Effective Instruction for Learning Disabled or At-Risk English-Language Learners: An Integrative Synthesis of the Empirical and Professional Knowledge Bases

Russell Gersten, Scott Baker, Susan Unok Marks, Sylvia B. Smith,Eugene Research Institute, University of OregonExecutive SummaryBackground and PurposeThe last 25 years have seen the largest wave of immigration in the history of the United States. Projections indicate that one student in four will be Latino in 2020, compared to only one in ten in 1982.What is the best way to teach English-language learners? As the number of non-English speaking students in schools rises rapidly, this question presents a major concern to educators. Educators need a professional knowledge base on effective instructional practices for English-language learners. The urgency of this need is highlighted by NCES data indicating that the dropout rate for Hispanics is double that of African Americans and whites. Furthermore, an estimated one million students learning English in schools also have a learning disability. These students are at risk of receiving inappropriate special services or no such services at all.We therefore conducted a synthesis of all relevant research on effective instruction for English-language learners. The guiding question for the synthesis was:What do we know about effective teaching practices for English-language learners with disabilities or those at risk for school failure in the elementary and middle school grades (K-8)?Goals of ResearchOur primary goal was to conduct a rigorous examination of existing research to identify and understand those practices and instructional principles that produced a positive impact on student learning. Unfortunately, we found only a small number of empirical studies (nine) that assessed the impact of specific instructional interventions or learning outcomes. Therefore, we supplemented our synthesis of existing research with additional research of our own (including analyses of discussions from five professional work groups made up of educators working with this population and researchers). Our second goal was to help educators better understand why some practices are more likely to be effective than others. For this purpose, we used a wide range of data sources (including the professional work groups). A third goal was to draw inferences from an examination of nine studies that met our criteria.TOPFindingsInstructional approaches that expanded upon the current research base of effective teaching yielded stronger results than some of the seemingly innovative methods. This is especially true in reading and math. For example, quality and quantity of feedback provided was a critical determinant of achievement growth.

The meetings and discussions with educators generated some promising instructional practices that are useful for defining best practices for teaching English-language learners. Among these are:
 - Using visuals to reinforce concepts and vocabulary;
 - Utilizing cooperative learning and peer tutoring;
 - Use of students' native language strategically when students are floundering;
 - Providing opportunities for students to practice speaking English in both formal and informal contexts throughout the day; and
 - Focusing on rich and evocative vocabulary words during lessons so students remain engaged and challenged. The words can serve as vehicles for teaching literary concepts. Current Challenges

Extensive discussions with practitioners revealed that many current attempts to merge content area instruction with English-language development instruction are not well implemented. Current classroom practice typically fails to provide sufficient time for teaching English or sufficient opportunities for students to use oral language or to develop English writing skills. There also appears to be a tendency to over-emphasize conversational language use and to devote insufficient effort into building students' command of the abstract language required by many academic content areas. It is important to distinguish between the separate goals of language development and academic improvement. Our research indicates that increased language use in the classroom does not lead to increased academic improvement. In some studies, greater use of sophisticated language constructions in content-area classes was found to limit students' cognitive and academic growth. Because of limited and inconclusive research, we do not yet know which form of student engagement (e.g., speaking, listening, reading, writing, content activities, or a combination of these) provides more overall benefit for English-language learners. Further research needs to help clarify the link between academic growth and language learning. TOP

How is research being used to guide practice?We found only nine valid experimental studies for all academic areas in grades K-8. Currently, there is a limited empirical research base to guide practice. Although many articles and reports claim to describe effective practice, few provide the type of data necessary for firm conclusions.Recommendations For Practitioners

We conclude that an effective English- language development program must include a balance of three components: (1) development of proficiency in "natural" language or conversation, (2) traditional emphasis on grammar and syntax, and (3) development of academic or decontextualized language.Teachers should use instructional approaches identified in the effective teaching research (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1986) and modulate them for English-language learners.Educators need to improve the way they merge content area instruction with English-language development instruction and provide both sufficient time for teaching English and sufficient opportunities for students to use oral language and writing. Key instructional practices for English-language development include introducing sets of no more than four to seven new vocabulary words per lesson, using visuals for reinforcement, using cooperative learning and peer tutoring, and making strategic use of the native language by allowing students to organize their thoughts in their native language before risking

an English response. For ResearchersThe greatest need in future research of English-language learners (particularly in the area of special education) is for well-designed and valid intervention research. Existing studies are vague or unclear regarding how teaching methods were implemented, the level of implementation achieved, the language of instruction, and many other "context" variables that provide a rich picture of intervention research.TOPThis document was prepared for the Keys to Successful Learning Summit held in May 1999 in Washington, D.C. Keys to Successful Learning is an ongoing collaboration sponsored by the National Center for Learning Disabilities in partnership with the Office of Special Education Programs (US Department of Education) and the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (National Institutes of Health).The purpose of this initiative is to translate research and policy on learning disabilities into high standards for learning and achievement in the classroom, and to take action at the local, state and federal levels to ensure that all students, including those with learning disabilities, are afforded the highest quality education.Keys to Successful Learning is supported by a coalition of national and regional funders as well as a broad range of participating education organizations.TOP