

Application of Common Core State Standards for English Language Learners

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers strongly believe that all students should be held to the same high expectations outlined in the Common Core State Standards. This includes students who are English language learners (ELLs). However, these students may require additional time, appropriate instructional support, and aligned assessments as they acquire both English language proficiency and content area knowledge.

ELLs are a heterogeneous group with differences in ethnic background, first language, socioeconomic status, quality of prior schooling, and levels of English language proficiency. Effectively educating these students requires diagnosing each student instructionally, adjusting instruction accordingly, and closely monitoring student progress. For example, ELLs who are literate in a first language that shares cognates with English can apply first-language vocabulary knowledge when reading in English; likewise ELLs with high levels of schooling can often bring to bear conceptual knowledge developed in their first language when reading in English. However, ELLs with limited or interrupted schooling will need to acquire background knowledge prerequisite to educational tasks at hand. Additionally, the development of native like proficiency in English takes many years and will not be achieved by all ELLs especially if they start schooling in the US in the later grades. Teachers should recognize that it is possible to achieve the standards for reading and literature, writing & research, language development and speaking & listening without manifesting native-like control of conventions and vocabulary.

English Language Arts

The Common Core State Standards for English language arts (ELA) articulate rigorous grade-level expectations in the areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing to prepare all students to be college and career ready, including English language learners. Second-language learners also will benefit from instruction about how to negotiate situations outside of those settings so they are able to participate on equal footing with native speakers in all aspects of social, economic, and civic endeavors.

ELLs bring with them many resources that enhance their education and can serve as resources for schools and society. Many ELLs have first language and literacy knowledge and skills that boost their acquisition of language and literacy in a second language; additionally, they bring an array of talents and cultural practices and perspectives that enrich our schools and society. Teachers must build on this enormous reservoir of talent and provide those students who need it with additional time and appropriate instructional support. This includes language proficiency standards that teachers can use in conjunction with the ELA standards to assist ELLs in becoming proficient and literate in English. To help ELLs meet high academic standards in language arts it is essential that they have access to:

- Teachers and personnel at the school and district levels who are well prepared and qualified to support ELLs while taking advantage of the many strengths and skills they bring to the classroom;

- Literacy-rich school environments where students are immersed in a variety of language experiences;
- Instruction that develops foundational skills in English and enables ELLs to participate fully in grade-level coursework;
- Coursework that prepares ELLs for postsecondary education or the workplace, yet is made comprehensible for students learning content in a second language (through specific pedagogical techniques and additional resources);
- Opportunities for classroom discourse and interaction that are well-designed to enable ELLs to develop communicative strengths in language arts;
- Ongoing assessment and feedback to guide learning; and
- Speakers of English who know the language well enough to provide ELLs with models and support.

Mathematics

ELLs are capable of participating in mathematical discussions as they learn English. Mathematics instruction for ELL students should draw on multiple resources and modes available in classrooms—such as objects, drawings, inscriptions, and gestures—as well as home languages and mathematical experiences outside of school. Mathematics instruction for ELLs should address mathematical discourse and academic language. This instruction involves much more than vocabulary lessons. Language is a resource for learning mathematics; it is not only a tool for communicating, but also a tool for thinking and reasoning mathematically. All languages and language varieties (e.g., different dialects, home or everyday ways of talking, vernacular, slang) provide resources for mathematical thinking, reasoning, and communicating.

Regular and active participation in the classroom—not only reading and listening but also discussing, explaining, writing, representing, and presenting—is critical to the success of ELLs in mathematics. Research has shown that ELLs can produce explanations, presentations, etc. and participate in classroom discussions *as they are learning English*.

ELLs, like English-speaking students, require regular access to teaching practices that are most effective for improving student achievement. Mathematical tasks should be kept at high cognitive demand; teachers and students should attend explicitly to concepts; and students should wrestle with important mathematics.

Overall, research suggests that:

- Language switching can be swift, highly automatic, and facilitate rather than inhibit solving word problems in the second language, as long as the student’s language proficiency is sufficient for understanding the text of the word problem;
- Instruction should ensure that students understand the text of word problems before they attempt to solve them;
- Instruction should include a focus on “mathematical discourse” and “academic language” because these are important for ELLs. Although it is critical that

- students who are learning English have opportunities to communicate mathematically, this is not primarily a matter of learning vocabulary. Students learn to participate in mathematical reasoning, not by learning vocabulary, but by making conjectures, presenting explanations, and/or constructing arguments; and
- While vocabulary instruction is important, it is not sufficient for supporting mathematical communication. Furthermore, vocabulary drill and practice are not the most effective instructional practices for learning vocabulary. Research has demonstrated that vocabulary learning occurs most successfully through instructional environments that are language-rich, actively involve students in using language, require that students both understand spoken or written words and also express that understanding orally and in writing, and require students to use words in multiple ways over extended periods of time. To develop written and oral communication skills, students need to participate in negotiating meaning for mathematical situations and in mathematical practices that require output from students.