

# IV FORO NACIONAL INTERCULTURALIDAD, BILINGÜISMO Y CIUDADANÍA

## INSTRUCTION FOR DIVERSE GROUPS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

(Documento complementario)

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Se presentan cinco principios para orientar la provisión de experiencias de aprendizaje en estudiantes de Inglés como segunda lengua teniendo como objetivo los Common Core State Standards (CCSS) en Estados Unidos. Aunque esta propuesta supone un manejo básico o intermedio del inglés, los principios sugeridos permitirían el desarrollo de usos académicos del Inglés independientemente del nivel de suficiencia del estudiante.

ENSEÑANZA DE SEGUNDA LENGUA / BILINGÜISMO / INGLÉS / ESTÁNDARES  
DE APRENDIZAJE



## **Instruction for Diverse Groups of English Language Learners**

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As the title of this paper implies, English Language Learners (ELLs) are immensely diverse<sup>i</sup>. Given this variability, what are the learning opportunities their teachers need to offer them so that they can achieve the goals envisioned by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)? We take the view that for children entering school with little or no English, there is a pivotal role for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, which is to develop students' English language, both social and academic, in deep, generative, and accelerated ways. Once students have reached a threshold level of English Language proficiency (broadly defined as intermediate), further development of the academic uses of language should be the responsibility of every teacher<sup>ii</sup>. This, of course, will require a different level of teacher expertise than currently exists among most teachers. However, we see the advent of the CCSS as a catalyst for change in this regard. With this end in mind, we offer a set of five principles to guide the provision of learning experiences for ELLs.

***Principle 1: Learning is always based on prior knowledge and experience. ELLs must have equal access to knowledge that is valued in school.*** Learners actively construct understandings within a social and cultural context (Greenfield, 2009), building new knowledge on what they already know (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978), and developing the metacognitive skills necessary to regulate their own learning (Bruner, 1985; Rogoff, 1998, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). The cultural as well as social foundations of learning are important in that the prior knowledge on which students build new learning is culturally shaped (Greenfield, 2009; Heath, 1983; Rogoff, 2003). This includes ideas about social roles in the classroom, the role of schooling, and how to use language in the learning process (Bransford et al., 2000).

Academic language has often been conceived of as “decontextualized language” and defined in contrast to conversational language, which occurs in a shared physical context. It is also described as being explicit, as if all that were needed to interpret it were located in the text. However, academic writing is not decontextualized, nor is it fully explicit. It presumes a shared context with its readers who have to “add back in a large piece of the domain conversation that is left inexplicit in the writing” (Gee, 2006, p. 159). Therefore, making meaning of academic language—as with any language—requires drawing on relevant background knowledge and previous participation in discourse, a process Aukerman calls “situating that language vis-à-vis other experiences and what others have said” (Aukerman, 2006, p. 631). This contextualization serves as a gatekeeper and obscures meaning when students cannot draw upon this shared context.

A common solution to this challenge is to ask ELLs to work with texts of familiar or low-level content and simplified language. This works against their academic content, language, and literacy development. To advance into what they do not know yet presupposes that their teachers “build the field” (Derewianka, 1991; Hammond and Gibbons, 2005), that is, help them develop the indispensable knowledge needed to construct new understandings. To this end, teachers will need to weigh the appropriateness of texts taking into consideration a progression of content and linguistic complexity, bridging into new complex understandings and language.

For example, the ELA CCSS suggest reading an excerpt from Frederick Douglas’s autobiography in the middle grades. To be able to understand this text, students need to be

aware that slavery existed in the U.S., and the conditions and tensions it introduced. Linguistically, the text uses arcane language: "...This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge... I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids, not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them." Historically, it has great value as a counterargument for the existence of slavery. The text merits being read by middle school students. However, the pertinent questions are *when?* and *with what support?* If the teacher had mostly long-term ELLs in class, she might decide they had enough background knowledge to support their reading. She could not, however, assume that students who had recently arrived from other countries and had interrupted schooling would be able to work through the text meaningfully without her support. She would need to build students' background knowledge of the historical moment, and prepare them for the arcane features of the language used. On the other hand, the teacher may decide that while the theme is important, at this moment in the development of her ELLs' English and literacy skills, it may be better to use a comparable text in modern English. Later on, with deeper and wider understandings, students would be able to tackle this text on their own.

***Principle 2: Language and cognition develop together and progressively. As ideas and relationships become more complex, so does language.*** Ever since the emergence of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956), the general relationship between language and cognition has been disputed (Pinker, 1995), though recent evidence suggests that language does play a significant role in the specification of particular cognitive faculties (Lucy 1992; Gumperz & Levinson 1996; Levinson, 2003). A useful way to understand this relationship may be in terms of Boyd and Richerson's (2005) concept of cultural evolution as a process through which collective conceptual stabilization is facilitated by the role of linguistic categories. Such linguistic categories make particular relationships more highly codable, and retrievable by individuals and groups. For example, a child may note the recurrence of an object by announcing "another one X", but subsequently refine the intention of the concept of "another one" by replacing it with the predicate "same" while successively touching the two objects (William Ziolkowski, 2011). Here, the underlying criterion for the expression "another one," already cognitively available to the child in 'practical consciousness,' (Giddens, 1984) is becoming articulated through the availability of the term "same", thus entering into 'discursive consciousness' and becoming stabilized as a resource for use in ordinary interaction. In this way, an underlying criterion of judgment is externalized through the resources of culture.

Language learning is an essential feature of this process. In the specific context of EL instruction, teachers must pay attention to developing the language necessary to encode emerging concepts across domains so that they can be sustained. Learning concepts is not treated as distinct from the linguistic means through which the understanding is acquired and expressed; the demands of understanding concepts and relationships are not privileged above the demands of linguistic resources, nor vice versa. Thus, effective instruction involves the integrated learning of concepts and language through meaningful experiences in conjunction with scaffolding by teachers and peers of the features of academic language, both spoken and written, that are needed to construe meaning (van Lier, 2004; Heritage, Silva & Pierce, 2007). To illustrate the integration of language and understanding, we turn to an example from a kindergarten-first grade science class. The teacher is planning a unit of study to develop the

concept of the life cycle, and has identified the following goals: 1) understanding plants and animals have life cycles that include being born, developing into adults, reproducing, and eventually dying; 2) knowing that the details of this life cycle are different for different organisms; and 3) understanding that many characteristics of an organism are inherited from the parents. She decides on the particular language elements that she will be teaching alongside the development of students' knowledge, understanding and skills so as to support their acquisition: the vocabulary and syntax to observe, describe, compare, question, sequence, and report; specific vocabulary, including the nouns caterpillar, chrysalis, larva, the verbs grow, change, transform and reproduce, and the prepositions on, over, under, through, inside, outside; words such as, like, same as, similar, and different to be able to make comparisons between and among organisms; the use of active declarative sentences that include the specific vocabulary in order to describe a sequence of events; and interrogative structures so they can ask questions as part of their inquiry into the life cycle. Pedagogically, she will develop the children's understanding of the life cycle and the language to support their understanding in the context of first-hand experiences, observations and questioning about phenomena and the use of second hand materials such as charts and books (Heritage et al., 2007).

***Principle 3: The goal of learning is to develop the stance of generativity and autonomy.***

***This is accomplished through apprenticeship in which the learner is invited to become a member of a community of practice.*** Generativity and autonomy refer to the ability students develop to support their own learning by using independently what they have learned in the context of apprenticeship with peers or adults within a community of practice (van Lier, 2004.)

Acquiring the linguistic resources is a vital condition to participate in communities of practice (Block, 2003; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). However, without a teacher who is able to invite and support students' participation, resources, while necessary, are not sufficient. Students are socialized into the academic practices of disciplines through joint activity and by being provided with the support, modeling, and opportunity to practice and eventually own or appropriate those practices so that they become generative (Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Walqui & van Lier, 2010).

We see the stance of generativity and autonomy as being essential to college and career readiness, to success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and an espoused goal of the CCSS.

We illustrate this process in the following example. In a 5<sup>th</sup> grade writing class, the students are learning about persuasive writing with a focus, selected by the students, on "saving the environment." The students have learned about the idea of "arguments" and reasons to support the argument, as well as learning about developing counterarguments. One student, Angelica, who has written her arguments and counterarguments, requests a one-on-one conference with her teacher during independent writing time, opening with an invitation: "I would like to get your feedback". With this statement, Angelica is registering her agency as a participant in a community of practice. The teacher engages in the conversation with Angelica, first by asking what she is working on and then what she would specifically like feedback about. Her approach acknowledges the child's agency in the work and her own role as an assistant in supporting Angelica's writing. Angelica has started her piece of writing with two questions and is unsure if this is an effective beginning. In the collaborative discussion that ensues, they simultaneously conclude, in a meeting of minds, that the two questions address different aspects of the same topic and could be combined into one

question. Satisfied that she has a solution, Angelica thanks her teacher and continues to revise her work independently.

(See Appendix 2 for secondary example)

In both these examples we see teachers who have established the norms, values, and routines that are understood and shared by all participants in a community of practice. That facilitates and hones generative learning and autonomy.

***Principle 4: Language use is always contextually appropriate; students need to be competent navigators within a range of different registers.*** Language is a tool human beings use to get things done in the real world. Acquiring proficiency in a language entails developing a linguistic repertoire with which to negotiate different situations and cultural practices (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Valdés, Bunch, Snow, & Lee, 2005). Skilled language users vary their use of language depending on the context and on their purposes, employing different registers and genres as communicative resources. Registers are language varieties associated with a particular situation of use, and genres are regularly occurring spoken and written message types (Derewianka, 1990; Halliday, 1994). Bauman (2001) describes genres as orienting frameworks that support our interpretation and creation of meaningful language. To acquire these, students need access to fluent models and opportunities to participate in interactions where they are also asked to produce extended discourse.

For teachers of ELLs, it will be important to adopt the stance of assisting students to recognize the context in which specific language registers are appropriate –a case of *when* rather than an approach of *you can't*. This presupposes that when teachers are teaching they are aware of the contexts of use and how to bridge students' competence with new registers.

***Principle 5: Assessment is integrated into the process of teaching and learning.***

***Assessment-elicited information is used by both teachers and students to consistently keep learning moving forward.*** During the course of teaching and learning, three key questions serve as the guides for both teachers and their students: Where am I going? Where am I now? Where to next? (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989). In the context of language learning, to answer these questions, teachers and students first need a clear roadmap for learning, a progression of how language develops at the discourse, sentence, and word level across modalities and within different content areas (Bailey & Heritage, 2008; Heritage & Bailey, 2011). This means that there will be multiple, related progressions of the sequence of necessary linguistic skills and knowledge associated with specific disciplines in listening, speaking, reading and writing. These include the discourse features needed to describe content area phenomena, the tenses required for both understanding and expressing causal relationships, and the vocabulary needed to understand concepts (for a more detailed description see Heritage & Bailey, 2011). From these progressions, teachers identify specific short-term language learning goals, sometimes in collaboration with their students, which are the target of immediate teaching and learning. Second, they need a steady stream of data about the current status of student language learning as it is developing. Important to note here is that these data are generated during ongoing teaching and learning, so as to provide both teacher and learner with the necessary information to keep learning moving forward, rather than generated at the end of a period of learning in order to summarize what has been learned. To answer the final question, the data need to be interpreted in relation to the learning goal so that both teacher and student understand students' learning status in relation to the goal to inform decisions about where to next.

To illustrate this process, below we describe two examples of assessment integrated into language instruction. (See appendix 2 for elementary example)

Our next example comes from a secondary ESL class, with newcomers whose experience in the U.S. ranges between three months and two years. The teacher, Mr. DeFazio, has created a five-week unit on linguistics with the purpose of guiding his students through a deep exploration of an academic theme, while at the same time placing a focus on the language needed. This is the third class of the first week on the unit. Having formulated questions they would like to explore around language, students have then perused a variety of texts on the theme to get some information. They now write a letter to a person they know telling them what they have learned so far about language. Before the lesson is over, five students write their beginnings on large sheets of paper to enable a discussion on what they have done and where they may go next. An animated conversation develops on whether animals have language or not. Julio, not part of the five initial volunteers, decides to read his letter aloud to the class.

*Julio:* ... First of all, I think that language is a way to inform others around you, your feelings or just a simple thing that you want to let know people what is the deal. And it can be expressed by saying it, watching a picture, or hearing it, you know what I'm saying? I don't know if you have heard about the kangaroo rat that stamps its feet to communicate with other rats. It's really funny cause we humans have more characteristics to communicate to each other, but we still have problems to understand other people. Characteristics like sound, grammar, pictures and body language are some of them, while the rat only uses the foot (he stamps the ground).

In this lesson, we observe that the teacher has chosen the genre of letters, to have students write with the comfort that letter writing affords. This provides Mr. DeFazio with feedback on what the students understand, and how they are able to express these ideas in emergent academic uses of English. He then leverages his understanding of what students have developed to determine next steps in the process to extend his students' cognitive, academic and linguistic skills. In the above example, Julio demonstrates his understanding of the concept of language.

Both examples shows how teachers focus on students' evolving understandings to decide where next support needs to be centered so as to ripen in their students what is ready to develop.

## **Conclusion**

The advent of the CCSS provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to reconceptualize how ELLs come to acquire increasingly sophisticated understandings, the linguistic resources to internalize and express them, the stance of generativity and autonomy, as well as adeptness in the range of language registers. This opportunity entails a retooling of the education profession to develop the skills to realize the immense potential that diverse groups of ELLs bring to American society. If we fail to take this opportunity, we risk doing a disservice to our students and to our nation as a whole. It is an opportunity we must surely grasp.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> ELLs come from a wide range of backgrounds bringing to their schooling experience “their own personalities, likes and dislikes and interests, their own individual cognitive styles and capabilities and their own strengths and weaknesses” (McKay 2006, p. 5). Developmental differences between younger and older children have a strong impact on the design of the learning opportunities they should be offered. In general the youngest children (ages 3-7) will still be acquiring the more sophisticated formal features of their language, while engaged in learning English. In contrast, older students (ages 8-18) may have mastered more formal aspects of their family language but may still be challenged by non-literal uses of the language such as metaphor and humor (Bailey, Heritage, and Butler, forthcoming.).

ELLs also vary according to socio-cultural environmental differences while at the same time, they share similar features: language exposure, parental education, community attitudes, socioeconomic status, time in the United States, legal status, and ethnic heritage all play a role in the learner’s educational experience as they develop linguistic and social skills (Butler and Stevens, 1997; Walqui, 2000).

ELLs may be monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual. “Monolingual children are typically exposed to one language from birth with the predominant input coming from the home environment. Bilingual or multilingual children speak more than one language with varying degrees of proficiency mediated by situation and need” (Bailey et. al., forthcoming). For example, depending on the circumstances, a child will often associate a specific language with a particular person or people and a specific context. One language is usually dominant in a specific context. In some instances, children may be exposed to two languages simultaneously from birth and handle each language as a distinct system (De Houwer, 2006). (Such instances are referred to as bilingual/first language acquisition).

In addition, adolescent ELLs may have interrupted or no schooling at all when they enter US schools, which means their having to learn the habits and routines of school and associated “school navigational language”, (Bailey and Heritage, 2008) curricular content, and language simultaneously (Walqui, 2000; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

<sup>ii</sup> ELLs who remain enrolled in ESL classes are many times deprived of rich subject matter intellectual engagement (Valdés, 2001; Walqui, Koelsch, & Hamburger, 2010), and they do not advance in their English language proficiency either (Linguanti, R., Crane, R., & Huang, M., 2010).

## OTHER EXAMPLES

We envision the final paper will contain an example from elementary, and another example from middle or high school to illustrate the principles set forth. So as to provide an idea of what that would look like, we include two appendices.

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## Appendix 1

### Principle 3: High School Example

It is not the case that ELLs always willingly engage in school practices. When they have been continuously disinvited from meaningful participation in complex, well-supported activity, as is the case with many long term ELLs, they may take an oppositional attitude to a teacher that breaks the pattern of neglect (Walqui, Koelsch, & Hamburger, 2010).

The following example comes from such a situation. The teacher, Ms. Crescenzi, has renamed the “Remedial Writing” course as a Psychology elective, she has actively “recruited” students for the class, and throughout the semester she offers them rich, sophisticated lessons that develop their literacy skills. In her class, students speak to read, read to write, write to share important ideas, and in the process, they develop their academic uses of English. Three weeks into the class, Carmen, a second generation ELL is engaged in a jigsaw project that engages all students to study a case of brain injury and its aftermath.

In their “expert groups” students have read, discussed, and agreed to write down key information that will be shared by each individual at the next step, when they go back to their “base groups”. There, each student, in a team of four, will share their written notes and discuss them with their peers. In her base group Carmen refuses to share her notes orally. She just hands her notes to her peers. Ms. Crescenzi sees this and asks her to share her notes:

*Carmen:* Why do I have to talk?

*Ms. Crescenzi:* Because you need to practice your English

*Carmen:* But I speak English

*Ms. Crescenzi:* Yes, but *psychological* English...

Indeed, Carmen knows how to use English. In fact, this is the only language she uses with friends and in school, but as the teacher points out invitingly but forcefully at the same time, she needs to develop subject matter uses of English. Fifteen minutes later in the same class, Carmen is observed volunteering to present her team’s work to another group. Although initially not too convinced, she has accepted the invitation to be an apprentice in Ms. Crescenzi’s community of psychology students.

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## Appendix 2

### Principle 5: Elementary School Example

To illustrate this process, below we describe an example of assessment integrated in to language instruction. In Ms. Olvera's third grade classroom of dual language learners, the children are learning about rock formation and because Ms. Olvera integrates reading, writing, listening and speaking into her science content, they have been reading and discussing text on the topic. Her current English language focus with the students is the development of interrogative structures and the use of specific topic vocabulary: rock, mineral, igneous, sedimentary and conglomerate.

She uses three sources of data to inform her and her students about their English language learning: 1) student responses to her questions in the discussion section of the lesson; 2) the oral questions about the text that she asks particular students to construct and the feedback that peers provide to them; and 3) students construction of questions that they think are answered by the text they have just read. They post their notes on what Ms. Olvera has labeled a response board (Figure 1 shows a sample of the post-it notes).

When the questions are posted, Ms. Olvera leads the students through a discussion of the responses (without revealing who wrote which) to consider the degree to which the target vocabulary has been used, the question structure employed and suggestions for improvement.

At the lesson's conclusion, Ms. Olvera and her students decide that they need to continue the focus on vocabulary usage, particularly of rock types and to revise their questions in light of the feedback they have received from their classmates. Ms. Olvera also notes specific students whom she has decided need more focused work on question structures, for example, those influenced by Spanish language word order.

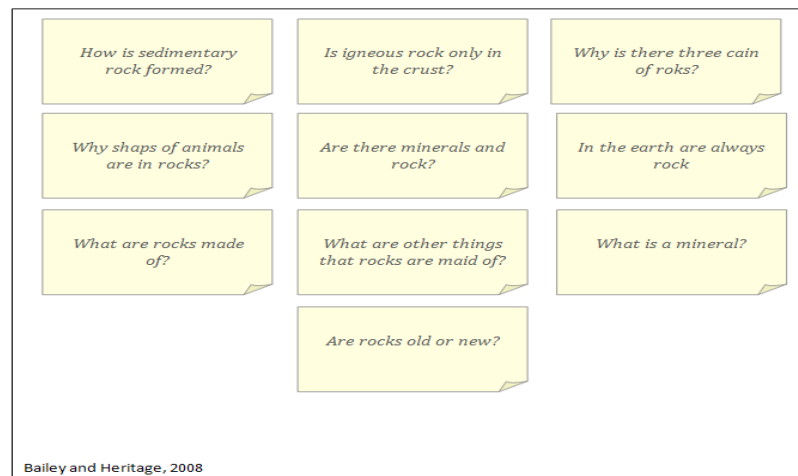


Figure 1. Student questions.