

Considerations for program planning

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Planning for English Language Learners

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English Language Learners in Ontario Schools

Ontario schools have some of the most multilingual student populations in the world. The first language of approximately 28 per cent of the students in Ontario's English-language schools is a language other than English. In addition, some students use varieties of English – sometimes referred to as dialects – that differ significantly from the English required for success in Ontario schools. Many English language learners were born in Canada and have been raised in families and communities in which languages other than English, or varieties of English that differ from the language used in the classroom, are spoken. Other English language learners arrive in Ontario as newcomers from other countries; they may have experience of highly sophisticated educational systems, or they may have come from regions where access to formal schooling was limited.

When they start school in Ontario, many of these students are entering a new linguistic and cultural environment. All teachers share in the responsibility for these students' English-language development.

As students who are learning English as a second or additional language in English-language schools, English language learners bring a rich diversity of background knowledge and experience to the classroom. These students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds not only support their learning in their new environment but also become a cultural asset in the classroom community. Effective teachers find positive ways to incorporate this diversity into their instructional programs and into the classroom environment.

Most English language learners in Ontario schools have age-appropriate proficiency in their first language, as well as age-appropriate literacy skills. Although they need frequent opportunities to use English at school, they also derive important educational and social benefits from continuing to develop their first language while they are learning English. Teachers should encourage parents to continue to use their own language at home, both to preserve the language as part of their children's heritage and identity and to provide a foundation for their language and literacy development in English. It is also important for teachers to find opportunities to bring students' languages into the classroom, using parents and community members as a resource.

English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development Programs

During their first few years in Ontario schools, English language learners may receive support through one of two distinct programs designed to meet their language-learning needs:

English as a Second Language (ESL) programs are for students born in Canada or newcomers whose first language is a language other than English, or is a variety of English significantly different from that used for instruction in Ontario schools. Students in these programs have had educational opportunities to develop age-appropriate first-language literacy skills.

English Literacy Development (ELD) programs are primarily for newcomers whose first language is a language other than English, or is a variety of English significantly different from that used for instruction in Ontario schools, and who arrive with significant gaps in their education. These students generally come from countries where access to education is limited or where there are limited opportunities to develop language and literacy skills in any language. Schooling in their countries of origin may have been inconsistent, disrupted, or even completely unavailable throughout the years that these children would otherwise have been in school.

Supportive Learning Environments

In planning programs for students with linguistic backgrounds other than English, teachers need to recognize the importance of the orientation process, understanding that every learner needs to adjust to the new social environment and language in a unique way and at an individual pace. For example, students who are in an early stage of English-language acquisition may go through a “silent period” during which they closely observe the interactions and physical surroundings of their new learning environment. They may use body language rather than speech or they may use their first language until they have gained enough proficiency in English to feel confident of their interpretations and responses. Students thrive in a safe, supportive, and welcoming environment that nurtures their self-confidence while they are receiving focused literacy instruction. When they are ready to participate, in paired, small-group, or whole-class activities, some students will begin by using a single word or phrase to communicate a thought, while others will speak quite fluently.

In a supportive learning environment, most students will develop oral language proficiency quite quickly. Teachers can sometimes be misled by the high degree of oral proficiency demonstrated by many English language learners in their use of everyday English and may mistakenly conclude that these students are equally proficient in their use of academic English. Most English language learners who have developed oral proficiency in everyday English will still require instructional scaffolding to meet curriculum expectations. Research has shown that it takes five to seven years for most English language learners to catch up to their English-speaking peers in their ability to use English for academic purposes.

Program Adaptations

Responsibility for students' English-language development is shared by all teachers, including the ESL/ELD teacher (where available), and other school staff. Volunteers and peers may also be helpful in supporting English language learners in the classroom. By adapting the instructional program, teachers facilitate these students' learning. Appropriate adaptations include modifications and accommodations, as follows:

- modification of some or all of the grade or course expectations so that they are challenging but attainable for the learners at their current level of English proficiency, with the necessary support from the teacher;
- use of a variety of instructional strategies;^[*]
- use of a variety of learning resources;^[*]
- use of assessment accommodations that support students in demonstrating the full range of their learning.^[*]

Teachers need to adapt the program for English language learners as they acquire English proficiency. For English language learners at the early stages of English language acquisition, teachers are required to modify curriculum expectations as needed. Most English language learners require accommodations for an extended period, long after they have achieved proficiency in everyday English.

Assessment and Evaluation

When curriculum expectations are modified in order to meet the language-learning needs of English language learners, assessment and evaluation will be based on the documented modified expectations. Teachers will check the ESL/ELD box on the Provincial Report Card only when modifications have been made to curriculum expectations to address the language needs of English language learners (the box should *not* be checked to indicate simply that they are participating in ESL/ELD programs or if they are only receiving accommodations). There is no requirement for a statement to be added to the "Comments" section of the report cards when the ESL/ELD box is checked.

Although the degree of program adaptation required will decrease over time, students who are no longer receiving ESL or ELD support may still need some program adaptations to be successful.

Related Policy and Resource Documents

For further information on supporting English language learners, refer to the following documents:

- *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools, First Edition, Covering Grades 1 to 12, 2010* [↗](#)
- *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9–12: English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development, 2007*
- *English Language Learners – ESL and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12, 2007* [↗](#)
- *Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 3 to 12, 2008* [↗](#)
- *Supporting English Language Learners: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 1 to 8, 2008* [↗](#)
- *Many Roots, Many Voices: Supporting English Language Learners in Every Classroom, 2005.* [↗](#)