

ESOL 101: An Introduction to English Learners in the United States

By Farhana N. Shah

**Montgomery County Public Schools
Maryland**

Abstract

Enrollment of English Learners (ELs) in United States schools have spiked in the last few years. This paper will seek to highlight the struggles that ELs face in their quest to learn English, struggles that teachers face in teaching ELs and the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on ELs. This paper will also introduce the WIDA Consortium, its framework and how it helps educators support ELs.

ESOL 101: An Introduction to English Learners in the United States

According to the National Education Association (NEA), the number of English Learners (ELs) enrolled in American schools has more than doubled in the past 15 years. ELs are a unique group of learners in that they are simultaneously learning English as well as American culture and values. As many studies point out, however, there is a significant achievement gap that exists between ELs and native learners. ELs not only have to overcome struggles in the classroom, but external factors such as the No Child Left Behind Act, which places an importance on standardized testing to determine the abilities of ELs (Menken, 2010). Despite this, ELs are capable of much more than they are given credit for. Therefore, this paper will serve as an introduction to the struggles and accomplishments of young ELs in the United States public school system. With regards to accomplishments of ELs, this paper will also introduce the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessments (WIDA) Consortium and the support it provides to educators of ELLs.

It is a common misconception that the term “English Learners” refers to recently-arrived or immigrant students to the United States. In fact, the NEA points out that 76% of primary school ELs and 56% of secondary school ELs were born in the United States. Hallman and Meineke (2016), add to this by saying, “most of them were born in the United States and in some cases are second- and third-generation students, suggesting that many children of natives who were LEP [limited English proficient] when they began school remain LEP through secondary school.” Also, students are not spread evenly throughout the country. According to Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016), about 50% of ELs are in five states; California, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois. The majority, approximately 75% of all ELs according to the NEA, speak

Spanish as L1. This may be in part due to the proximity of Latin America to the United States. The next common languages are Arabic, Chinese and Vietnamese (NCES, 2017).

As stated before, the main goal of all ELs in the United States is to learn English as well as American customs and values. To do so, ELs “participate in language assistance programs to help ensure that they attain English proficiency,” (NCES, 2017). Since there are varying educational systems throughout the United States, each supports their ELs in different ways. Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016), discuss of two of the more widely used methods, English Immersion and Bilingual Education. The English Immersion method places a heavy emphasis learning only English, while bilingual education places an importance on the development of English and the learner’s L1. Proponents of English immersion say, “there’s a critical period for language acquisition, and thus the earlier students are exposed to and learn English, the better.” Proponents of Bilingual Education state that while the short-term development of English is slower, the long-term effects show that development of both languages can increase English proficiency. In regard to a superior way to teach, Markman and Pithers state, “studies that focus on children in grades K-12 suggest that bilingual education is at least as effective as English-only programs,” meaning that no one way is better than the other.

However, with the increase of ELs in recent years, more and more educators are seeing ELs in their classrooms, whether they are prepared for them or not. Hallman and Meineke (2016), address the various issues that teachers have when left to teach ELs without any prior experience. They argue, “teachers in all content areas must be responsible for providing high quality instruction that meets the needs of this group of students.” This means that any teacher who is teaches in a school that has any EL population must be equipped to support the needs of those students. Hallman and Meineke state that teachers must be willing to go through a

professional development course that will help them in this cause. Doing so will “broaden their conceptual and pedagogical knowledge and more successfully integrate an awareness of teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students into their syllabi and courses.” They point out that over the course of their study, participants said that a combination of external and internal factors contribute to the lack of professional development courses available for teachers, despite the acknowledgement that it is a “growing need.”

In their study, Master, Loeb, Whitney and Wyckoff (2016) describe characteristics of successful EL teachers. They start off by saying that, “characteristics and experiences associated with more effective teachers in general—such as knowledge and teaching experience—will be associated with roughly similar achievement gains for both ELLs and non-ELLs.” This means that effective teachers will see similar results from both their EL students and native students. They also add that successful math teachers are those who, “recognize and explicitly teach the semiotics and vocabulary used in math, and successfully relate the “language” of math to ELLs’ existing knowledge of English and of their first language.” Therefore, a successful teacher can relate new knowledge to what a learner already knows. Master et al., also delves into how “novice,” or new teachers can improve over time. This includes a lot of “on the job learning,” as well as expecting a significant “slope of improvement” within the first few years. The study also echoes the needs addressed by Hallman and Meineke (2016) by stating that teachers who receive preservice and in-service training see an increase in their students’ performance in math, among other areas.

Although there is no formula for a prototypical successful English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, many studies offer their view of what teachers can do in order to increase their chances of success. Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) places an importance on developing

phonetic awareness, as well as “providing explicit vocabulary instruction.” Vocabulary, they say, is closely related with reading comprehension. Martinez, Harris and McClain (2014) believe that reading comprehension is the most important academic skill. They add, “successful in the prototypical American, English dominant public school, ELs must not only learn communicative (i.e., social) English, they also must master academic language.” Hallman and Meineke (2016) add to the discussion of successful teaching by stating, “the [ESL] field must move toward a vision of both culturally and linguistically responsive teaching when working with ELLs.” In other words, the best approach to teaching ELs is one that includes and respects the diversity of the students.

No Child Left Behind and WIDA

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law in 2001. Title III of the act, otherwise known as the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act, provided extra funds “for states to support the needs of English learner students aged 3-21, with the goal of helping them attain English language proficiency,” (Barrow and Markman-Pithers, 2016). However, many studies have pointed out some of the difficulties that ELs, teachers and the school systems have faced since the implementation of the law. This section will not only highlight some of the issues, but also introduce the WIDA Consortium and its attempts to alleviate some of its problems.

In her article, Menken (2010) highlighted some of the issues that have arisen since NCLB was passed into law. She states that the overall effect of the bill has had a negative impact on ELs, “; instead, the quality of schooling for ELLs may indeed have worsened, rather than improved, during the NCLB era.” She attributes this heavily to the over importance of testing

that has come with the NCLB, “Specifically, ELLs must take tests of English language proficiency to measure their acquisition of English, and they must also take—and pass—the same tests of academic content as those taken by native English speakers.” In other words, whether they are ready or not, ELs must pass the same tests that their native counterparts also take. This obviously leads to lower scores even though it is not an accurate portrayal of the abilities of ELs. The necessity for students to pass these tests may also lead teachers to “teach to the test.” In this regard, Menken adds, “Because ELLs typically do not perform well on standardized tests, they are more likely to receive instruction that focuses on test preparation in the form of rote memorization and drills, at the expense of teaching methods proven effective in meeting the needs of this student population,” ergo the actual teaching of English may be neglected in favor of material that helps pass tests.

As stated before, the WIDA Consortium works to alleviate some of the problems ELs face in their education. WIDA was founded in 2002 by three states; Wisconsin, Delaware and Arkansas. Since then, it has grown to 32-member states including Florida, Maryland, Virginia, Nevada and New Mexico, among many more. WIDA states that its mission is to “advances academic language development and academic achievement for children and youth who are culturally and linguistically diverse through high quality standards, assessments, research, and professional learning for educators,” (“Mission and the WIDA Story,” 2014).

One of the few ways WIDA strives to help ELs in the educational context is seen in their standards and theoretical framework. The framework consists of five components; “Can Do Philosophy, Guiding Principles of Language Development, Age-appropriate Academic Language in Sociocultural Contexts, Performance Definitions and Strands of Model Performance Indicators,” (“WIDA Framework,” 2014). To support these standards, WIDA uses theories in

Second Language Acquisition. Theories such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, the conception of interlanguage and the theory that "Language is organized around its communicative purpose," all guide WIDA philosophies, framework and support given to ELs in the United States.

One of the more important standards is the Can-Do descriptors. The descriptors define ELs by their current abilities rather than what they cannot do. The descriptors are broken down by different grade levels. They measure a learner's abilities in the following four categories; to recount, to explain, to argue and to discuss. They are further broken down into the four main EL abilities; speaking, listening, reading and writing. Learners are split up into five categories based on their abilities. Level 1, the lowest level, is described as Entering. The highest level, Level 6, is described as bridging. This can help teachers by measuring what their students are capable of doing and developing instruction that aims to improve what the learners can already do. For example, a middle school learner level 3 (Developing) can speak by relating a series of events by expressing time in multiple tenses and connecting ideas in content-related discourse using transition. For the learner to move to a level 4 (Expanding), they need to be able to speak by paraphrasing and summarizing content-related ideas presented orally as well as connecting ideas with supporting details in a variety of oral venues. Therefore, teachers with level 3 learners can prepare materials that allow for practicing paraphrasing as well as gathering details from a story ("Can Do Descriptors," 2014).

English Learners in the United States is a continuously growing population. Despite the presumed language barrier, ELs are capable of much more than educators realize, if given the proper chance. In fact, Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) claim that ELs have an advantage that some students may not, "speaking two or more languages creates more economic and social

opportunities as it expands the number of people you can communicate with in an increasingly global economy.” Therefore, it is critical that educators of all backgrounds be prepared to better support ELs. Despite some of the struggles that ELs face, there are organizational resources, such as the WIDA Consortium, that seeks to ease their education. ELs, like any other student population, need the whole education system’s support to find success in and beyond the classroom.

Bibliography

Barrow, L. & Markman-Pithers, L. (2016). Supporting Young English Learners in the United States. *Future of Children*, 36(2) pp. 159-183.

“Can Do Descriptors: KEY USES EDITION.” (2016). Retrieved from:
https://www.wida.us/standards/CAN_DOs/

“English Language Learners Face Unique Challenges.” (2008) Retrieved from:
[http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/ELL_Policy_Brief_Fall_08_\(2\).pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/ELL_Policy_Brief_Fall_08_(2).pdf)

“Fast Facts: English Language Learners.” (2017). Retrieved from:
<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>

Hallman, H. L & Meineke, H.R. (2016). Addressing the Teaching of English Language Learners in the United States: A Case Study of Teacher Educators' Response. *A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*. 26(1) pp. 68-82.

Master, B., Loeb, S., Whitney, C., & Wyckoff, J. (2016). Different skills? Identifying differentially effective teachers of English language learners. *The Elementary School Journal*, 117(2), pp. 261-284.

Martinez, R. S., Harris, B., & McClain, M.B. (2014). Practices That Promote English Reading for English Learners (ELs). *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation* 24(2), pp. 128-148.

Menken, K. (2010). NCLB and English Language Learners: Challenges and Consequences. *Theory into Practice*, 49(2), pp. 121-128.

“The WIDA Standards Framework and its Theoretical Foundations.” (2014) Retrieved from: <https://www.wida.us/standards/eld.aspx>