CCNETWORK Content Center

English Language Proficiency

Content-Based English Language Development Instruction Through Evidence-Based Practices

ADVANCING COMPREHENSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IMPLEMENTATION BRIEF SERIES

JUNE 2026

Introduction

The Center on English Language Proficiency (ELP) developed this series to help Regional Centers, state agencies, and local systems turn vision into action—designing, implementing, and strengthening coherent Comprehensive ELD systems that work in practice and improve outcomes for English Learners. The **Advancing Comprehensive English Language Development (ELD) Implementation Brief Series** brings together the core components for high-quality Comprehensive ELD, across both content-based ELD and designated ELD.

This **Content-Based ELD Instruction Through Evidence-Based Practices** brief is the first in a four-part series on implementing high-quality Comprehensive ELD. The intent of this brief is to bridge the gap between research and practice by illustrating what implementation looks like for evidence-based practices for content-based ELD curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Subsequent briefs in the series will address classroom practices and systemic coherence for both content-based and designated ELD.

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Evidence-based practices are approaches or strategies supported by rigorous research showing improvement in student outcomes and/or a strong rationale based on prior evidence.

About the Series

*English Learners' academic achievement and English language development are strengthened through supports that address students' social, academic, and linguistic development. The **Advancing Comprehensive English Language Development (ELD) Implementation Brief Series** highlights evidence-based practices and systems that support the design, implementation, and systemic coherence for Comprehensive ELD. Evidence-based practices are approaches or strategies supported by rigorous research showing improvement in student outcomes and/or a strong rationale based on prior evidence.[1,22,23,32] Although research continues to identify effective educational practices, evidence is inconsistently used in decision-making due to persistent barriers.[2,3,4,5] This contributes to achievement gaps between students classified as English Learners* and non-English Learners.*

**We use the federal term "English Learners (ELs)" to refer to students developing English proficiency while building on diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. We affirm the use of asset-based terms such as "multilingual learners," which emphasize students' developing proficiency in English and one or more additional languages. For additional context, see the federal legal requirements guiding equitable services and supports for English Learners.*

To flourish in school, English Learners need strong systems of support. These include adult-student interactions in schools that demonstrate personal investment in students and establish a welcoming and affirming culture for all students, their families, and their communities as well as peer interactions that support English language development and promote a sense of community amongst students.

What is Comprehensive ELD?

The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) has identified evidence supporting the implementation of a Comprehensive ELD program that includes both content-based ELD and designated ELD.[6,7]

- **Content-Based ELD** integrates English language development with engagement in academic content learning (e.g., history, math), using the subject matter as a medium for building students' disciplinary academic language through dynamic classroom interactions in which language and knowledge are co-constructed through sustained, purposeful dialogue and content negotiation. Rather than simplifying the curriculum for English Learners, this approach emphasizes dialogue with rigorous academic content alongside robust scaffolding to amplify participation and learning. The goal of this model is to prepare students to meet academic achievement standards while gaining proficiency in English. Content-based ELD is also known as Integrated ELD or Sheltered English instruction.
- **Designated ELD** is dedicated time during the school day during which English Learners receive specialized instruction based on the English Language Development/Proficiency (ELD) Standards, students' language proficiency levels, and their English language learning needs.

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Providing both content-based ELD and designated ELD is an integral part of a comprehensive program to promote the English language proficiency and overall academic achievement of English Learners.[8,9,10,11] This framing emphasizes that language development spans listening, speaking, reading, and writing for both everyday communication and academic learning.

What Do English Learners Need to Succeed in Content-Based ELD?

To achieve success in school, including attaining academic standards across subject areas while simultaneously gaining proficiency in English, English Learners need supports that span the social, academic, and linguistic domains. Although this brief focuses on the implementation of evidence-based practices for content-based ELD, which are discussed in the sections below, strong and positive relationships with adults and peers that form enduring systems of support are important contributors to student success. This includes adult-student interactions in schools that demonstrate personal investment in students and establish a welcoming and affirming culture,[12,13] as well as peer interactions that support English language development and promote a sense of community among students.[10,14,15,16]

What Does Evidence-Based Content-Based ELD Look Like?

To increase student understanding, achievement, and English proficiency, students need an education that implements evidence-based practices for 1) high-quality curriculum, 2) high-quality instruction, and 3) aligned assessments for English Learners. The table below summarizes key evidence-based instructional practices for teachers to promote student learning.[17] Additionally, the table can be used by system leaders across levels to build shared understanding regarding evidence-based practices and guide support of the implementation of content-based ELD.

FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICE 1

Know Your Students

- Primary/home language (L1)
- English proficiency level
- Educational background
- Funds of knowledge
- Current educational context
- Family and community context

FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICE 2

Know the Content Standards and English Language Development Standards

- Align lesson objectives with content and ELD standards
- Design and deliver instruction to advance academic English language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing within the content subjects

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Implement Evidence-Based Practices for High-Quality Content-Based Curriculum and Instruction

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Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum

- Integrates language development with academic content
- Promotes problem solving, critical thinking, and relevant learning
- Supports academic language across disciplines
- Provides regular, structured opportunities to develop oral and written academic language skills
- Incorporates access to content in L1 and transfer of skills and knowledge across languages

Interactions

- Encourages student autonomy and participation
- Promotes academic discourse and collaboration
- Structures meaningful peer interaction
- Uses flexible participation structures

Comprehensibility

- Makes academic content and language accessible
- Uses scaffolds and multimodal supports
- Incorporates formative assessment and feedback
- Supports vocabulary and disciplinary language development

Connections

- Builds on students' cultural and linguistic assets
- Connects instruction to students' experiences and prior knowledge
- Creates meaningful and relevant learning opportunities

High-quality content-based ELD includes foundational and evidence-based practices. Foundational practices involve understanding students' linguistic, cultural, educational, and community backgrounds and aligning instruction to both academic content and English Language Development (ELD) standards.

FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICE 1

Know Your Students

Understanding your students' background, community, and bodies of knowledge is critical to tailor content instruction in a manner that is comprehensible and relevant for students.

- Understand and validate students' backgrounds and existing knowledge—including their "funds of knowledge"—such as their abilities, bodies of knowledge, assets, and cultural ways of interacting—current educational context, family and community context to establish positive, asset-based, welcoming learning settings for students.[15,18,19]
- Draw on students' primary/home language to connect with students and facilitate proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

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FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICE 2

Know the Content Standards and English Language Development Standards

Effective practices in content-based instruction integrate language development with content instruction.[20] This process includes:

- Identifying content objectives that support the discipline-specific content standards and tasks. Language objectives should be informed by grade-level content standards and the daily content objectives for each subject.
- Determining the academic language within content tasks, to serve as the basis for a lesson's language objectives, with lessons including all four domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).[10,21]

Effective practices span each of the four domains of high-quality curriculum and instruction: Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum, Connections, Comprehensibility, and Interactions.

Implement Evidence-Based Practices for High-Quality Content-Based Curriculum and Instruction

Effective instruction for English Learners includes providing comprehensive, rigorous, and relevant content instruction and opportunities to link content with prior knowledge through classroom participation that maximizes student engagement.[6,22,23] In order for students to develop proficiency in the academic English of each discipline, it is important for teachers to make the language of the content more transparent for students and intentionally plan instruction that allows students to develop their language skills within the context of the subjects they teach.[10,24]

It is important for teachers to make the language of the content more transparent for students and intentionally plan instruction that allows students to develop their language skills.

High-quality content-based ELD includes both foundational and evidence-based practices. Foundational practices include understanding students' linguistic, cultural, educational, and community backgrounds and aligning instruction to grade-level content and English Language Development (ELD) standards. Evidence-based practices for high-quality content-based ELD span four domains of curriculum and instruction: Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum, Connections, Comprehensibility, and Interactions..[17] These domains integrate recommendations from the IES Practice Guides[6,7] and the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition Practice Brief regarding the implementation of evidence-based instructional practices.[10] The section below describes each domain and provides key practices for consideration. To see how these key practices can be implemented, we have provided separate Classroom Snapshots Resource.[17]

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Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum

A rigorous and relevant curriculum is cognitively complex, relevant, challenging, and appropriate for linguistically diverse student populations. Rigorous instruction engages students in higher-order thinking skills, disciplinary learning, and academic language development across listening, speaking, reading, and writing.[25,26]

Consider the following key instructional practices:

- Establish high expectations based on content and ELD standards that address students' linguistic and academic needs.
- Engage students in problem solving, critical thinking, and disciplinary inquiry.
- Present lessons and units of study that promote cross-curricular understanding based on cognitive and language proficiency levels.
- Identify language and content objectives aligned to ELD and content standards.
- Use curricular materials that represent students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and experiences.
- Provide access to materials and content in the student's primary/home language.
- Provide opportunities for students to transfer and apply knowledge and skills from their primary/home language to English learning.

Interactions

Instruction that provides ample opportunities for English Learners to interact with other students in various participation structures supports access to the curriculum, promotes maximum engagement and leadership opportunities, and fosters academic language development and positive social relationships.[6,10,17] Structured interactions also prepare students for increasingly rigorous and collaborative learning environments.

Consider the following key instructional practices:

- Assess students' linguistic, academic, and social strengths and needs to create strategic and flexible groupings aligned to the purpose of the lesson.
- Establish and modify classroom structures and procedures that promote accountability during collaborative work.
- Create classroom routines that promote student autonomy and build self-monitoring skills.
- Model and provide opportunities for students to engage in academic discourse across content areas.
- Use flexible grouping structures to provide targeted instructional support.

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Comprehensibility

To meet the needs of English Learners and Multilingual Learners, educators must intentionally design instruction that aligns content and ELD standards and makes academic language and disciplinary concepts accessible to students across English proficiency levels. To support students in understanding and applying instructional concepts and skills, educators provide opportunities for students to develop and explain ideas, and strategically use instructional supports such as short videos, visuals, and graphic organizers.[6,10,15]

Consider the following key instructional practices:

- Scaffold instruction to clarify grade-level concepts and support comprehension of core content.
- Check for understanding throughout lessons and provide frequent feedback.
- Use formative and informal assessments to adjust instruction.
- Create opportunities for students to develop and explain ideas orally and in writing.
- Provide direct and explicit instruction targeting academic vocabulary and provide multiple opportunities for students to internalize and use the terminology across multiple contexts and modalities (writing, speaking, listening).
- Use linguistically appropriate instruction of grade-level content with strategies tailored to each student's level of language proficiency. Strategies include questioning, restating, rephrasing, expanding, and contextualizing tasks in students' primary/home language and English, as appropriate.

Connections

Instruction that values and incorporates the linguistic, cultural, educational, and community experiences that English Learners bring to the classroom enables students to make meaningful connections between what they know and what they are learning.[6,10,27,28,29] Building on students' prior knowledge, primary/home language, funds of knowledge, and lived experiences promotes engagement, relevance, and deeper learning.

Consider the following key instructional practices:

- Learn about students' linguistic, cultural, educational, and community backgrounds to inform instruction and support high expectations for learning.
- Plan opportunities to value and connect students' personal/home/family/cultural experiences to classroom learning by inviting them to share expertise and life experiences about the content or topic.
- Use supplemental materials that reflect students' cultural backgrounds, histories, interests, and communities.
- Ask and model explicit questions that guide students' thinking and support deeper understanding.

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What Systems of Support are Needed to Implement Content-Based ELD?

To support the implementation of evidence-based classroom practices for content-based ELD, support from school leaders for teachers, students, and families is critical. For example, foster collaboration between content-area and English development teachers through collaborative structures like professional learning communities. This collaboration is critical to allow educators to meet regularly to talk about their work and students' work[30,31] and plan lessons and scaffolds tailored to students' proficiency levels. Additionally, it is important for school leaders to build relationships with students, their families, and communities to better understand their backgrounds, needs, and perspectives, and make decisions that respond to their needs.[27,30]

In addition to school leaders, educational organizations and educators play an important role in supporting policies, practices, and organizational conditions that promote high-quality education for English Learners. Educational organizations, leaders, and educators can collaborate with partners such as district leaders, state agencies, school boards, community organizations, legislators, and families to strengthen systems and supports for English Learners across educational settings.

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How Can You Learn More?

The evidence-based classroom practices introduced in this brief are critical to providing English Learners with a high-quality education that integrates language development with rigorous content instruction. Effective implementation of these practices also depends on systems of support that foster collaboration, instructional coherence, professional learning, and engagement with students, families, and communities.

The next brief in this series examines the systems, structures, and organizational conditions that support coherent implementation of content-based ELD across schools and districts.

Explore Additional Resources

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Authors and Affiliations

Center on English Language Proficiency:

Ahmad, Neida, Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola Marymount University

Kaminski, Linda, Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola Marymount University

Matias, Aline, Education First

Armas, Elvira, Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola Marymount University

Lavadenz, Magaly, Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola Marymount University

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CCNETWORK Content Center

English Language Proficiency

About Us

The Center on English Language Proficiency (ELP) operates as a content center within the Comprehensive Center Network (CCNetwork) and focuses on using an assets-based approach to improve educational outcomes and increase English Language Proficiency. ELP provides vital resources and technical assistance to the 14 regional service centers and three content centers, and, by extension, to SEAs, REAs, LEAs, TEAs, schools, practitioners, research partners, state partners, professional organizations and advocacy groups. This support is specifically designed to assist their work with state and local education agencies.

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Our Mission

The Center on English Language Proficiency engages with national and regional partners to improve educational outcomes for all students by providing research- and asset-based support for English Learners, ensuring that all students achieve English proficiency and thrive.

Our Vision

All English Learners achieve full English proficiency and excel across all academic subjects.

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