

The Difficult Road for Long-Term English Learners

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Schools have increasingly large numbers of long-term English language learners. So what can they do to meet their needs?

Recent data show that approximately one-third of all English language learners in grades 6–12 in New York City are actually *long-term English language learners* (New York City Department of Education, 2008). The term refers to English language learners who have attended U.S. schools for seven years or more. Although national data about these students have not been gathered, it appears that significant numbers currently attend middle and high schools across the United States.

In spite of their numbers, long-term English language learners mainly go unnoticed in schools or, worse yet, are misunderstood and perceived as failures. By better understanding the characteristics and needs of this student population, schools can do a better job of supporting their learning.

Who Are They?

With a team from the Research Institute for the Study of Language in an Urban Society, we are currently in our third year of research¹ on long-term English language learners in New York City high schools. The first phase of this research, which we conducted in the 2007–08 school year, consisted of interviews with 29 long-term English language learners and their teachers and administrators to identify the characteristics and education needs of these students. During the second phase, which is currently underway, we are piloting a program of support services specifically targeting long-term English language learners in two New York City high schools. The focus is on English and Spanish biliteracy development and explicit literacy instruction across all content subjects.

From our own research (Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2007) as well as others' (Callahan, 2006; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000), several common characteristics emerge that define this student

population. Long-term English language learners

Are typically found in grades 6–12.

Speak different languages and come from all over the world.

Are often orally bilingual and sound like native English speakers.

However, they typically have limited literacy skills in their native language, and their academic literacy skills in English are not as well-developed as their oral skills are.

Fall into two main groups: (1) transnational students who have moved back and forth between the United States and their family's country of origin and have attended school in both countries; and (2) students who have received inconsistent schooling in the United States, moving in and out of bilingual education, English as a second language, and mainstream programs in which they received no language support services.

Have often not resided in the United States continuously, despite the fact that they may have been born in this country. So the U.S.-born label can be misleading.

Experience inconsistent schooling because of frequent moves or incoherent language programming within and across the schools they have attended. Thus, many have significant gaps in their schooling.

Perform below grade level in reading and writing and, as a result, struggle in all content areas that require literacy. The overall school performance of long-term English language learners is low, with poor grades and grade retention commonplace, making this population at high risk for dropping out.

Have different needs from those of newly arrived English language learners, yet language programming at the secondary level is typically intended for new arrivals. In addition, most educators are unfamiliar with the specialized needs of this population, a problem compounded by poor data about these students in their school records.

What Are Their Stories?

Three students whom we interviewed for our research give a human face to the issue.

José Miguel: Transnational with Schooling Gaps

José Miguel² is a 10th grader who has experienced significant transnational and intranational moves (Menken et al., 2007). He was born in Mexico and came to the United States when he was 2 years old. For five years, his family lived in New York, where he began school. His family then moved to Virginia for his 2nd grade year. After completing only part of that school year, he went to live in Mexico for nearly two years. He did not attend school during that time. When he returned to Virginia, "They put me in 4th grade," he said, "because of my age." He spent two years in Virginia before returning to New York City, where he attended one middle school and where he is now in his second year of high school.

Because of his frequent moves, José Miguel has faced considerable inconsistency in the programming he has received. He began in a bilingual program in New York City but received English-only instruction in Virginia. His English acquisition was then interrupted when he moved to Mexico. Since returning from Mexico, José Miguel has only received English as a second language instruction in middle and high school, without native language support. His high school first placed him in a Spanish foreign language class, but his proficiency in Spanish caused the school to quickly move him to French class instead.

As a result of his education experiences, José Miguel believes that his literacy skills are more developed in English than in Spanish. He can read Spanish, he noted, "but not perfectly." His grades average 75 percent.

Sandra: U.S.-Born, with Inconsistent U.S. Schooling

Sandra is an 11th grader who was born in the United States and has remained in this country her entire life. She was born to immigrant parents—her mother came from Ecuador and her father from Puerto Rico. At home, she converses in Spanish with her parents and in English with her siblings. Among her friends, English is her language of choice, with one exception: "When we talk about our parents," she said. Sandra feels equally comfortable speaking both languages.

Sandra's academic career has spanned a total of five New York City schools:

three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Language instruction has been inconsistent. She recalled how the teacher in an early grade "used to write sentences in Spanish and then do the same sentences in English." As she moved into 4th grade, her teacher and fellow students were bilingual, "But we didn't do no work in Spanish," she explained. In fact, she received no Spanish instruction until her sophomore year of high school, when she began taking a Spanish course intended for those learning it as a foreign language. She easily passed that course because of her oral proficiency and was then placed in a Spanish class for students from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. (These are common in schools with large numbers of Spanish-speaking students.) This class posed new challenges for her because of her limited literacy skills in the language. As she explained, "It's like words that I've never seen before, I've never spoken."

Sandra is also enrolled in an English as a second language class. But she doesn't go to it because it's too easy—"like a baby class," she said. For example, the teacher "takes a paragraph and she does a dictation. And she tells us what to write, and she reads it," or she asks the students to write about a vacation they took.

Her English language arts class, on the other hand, is too challenging for her. One task that the teacher asks the students to do is a *critical lens*,³ which requires students to interpret a quotation and write a persuasive essay, drawing on different literary genres. Said Sandra, "And I be stuck, like how am I supposed to write what that means?" Sandra's average grade in 11th grade is 55 percent. She admitted, "I feel embarrassed. I usually get low grades."

Akousa: Foreign-Born, with Inconsistent U.S. Schooling

Akousa is a 12th grader whose family emigrated from Ghana when she was 7 years old. Before arriving in the United States, she only spoke Twi. Akousa experiences rigid language separations in her personal life and schooling. She explains, "I speak Twi the most with my father and stepmother. I have to speak English with my brother because I feel like it's more easier for me. I, like, spit it out." With bilingual friends, she uses both English and Twi, yet she points out, "I'm trying to speak my language to my people who come from where I came from ... because it's my native language and I should be proud of it. I shouldn't let it slip out of my mind." Although her personal life has been bilingual, her

schooling has been completely monolingual in English; there are relatively few Twi speakers in New York, and thus no bilingual programs in that language.

Akousa started school in the United States in 3rd grade, although before beginning that year, she was out of school for somewhere between a few months and a full school year. So far, she has attended two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Akousa received English as a second language services in elementary and high school; in middle school, she experienced a three-year absence of any language support.

Although Akousa feels comfortable speaking English and Twi, her schooling experiences have led to English dominance in her literacy skills. She never formally learned to read in Twi, yet English literacy poses a great challenge for her. She explained, "The big words, I don't understand them, you know, so confusing." When asked to specify her greatest weakness, she responded, "Oh! Writing ... Like when they give you an essay to write ... I have to really think deep and sometimes I misunderstood what they say." Akousa's average grade in her senior year is 69 percent.

What Opportunities Have We Missed?

As research has shown, native language literacy ability is one of the greatest predictors of academic performance in school for English language learners (Ford, 2005; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Research is also conclusive that teaching students to read in their native language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English (Goldenberg, 2008). Students who have the opportunity to develop and maintain their native languages in school are likely to outperform their counterparts in English-only programming and to experience academic success (Baker, 2006; Krashen & McField, 2005; Thomas & Collier, 1997). This is because the literacy skills that students learn in their native languages transfer to English (Cummins, 2000).

However, the long-term English language learners we studied rarely had the opportunity to hone their native language skills. For instance, Akousa has been taught in English only, and she never formally learned how to read and write in her native language. The majority of English language learners speak Spanish, but the rest speak more than 400 languages, which makes it difficult for schools to include less prevalent languages, such as Twi, in their programming. But

schools can still focus on developing all students' native language literacy skills through several approaches: by using bilingual paraprofessionals or local volunteers; by implementing after-school enrichment programs; and by providing, when possible, texts in students' native languages for classroom use.

In addition, students like Akousa are often placed in mainstream classrooms for long periods of time without receiving language support. This lack of support is explained by the fact that the majority of mainstream teachers feel unprepared to work with language learners (Nieto, 2002).

José Miguel missed two years of elementary school altogether, a period when literacy is a central focus of schooling. When he returned from Mexico to the United States, he found that the 4th grade curriculum already demanded high levels of literacy and that his peers had a stronger literacy foundation than he did. He is still making up for the time lost.

Moreover, although José Miguel and Sandra were enrolled in bilingual education programs in early elementary school, these programs were not always pedagogically sound. For example, in Sandra's experience, the teacher used to write the same sentence in English and Spanish on the chalkboard. But this concurrent translation approach has proven to be an ineffective pedagogical tool, as students simply wait to hear information in their dominant language and disregard the other language (Crawford, 2004).

Whatever the caliber of these bilingual education experiences, they were not sustained. For Sandra's and José Miguel's remaining years in U.S. schools, instruction has taken place in English only.

In fact, the vast majority of immigrants to the United States receive instruction only in English, the misconception being that doing so will help students learn English better and more quickly. But the English language programming offered to these students in high school is often mismatched to their needs. English classes are either too easy—like a "baby class"—or too difficult, as in English language arts classes that demand high levels of English literacy.

Foreign language classes are a missed opportunity to support long-term English language learners' literacy development. Schools rarely offer foreign language classes targeted to long-term English language learners. Instead, Spanish classes, for example, are usually intended for either native English speakers who

do not speak Spanish or for native Spanish speakers who arrive in the United States with high levels of Spanish literacy skills. Spanish classes would have been particularly helpful for José Miguel and Sandra if teachers had used them strategically to develop the students' native language literacy skills and address their gaps in schooling.

What Can We Do?

To ensure that English language learners have the opportunity to build a strong foundation in their native languages and to support their acquisition of English, educators and administrators need to promote bilingualism and biliteracy development in grades K–12. Secondary schools must develop specialized programs for long-term English language learners, tailor English as a second language classes to students' needs, and focus on literacy development across content areas and languages.

Our pilot program for long-term English language learners seeks to support the development of students' literacy skills in English and Spanish through a three-pronged approach:

Spanish language and literacy courses, to help students develop a strong foundation in academic Spanish.

English as a second language courses, in which long-term English learners are taught separately from new arrivals so that instruction can focus on literacy in English rather than on the development of oral language proficiency.

Content-area courses—such as math, science, and social studies—that focus simultaneously on content and literacy learning.

Teachers plan collaboratively throughout the year to develop units with embedded language and literacy skills, which they then teach across all subjects. For example, teachers at one school chose to incorporate into their instruction a focus on comparisons and the academic language structures that comparing entails—descriptors such as *larger than*, *greater mass than*, *more robust than*, and so on. In social studies, students analyze two different time periods, comparing and contrasting them as they familiarize themselves with the terms. In science, students compare asexual and sexual heredity. In all language courses, students may work on nonfiction autobiographies to develop more sophisticated

use of language and deeper understandings about the genre. Regardless of the subject matter, all teachers must see themselves as language and literacy teachers and be prepared to teach language through content.

On a wider scale, it is essential that U.S. schools develop more coherent language policies to reduce the movement in and out of bilingual education, English as a second language, and mainstream programs. Schools also need more accurate data about the English learner population so that they can do a better job of both placing and serving these students. For instance, schools need to know not only when the students arrived in the United States, but also whether the students have been here consistently. Because no system like this is currently in place, schools must take it upon themselves to learn about their incoming students by asking them about their previous schooling and the length of time they have attended U.S. schools.

Long-term English language learners are a significant and growing secondary population, so it is of pressing concern that schools take notice of them and meet their needs.

Endnotes

1 The Office of English Language Learners of the New York City Department of Education funded our research project. For more information about our research, including information about our pilot program, visit

<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/Linguistics/rislus/projects/LTELL/>.

2 All student names are pseudonyms.

3 *Critical lens* is a task on the statewide English language arts exam required for high school students in New York. The task is linguistically complex and intended to measure college readiness (Menken, 2008).

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