

Effective Programs for English Language Learners (ELL) with Interrupted Formal Education



A growing number of recent immigrant students are entering U.S. schools with little or no prior formal schooling and low literacy skills. This group of English language learners has to simultaneously develop academic language skills and master grade-level content. They may be several years below their age-appropriate grade level in school-related knowledge and skills. This research article gives an overview of effective instructional approaches for English Language Learners with interrupted formal education, and provides comprehensive resources and research on this topic.

Migration, war, lack of education facilities, cultural and economic circumstances can all interrupt a student's formal education. Because some students enter a U.S. school with limited or even no history of schooling, they may lack understanding of basic concepts, content knowledge, and critical thinking skills. They may not even read or write in their home language. Nevertheless, they will be expected to develop higher-order thinking skills in English and prepare for high-stakes tests while mastering basic literacy and math skills in a language other than their own. Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) are “the highest of high-risk students” (Walsh, 1999). Although the needs of the SIFE population may overlap with those of English language learners (ELL) in general, students with interrupted formal education most often require additional assistance in acquiring fundamental skills that many English language learners already possess.

A number of educators working with ELL students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) agree on several common features of an effective program. They suggest that a well-designed program for immigrant students with limited prior schooling and low literacy includes these components:

- 1) Literacy and content courses that are thematically coordinated and encourage transfer of learning across content areas;
- 2) follow-up on thematic content and skill development, provided by double-period ESL classes;
- 3) small classes that allow individualized attention from teachers;
- 4) common planning periods that give bilingual and ESL teachers an opportunity to coordinate their work;
- 5) an ungraded course structure that allows students to learn at their own pace.

In addition to that, many SIFE students may need extensive long-term remedial instruction and tutoring.

Various English language development programs, or combinations of programs that focus on learning the basics and adapting the mainstream curriculum can improve the chances for students with interrupted formal education to succeed academically. Effective programs put together a team to work with students with interrupted formal education.

The Pull-Out Model

In a pull-out model, students are pulled out of mainstream classes for a small portion of the day to attend classes that integrate English language development such as English as a second language (ESL) instruction, academic skills development, literacy, and content-area support. Schools can arrange student schedules

to maximize student participation in mainstream classes. When implemented traditionally, the pull-out model has been criticized as the least successful model for language learning. However, pull-out programs that focus on teaching English through academic content and developing higher-level thinking skills can make a difference for SIFE students when implemented by high-quality teachers (Collier & Thomas, 1995).

The Push-In Model

Push-in programs place students in regular mainstream classes. This exposes students to the mainstream curriculum, which they must master to graduate, and helps integrate them into the student body rather than separating them from it. This model is most successful when an ESL teacher or a trained bilingual paraprofessional assists the students in mainstream classes. The push-in model, prevalent in such content-area classes as math, science, and social studies, provides an excellent opportunity for team-teaching and joint problem solving. ESL teachers can work with content-area teachers on different ESL techniques for approaching content-area instruction. In addition, ESL teachers can use texts drawn from the mainstream curriculum to hone students' language skills. The success of this model depends on providing content-area teachers with extensive professional development opportunities in ESL methodologies and supporting team-teaching efforts through scheduling flexibility. Schools can effectively use both the push-in model and the pull-out model for SIFE students as long as the programs have shared goals and are mutually supportive. (DeCapua, Smathers and Tang, 2007).



After-School and Saturday Programs

Students with interrupted formal education can also take credit-bearing or non-credit-bearing classes in content-area subjects and English as a second language after regular dismissal time. In credit-bearing classes, students follow the general curriculum, use the regular textbooks, and receive grades. The purpose of these extended-day programs is to help students compensate for lost learning time so they can complete their studies and graduate within an acceptable time frame.

Non-credit-bearing after-school or Saturday programs are similar to tutoring programs. They generally allow for more flexibility than extended-day programs do because they don't have to closely follow the regular curriculum and can be geared toward individual student needs. After-school and Saturday programs can easily incorporate small study groups and individualized instruction. (DeCapua, Smathers and Tang, 2007).

Best Practices for SIFE students

Teachers must consider the student makeup of the school, curriculum requirements, the degree of administrative support, and realities of the school system in choosing appropriate practices. The following approaches have proven successful with students with interrupted formal education.

Sheltered Instruction

Sheltered instruction consists of an integrated approach to developing English language proficiency, basic literacy skills, school behavior knowledge, and academic content knowledge, with a strong emphasis on basic learning strategies. Teachers present content in ways that enable students to learn the academic material as they “learn how to learn” and work on English proficiency. Students are “sheltered” in that the teacher modifies the academic material from a language and skills perspective to make it accessible and comprehensible to the learners. Teachers can effectively introduce academic content to the SIFE

population by using visuals, such as charts, graphs, time lines, and Venn diagrams. Collaborative learning activities, such as task oriented projects and small-group activities, replace traditional note taking and individual worksheet assignments. Demonstrations often replace lectures. When teachers must lecture, they repeat main points, speak slowly, and pause for frequent comprehension checks.

Content Based ESL

Fluency in academic English is the primary goal of content based ESL. Through ESL and mainstream teachers' collaboration students learn English using as much as possible important basic academic concepts, principles, and vocabulary from the mainstream curriculum. Teachers should meet regularly, usually weekly or biweekly, to discuss each SIFE student's progress in all subject areas, clarifying both strengths and areas needing extra work.

Meaningful, Standards-Based Learning

Mandated standards are likely to be well beyond the initial capabilities of students with interrupted formal education. Teachers can create lessons that are standards-based yet suitable for students' various ability levels; teachers should regularly assess students to determine whether they have mastered the standards.



When teachers adapt standards-based curriculum to meet the needs of students with interrupted formal education, they should ensure that content and materials are age appropriate and culturally appropriate. This is not the same as “dumbing down” lessons, which is a great disservice to students. Instead of giving a 2nd grade book to a 17-year-old immigrant from Ghana who reads at a 2nd grade level, a teacher might work, for example, with the social studies instructor and provide the student with ESL materials on U.S. history.

Indiana's K-12 English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards are a valuable resource for English language development instruction and a good tool for mainstream teachers. The organization of the ELP Standards includes indicators at each level of English proficiency, Level 1 (Beginner) to Level 5 (Fluent), to describe what students at each level should know and be able to do. They serve as a classroom tool for informing instruction and assisting teachers in evaluating limited English proficient (LEP) students' progress in their acquisition of English proficiency. They also facilitate the alignment of curriculum between English language development services and the general education program. The ELP Standards are available at: <http://www.doe.state.in.us/lmmp/standards.html>.

ERIC's (Education Resources Information Center) suggestions of best practices for students with interrupted formal education include sheltered instruction, content based ESL, bilingual instruction, and collaborative learning. Successful programs have committed teachers; are well planned; focus on meaningful, standards-based learning; educate the whole child; and have full administrative support.

Council of Chief State Officers (CCSSO) points out that cross-content area collaboration is fundamental to developing a curriculum to bring ELL students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) up to speed in their core subject areas while simultaneously developing their literacy skills. Educators serving these students must transcend traditional departmental lines and work as teams to integrate language and content area learning in creative ways, such as through the use of project-based work and portfolio assessments. For administrators, the remedy may be as simple as giving ESL and content teachers shared planning time, or it may entail an overhaul of the school's departmental structure.

What Works in Instruction of Students with Interrupted Formal Education

- ✓ Intensive English language development instruction teaching social and academic language
- ✓ Reorganizing ESL teachers' schedules; English language instruction in a double period/block scheduling format
- ✓ Intensive literacy development
- ✓ Sheltered content instruction
- ✓ Flexibility in curriculum development. Creating a curriculum for SIFE students based on state academic standards, concentrating on essential knowledge and skills only. Teachers' collaboration to modify curriculum
- ✓ Modified scheduling
- ✓ Condensed remedial courses that can catch students up to their grade levels in Math, science and social studies
- ✓ Thematically organized curriculum. Fewer topics, more time
- ✓ Team teaching
- ✓ Providing training in ESL techniques for mainstream teachers
- ✓ Collaboration of ESL and mainstream teachers, common planning and discussion, ongoing communication via e-mail about weekly language and content development planning
- ✓ Newcomer programs within a school aimed at building academic foundation for students with interrupted formal education: access to literacy development, English acquisition and core curriculum
- ✓ Explicitly teaching SIFE students studying skills
- ✓ Extended-day opportunities
- ✓ After school tutorials and programs
- ✓ Stipends for teachers and instructional assistants for after school work/tutoring
- ✓ Extended high school experience (5-6 years)
- ✓ Individual tutoring: inviting volunteers to be tutors for SIFE students: college students, high school students, teachers, community volunteers
- ✓ Working with the businesses and colleges in the community
- ✓ Recruiting native language tutors
- ✓ Having a single counselor working closely with SIFE students
- ✓ Establishing "Buddy" system (peers as "buddies")
- ✓ Establishing mentoring system for SIFE newcomers (teachers as mentors)

The type of program and support will depend on the school district. Lack of resources cannot be used as a rationale to place ELL students with limited formal education into mainstream classes with little or no support.

High School Language Minority Students with Interrupted Formal Education

The challenges of educating adolescent SIFE ELLs are especially acute at the high school level. The linguistic, academic, and social challenges they face are enormous, and many have very little time to fulfill high school graduation requirements. Under-schooled, late-arrival adolescent English language learners need intensive, specialized



literacy and content-area instruction. In addition to the strategies mentioned above, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) outlines three main approaches that are necessary to meet the needs of SIFE ELLs in a high school setting:

- Create structures that transcend high school academic departmental divisions in order to support simultaneous linguistic and academic development of SIFE ELLs
- Implement flexible scheduling
- Align high school program with higher education and adult education.

Walsh (1991) makes the following recommendations:

- Individual learning plans, set jointly by a guidance counselor, teacher and student, should lead to either a regular or alternative high school diploma. Literacy and content courses should be appropriately designed and taught to enable students to earn full credit toward their diploma. Alternative means of gaining credit (e.g., independent study) and an occupational, career-awareness component that includes hands-on experience should be provided.
- Flexible scheduling should be available, as it enables students to combine academic study and work or work-related experience. Students aged 18 or older can earn a high school diploma by completing at least 2 years in a high school-based program, then transferring to a GED program.
- Access to a range of services should be offered, including regular, individual meetings with guidance and adjustment counselors who would preferably speak the students' native languages, group counseling, peer tutoring, mentoring by sympathetic adults, frequent meetings of counselors with teachers and parents, home-school liaisons, and links with community-based agencies.

Newcomer Programs

An increasing number of SIFE ELL secondary students has prompted school districts in some states to establish newcomer programs. These programs encounter many challenges in helping students who have had interrupted education and/or little or low literacy skills, providing intensive instruction so students may acquire English and academic content in a limited amount of time. Flexible school scheduling alleviates the choice between employment and education that many immigrant students must make. Secondary schools that build partnerships with higher education and adult education offer working immigrant youth the opportunity to attend classes during non-traditional school hours and to earn credit toward diplomas. Post-secondary alignment allows immigrant students, who may not be able to finish high school in the traditional timeline to develop long-term educational goals leading to high school diploma. (CCSSO)



Betty Mace-Matluck, Rosalind Alexander-Kasparik, and Robin M. Queen in the book *Through the Golden Door: Educational Approaches for Immigrant Adolescents with Limited Schooling* name factors essential in designing a program for immigrant adolescents with limited schooling. A common strategy is to place immigrant English language learners in a specialized learning environment for a half-day newcomer school-within-mainstream school program. Programs vary in the types of specialized classes offered, the ways in which students are integrated with students from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds and of other ages, and the length of time students attend special programs or classes before making the transition to mainstream classes. To prepare for academic success, these students need access to courses that focus

on literacy and study skills, and sheltered content courses that are taught in English and adapted to make the content more accessible.

The report on Research-based Recommendations for Serving Adolescent Newcomers from Center on Instruction, 2006, describes six specific elements of effective instruction for adolescent newcomers, giving the “Why?” and “How?” for every element. These elements are: 1) Explicit instruction in word-reading skills; 2) Content-based literacy approach; 3) Instruction in academic language; 4) Reading comprehension instruction; 5) Intensive instruction in writing for academic purposes; 6) Effective assessment system to inform instruction.

Teaching Literacy to ELLs with Interrupted Formal Education

Over the last few years, hundreds of school districts have introduced new programs designed to help struggling adolescent readers catch up in the basics. Many of the nation's top education researchers have launched new studies into topics such as how best to teach reading in the academic content areas, how best to teach writing at the high-school level, and how best to support the literacy development of adolescent English language learners.

According to these studies, becoming literate in a second language depends on the quality of teaching, intensity/thoroughness of instruction, methods used to support the special language needs of second-language learners, how well learning is monitored, and teacher preparation.



Explicit instruction that provides substantial coverage in the key components of reading - phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension - has clear benefits for language-minority students. Adjustments to these approaches are needed to have maximum benefit with SIFE students.

Word-level skills in literacy - such as decoding, word recognition and spelling - are often taught well enough to allow language-minority students to attain levels of performance close to those of native English speakers. However, this is not the case for text-level skills - reading comprehension and writing. Language-minority students struggle to approach the same levels of proficiency in text-level skills achieved by native English speakers. Specifically, English vocabulary knowledge, the ability to provide definitions of words, sentence/phrase structure skills, and listening comprehension, are linked to English reading and writing proficiency. These findings help explain why many language-minority students can keep pace with their native English-speaking peers when the instructional focus is on word-level skills, but lag behind when the instructional focus turns to reading comprehension and writing.

The report of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth states that instruction in the key components of reading is necessary - but not sufficient - for teaching ELLs with interrupted formal education read and write proficiently in English. Oral proficiency in English is critical as well - but student performance suggests that it is often overlooked in instruction. Well-developed oral proficiency in English is associated with English reading comprehension and writing skills for these students. It is not enough to teach language-minority students reading skills alone. Extensive oral English development must be incorporated into successful literacy instruction. **The most successful literacy**

instructional practices for SIFE ELLs are programs that provide instructional support of oral language development in English, aligned with high-quality literacy instruction.

The following components of literacy development for SIFE ELLs are suggested and discussed below by educators in the field of adolescent literacy, [All About Adolescent Literacy](#) website of partner organizations, that provides specific suggestions for modifying reading programs to meet the needs of English language learners, based on the findings of the National Literacy Panel.

Phonemic Awareness. Phonemic awareness is difficult for ELLs because they may not yet have enough experience with English to be able to distinguish sounds that differ from those of their native language. These differences vary from one language to another. Teachers will have to identify which sounds of English cause confusion, depending on the language backgrounds of their students, and provide more practice in these sounds.

Phonics. Systematic phonics instruction can be very effective in helping newcomer ELLs, even those at fairly low levels of language proficiency, to learn to decode words. Most SIFE ELLs will need additional time and practice to learn to hear and produce the sounds of English, to learn the meanings of the words used in phonics instruction, to learn the multiple combinations of letters that make the same sound, and to learn many more sight words than native English speakers need. Additional time for phonics instruction should be built into reading programs for SIFE ELLs.

Oral language development. Phonics and phonemic skills, though important for newcomers, do not facilitate reading comprehension if students' oral language proficiency is not developed to the level of the texts they are expected to read. For this reason, reading instruction should be combined with intensive development of the oral language needed to understand the text. The most effective reading programs for SIFE ELLs combine systematic phonics instruction with a print-rich environment that provides exposure to appealing reading materials in varied genres.

Vocabulary. English language learners are many thousand words behind their native English speaking peers. They need more vocabulary instruction than their native-speaking peers; they also need multiple exposures to the vocabulary to be able to retain new words. Everything a teacher of ELLs does should revolve around vocabulary acquisition - explaining, demonstrating, drawing, repeating, rephrasing, reading, writing, and manipulating with words throughout every aspect of instruction. The meanings of words are acquired through multiple opportunities to hear, say, read, and write the words in slightly different meaningful contexts. Teachers will have to create these contexts in the classroom, since incidental learning of vocabulary cannot be relied on for ELLs. Collaboration between mainstream classroom instruction and ESL program is a key to effective and consistent vocabulary development of SIFE ELL students.



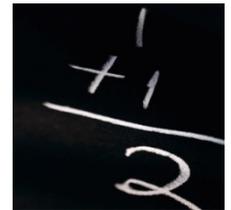
Comprehension. ELL newcomers, especially students with interrupted formal schooling, are more likely than native speakers to lack the background knowledge necessary for understanding texts, that's why teachers will need to find ways to build that knowledge for SIFE ELLs. As has been mentioned above, their knowledge of vocabulary is only a fraction of what it is for native speakers of English, and the failure to understand even a few words of a text can have negative effects on comprehension. Integration of intensive language development with reading instruction is highly recommended for ELLs at all levels of language proficiency, providing as much nonverbal support for reading comprehension as possible. Comprehension strategies, such as reader-generated questions, summarizing, and monitoring

comprehension need to be explicitly taught to newcomer ELLs, especially students with interrupted education. However, teaching these strategies is not enough; students must practice them with texts that are accessible at their level of language proficiency. If students don't experience successful application of comprehension strategies, they won't even try to use them with other texts. Interactive activities, properly scaffolded for ELLs, should be planned around reading and interpreting texts. Sharing ideas, comparing perspectives, and coming to agreement (or agreeing to disagree) are all ways that students use the language of the text in meaningful ways, and thus progress to higher levels of language proficiency and reading comprehension.

Deshler (2001) advocates that subject matter teachers of ELL students need to be able to select and present critical content information that is potentially difficult to learn in a way that is understandable and memorable to all students in an academically diverse class regardless of literacy levels. Teachers of all ELLs, especially SIFE students, must ensure learning by (a) actively engaging students in the learning process, (b) transforming abstract content into concrete forms, (c) structuring or organizing information to provide clarity, (d) ensuring that the relationships among pieces of information are explicitly discussed, (d) tying new information to prior knowledge, and (e) distinguishing critical information from less critical information. All this will support the instruction of critical vocabulary and critical conceptual knowledge and will lead to enhanced literacy outcomes.

Teaching Math to ELLs with Interrupted Formal Education

Math teachers working with ELL students with interrupted formal education have a dual task: help students develop the most important mathematical concepts, and the academic language necessary for these concepts. ELL students have an additional challenge: to learn the specific content vocabulary and expressions, along with their ongoing second language acquisition. Following the suggestions from educators working with SIFE ELLs, teachers can help these students by employing the following strategies and techniques:



- Creating a plan for how to help ELL students acquire the language of mathematics
- Helping ELL students by directly teaching math vocabulary which can be further reinforced by an ESL teacher
- Having key terms and concepts on display all the time
- Using drawings, diagrams, graphs and other visual aids to help the students to develop concepts and understanding
- Utilizing multiple instructional approaches and accommodating multiple intelligences to make Math understandable and relevant to SIFE students
- Using models or manipulatives to demonstrate concepts and/or processes
- Using small groups
- Using a “think-aloud” technique to solve the problem
- Presenting activities that involve application of problems in contextual situations to make learning relevant to real-life experiences
- Being flexible with student use of native language, if it is helpful in clarifying ideas and concepts
- Focusing on meaning ELL students are conveying, not on their grammar and usage of the language. Increasing the focus on reasoning and decreasing the focus on language.

Helpful resources:

1. **FAST Math** designed by Fairfax County Public Schools, *Fairfax, VA* in 2003 is available online and can be downloaded for free. FAST Math provides math instruction to newly arrived limited English proficient (LEP) students with interrupted formal education in grades 4-12 who are two or more years below grade level in mathematics. The curriculum is comprised of two levels: elementary and pre-algebra. The FAST Math curriculum integrates English content language and mathematics skills: SIFE ELLs acquire mathematics skills in preparation for grade-level courses as they simultaneously develop their English language proficiency. FAST Math, description of the program, Department of Instructional Services, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, VA: <<http://www.fcps.edu/DIS/OESOL/fastmath.htm>> Fast Math: Volume I, II, and III. Free mathematics curriculum materials available online. All files are in Adobe Acrobat (PDF.) format. <<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/resabout/curriculum/fastmath/>>
2. **Multilingual online Math Glossary**, Free Glossary of Math terminology, definitions and formulas in languages: Arabic, Bengali, Brazilian, Chinese, English, Haitian Creole, Hmong, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, Urdu, Vietnamese. Free resource from Glencoe, a division of the Educational and Professional Publishing Group of The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. (public right to use confirmed by McGraw-Hill Education company). <<http://www.glencoe.com/sec/math/mlg/mlg.php>>

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