

Language-Rich Approach Boosts English Learner Skills

Four years ago, teachers at International High School in Austin, Texas, thought they were doing a great job. Visitors to the school for new immigrants often praised the faculty for working with such a diverse population of students, some of whom had no prior formal education.

Aída Walqui's observation was different. The director of WestEd's Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) project told faculty members there was so much more they could do to engage students and accelerate their learning.

Although the constructive criticism initially stung, International's teachers said they respected Walqui's assessment because she also offered solutions. When she and her WestEd colleagues suggested a detailed improvement plan that included lesson makeovers and classroom coaching, the International staff jumped on board.

In 2007-2008, International became part of a three-year pilot of the QTEL approach to school-wide instructional improvement, which included two other Austin high schools, Lanier High School beginning in 2007-2008 and Reagan High School in 2009-2010. Through the pilot, all three schools accelerated student achievement and improved teacher practice.


Austin's success has important implications for districts across the country that are struggling to serve English language learner (ELL) students, as well as low-income and minority students who do not speak standard English. "While the QTEL approach is really for ELL students," says Melissa Hutchins, administrative supervisor in Austin's Office of English Language Learners, "we see the benefit of this for all students."

Engaging All Students in Active, Language-Rich Learning

QTEL's approach is grounded in the theory that learning is not a passive process of receiving information presented by a teacher. Rather, it requires students to actively construct their own understanding of new concepts and skills, most often in a social context and always through active and purposeful use of language. Reflecting this theory, QTEL's foundation for effective instruction is the "three-part architecture of a lesson": prepare students for the theme to be explored, construct deliberate invitations for students to interact with related texts, and then extend their understanding through exposure to rigorous and engaging applications of new concepts.

For example, in a science unit about brain injuries, a teacher begins by activating students' prior knowledge, asking them if they know anyone who has suffered an accident involving a brain injury, and whether the person changed as a result of that injury. After creating a context for the topic through whole-class discussion of the brain and what happens when it is damaged, the

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teacher splits students into groups according to their language proficiency and reading levels so that each group becomes expert in one of four case studies of brain damage.

All four texts are highly compelling, and while the text assignments for ELL students might be shorter and more explanatory, the questions, focus, and expectations for all groups are the same. Students share insights with peers in small groups, and then return to the whole class for more exploration of the topic. Additional targeted reading and writing assignments are designed to weave together and reinforce the academic vocabulary and science knowledge.

"One of the common misconceptions about ELL students is that they need simplified and isolated instruction," explains Walqui. To address ELL students, teachers often speak slowly, using simple sentence structure and careful enunciation; they provide less complex assignments and rarely expect ELL students to participate in classroom conversations. However well-intended, the attitudes embodied in these typical approaches reinforce the huge learning gap between new and native English speakers.

"We propose that after students have a threshold level of proficiency in English, what they need is access and time to engage with the really valuable and rigorous core curriculum," Walqui says. "What we see all the time is ELL students filling in the blanks on worksheets, working individually at their desks. We want to break that pattern so that rich conversations are always part of their learning."

Using QTEL to Drive Schoolwide Instructional Improvement

QTEL starts with the premise that every teacher interacts with ELL students, so the entire faculty must be collectively committed to setting high expectations for these students and helping them excel. An important lesson of QTEL's work in Austin is that a school must have a clear vision of what high achievement looks like in the classroom and a coherent set of instructional practices to bring about the achievement. To develop that vision, instructional coaches work with individual teachers on every aspect of the instruction cycle, from creating purposeful lesson plans to evaluating whether students have met daily learning goals.

"One of the revolutionary moments for me in lesson planning and design was that I used to think that something would be cool to do with kids, so I'd want to use it in class," says International High School history and geography teacher Kyle Olson. "But was it purposeful? Was I scaffolding their learning? Was it moving them toward the learning goals? Those kinds of questions I started asking after QTEL."

Olson's colleague, English teacher Angela Hinz, discovered she had to do a better job of balancing content instruction with language acquisition strategies. Instead of marching sophomores through a drawn-out reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Hinz learned to prepare students for the play's central theme by drawing on their prior knowledge of family conflict. Then she chooses key sections of the play that will engage students in the story of infatuated teenagers caught between feuding families.

To strengthen understanding of the play and use of literary terms, Hinz has students design posters defining the main characters' roles, write postcards to friends concisely describing the play's setting and context, and use evidence from the play to justify a character's actions.

Implementing Change That Can Be Sustained

To help institutionalize instructional reform, QTEL provides extended professional development for administrators as well as teachers. At Lanier High School, former principal Edmund Oropez says, he and his entire administrative team taught at least one class a day so they would understand how the recommended instructional changes affected students and staff across the school. He also adjusted the school schedule so teachers could have common planning periods with colleagues from the same departments. This resulted in more instructional consistency across the school because teachers could collaborate "as physicians do in a teaching hospital."

Because of QTEL, says International High School Principal Leticia Vega, she has developed a shared leadership approach to school management that focuses on relationships and results. For example, rather than treat classroom observations as checklist walk-throughs — lesson plans aligned to standards, check; students working in groups, check — Vega began looking for evidence of deep and progressive learning.

"We are not satisfied so quickly now," Vega says. "Before, classroom observations resulted in an administrator telling teachers what they needed to change. Now conversations are much more purposeful and give teachers a voice in explaining what they're doing and why."

During the three-year cycle of change, QTEL identifies teachers in all subject areas and extends their learning on how to translate educational theory into purposeful classroom tasks. With support and coaching, the teachers will be able, in turn, to coach their colleagues in years to come. Kyle Olson and Angela Hinz have become instructional coaches at International High School.

Building trust so that teachers feel comfortable changing practices is "tricky," Hinz acknowledges, "but if you have respect and lay down your ego, then other people shift, too, and you can have honest conversations about teaching."

"One of the nice surprises for all of us has been how willing, how friendly and receptive teachers become," Walqui comments, "when you provide them with targeted support — even though this requires them to significantly change how they are teaching. Whenever we begin our work at a school, we meet some teachers who have become jaded and bitter because they have seen so few positive outcomes from their efforts and no one is helping them with the concrete aspects of teaching. It is exciting when, through collegial conversations and follow-up, they begin to renew their teaching and themselves, and to sense that their work really does matter."

A full study of QTEL's impact in Austin, as well as of similar QTEL projects in New York City and San Diego, is under way.