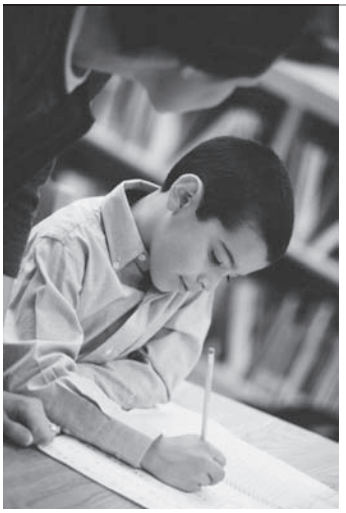
Aiming High
A Countywide Commitment To Close The Achievement Gap For English Learners
Aspirando a lo Mejor
RESOURCE
A SCOE Publication, October 2006



Effective Instruction for English Learners

Based on a presentation by Margarita Calderón, Ed.D.
Senior Research Scientist and Professor
Johns Hopkins University's Center
for Data-Driven Reform in Education

High-quality instruction is the single most important factor in improving student achievement for English Learners. But what does that instruction look like? What does research say about first- and second-language instruction? How do English Learners learn best? What instructional strategies are most effective?

Classroom teachers and school administrators across Sonoma County are asking these questions. In a presentation at the annual Administrative Conference on English Learners held at SCOE last April, Dr. Margarita Calderón used her research with elementary and secondary students across the United States to help local teacher-leaders and administrators explore these questions.

Dr. Calderón's research, supported by previous studies, indicates that the *quality* of the instruction may be more important than the *language* of the instruction when it comes to providing effective educational programs for English Learners. **She defines high-quality instruction as strategic, systematic, and incrementally built on what students already know.** She also says that making instruction explicit will boost English Learner comprehension and participation in learning.

continued next page

This publication is based on a presentation made at the 2006 ELL Administrator Conference hosted by the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE). As part of its Aiming High initiative, SCOE is providing this resource to teachers in Sonoma County.

What is explicit instruction?

Providing explicit instruction of strategic skills and concepts is a key component of quality instruction for English Learners. Explicit instruction focuses on supporting students to produce specific learning outcomes. Topics and content are broken into small parts and taught individually. Instruction is arranged in a logical order. Teachers and students work together to explain, demonstrate, and practice the skills and concepts that will lead to proficiency. Teachers model and monitor student skills, language, behaviors, and thought processes, and students have ample opportunities to practice what they're learning.

Explicit instruction begins with the teacher setting the stage for learning. For example, "Today, we will learn about the digestive system. You will be expected to name the parts of the digestive system and be able to describe how food moves through it."

In this example, students fully understand what the purpose of the lesson is and what they are expected to learn. The teacher then provides a clear explanation of the topic and teaches target vocabulary using visuals, graphic organizers, and note-taking guides. The teacher models how students should complete instructional tasks and demonstrates the type of thinking they should use to explore the content of the lesson.

Throughout the lesson, students are given multiple opportunities to process and practice new information and skills by working in pairs, in small groups, and individually. Instructional tasks are differentiated to meet students' language and learning needs. For example, one group of students might label the parts of the digestive system on a diagram, while another group uses a graphic organizer to sequence how food moves through the digestive system.

As students practice, the teacher monitors and provides feedback, working to increase student understanding of the vocabulary, language, and concepts that are integral to the content. Using the information gained from monitoring student understanding, the teacher develops the next lesson in the learning cycle.

In her research, Dr. Calderón specifically explored literacy development in English Learners and found that explicit instruction is essential in the following key areas:

- Vocabulary acquisition (before, during, and after instruction)
- Phonemic, phonological, and semantic awareness
- Decoding and fluency
- Grammar and spelling
- Contrasting key features of the primary language and English
- Comprehension strategies
- Writing mechanics and composition

Strategic teaching can expedite learning

In order to learn what works best and is most important in the instruction of English Learners, Dr. Calderón spent the last five years developing a program called ExCELL, Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners, as a model for middle and high school teachers who provide English, science, and social science instruction. The schools that participated in the development of this program enrolled a wide range of students—recent newcomers with and without schooling, English Learners who had been in U.S. schools for long periods of time but were not making progress, and English-only students. English Learners and mainstream students in the ExCELL program realized significant gains in both vocabulary and comprehension.

From her studies, Dr. Calderón identified ten components essential to effective instruction for

Explicit instruction is a step-by-step process

1. Set a purpose for learning
2. Tell students what to do
3. Show them how to do it
4. Guide their hands-on application of the learning
5. Monitor their use of vocabulary, language, and concepts
6. Design the next lesson in the learning cycle

English Learners (see box). Each component was carefully analyzed based on reliable scientific research and empirically tested across a variety of classrooms and language groups.

Some of the strategies Dr. Calderón identified relate to preparing appropriate lessons, while others guide lesson delivery or help consolidate student knowledge.

ExCELL components

Lesson preparation

1. **Backward planning.** In backward planning, the first step is to identify the desired end result of instruction by selecting the essential standards that students need to learn to become proficient in the subject area. Next, identify what students should know, understand, and be able to do to demonstrate mastery, then determine which assessments will provide the best evidence of student proficiency. As a last step, plan learning experiences and instruction that will lead to student mastery.
2. **Parsing of text by teachers.** Based on standards, select the most important content for the semester and break those larger pieces into weekly assignments. Condense and eliminate text that is extraneous to student understanding and focus instruction on what is most important for mastery of the topic.
3. **Summarization.** Write a summary or overview of the unit, lesson, or chapter and share it with students. These summaries can take the form of an outline, Thinking Map, Cornell Notes, or written document. Use the summary to focus students on what is important to know, understand, and be able to do.
4. **Background building.** Explore the depth and breadth of student understanding of and experience with a concept, then connect what they already know to what they will learn. Build background around unfamiliar concepts by using graphic organizers, films, pictures, and realia. While building background, focus on developing the academic vocabulary that's essential for proficiency in the content area.
5. **Review of previous lessons, concepts, and content.** Review previously taught lessons and/or what students learned in other grades to form a bridge to new learning. Connecting new learning to previous knowledge will help students move new information into permanent memory.

Lesson delivery

6. **Explicit instruction of vocabulary.** Identify the Tier 1, 2, and 3 words in the lesson, then explicitly teach Tier 2 words. Quickly review important Tier 2 words daily throughout the week. Talk with students about which vocabulary strategies work and which should be revised in order to solidify their learning.
7. **Formulation of questions.** Pose questions that focus students on what is important to know, do, and understand. Use questions to probe student knowledge and deepen understanding.
8. **Engagement with text.** Use read-alouds to model comprehension strategies and thinking about a topic. Target a specific comprehension strategy in each lesson—for example, cause and effect, inference, comparing and contrasting, problem-solving, self-correction, summarizing, questioning, and forming hypotheses. Have students read with a partner to practice the strategies and expand comprehension. Debrief with students about the success of their learning.

Consolidation of student knowledge

9. **Consolidation of knowledge and skills.** Use instructional conversations, graphic organizers, team activities, writing tasks, and debriefing to solidify what students have learned.
10. **Assessment.** Use a variety of assessments—performance-based assessments, portfolios, traditional tests, quizzes, or compositions—that are keyed to the way students can best demonstrate new learning.

Engage students in structured active participation

A basic premise of ExCELL is that all students must participate and actively practice what they learn. Through her extensive research, Dr. Calderón has found that it is not enough to encourage students to talk to an elbow partner or table group or to direct round-robin reading. Interactions must be carefully structured to ensure that students gain the greatest benefit possible from their participation.

"There is no such thing as silent learning, especially with EL students," says Dr. Calderón. "Students must all participate 100 percent of the time—and they must practice, practice, practice if they are going to reach academic and linguistic parity with their English-only peers."

Structured active participation does not happen when students are listening quietly to a lecture about the digestive system. It happens, says Calderón, when they are interacting with teachers and other students and when they are writing, drawing, and making presentations about what they've learned.

Students must all participate 100 percent of the time—and they must practice, practice, practice.

Well-designed lessons that incorporate structured active participation allow students at all levels of language and learning proficiency to take in and

Choosing words for EL students

Dr. Calderón uses the concept of Tier 1, 2 and 3 words when describing the process of vocabulary development for English Learners. Tier 1 words are everyday words that are used simply and frequently. Many English Learners are familiar with Tier 1 words in their primary language and only need to learn the English translation. Simple, direct instruction works well with Tier 1 words.

Tier 2 words are words that can be used across the curriculum, are important to comprehension, appear frequently, and have high instructional potential. Words with multiple meanings—words like run, dash, and table—are also Tier 2 words. Students must talk about, compare, analyze, and use Tier 2 words to ensure deep understanding. They can build connections between Tier 2 words by looking at their roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

Tier 3 words are complex, technical, used less frequently, and often relate to a specific discipline. Tier 3 words are generally taught through discussion during a lesson.

Three tiers of words

Tier 1 Basic words—*fell, mad, good, speak*

Tier 2 High frequency, but challenging words—*clarify, firmly, issue, industrious*

Tier 3 Infrequently used words that are often discipline-specific—*foreshadow, monarchy, vacuole, integer*

Teaching Tier 2 words

1. Select a word or concept from the text.
2. Explain the meaning with a student-friendly definition and/or visuals.
3. Provide examples in contexts other than the one in the text.
4. Have students repeat the word at least three times.
5. Engage students in activities that develop both word and concept knowledge.
6. Have students re-state the word.

process new information. Through their participation, students can integrate new learnings with old and extend understanding. To ensure 100 percent participation among English Learners, instruction and tasks must be differentiated to meet the range of language and learning needs in each classroom.

Dr. Calderón suggests these ideas for teachers to consider when planning structured active participation:

- In each lesson, incorporate not one, but a *series* of instructional tasks that are leveled from where students are to where they need to be in order to meet grade-level standards.
- Arrange instructional tasks so they move from the concrete to the abstract.
- Transition students from informal to formal usage of academic language in the sequence of tasks.
- Model and provide clear demonstrations of the type of thinking and strategies required for successful completion of the academic tasks.
- Link the language students need for communicating understanding to the content of the lesson.
- Provide clear, explicit feedback about student performance and how it compares to grade-level standards.

Base vocabulary development on what students already know

Dr. Calderón has found that one challenge teachers of English Learners face is balancing comprehensible input with rich, challenging vocabulary instruction. For students to comprehend a teacher presentation or text, they must know and understand 90 to 95 percent of the words. On average, when taught a new word, students must use it 12 times before it is mastered.

To add some perspective to the daunting task English Learners face in terms of vocabulary development, consider this fact: high-performing high school seniors in the United States have a working vocabulary of over 60,000 words, which means they learned over 5,000 words in each year of schooling or about 15 words per school day.

For English Learners, this means that it is not enough for vocabulary to be explicitly taught only in English-language arts classes; vocabulary must be taught on a daily basis *in all disciplines*. Teachers across the content areas must make word learning overt in order to ensure that students focus on and understand the importance of vocabulary development.

Dr. Calderón's research emphasizes that the strategic use of a student's primary language can speed English vocabulary development. That's because vocabulary knowledge can transfer from a student's primary language to English, although it must be explicitly taught for the transfer to take place.

In order to overcome the English vocabulary disadvantage for English Learners, Dr. Calderón maintains that teachers need to teach vocabulary explicitly on a daily basis *in both Spanish and English*. She has found that when EL students are taught 15 words a day in English only, they do not reach mastery. However, if taught 15 words a day in both Spanish and English, five to ten of the words will transfer from the primary language to English, thereby significantly increasing the number of words acquired.

For students to comprehend a teacher presentation or text, they must know and understand 90 to 95 percent of the words.

Here are some ideas for the strategic use of students' primary language recommended by Dr. Calderón:

- Teach cognates, prefixes and suffixes, and common features of Spanish and English.
- Provide a quick translation of vocabulary words, if you speak the primary language of your students.
- Use a parallel primary language text and help students find the critical words in the text.
- Group students in like-language groups to negotiate meaning.

- Assign bilingual paraprofessionals to work in both languages with an emphasis on connecting the primary language to English.

In summary

High-quality instruction that effectively and efficiently builds English Learner linguistic and content area proficiency must be designed so that each component supports the others. Teachers should carefully plan lessons, deliver instruction, and consolidate student learning with a goal of allowing English Learners to fully participate in the curriculum 100 percent of the time. To ensure that EL students are successful, teachers must support students with explicit step-by-step instruction, a strong focus on vocabulary, strategic use of the first language, and structured active participation that allows students to process new information, while expanding and elaborating on what they know and can do. Dr. Calderón's work with teachers across the United States has confirmed that when strong connections are made for EL students, high expectations can be met. ■

Making instruction explicit will boost English Learner comprehension and participation in learning.

Dual language concept categorization

Dr. Enrique Dominguez, a teacher at Vallejo High School, uses this strategy when starting a new topic or concept. Students use Thinking Maps as graphic organizers for their work.

- First, he asks students to brainstorm a list of all the words they know in their primary language relating to the topic/concept being studied—in this example, the American Revolution. Students may work in pairs or alone. A Circle Map is used to record their words.
- Next, he has students use a Tree Map to categorize those words. Sometimes, he determines the categories for the students. At other times, he asks them to group and label the words themselves. Categorization is important because it helps students make connections between words and encourages greater comprehension.
- Dominguez then pairs students with a partner or bilingual paraprofessional to translate the words into English and verify their meanings. Using a vocabulary notebook, students create a personalized bilingual reference that can be used and expanded throughout the study of the topic/concept.

Students used a Circle Map to record Spanish words about the American Revolution.

Words about the American Revolution

Ideas	People	Tools
liberty	army	gun
war	soldier	pistol
treaty	colonist	cannon

This Tree Map shows how the students translated and categorized the words from the Circle Map.

Use contrasting features to further English language development

One instructional strategy that teachers can use to support students learning English is to contrast the common and unique features between the two languages, in this case Spanish and English.

For example, some of the most common prefixes and suffixes in English actually are the same, with the same meaning, in Spanish. When teaching the English prefix "pre," a teacher can refer to the Spanish prefix "pre" and give examples of both Spanish and English words that use this prefix, then compare/contrast the meaning and construction of those words. This would be a great activity for students working in pairs or with the support of a bilingual paraprofessional or parent volunteer—especially in a class where the teacher does not speak Spanish. Students can keep word lists in a vocabulary notebook for future reference, which can be added to on an ongoing basis.

English	Spanish	Meaning	English example	Spanish example
co-	co-	together	cooperation	cooperación
inter-	inter-	between	intermediate	intermedio
pre-	pre-	before	prefix	prefijo
dis-	des- or dis-	away, off	displease	desagradar
re-	re-	again	revoke	revocar
sub-	sub- or sus-	under	subordinate	subordinar

Build vocabulary knowledge by teaching cognates

Explicit instruction of cognates is also an effective way to build vocabulary knowledge among English Learners. Cognates are words that sound alike and/or look alike in both Spanish and English. Dr. Calderón and other researchers have found that while vocabulary banks increase faster in the primary language, comprehension in the second language can be expedited when students understand and use cognates.

To teach cognates, start by stating the word in English and in Spanish. Ask the students to say both the English word and Spanish cognate. Look at the words to determine how they are alike and how they are different. What are the endings, roots, and affixes across the languages? Verify the meaning of the word in English and Spanish. Is the meaning the same? Across contexts? Identify how the word is used across languages. Ask the students to write, draw, and define the English word and its cognate in their vocabulary notebooks. Finally, ask students to say the words again.

When using cognates, teachers must also be aware of false cognates, words that look or sound alike in Spanish and English, but do *not* have the same meaning. Examples of false cognates include large and largo (long), exit and éxito (success), and pie and pie (foot).

Dr. Calderón's research emphasizes that the strategic use of a student's primary language can speed English vocabulary development.

Examples of cognates	angle	ángulo
	peninsula	península
	gulf	golfo
	volcanic	volcánico

Local example: Bellevue School

Structured active participation engages all students in learning

Teacher **Peggy Stark** at Bellevue School uses structured active participation to ensure that her EL students are processing information that is critical for deep comprehension. Deep comprehension requires students to continuously learn new vocabulary, associate new readings with prior knowledge, add new knowledge, discuss ideas, interpret facts, and apply critical thinking skills.

Stark began a lesson based on *Mrs. Brown Went to Town* from the second-grade Houghton Mifflin Reading anthology with a Multi-Flow Map, which is used to determine cause/effect and make predictions. To build background for her students, Stark talked about what her dog, Sony, did when he was left home alone. She used the Multi-Flow Map to detail the causes and effects of Sony being left alone.

After reading the first part of *Mrs. Brown Went to Town*, students created their own Multi-Flow Maps and predicted three things the animals would do when left alone in the house. Some students drew pictures, while others wrote single words or entire sentences.

Stark grouped the students in pairs and asked them to review their predictions with their partner. She provided sentence starters to help students structure their responses.

- *For more limited students:* The animals will _____.
- *For more advanced students:* If left alone, the animals would _____.

Finally, Stark's students each created another Multi-Flow Map predicting what would happen if their own pets were left home alone. Students then took the information from their maps and wrote a paragraph about their animals.

One student predicted what the animals would do when left in the house by using words, while another made drawings to illustrate his predictions.

Stark structured the lesson so that students understood they were working with the skill of prediction, then supported their active processing of information through a variety of structured activities—write-pair-share, use of sentence starters, and scaffolding language—which enabled all students to participate regardless of their skill or language level.

This publication was developed by the Sonoma County Office of Education in support of Aiming High. For information, contact Jane Escobedo, (707) 522-3305.

Sonoma County Office of Education

Carl Wong, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools
5340 Skylane Boulevard Santa Rosa, CA 95403
(707) 524-2600 ■ www.scoe.org