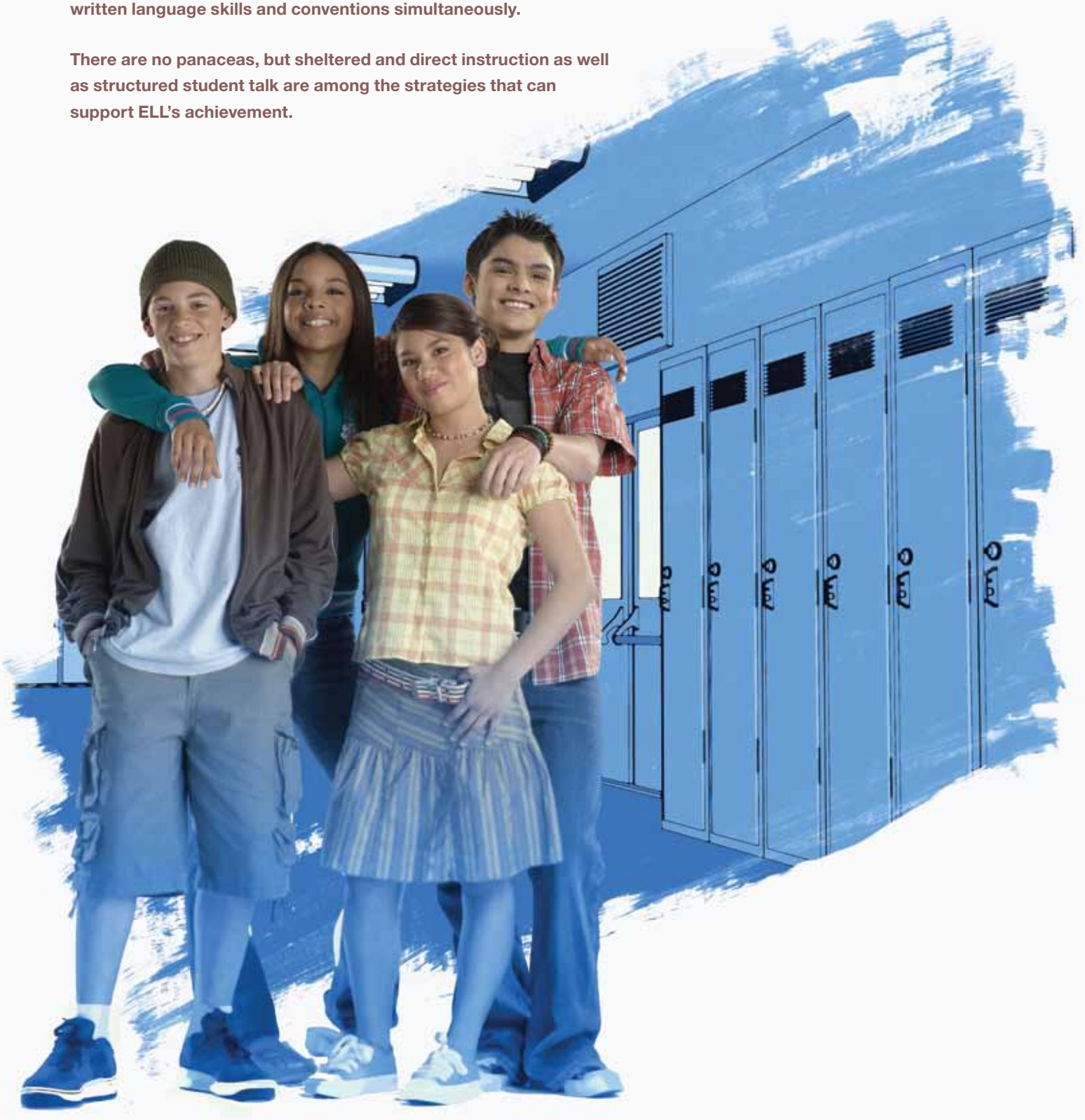
Kenji Hakuta of Stanford University is leading a national effort to develop CCSS-aligned resources that provide specific support for educators working with ELLs. In a recent interview, Hakuta (as cited in Migdol, 2011) identified two key areas that undergird the recommendations put forward by the creators of the CCSS:

1. Teaching ELLs the mainstream academic content that all students must learn.
2. Helping ELLs develop proficiency in English, particularly the academic English in oral and written language that is foundational to the content standards. (Although

Many of the students who will be expected to meet the Common Core State Standards are English language learners (ELLs).

ELLs have the challenge of learning academic content and oral and written language skills and conventions simultaneously.

There are no panaceas, but sheltered and direct instruction as well as structured student talk are among the strategies that can support ELL's achievement.



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literacy is an aspect of language, listening and speaking are distinct from reading and writing. Literacy proficiency requires concepts and skills that oral language proficiency does not.)

Content is certainly important, but so are the oral and written language skills necessary to learn and use that content. Mathematics, for example, requires knowing mathematical concepts and skills, and it also requires knowing the language of mathematics—how to use language to learn and discuss operations and proofs and how to understand and demonstrate solutions to mathematical problems. History requires knowing names, events, places, and concepts *and* how to talk or write about them, analyze cause and effect, synthesize and compare explanations for events, and discuss and write about alternative interpretations. Without those oral and written language skills, it is virtually impossible for students to have access to CCSS content.

Although it is far from definitive, there is research that can be used as the basis for helping promote high levels of content and language learning among ELLs. Drawing broadly on this research, we suggest the following guidelines. They vary with respect to how much research support they have; some are based on research in the general education literature rather than research specifically with ELLs.

Instruction in the Content Areas

Recognize the challenge. Teachers must first be mindful of the fundamental challenge that ELLs who receive all-English instruction face as they attempt to learn academic content while becoming increasingly proficient in English. The goal should be to make academic content as accessible as possible for those students and promote oral and written English language development as students learn academic content.

Effective teaching. Effective teaching for ELLs is similar in many ways to effective teaching for English speakers. All learners benefit from clear goals and objectives, well-structured tasks, adequate practice, opportunities to interact with others, frequent assessment and reteaching as needed, and other elements of effective instruction identified in the professional and research literature. ELLs also need focused development of oral reading fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing in addition to enriched literacy instruction that targets complex sets of skill and concepts.

Sheltered instruction. Educators and researchers have devised a number of techniques and strategies that help make academic content accessible to English learners and, secondarily, promote the development of English language skills. Effective general instruction is the foundation of teaching ELLs effectively, but it is almost certainly not sufficient. Research is sparse, but possible effective modifications for ELLs include:

- Target both language and content objectives in all lessons
- Make instruction and expectations extremely clear, focused, and systematic
- Employ visuals, charts, and diagrams to aid comprehension
- Use the primary language for support (e.g., preview what students will read and use cognates for vocabulary instruction)
- Choose reading matter with familiar content
- Provide additional practice and repetition. (See Echevarría, Vogt, and Short, 2007, for additional information about sheltered strategies.)

Evaluate effectiveness. Educators should take the initiative to implement sheltered strategies in their classrooms and evaluate their effectiveness. Although formal research to evaluate the effects of various sheltered strategies is ongoing, educators must help lead the way. There is simply no time to wait until researchers address all of the important issues regarding sheltered instruction. Teachers and administrators in schools and districts can learn those strategies and determine for themselves which ones are practical, feasible, and effective in their particular situations.

Academic language. Make academic lan-

guage a vital part of content-area instruction. Knowledge of academic disciplines—science, social studies, history, and math—is, of course, what content-area instruction is all about. But just as important is the oral and written language needed to learn about, discuss, and write about academic content. Most ELLs eventually acquire adequate conversational language and informal writing skills, but they often lack the academic language that is essential for high levels of achievement in the content areas. For example, one of California's history and social science standards for 11th graders is, "Analyze the women's rights movement from the era of Elizabeth Stanton and Susan Anthony and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the movement launched in the 1960s, including differing perspectives on the roles of women" (California Department of Education, 2000, p. 53).

That standard can be taught in conjunction with the sixth standard from the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010b) for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects for grades 11–12: "Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence" (p. 61).

For students to express their understanding of differing viewpoints, they need to learn the language of compare and contrast. The teacher can model and have students practice compound and complex sentences using *although* and *however*. Dutro and Moran (2001), Lyster (2007), and Zwiers (2008) offer promising directions for additional research in this area. Educators are strongly encouraged to learn more about strategies for teaching academic language and implement it in their classrooms.

Promoting English Language Proficiency

English language development (ELD) instruction must be a priority from the moment students walk into school, although it cannot displace instruction in academic content. Content-area instruction can be a venue for language learning, but the focus during content instruction should be content; the focus during ELD instruction should be the English language. Ideally, content instruction and ELD instruction should complement and reinforce each other.

Daily language instruction. Students should receive daily instruction that focuses on the English language. Instruction should include explicit teaching of elements of English (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, and conventions), conversational conventions (e.g., taking turns and signaling disagreement), and strategies for how to learn the language (e.g., taking notes, paying selective attention, and summarizing).

Just as important, ELLs must also have ample opportunities for authentic and functional use of English. Learning the elements of a language is important, but without extensive use of the language, it is probably impossible to acquire high levels of proficiency. Instruction in specific elements of the language should be integrated with opportunities to use those elements in meaningful communication.

ELD instruction should help students learn conversational norms, but it must also teach the academic language needed for learning and discussing content in math, language arts, social studies, science, and all other curricular areas.

Academic language. ELD instruction should help students learn conversational norms, but it must also teach the academic language needed for learning and discussing content in math, language arts, social studies, science, and all other curricular areas. Ideally, ELD and content-area instruction will be well-articulated so that students have an opportunity to apply the language they learn to their academic tasks.

Academic language instruction should include not only the vocabulary of the content subjects but the syntax and text structures as well. For example, students must understand how to construct a sentence or a paragraph (orally and in writing) that expresses compare and contrast or cause and effect. Academic language and curriculum content are closely intertwined.

Structure tasks and prepare students for interactions with English speakers so that students focus on participating in productive verbal exchanges, rather than simply finishing tasks.

Structured student talk. Opportunities for student language production can result from open-ended prompts or prompts for a specific language structure or vocabulary item, particularly increasingly elaborated student talk. Some examples of open-ended, elaborated responses might be, Why do you say that? Can you say more about that? Can you give an example? How does that relate to…? Prompts that include specific language structures might require a student to answer using identified vocabulary words; a particular sentence frame; or a specific sentence structure, such as a compound or complex sentence.

Sufficient duration of services. ELD instruction should probably continue at least until students reach level four (advanced intermediate) and possibly through level five (advanced or native-like proficiency). Intermediate English proficiency (level three) is almost certainly inadequate for success in a mainstream English classroom in middle elementary school and later.

Grouping. Group ELLs carefully. Although ELLs should not be in classrooms segregated by language proficiency levels, grouping by language proficiency specifically during ELD instruction is likely to be effective as long as instruction is carefully tailored to students' language-learning needs.

Encourage verbal interactions. Structure tasks and prepare students for interactions with English speakers so that students focus on participating in productive verbal exchanges, rather than simply finishing tasks. Teach and model strategies for successful interactions between ELLs and English speakers. Ensure that ELLs have the language skills to interact productively with English speakers on academic tasks. For example, ensure that cooperative group work provides opportunities for structured practice, not just spontaneous conversation. In primary language programs, where students might be more likely to use their primary languages with their peers, structure some tasks to encourage peer interactions in English.

School and District Role

One very important finding from research is that school and district factors have an influence on what happens in classrooms and on ELLs' achievement. Classroom instruction does not take place in a vacuum. It is strongly dependent upon organizational features that influence what happens in classrooms and how teachers teach. Coherent schoolwide goals, ongoing assessment of student learning, strong leadership, and ongoing professional development linked to goals and assessments contribute to creating a schoolwide culture of higher achievement and higher expectations for ELLs.

Be wary of piecemeal efforts that target narrow aspects of school functioning and ignore the larger schoolwide context (Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010). This is especially relevant in anticipation of the CCSS. Some teachers might feel that they don't have time to teach language arts because they have so much content to cover; they may not see the connections to what they already do. School leaders at all levels must organize conversations and planning within each subject area. Enthusiasm and commitment are needed to find solutions and promote a positive culture so that the new standards lead to success for ELLs and all students. PL

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