

# What School Administrators Need to Know about English Language Learners and ESL Programming

## Who are English language learners?

English language learners (ESL students) come from a range of cultural backgrounds and bring with them a variety of educational, social and personal experiences. English language learners first learned to speak, read and/or write a language other than English and require English language instruction and supports to participate fully in the learning experiences provided in Alberta schools. English language learners may have recently immigrated to Canada or they may have been born in Canada and live in homes in which the primary spoken language is not English.

**Canadian-born English language learners** include First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Francophones, Hutterites, Mennonites and Canadian-born children of immigrants who speak other languages in the home.

**Foreign-born English language learners** include recently arrived immigrants, refugees and fee-paying and funded international visa students who speak other languages in the home.



©Photodisc/Getty Images

### *Literacy is ...*

*“acquiring, creating, connecting and communicating meaning in a wide variety of contexts.”*

*Literacy First: A Plan for Action, 2010. (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education, 2010), p. 3.*

## How is ESL programming and support delivered to students?

The way to organize the school to support English language learners depends on the nature of the school's programs and the number of English language learners and their proficiency levels and needs. English language learners in elementary and junior high schools are generally placed in age-appropriate classrooms with their peers and also receive additional language and content instruction within the classroom context.

The needs of English language learners are best met when teachers work collaboratively to **differentiate** or **adapt instruction**, provide **explicit language instruction** and create an **environment that values cultural diversity**. Additional support may include ESL consultants, educational assistants, community volunteers and peer tutors.

### Factors to consider in program delivery:

- English language proficiency level and learning needs of the students
- number of English language learners in the school
- expertise and professional learning opportunities for teachers

*In teaching students who are learning English as another language, the big picture is the same as it is for all students. Teach every student based on his or her developmental and language proficiency level and identify and address the needs of each student.*

Making a Difference: Meeting diverse learning needs with differentiated instruction. (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education, 2010), p. 144.

## How is the English language proficiency of students measured?

Alberta Education has developed the *Alberta K–12 ESL Proficiency Benchmarks* to assist teachers in determining the language proficiency of their English language learners. The benchmarks provide descriptions of the English language abilities that students typically demonstrate at each of five proficiency levels in Kindergarten, grades 1–3, grades 4–6, grades 7–9 and grades 10–12.

### The Benchmarks are used:

- when English language learners enter the school system in order to establish baseline proficiency
- to identify the level and types of instructional supports these learners require to be successful
- at each reporting period to assess students' current English language proficiency
- on an ongoing basis to monitor language proficiency growth and to inform instructional planning
- at transitions between grades, schools and/or programs.

## What teaching strategies work well for English language learners?

### **Integrating language and content**

The key objective of teaching language through content is to help students comprehend and demonstrate understanding across a variety of topics, tasks and situations in all subject areas. When teachers integrate explicit language instruction in their content lessons, English language learners gain academic knowledge and cognitive academic language proficiency simultaneously.

### **Organizing structured cooperative learning**

Structured cooperative learning helps English language learners:

- develop positive interdependence, learning from the language models and group skills of their peer group
- demonstrate knowledge of their culture and their own areas of expertise
- benefit from the natural recycling of language and content that is created by asking and answering questions and by working together to solve problems.

### **Creating a supportive language learning environment**

A supportive language learning environment includes:

- visuals such as: pictures, charts, graphs, word walls, anchor charts of lessons and completed graphic organizers
- language mini-lessons with clear objectives directly related to content, with guided practice opportunities
- regularly scheduled routines and events, marked by changes in location and visuals
- clear lesson formats across subjects, from day to day.

### **Differentiating content, process and products**

Differentiating **content** involves modifying the language level, adjusting the scope and delivering content of informational resources in different ways for English language learners at various proficiency levels.

Differentiating **process** involves providing alternative ways for students to access, or work through, the content. Examples include scaffolding learning tasks, providing models or templates, giving guided instruction on using graphic organizers or demonstrating collaborative strategies for English language learners working with a partner or in a small group.

Differentiating **products** involves establishing assignment options that vary in complexity and language requirements, such as options to produce a poster or multimedia presentation or a piece of written work that aligns with content objectives and the student's level of language proficiency.



©Photodisc/Getty Images

*Communicative Competence is ...*

*... the ability to understand and use language to communicate effectively in authentic social and school environments.*

## How are English language learners assessed?

When English language learners arrive at school, information is gathered about English language proficiency, academic achievement and recent experiences that can affect schooling. This information is used to make decisions about what type of ESL support and programming is needed. English language learners are typically placed in their age-appropriate grade.

The classroom teacher assesses the students' achievement and growth using the *Alberta K-12 ESL Proficiency Benchmarks*, provides feedback to students and their parents or sponsors, evaluates student achievement for report card purposes, and adjusts English language instruction and supports as required.

### Tips for Fair Assessment of English Language Learners

- Focus on the English language that the student is using to demonstrate understanding of content.
- Explain the assessment process to the student. Show examples of good work, using rubrics with clear criteria. Involve the student in determining assessment criteria and provide opportunities for self-assessment and reflection.
- Assess the student by engaging in a variety of learning processes.
- Assess a variety of product options such as: projects, portfolios, oral explanations and written work.
- Provide extra time for assignments and assessments.
- Construct assessment tasks appropriate to the content and language proficiency.

*“Culture is ... the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communication, action, customs, beliefs, values, and instructions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group.” “Cultural competence [is] the ability to work effectively across cultures in a way that acknowledges and respects the culture of the person or organization being served.”*

Jerome H. Hanley, “Beyond the Tip of the Iceberg: Five Stages Toward Cultural Competence,” *Reaching Today's Youth* 3, 2 (Winter 1999), pp. 9–10.

## How can schools support English language learners and families?

**Welcome** parents and children and answer any questions they have.

Provide a **school tour** for parents and their children.

**Invite** parents to visit the school to watch a class in action or volunteer.

**Find out** if there are cultural holidays or customs that the school should be aware of.

**Use plain English** when writing information letters regarding school meetings or upcoming events, or have the information translated.

**Contact Citizenship and Immigration Canada** and/or local settlement organizations to learn about various cultures and community supports.

**Encourage** families to maintain their home language, as it has been proven to enhance English language acquisition and student success.