

English Learner Expertise: Not Just for Specialists Anymore

With a majority of English learners (EL students) born in the U.S. and the proportion of EL students within the overall student population growing dramatically, providing the best possible education for English learners has become a home-grown issue of increasing urgency.

Aida Walqui, Director of WestEd's Teacher Professional Development Program, makes the point more starkly: "Unless we start looking at how to educate English learners as a systemic issue – something relevant to all teachers, not just EL specialists – we will become an illiterate nation soon."

A "New Model" for Educating EL Students

Walqui advocates not only for a more systemic approach to educating English learners than schools traditionally have pursued, but also for a more ambitious approach.

In the traditional model, Walqui notes, regular subject matter teachers generally simplify instruction and reduce expectations for English learners. EL specialists bear most or all of the responsibility for improving these students' language skills, while the subject matter teachers generally have little or no expertise specific to working with EL students. If the teachers do receive professional development focused on EL instruction, it is generally no more than a few days of workshops with no follow-up.

By contrast, Walqui and colleagues are advancing a new model in which all educators develop expertise in English learner instruction. Professional development guides teachers toward providing "high challenge, high support" lessons, which give English learners intellectually challenging experiences and provide the supports needed for them to develop English language skills and academic content knowledge simultaneously.

To put this model into action, Walqui and colleagues developed the Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) initiative. QTEL provides systemwide professional development and coaching to help teachers in every discipline offer high-caliber instruction for secondary students who are learning English as a second language.

Over several years, QTEL has had success in sites ranging from La Paz Middle School (in an agricultural community in California) to the New York City Department of Education (the nation's largest school district) and has partnered with universities, both nationally and internationally. Building on these experiences, QTEL in 2007 began a multi-year engagement in Austin, Texas, where the QTEL approaches described in this article are being applied at the school system and classroom levels.

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At the System Level

Reconceptualizing professional development. QTEL embodies the notion that professional development must focus on both pedagogy and subject matter simultaneously, and that doing so effectively requires a significant investment of time. The QTEL program includes apprenticeships that help educators build their theoretical knowledge and practical skills for supporting English learners. Experienced educators who have strengthened their own skills and understanding of how to work effectively with English learners provide models for other teachers and guide them through opportunities to apply newly learned information and practices. In this manner, professional development is very different from short-term workshops and better enables educators to gradually appropriate new information and abilities.

Sustained focus. QTEL's developers have found that the competing expectations and requirements of pursuing multiple reform initiatives can create a significant impediment to the success of professional development. In Austin, QTEL has begun with only two high schools (with plans to expand later) and is the only outside support provider currently in these schools. All teachers learn the same theory, says Walqui, and teachers within each discipline learn the same practices, so there's much more coherence and more buy-in.

"We didn't want that Christmas tree approach of just putting an ornament here, putting another there, adding another initiative," explains Edmund Oropez, who was Principal at Austin's Lanier High School when QTEL started there. "We are multiple ships, but all sailing in the same direction. And the beauty of QTEL is it helps us do that through cutting across curriculum, uniting our staff with one single purpose: improving instruction in the classroom."

Nested levels of professional development and capacity building. To build systemic support for English learners requires multilevel professional development. QTEL in Austin consists of three years of continuous professional development for all educators in a school. In this "nested model," different types of participants have different levels of engagement, varying from 8 to 20 days per year of professional development. Some of the QTEL professional development takes place with teachers in disciplinespecific groups (e.g., all mathematics teachers together), and some with all disciplines mixed together.

Administrative leaders attend professional development prior to their teachers and then alongside them. Teacher leaders in each discipline engage in additional professional development to become expert QTEL teachers who, by the second year of QTEL, open their classrooms to their peers to model instructional practices. These leaders participate in six days of professional development per year with other teachers, but they also engage in further reading and discussions, plus they receive extensive coaching, are videotaped, and participate in guided lesson-planning sessions.

QTEL also helps develop the expertise of local professional developers to coach teachers in their subject matters, usher new colleagues into the schools' ways of doing things, and to appropriate and reinvent the schools' professional development model to sustain high-quality instructional practices beyond QTEL's direct involvement. QTEL takes these local professional development experts through a supported apprenticeship process, including benchmarks that signal different levels of expertise.



At the Classroom Level

Opportunities for students to "own the language" as teachers let go of some control. Through the support of scaffolding and opportunities to practice using academic English, says Walqui, students "apprentice to the language" and eventually come to "own the language." She notes that one of the best ways for English learners and other students to have these opportunities is to work together in small groups, solve problems together, struggle, and make mistakes as they participate in activities teachers have carefully constructed.

Providing these kinds of opportunities often requires teachers to let go of some control in their classrooms, allowing the students to take more ownership. Giving up control can be very challenging, especially when it means allowing students to make mistakes, but Walqui insists that errors are part of learning. She encourages teachers not to avoid students' errors but to focus on when and how best to deal with them.

Multiple types of scaffolding. At the core of QTEL professional development is a focus on classroom instruction. QTEL helps educators understand and know how to provide the kind of "quality interactions" in the classroom that are essential to learning. In particular, QTEL helps teachers learn and implement multiple kinds of scaffolding to make content more accessible for students who are still acquiring English.

The idea behind scaffolding is to foster student autonomy, says Walqui – whatever English learners can do with support from others today, they will be able to do alone tomorrow. And as our schools serve more EL students, knowing how to help them develop into independent, high-achieving learners will become an important goal for all educators.