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## Helping Middle and High School Age English Language Learners Achieve Academic Success

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### Abstract

Middle and high school-age English language learners present a challenge for teachers. Some arrive with adequate formal schooling. Others have limited formal or interrupted schooling. A third group consists of long-term English learners who may have conversational proficiency in two languages but lack the academic language required for school success. The authors provide brief case studies of students representing each of these groups and then present four research-based keys for working successfully with struggling older English learners. They conclude by describing how one teacher implements the four keys with her English learners.

The number of English language learners in schools in the United States has increased dramatically. According to the National Center for Bilingual Education (NCBE), over the last ten years, while the general school population in the United States has increased by only 24%, the number of English language learners (ELL) has increased by 105% ("The growing numbers of limited English proficient students," 2000). In a review of the research on concerns about English learners, García ( 2000) found that policy makers and school administrators at state and local levels have three main concerns. These are: (1) a growing number of students come to school unprepared, (2) a steady increase in foreign born children and youth enrolling in schools at every grade level, and (3) large numbers of native and non-native students with limited English proficiency.

These changes in school demographics have had an impact on teachers across the country. As we have worked with pre-service and in-service teachers, questions such as the following often arise: "Why do some older students who have only been here a few months learn to read and write English so well while others, who have been here since kindergarten, still struggle?" "How can I help my English learners to read and write in English when they cannot read or write in their first language at all?" "What strategies and texts should I be using with bilingual students?" "Who can expect me to get my bilingual students to read at grade level when they are all at so many different levels of

English proficiency?” New and experienced teachers alike may feel overwhelmed as they attempt to meet the needs of all their students, including their English learners.

There are several potential reasons why English learners struggle in schools. Many of them live in households and neighborhoods with high and sustained poverty, attend schools with other poor children, and are members of families that are likely to move from one school or district to another at least once during the school year. Secondly, in many schools, all English learners are given the same curriculum despite the differences among them. In relation to this latter reason, García (2000) points out, “There is no typical LEP child”(p3). A third reason, as Valdés (2001) has shown is that frequently older students are trapped in a cycle of ESL classes in which they do low level tasks that do not help them develop academic English or content area concepts. As teachers plan instruction for their middle and high school-age English learners, it is important that they consider some basic differences among these students and provide instruction that will challenge all their students without overwhelming them.

In this article we first present brief case studies of students who represent three distinct types of older English learners identified by Olsen and Jaramillo (1999). The first group consists of students who are recent arrivals who have had adequate formal schooling in their native country and have developed literacy in their first language. The second group are those recent arrivals who have had limited formal schooling and who have not developed literacy in their primary language. The third group is made up of students who have been schooled in the United States for at least seven years but have not developed adequate literacy skills or academic concepts in either their first language or in English.

All three types of older English learners face a considerable challenge. They need to learn academic English and subject area content to succeed academically. We present four research-based keys teachers can use to plan the kind of instruction that will enable their middle and high school-age English language learners to succeed. Next, we describe a thematic unit one teacher developed to put the four keys into action in her classroom. We conclude by considering the implications for best practices for older bilingual students

### **Types of English Learners**

#### **Students with Adequate Formal Schooling: Stephanie**

Stephanie’s parents came to the United States from Argentina five years ago when she was in the second grade. Both parents are educated professionals. Her mother is bilingual and her father speaks German in addition to English and Spanish. Her father owned a successful travel agency in Argentina, and her mother owned and operated a ballet school. The family, concerned about the growing economic uncertainty in Argentina, came to the United States supported by Rotary, an organization that promotes international understanding. As soon as they arrived, Stephanie’s parents sought advice from professionals in this country, and they carefully selected schools and extra curricular activities that would help their daughter succeed socially and academically. Now, five years later, Stephanie is in junior high school doing well in college preparatory

coursework. Proof of Stephanie's successful social adaptation to mainstream school culture is that her parents' main concern is that she is too much like a typical U.S. adolescent!

Stephanie represents the first of the three types of English learners described by Olsen and Jaramillo (1999). She is a new arrival with adequate formal schooling. She came to this country within the last five years with a strong educational background and literacy in her first language. Her parents are upper middle class and well-educated. Stephanie had already developed academic language and content knowledge in Spanish that transferred to her academic studies in English. When she first arrived, she lacked conversational skills in English, but her school experiences and extra curricular activities soon made her the most proficient user of conversational English in her household.

Students like Stephanie do well in transitional or maintenance bilingual programs and can also succeed in ESL (English as a Second Language) programs. Such students are usually integrated into the mainstream after one or two years although it still may take several years for them to score at national norms on standardized test. Teachers often ask why all their English learners don't succeed as quickly as these students. The answer lies in looking at the differences between Stephanie's background and the backgrounds of two other types of older bilingual students.

#### Students with Limited Formal Schooling: Blia

Blia represents the second group of English language learners identified by Olsen and Jaramillo (1999): recent arrivals with limited or interrupted formal schooling. These students come to school in this country with limited academic knowledge and limited English proficiency. Such students struggle with reading and writing in their first languages or do not read or write their native languages at all. In addition, because of their limited experiences in school, they lack basic concepts in the different subject areas. For example, they are often at least two years below grade level in math, a subject that is not heavily language dependent.

Blia is a Hmong student from Laos. Because of the Vietnam War, she did not receive any schooling in Laos. The family escaped to Thailand where she attended school at a refugee camp. Classes at the camp were informal. Teachers did not have adequate preparation, supplies, or a well-designed curriculum. Blia learned some survival English and a few academic concepts.

Blia came to the U.S. in 1994, right before the closure of the camp. Her parents are not literate and went through culture shock as they tried to adjust to life in the U.S. They had no marketable skills and very limited English. They lived in a large apartment complex with other Hmong refugees, depending on welfare subsidies for their daily needs.

Blia attended a newcomer school in a large district in California for one year and then, at age fifteen, enrolled in the 10th grade at the regular high school. Not surprisingly, she struggled academically in high school. Her aunt, a Hmong teacher in the district, helped her pass her high school writing proficiency test. Without her tutoring, Blia probably wouldn't have graduated. As Doua, her aunt, explained, "I realized Blia had not

acquired enough English and it was her last year; she would either graduate or not, so I decided to give her extra help. Well, she did eventually pass. She did have to repeat summer school. She is at the local community college now.”

Recent arrivals with limited formal schooling, like Blia, are faced with the complex task of developing conversational English, becoming literate in English, and gaining the academic knowledge and skills they need to compete academically with native English speakers. Because they do not have the academic background to draw upon in their native languages, they often struggle with course work and do not score well on standardized tests. Many also lack an understanding of how schools are organized and how students are expected to act in schools. Fortunately for Blia, her aunt is well-educated and served as a mentor. Without Doua’s support it is unlikely that Blia could have completed high school. She still faces great difficulties in the community college because she has not had adequate time to develop the academic English proficiency required for college classes.

#### Long Term English Learners: Mireya

Mireya is typical of the third type of bilingual student identified by Olsen and Jaramillo (1999), the long-term English learner. All her schooling has been in the United States. She did not experience a bilingual program that allowed her to develop first language literacy and academic content knowledge while she was learning English. As a result, she never developed literacy in Spanish, and although she has conversational language proficiency in both Spanish and English, she has not developed academic proficiency in either language.

Fifteen year-old Mireya was born in San Bernardino, California, on a sidewalk next to her home to a single mother. Most of her schooling has been in a small, rural town. Mireya grew up in the section of town known for crime and poverty. Her older brothers and sisters are all known members of a local gang. Mireya’s mother died when she was in fifth grade, and as the youngest in the family, Mireya felt abandoned by her father and her older siblings. Until recently, in fact, Mireya was a known troublemaker, but at the beginning of her eighth grade year she wrote to her teacher that she was going to change her ways.

Mireya’s academic performance up to the year she entered the eighth grade was dismal. Her records showed frequent “F’s” in different subjects. Mireya explained to her teacher that early in her schooling classmates made fun of her for her accent and her struggles to learn English. She responded by striking back and out and making no effort in school. She now speaks both Spanish and English, but she has not developed grade level academic proficiency in either language.

Long-term English learners like Mireya have attended U.S. schools for seven or more years. Indeed, many are high school students who began kindergarten in the U.S. Often, their parents have limited schooling, and the families live in poverty. Usually, these students have been in and out of various ESL and bilingual classes without ever having received any kind of consistent support program. They also have often missed school during extended periods at different times. These students are below grade level in

reading and writing and usually math as well. Often, they get passing grades, C's and even sometimes B's when they do the required work. Because teachers may be passing them simply because they turn in the work, their grades give many of these students a false perception of their academic achievement. However, when they take standardized tests, their scores are low.

### **Differences Among Middle and High School-Age English Language Learners and Recommendations for Instruction**

Students like Stephanie, the newly-arrived English learners with adequate formal schooling, are the most likely to succeed academically. They generally come from middle class backgrounds, and their parents are often well-educated. Such students have already developed academic language proficiency and academic content knowledge in their first language. They still need effective bilingual or ESL programs that will allow them to continue to develop subject matter knowledge and skills as they acquire English. They need knowledgeable teachers who can make the English instruction comprehensible. They also need support as they go through culture shock and the adjustments involved in living in a new culture and speaking a new language.

Recent immigrants with limited formal schooling, like Bliá, face a much greater challenge. Often, their parents have only minimal education and the families live in poverty. These students need to learn both academic English and subject matter content. In many cases, no bilingual program is available for these older learners to provide first language support while they learn English. They are quickly placed in mainstream classes even though they may not understand much of the language of instruction.

Long-term English learners like Mireya understand conversational English, but they haven't developed the academic English needed for school success. These students also often come from low-income homes, and their parents generally have limited education. Many long-term English learners have experienced a great deal of school failure, and often they develop negative attitudes toward school.

For students with limited formal schooling and for long-term English learners, it is crucial that teachers implement a research-based curriculum that will challenge them without overwhelming them. In the following sections, we summarize the research on effective practice for older bilingual learners.

### **Four Keys for Academic Success**

Key #1: Engage Students in Challenging, Theme-Based Curriculum to Develop Academic Concepts

García ( 1999) conducted research on attributes of effective teachers. One of his findings was that the teachers focused on meaningful instruction and organized curriculum around themes. He noted, "Students became 'experts' in thematic domains while also acquiring the requisite academic skills" (p. 311). García reported on a special

program for high school students that featured student-generated themes. As one teacher commented:

Having student-generated themes formalized student input for curriculum [because] they create the theme, [and] we [teachers] let them imagine what they want to study. They write the curriculum at the start of the six-week unit. From assignment to assessment, they are more involved” (p. 362)

This program, highlighted by García (1999), was successful in part because teachers organized curriculum around themes that students helped choose.

Similarly, Freeman and Freeman (2001) described how an interdisciplinary team of teachers at a middle school worked together to develop a unified curriculum. Student schedules were organized so that each group of students worked with a team of four teachers. The language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics teachers planned thematic units together. For example, during the theme study, *One World/One Family* the language arts teacher had students read *The Acorn People* (Jones, 1976), a powerful book that tells the true story of the author’s work as a counselor at a summer camp for severely handicapped children.

The middle school students read this book, discussed it, and completed writing and art projects. Through these activities, they came to realize that despite differences among people, everyone belongs to *One World and One Family*. The other teachers in the team focused on this same topic with activities in social studies, science, and math. Older English learners benefit from this kind of unified curriculum developed around a topic that is meaningful and relevant to them.

#### Key #2: Draw On Students’ Background:- Their Experiences, Cultures, and Languages

Moran, Tinajero, Stobbe, and Tinajero (1993) point out that limited formal schooling and long-term English learners do well when “they are accepted, respected, made to feel that they belong, and given opportunities to be in charge of their own learning”(p. 117). In addition, they need teachers who build personal relationships with them and their families. Grace, Mireya’s eighth grade Language Arts teacher begins the school year asking students to write to her, telling her about themselves and telling her what they want from her as a teacher. Students respond to Grace’s sincere attempts to get to know them and their needs. They write asking for help because they know they are struggling readers and writers. Mireya wrote, “The important thing for me is pass 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I will tell you the true I never like reading or write. But I want to be better on those two things. I hope you could help me.”

Grace does help her students. She and her students begin the year by reading books, short stories, and poems to get at the question, “Who are we?” “Where have we come from” and “Who are the people who have influenced us?” Grace selects culturally relevant texts for readings including *Living Up the Street* (Soto, 1992), which contains excerpts from the lives of Hispanics in the central valley of California where her students live. Her class also reads about young migrant workers in *The Circuit* (F. Jiménez, 1997) and about the experiences of other Hispanics in *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984). In their written responses, the students connect the readings to themselves personally by writing poetry, and doing projects about their lives.

Jiménez (2001) found that the struggling Latino/a students he worked with thrived when their specific background and national origin were recognized and when the challenge they faced at becoming competent bilinguals was acknowledged. In the school that Jiménez studied, the Spanish-speaking students were not all lumped together and treated alike. Students from El Salvador or Guatemala as well as those from Mexico were validated for their specific national origin, and students who served as language brokers for their monolingual Spanish-speaking relatives were given recognition. At the same time, those who were not proficient in their native Spanish were not criticized. All the students were encouraged to connect their reading and writing in English to their own cultural backgrounds and to value the literacy of their communities, including oral literary traditions. In these ways, educators at the school showed respect for the students' cultures, languages, and backgrounds.

Shifini (1997) studied older struggling immigrant students, including those with limited formal schooling. He makes specific suggestions for improving their literacy. These involve helping students feel part of the classroom community, drawing on students' background knowledge, and encouraging skill development through successful engagements with texts. A key is to build on what students bring to the classroom – their language, culture, and previous experience – to help them develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed academically.

### Key #3: Organize Collaborative Activities and Scaffold Instruction to Build Students' Academic English Proficiency

Gersten and Jiménez (1994) observed successful teachers during reading instruction. They looked particularly at ways teachers supported intermediate students who lacked first-language literacy and experienced difficulties in reading in English. The researchers concluded that effective instruction for language-minority students was challenging, encouraged involvement, provided opportunities for success, and included scaffolding and a variety of graphic organizers to draw on background knowledge and give students access to content. In addition, they found that effective teachers give frequent feedback, make the content comprehensible, encourage collaborative interactions, and show respect for cultural diversity.

While it is important to provide challenging curriculum for older English learners, it is equally important to support them as they study. Teachers can use a variety of techniques to make the input comprehensible, including visuals, gestures, and graphic organizers. In addition, research by Kagan (1986) has shown the benefits of cooperative learning for language minority students.

### Key #4: - Create Confident Students Who Value School and Value Themselves as Learners

Many older English learners enter schools in the United States with little confidence. They know that they are behind the other students in both their English proficiency and their knowledge of academic content areas. However, when teachers follow the first three keys (engaging students in challenging, theme-based curriculum, drawing on their backgrounds, and organizing collaborative activities to scaffold instruction), they create classroom communities in which students build confidence in

themselves as learners and in which they begin to see the value in school. As students experience academic success, their attitudes begin to change, and they engage more fully in the curriculum. In the final section, we describe how one teacher puts the four keys into action in her fourth, fifth, sixth grade newcomer class.

*Sandra's Theme Study: Putting all Four Keys into Action*

The physical environment of Sandra's 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom promotes literacy and learning. Every portion of the small classroom and three adjoining alcoves is filled with professional and student made posters, class produced big books, student art work, song and poetry charts, a computer, a listening center, a board game an activity corner, a math section, and a science corner. Everywhere there are books in Spanish and English, including many literature and content books in card racks and in large accessible, open boxes. The classroom belongs to the students, and they all know where materials and books are kept. Because the class is a community the students know that they all have the responsibility of taking care of what is there.

Students in Sandra's classroom understand how the classroom is set up, and what routines to expect as they engage in learning. Since her students have had little previous schooling and suffer from various degrees of culture shock, Sandra has found that having classroom routines helps them adjust to school and concentrate on learning to read, write, and problem solve. Her students must not only develop literacy in their first language but also prepare themselves to survive academically in English. Therefore, the daily routine includes many opportunities for students to develop literacy in their first and second languages while learning language through academic content.

The class frequently works in heterogeneous groups so students with different talents can share their knowledge and help others. Sandra also includes many opportunities for them to use different modalities as they learn. For example, the indigenous Mixteco and Trique students from southern Mexico, who have had little schooling, shine when illustrating class publications. When students work in centers, they are paired up so that a stronger student can help a classmate who needs more support.

Whenever possible Sandra encourages students to take responsibility for leading activities. She provides ample time daily for students to read and write. She reads to and with students several times during the day and encourages them to analyze texts and think critically. She also ensures that there is ample time for students to choose books and engage in free voluntary reading.

Sandra's students are almost all children of migrant farm workers from Mexico including the indigenous students from southern Mexico. Sandra builds on what they bring to school by developing a theme study each year around agriculture. This theme draws on students' prior knowledge and personal experiences. It is meaningful for them since it directly relates to their lives. Through teaching this theme, Sandra can present concepts the students may have missed due to their limited prior schooling.

Last year Sandra's From the Field to the Table theme study was part of a broader unit that lasted twelve weeks and included the study of seeds, plants, nutrition and health. Each topic flowed into the next giving the students the opportunity to develop vocabulary in the target language while developing key concepts. Sandra began with the topic of

seeds, and this naturally moved into plants, and because plants are the main source of the daily diet, she introduced the topic of food and nutrition. She brought the cycle to completion by helping her students see that good nutrition depends on the plants and crops their families provide for everyone.

Sandra involved parents from the beginning. She started the theme study by sending a note home asking parents to share with their children traditional recipes that they usually eat. The idea of this activity was to later prepare some of those recipes in the classroom, analyzing the nutritional value of their ingredients and discussing how those products travel from the field to the table. Sandra commented, "It is incredible the response that I got and the quality of information that the parents and students brought to the activity. The students were proud of their knowledge and that of their parents. This activity let me learn from my students and their parents."

A key book for her theme was *The Tortilla Factory* (Paulsen, 1995a, 1995b), a book available in English and Spanish. Sandra read the book in Spanish to her class and was soon interrupted by her indigenous Triqui and Mixteco students. When she read how the earth was worked to plant the corn and then dried to make flour, these usually shy students excitedly told her how they had done that in their villages and began to explain in detail how they helped grind the dry corn, make the flour, and how they knew how to make tortillas. Sandra is from Argentina and knew little about tortillas, but her students told her that they wanted to teach her. They wanted to show her how to make tortillas. The students were eager to take on the role of teacher, sharing their knowledge. The class discussed the ingredients they needed for their tortilla project. They investigated where the ingredients came from. They researched the different varieties of tortillas and the kinds of foods eaten with tortillas. The Mixteco and Triqui students, who were usually ashamed of their culture and language backgrounds, organized to bring all the needed items to class for a cooking demonstration. The students who were not involved in the demonstration were assigned to take notes during the whole process.

Sandra and the students gathered the materials and the utensils needed for the demonstration. They arranged the room so the students taking notes would have a clear view of what was happening at each table. Sandra labeled each utensil to build vocabulary. Sandra remembered well the day of the demonstration. Since students from indigenous groups of southern Mexico have corn as the main element of their daily food, there is a tradition within the families that every female member needs to have the tools necessary to pick, to grind and to cook the corn. The students brought different utensils given to them by relatives as gifts. They were all hand made. The petate, a basket that women hang back from their shoulders or heads is used to collect the corn as it is picked; the metate, a stone used to grind the kernels with water to make corn flour; the molcajete, a stone bowl in which the ingredients are mashed to make sauce; and the comal, a circular metal grill on which the tortillas are cooked.

Once all the utensils and ingredients were placed on the tables, the students went straight to work. At the first table, they explained how the corn is gathered and how the people in their community arrange and keep it for later use. One of the students in this group showed the class different techniques for removing the kernels from the cob. After the corn was removed from the cob, one girl soaked the grains and ground them in the

metate by hand. This process is done each week by their mothers at home or by the students themselves.

After this step was completed, students moved to the next table where another group of students was preparing green chili sauce and red chili sauce to eat later on with the homemade tortillas being prepared by their classmates. The students put the chilies and tomatoes over the comal to cook the skin so they could be peeled more easily. Once the chilis and tomatoes were ready, they put them into the molcajete and mashed them together. They added salt, water and a little bit of fresh garlic. They tasted the sauce and when it was done, the students moved to the next station.

At the third table, a student who cooks for her family daily when she gets home from school, was in charge of making the dough for the tortillas. She showed mastery in preparing it, and she directed her helpers, showing them how to prepare each tortilla by hand or by using a pressing machine. In a short period of time everybody at this table was working together to get the tortillas ready to be cooked. The collaborative work they did showed also the community created in the classroom. The students observing and taking notes were respectful of others working, and they were attentive to the whole process. Everybody was an active participant, and the cooks shined at being the experts in front of their peers and the teacher.

When the tortillas were ready, the students at the fourth table started cooking the tortillas and flipping them over by hand as their mothers do every day. The students even taught their teacher how to turn the tortillas over by hand. As soon as the tortillas were ready students started to prepare tacos. They used different ingredients Sandra had brought including cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, and refried beans. Then everybody ate tortillas.

During the following days, students worked at writing science books about making tortillas. Since students in the class have brothers and sisters in other classes at the school, the word about the tortilla presentation spread through the school. Teachers in the lower grades who were making a recipe book and had invited parents to do a presentation decided to ask Sandra's students to do the same presentation to second graders. When Sandra told the students about the invitation, they were proud of themselves and they were eager to share with the little ones what they knew. The second grade teachers who invited them were amazed to see their self-confidence, their self-esteem, and the ability that the students showed at their presentation.

Throughout this theme study, Sandra's students continued to read and write as they learned important concepts related to health and nutrition. In the process, they began to build the academic vocabulary and the literacy they lacked due to their limited previous schooling.

## **Discussion**

Sandra's newcomer class has many students who would be classified as recent immigrants with limited formal schooling following the typology developed by Olsen and Jaramillo (1999). Like the case study student, Bliia, these students arrive at middle or high school in the United States with little schooling background. Most of them have not

developed literacy in their primary language. They lack many basic academic concepts expected of students their age. They may be unfamiliar with school routines. Such students face the challenge of developing both conversational and academic English along with subject matter concepts.

Few older students receive the benefits of placement into a bilingual program where they can receive primary language instruction while learning English. Teachers like Sandra can at least preview and review concepts in the first language of most of her students, and this helps her make the instruction more comprehensible. Sandra also has the same students for up to three years. Recent immigrants with limited formal schooling need time, a stable classroom environment, and appropriate curriculum is they are to make the gains they must make to succeed academically.

Sandra also has long-term English learners in her class. These students, like the case study student, Mireya, have attended school in the United States for several years. However, they have not received effective bilingual education. They were either placed in English only classes or in early transition bilingual classes. As a result, they did not develop primary language literacy, and while they were developing conversational English they fell behind in academic subject matter knowledge.

Sandra knows that for long-term English learners to succeed, academic English proficiency is the key. She challenges these students with demanding curriculum. She provides many reading and writing experiences. Sandra's approach has enabled some long-term English learners to succeed, but they do need time to catch up with their mainstream peers. Even those that do well in Sandra's class, often struggle with the standardized tests that are being given with greater frequency to all students in all schools.

A few of Sandra's students come with adequate formal schooling. These students have grade-level literacy in their primary language and knowledge of academic subject areas. In some cases, their parents are also literate. Like the case study student, Stephanie, these recent arrivals succeed in Sandra's class relatively quickly. They often become class leaders, and Sandra has them direct class activities. Recent arrivals with adequate formal schooling still face challenges. They must learn to understand English instruction, and they need to be able to read fairly complex texts in English. Teachers need to challenge them and still provide the support they need to succeed academically.

All three types of students; the recent arrivals with limited formal schooling, the long-term English learners, and the recent arrivals with adequate schooling, benefit from a curriculum that incorporates the four research-based keys identified in this article. Teachers like Sandra provide effective instruction for her older English learners. She organizes her year around a series of related themes. Through these theme studies, students begin to develop key academic concepts. Sandra chooses themes that allow her to build on her students' background knowledge, their language and culture. She includes challenging activities in her curriculum, but she provides many kinds of support. She plans collaborative activities and scaffolds instruction to help her students develop academic English proficiency. Sandra's goal is to help her students build both confidence and competence so that they can come to value school and value themselves as learners.

## Conclusion

The increasing number of English language learners in schools present a challenge to teachers. Many of these students are in middle school or high school. However in these upper grades, there are few effective bilingual programs for older students whose English is limited. In some cases, teachers are not adequately prepared to teach these students.

The first step in providing effective instruction for older English language learners is to recognize differences among them. Some, like Stephanie, come with adequate primary language schooling. Since they have academic proficiency in their primary language and subject matter knowledge, they can transfer this knowledge into English. Students like Stephanie often succeed in a short time. They move into mainstream classes and achieve good grades. Others, however, like Blia and Mireya, struggle. Both recent arrivals with limited formal schooling and long-term English learners lack the academic English language and the subject matter knowledge needed for academic success.

A review of the research on effective instruction for middle and high school-age English language learners points to certain key practices that promote academic achievement. These practices include organizing curriculum around relevant themes, building on students' background knowledge and experiences, and planning collaborative activities that scaffold instruction and build academic English proficiency. When teachers incorporate these practices, their students become more confident. They begin to value school and value themselves as learners. When teachers follow the four keys identified in this article, they provide the most effective instruction for their bilingual students and help them achieve academic success.

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