



Pre-K–5 Promising Practices

The elementary school years are a critical time when students begin to acquire content area knowledge and skills that provide the foundation for more advanced learning in middle and high schools. The evidence is now clear that becoming proficient in English and able to perform at grade level in core academic subjects in English takes time and occurs over several grades. This is also a critical time to sustain the natural curiosity and eagerness to learn that young children bring to the early grades.

For English learners (ELs)¹, these grades also represent a time of adapting, many for the first time, to the new cultural demands of their schools. ELs will be learning the skills and content knowledge expected of all students, but in many cases, they will be doing so in a new language and also in ways that differ from those in their homes and cultures. A report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (2017), reviews promising practices in Pre-K-5 education. This brief summarizes the report’s findings in this area.



Different Instruction Methods in Schools

Two broad approaches are used to teach English to English learners in these grades:

1. English as a second language (ESL) approaches, in which English is the predominant language of instruction; and
2. Bilingual approaches, in which both English and students’ home languages are used for instruction.

The three models that provide instruction predominantly in English are the English as a Second Language (ESL) model, the content-based ESL model, and the sheltered instruction (SI) model

The two models that provide bilingual instruction are the transitional bilingual education (TBE) model and the dual language (DL) model. Syntheses of evaluation studies that compare outcomes for the bilingual and predominantly English approaches find either no difference in outcomes measured in English or find that students in bilingual programs outperform students instructed only in English. Two recent studies that follow students for sufficient time to gauge longer-term effects of language of instruction on outcomes find benefits for bilingual approaches compared with English-only approaches.

¹ When referring to children aged 5 or older in the pre-K-12 education system, the term “English learner” or “EL” is used.



Recommended Instructional Practices to Develop Oral Language Proficiency

Oral language proficiency is defined as both receptive and expressive oral language, as well as specific aspects of oral language including phonology, oral vocabulary, morphology, grammar, discourse features, and pragmatic skills.² Oral language proficiency plays an important role in content area learning for ELs. Though there is limited research in this area, below are the kinds of recommended instructional practices that are beneficial in promoting oral language proficiency:

- 1.** Provide specialized instruction focused on components of oral proficiency.
Examples include: providing practice in phoneme discrimination, phoneme segmentation, and blending; providing explicit in-depth vocabulary teaching; enhancing book themes with multimedia instruction; and providing instruction in summarizing text.
- 2.** Provide opportunities for interaction with speakers proficient in the learner's second language.
An example includes: peer-to-peer interactions involving discussion and dramatization related to stories that had been read.
- 3.** Engage in interactional feedback.
Examples include: Providing corrective feedback; and using prompts and recasts.
- 4.** Dedicate time for instruction focused on oral English proficiency.
Examples include: Providing a separate block of time focused on the direct teaching of English.

2 August and Shanahan, 2006.



Promising and Effective Practices for Educating ELs in Grades Pre-K-5

Research has identified seven guidelines for educating English learners in grades K-5:

- 1.** Provide explicit instruction in literacy components.

Examples: Teach young children explicitly to hear the individual English sounds or phonemes within words (phonemic awareness); use letters and spelling patterns within words' pronunciations (phonics); read text aloud with appropriate speed, accuracy, and expression (Oral reading fluency).

- 2.** Develop academic language in the context of content-area instruction.

Example: Infusing reading and writing activities into science instruction using questions with verbs such as “explain” and “describe.”

- 3.** Provide visual and verbal supports to make core content comprehensible.

Example: Using instructional tools such as short videos, visuals, and graphic organizers, strategically.

- 4.** Encourage peer-assisted learning opportunities.

Example: Enable students to talk about course content in pairs or small groups so that students benefit from opportunities to interact.

- 5.** Capitalize on students' home language, knowledge, and cultural assets.

Examples include: Previewing and reviewing material in children's first language; storybook reading in children's first language; and providing first-language definitions for targeted vocabulary.

- 6.** Screen for language and literacy challenges and monitor progress.

Examples include: Use students' writing samples on an ongoing basis to determine areas for improvement.

- 7.** Provide small-group academic support in literacy and English-language development for students.

Examples include: Use small homogeneous groups; address language and literacy skills, such as vocabulary, listening, and reading comprehension.



Conclusions

Research related to ELs and content area outcomes in grades pre-K-5 has focused predominantly on instructional supports to help ELs learn English and content delivered in English. As is the case with English-proficient students, progress among ELs is not uniform. In some cases, while students progress at different rates, their growth follows similar paths. Other students, however, may need more intensive and qualitatively different approaches to achieve English at levels commensurate with those of their English-proficient peers.

This brief is based on the report *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, a PDF of which can be downloaded free of charge at <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24677>.