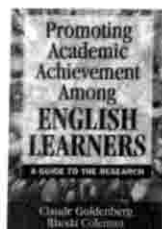


Book Notes

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**Promoting Academic Achievement Among
ENGLISH LEARNERS:
A Guide To The Research**

by Claude Goldenberg and Rhoda Coleman.
Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2010. 192 pp.

Given the ever-growing number of English language learners (ELLs) in our schools, providing an effective education for this diverse language-minority student population is a huge challenge. Administrators, policy makers, and teachers will find in *Promoting Academic Achievement Among ENGLISH LEARNERS: A Guide To The Research* the information and guidance to create the most viable possible instructional programs for ELLs. This clearly written and practitioner-friendly book captures the major directions and multiple perspectives in educating ELLs and proposes a plan of action that is soundly grounded in research and in the state of the art. Throughout the book, muddled and difficult concepts are parsed into comprehensible and usable components for informing readers. In addition, the authors accompany these concepts with boxes, tables, and lists of ideas that can support teachers who attempt to model each of the skills discussed.

The book consists of 9 chapters, the most important of which are those dealing with the role of the home language (Chapter 2),

literacy instruction in a second language (Chapter 3), promoting English oral language development (Chapter 4), academic instruction in a second language (Chapter 5), and school and district role (Chapter 6).

Chapter 1 (Why This Book?) answers crucial questions regarding the schooling of ELLs (who now account for more than 10 percent of the school-age population), especially those dealing with the kind of research on ELLs this book discusses and specifically the two major reports of 2006 that offer the most comprehensive review of this research to date. Regarding the kind of research the authors are interested in, they say cogently:

We draw on a range of study types. No study was excluded from consideration because it was qualitative; although most of the studies discussed here are quantitative, and quite a few had some sort of experimental design, we also draw on qualitative studies, as long as they met the criterion that data were collected and reported on some sort of student outcome. There was no requirement that only experiments or standardized tests be used. The requirement was that the researcher, in some way, collect data on student outcome – broadly defined-- and relate them to some educational process, usually at school. (p. 5)

The two major reports of 2006 are the government-funded reviews of research published in the previous quarter century (from 1980 to 2003) on the schooling of ELLs, namely *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth* (August & Shanahan, 2006) and *Educating English Language Learners* (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). Henceforth, the first report (published by Lawrence Erlbaum in Mahwah, NJ) will be referred to as “the NLP report” and the

second (published by Cambridge University Press in New York) as “the CREDE report” because its authors were affiliated with the CREDE (Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence) of the University of California at Berkeley. As to the goal of their book, Goldenberg and Coleman want “to make transparent for educators, policy makers, and any interested reader what these reports and some of the research that has appeared since their publication say about promoting academic success among ELLs” (p. 5).

Chapter 2 (The Role of the Home Language) offers some very noteworthy findings from the NLP and CREDE reports. To date, five different meta-analyses have reached the same conclusion on the advantages of teaching ELLs to read in their native language. As the authors note on page 27, “The fact that they all reached essentially the same conclusion is extraordinary. In fact, the benefits of teaching ELLs to read in their primary language might be one of the strongest findings in the entire field of educational research.” They also quickly clarify that “the effects of primary-language instruction are real, but they are modest.”

Regarding transfer, one of the most revered concepts in education, as it applies to ELLs according to the reports, the authors believe that “literacy and other skills and knowledge transfer across languages. That is, if you learn something in one language – such as decoding skills, comprehension strategies, or a concept such as democracy – either you already know it in (i.e., transfer it to) the other language, or you can more easily learn it in the other language” (p. 31).

Among the recommendations at the end of the chapter, the following stand out (p. 36):

- If at all possible, teach students literacy skills in their home language.
- Teaching ELLs subject matter content in their primary language might be beneficial.
- Use L1 support in all-English classes to preview, clarify, and explain.

The compelling *raison d'être* for the content of Chapter 3 (Literacy Instruction in a Second Language) is cogently expressed by the authors, "It's hard to deny how important literacy development is. Simply put, students need to read and write at sufficiently high levels if they are to be successful throughout school and beyond" (p. 39). With that premise in focus, the chapter eloquently responds to questions related to the similarities and differences between literacy instruction for ELLs and that for English speakers. It also identifies the kinds of instructional modifications that can perhaps help ELLs acquire literacy more effectively in English.

Believing that ELLs must acquire the same set of skills and concepts that students already proficient in English need to become successful readers and writers, the authors assert, "Our job as teachers is to make sure students acquire those skills that are essential for literacy development" (p. 41). Based on recommendations from the CREDE report, the authors believe that the best way to accomplish this goal is through "focused and explicit instruction in particular skills and subskills that will enable ELLs to become efficient and effective readers and writers" (p. 41).

Two observations by the authors deserving practitioners' attention are that "The most defensible and useful thing we can conclude from this research is that most of the strategies and approaches that help English speakers become literate also help

English learners become literate” and that “The effects of what might be called ‘generic’ effective instruction are generally smaller for English learners than they are for English speakers; in some studies the effects of instruction were actually nil” (p. 49). In light of this, for the instruction to be meaningful, ELLs need specific instructional modifications such as the following:

- Good, clear, systematic, focused instruction in phonological awareness and phonics seems to be effective, regardless of language proficiency. ELLs probably need even clearer and more systematic instruction than do English speakers, but this is probably a difference in degree, not a different type of instruction. (p. 51)

- Pictures helped children with low levels of oral English learn story vocabulary (e.g., dentist, mouse, cap). That is, the visual representation of concepts, not just a language-based explanation, provided children with additional support in learning the vocabulary words. There is scant research on this topic, but we would also expect that songs, rhymes, chants, or other additional opportunities to use and repeat words would help build vocabulary among young English learners. (pp. 52-53)

- Use instructional modifications to help English learners acquire literacy skills in English. Although research on these is sparse, the following are candidates for effective modifications: making instructions and expectations extremely clear, focused, and systematic; using visuals, including graphic organizers, to illustrate concepts; using the primary language for support (e.g., preview what students will read, explain skills and strategies students will use, use cognates for vocabulary instruction); use of reading matter with familiar content; and additional practice and repetition. (pp. 56-57)

- Teach ELLs literacy skills explicitly. Students in general benefit from explicit instruction, but ELLs probably even more so since they have the double challenge of learning literacy skills while learning to speak and understand English. Vague, unclear, open-ended instruction and expectations are unlikely to serve ELLs well, particularly the more limited they are in their English proficiency. (p. 57)

Chapter 4 (Promoting English Oral Language Development) begins with the authors' assertion that "Regardless of what we think of using the first language for classroom instruction, academic success in the United States requires proficiency in oral English" (p. 59). They also point out that oral proficiency in English "almost certainly contributes to English literacy development" (p. 60) and that, according to the NLP and CREDE reports, "when students have higher levels of oral language proficiency (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, ability to relate narratives and provide explanations), they also tend to have higher reading levels" (p. 60). Yet, "this is an aspect of the ELL literature with a surprising absence of research" (p. 61).

The chapter also does an excellent job in clarifying the differences between "academic" and "social" English, reviewing some of the major approaches to language teaching, answering the question on how long it takes English learners to become fluent in English, and elaborating on the need to focus on academic English proficiency. And among the end-of-chapter recommendations (pp. 78-79), the following stand out:

- Provide daily oral English language instruction, perhaps 45 minutes per day.
- Explicitly teach ELLs elements of English (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, conventions), social conventions (e.g.,

greetings, conversational conventions), and strategies for how to learn the language (e.g., note taking, selective attention, summarizing).

- Provide ELLs with ample opportunities for authentic and functional English use.

- Emphasize academic language – not only conversational language.

- When teaching academic language, do not focus only on vocabulary; focus on syntax and text structures as well. For example, students need to understand how to construct a sentence or paragraph (orally and in writing) that expresses compare and contrast or cause and effect. Academic language and curriculum content are closely intertwined.

Chapter 5 (Academic Instruction in a Second Language) addresses the two major topics of “academic instruction” and “academic language” by insightfully explaining the similarities and differences between “generic” effective instruction and “sheltered” instruction, the role of academic language in academic instruction, and what research says on effective academic instruction in the content areas for ELLs. Table 5.1 (pp. 86-87) clearly differentiates between Content-Based ELD and Sheltered Instruction, the two terms some school districts use interchangeably. “This is a serious misconception,” warn the authors, because “content-based ELD is primarily about learning English” (p. 85).

While there is little empirical research on strategies for teaching content to ELLs, the authors indicate that the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is “the most prominent instructional model to have appeared in the past few years” (p. 91). Box 5.3 (pp. 93-94) and Box 5.4 (p. 95) provide portions of lessons that illustrate sheltered instruction that teaches academic language

at the same time. Among the recommendations at the close of the chapter, the following pro-active ones make a lot of sense:

- Keep in mind the fundamental challenge ELLs in all-English instruction face: learning academic content while simultaneously becoming increasingly proficient in English. Because of this challenge, we do not know to what extent ELLs can keep pace with English speakers; nonetheless, our goal should be to make academic content as accessible as possible for these students and promote English language development as students learn academic content. (p. 97)

- Implement sheltered strategies in classrooms and evaluate their effectiveness in terms of concrete student outcomes. Formal research is underway to evaluate the effects of various sheltered strategies. However, educators themselves must help lead the way; there is simply no time to wait until researchers address all of the important issues regarding sheltered instruction. (p. 98)

Chapter 6 (School and District Role) rightfully endorses the idea that “higher achievement levels for ELLs appear to be the result of focused, sustained, and coordinated work among educators committed to the educational success of these students” given the fact that most studies “tell us the characteristics of schools considered to be effective with ELLs but not how they got to be that way” (p. 103). The key elements for such success are leadership, professional development, and linking school and district policies with classroom practices. Thus, schools and districts would do well by heeding the following recommended policies and practices:

- School and district administrators with ELL expertise and who are current on the research on improving ELLs’ achievement; these administrators are best able to make informed choices about

programs, policies, and practices that are likely to influence students' school success. (p. 113)

- Clear and challenging academic goals for students, explicitly articulated and understood by all teachers and embedded in well-structured curriculum. (p. 113)

- Ongoing professional development (provided from within school staffs or by outside trainers) focused on helping teachers achieve the learning goals for students. (p. 114)

- Adequate resources to support the academic program. (p. 114)

Chapter 9 (Conclusion) starts with the authors reaffirming that “this is not a methods book, nor is it a policy manual.” Yet they feel “we should close with some indication of how we think we should proceed if we are to deal seriously with the issues we have addressed in this book” (p. 167). Their final set of suggestions and recommendations are compelling and insightful and deserve to be heeded by teachers, specialists, coaches, administrators, and policy makers alike. The book ends with this optimistic note:

We are hopeful that the polarizing debates over bilingual education can be put behind us and that educators, policy makers, researchers, and the public at large can instead focus on making the best use of the research we have while forging ahead to chart new terrain that will help these students succeed in school and beyond. It is no exaggeration to say that, to a significant degree, the future of our society and economy depends upon it. (pp. 171-172)



**Access to Academics: Planning Instruction
for K-12 Classrooms with ELLs**

by Joy L. Egbert and Gisela Ernst-Slavit.

Boston: Pearson Education, 2010. 223 pp.

Access to Academics: Planning Instruction for K-12 Classrooms with ELLs is a practical and useful guide for content-area teachers who have English language learners in their classrooms. The book spells out what need to be done to effectively accommodate such students as they face the daunting task of learning academic content while simultaneously becoming increasingly proficient in English. After pointing out in the preface (p. x) that “Methods books consistently tell readers to ‘make learning engaging’ or ‘teach to your language objectives,’ but they rarely explain *how* to engage learners or to *create* objectives, let alone to teach them,” the authors present their book as “an answer to this gap in the literature.” This answer is timely, comprehensive, insightful, and practitioner-friendly. An engaging read, this book’s true charm is its clarity throughout and its consistent chapter organization. Its appendix (pp. 193-198), which includes answers to common teacher behavior questions and the home-visit brochure, testifies to the authors’ respectful, sensitive, and caring attitude toward English language learners’ and their families and cultures.

The book is organized in three parts. Part One (Understanding the Roles of Language and Content) includes Chapters 1 and 2 which deal respectively with academic success and language proficiency, and communicative competence, based on the seminal

research by Cummins (1984) distinguishing social and academic languages, and on the classic work by Pike (1982) establishing the notion of linguistic competence to mean more than mastery of formal linguistic systems.

Part Two (Components of Effective Lesson Design) covers Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 which successively address the topics of assessing student strength and needs; writing and teaching to language objectives; connecting to students' lives; designing engaging tasks; and assessing tasks, lessons, and students. The most remarkable subtopics in this part of the book include "Guidelines for Understanding Student Strengths and Needs" (pp. 51-52), "Teaching to the Language Objectives" (pp. 62-64), "Building Background Knowledge" (pp. 72-74), and "Assessing Student Process and Product" (pp. 94-96).

Part Three (Designing Lessons for Academic Success) consists of Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12. This part is perhaps the most interesting portion of the book because its chapters are intended to help teachers "unlock the language" of science, mathematics, English language arts, and social studies for ELLs as they acquire academic English in authentic contexts. Needless to say, these unlocking strategies are in dire need for teachers and fill the "gap" mentioned earlier. While every chapter of the book is well written and provides valuable information for teachers as they do lesson planning, those of Part Three that focus on the specialized register of science, mathematics, language arts, and social studies are particularly significant. For this reason, some of their highlights are noted below.

Like every other chapter in the book, Chapter 8 (Unlocking the Language of Science) starts with the "Key Issues" box followed by the list of "Potential Challenges," which serves as an

advance organizer for the readers. A sample of these key issues and potential challenges in this chapter follows (pp. 106-107):

- Hands-on, inquiry-based, and experimental science activities provide an ideal setting for learning language and content simultaneously.
- Practicing compare-and-contrast and cause-and-effect methods and the language of scientific inquiry can benefit all students, particularly ELLs.
- Students may be familiar with lectures and rote memorization of concepts but unfamiliar with hands-on, experiential approaches.
- Directions are usually multistep and complex.
- The language of science (vocabulary, language functions, and grammar and discourse characteristics) is specific and vast.
- Sentence structure in science texts is complex, and the use of the passive voice is pervasive.
- Students familiar only with the metric system will not know ounces, pounds, tons, pints, quarts, gallons, inches, feet, yards, miles and the Fahrenheit scale.

In unlocking the language of science, the authors indicate that the specialized register of science tends to:

- Describe relationships of taxonomy, comparison, cause and effect, hypothesis, and interpretation. Unlike language arts and history, science texts have few stories or narratives. The text structure is dense and hierarchical (topic, subtopic, details). (pp. 109-109)
- Connect abstract ideas illustrated by various media. Photos, diagrams, graphs, charts, math and chemistry symbols, lab experiences, and text all overlap to communicate concepts. (p. 109)

- Use many new and big words with new meanings, many of which are nominalizations. Examples of such words are *condensation*, *refraction*, *induction*, *resonance*, *reaction*, *radiation*, *fusion*, *erosion*, and most other *-ation* words. (p. 109)

Because “current studies point to a strong relationship between extensive student vocabulary and academic achievement,” the authors suggest that “effective science teachers can provide explicit and deliberate vocabulary instruction” (p. 110). They also point out that “There are many well-researched lists of vocabulary terms needed in science, ranging from general to technical, organized by disciplines” (p. 112). Helping ELLs “learn and talk science,” the chapter offers noteworthy strategies. While Figure 8.2 (p. 115) suggests important “sentence starters” needed during various phases of scientific inquiry, Figure 8.3 (p. 116) lists essential vocabulary signaling compare and contrast structures, and Figure 8.5 (p. 117) offers typical words and phrases showing cause-effect relationships.

Chapter 8 ends with a discussion on Greek and Latin roots. As the authors put it cogently, “A key component in learning to talk science for all students involves the analysis of Greek and Latin roots because they generate the overwhelming majority of science terms” (p. 117). Figure 8.6 (pp. 117-118) lists 17 Greek roots, their definitions, and examples of usage. For example, the root “bios” means “life, living things” and is found in the examples “biology, biopsy.” Figure 8.7 (p. 118) lists 19 Latin roots, their definitions, and examples of usage. For instance, the root “aqua” means “water” and is found in the examples “aquanaut, aquatic.”

Chapter 9 (Unlocking the Language of Mathematics) lists 5 key issues and 10 potential challenges for ELLs, the more significant of which include the following (pp. 121-122):

- The language of mathematics uses unique symbols, technical language, and diverse representations.
- Mathematics may not always be a universal language; there are many variations across languages and cultures.
- In many cultures school mathematics curricula emphasize calculations, not communicating mathematical thinking.
- Some students are used to learning mathematics by rote memorization.
- There are many distinct vocabulary terms used only in mathematics.

Showing teachers how to help ELLs develop the “mathematics register” is the forte of this chapter. Crucial information related to types of vocabulary used in teaching and learning mathematics is provided by means of user-friendly figures, two of which are mentioned here. Figure 9.3 (Problematic Words for ELLs Commonly Used in Mathematics Textbooks and Classrooms) (p. 127) lists words that “express quantitative relationships” such as *hardly*, *roughly*, *most*, *less*, and *higher* and words that “link phrases and sentences and express a logical relationship” such as *since*, *probably*, *unless* and *whether*. Figure 9.4 (Different Terms That Signal the Same Operation) (p. 127) provides clear “examples of different terms with similar meanings” for mathematical operations. For instance, these different terms have similar meaning for “multiplication”: *multiply*, *time*, *product*, *as a factor*, *twice*, *double*, *triple*, *groups of*. The selected strategies suggested for mathematics teachers who wonder how they can “teach their students mathematical thinking if their students communicate minimally in English” (p. 130) are practical and easy to implement. Here are some noteworthy suggestions (pp. 130-132):

- Design multisensory lessons (visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic).
- Use visuals (graphs, charts, diagrams, models) when possible.
- Use graphic organizers to visually represent mathematical concepts.
- Point to or explicitly connect terms with a visual representation.
- Use real-life problem-solving situations to teach new concepts.
- Avoid using idioms and slang.
- Use key words frequently.
- Particularly for difficult mathematical content, allow non-English-language group discussion or the help of teaching assistants.
- Beware that additional wait-time may be needed when teaching ELL students.

Among the potential challenges for ELLs cited in Chapter 10 (Unlocking the Language of English Language Arts) are the following daunting ones (p. 137-138):

- English texts have an abundance of idioms, figurative language, imagery, and symbolism.
- Students may not have practice in forming, expressing, and supporting their opinions about a literary work.
- ELLs may not be familiar with terminology and routines associated with the writing process: drafting, revising, editing, workshop, conference, audience, purpose, or genre.

In an effort to help prepare ELLs “for the literacy demands of today and tomorrow,” (p. 139) this chapter offers a plethora of ideas for teachers. They cover such vital topics as “key elements

for improving literacy for elementary for elementary English language learners” (pp. 141-142), “strategies for beginning readers” (p. 144), “strategies for intermediate readers” (p. 145), “key elements of effective reading instruction for ELLs” (pp. 146-147), and “key elements of effective writing instruction for ELLs” (p. 148-149). The last two topics stand out with their insightful “focus on ELL.” For example, for the practice of “diverse texts,” the focus on ELL is “Ensure access for ELLs through differentiated texts that address the same topic” (p. 146). And for the practice of “process writing,” the focus on ELL is “Provide daily opportunities to practice writing. Link assignments to personal experiences to activate background knowledge” (p. 148). Of the numerous useful figures in the chapter, the following two are noteworthy for their practicality. While Figure 10.10 (pp. 154-155) focuses on “ten grammatical features that English language learners need to know,” Figure 10.11 (pp. 155-156) features “sentence starters for scaffolding conversations.”

Among the potential challenges for ELLs that Chapter 11 (Unlocking the Language of Social Studies) mentions are the following (p. 160):

- Social studies vocabulary can be highly technical and abstract.
- ELLs may not be familiar with historical concepts, terms, or U.S. governmental processes.
- Social studies requires very high literacy skills because much of the instruction comes through teacher lecture and textbook reading.

Indeed, the greatest challenge for ELLs in the social studies classroom is the fact that they have to cope with a plethora of new vocabulary terms and difficult grammatical structures that can

daunt even the average native English-speaking student. As insightfully expressed by the authors:

Another challenge aspect about many of the terms and concepts used in social studies, particularly in relation to history, is that words can be culturally situated and may have different meanings for students coming from other countries. A case in point is the term *colony*. For most students born in the United States, the term *colony* is positively associated with the thirteen colonies, independence from Great Britain, and the beginning of the United States. For many immigrant students, however, the terms *colony* and *colonization* are associated with oppression, enslavement, and, in some cases, genocide. (p. 166).

Regarding the abundance of highly abstract terms and concepts in social studies (e.g., *democracy*, *citizenship*, *capitalism*, *embargo*), the authors warn that “Unlike science or math classrooms, social studies classrooms do not often include the use of hands-on experiments or manipulatives” (p. 167). Given these mind-boggling obstacles, the chapter recommends three broad practices for teaching and learning social studies (pp. 171-176), based on the work by Szpara and Ahmad (2007), namely (1) “Developing Socially Supportive Classrooms,” (2) “Explicit Teaching of Academic Skills,” and (3) “Reducing Cognitive Load and Increasing Accessibility of Content Knowledge.” Among the strategies recommended by Practice (1) are “Link the unfamiliar with the familiar by tapping students’ previous knowledge” and “Use collaborative groups for tackling complex reading materials.” Practice (2) consists of such strategies as “Offer explicit instruction of learning strategies” (e.g., CALLA, SIOP, SDAIE), “Encourage

students to practice how to ask questions and request clarifications,” and “Use graphic organizers.” Practice (3) relies on strategies like “Provide or encourage students to locate materials and information in their native language” and “Use cognates with your Spanish-speaking students.”

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