

## Chapter 1

# The Current State of Education for English Language Learners

### In This Chapter

- The changing demographics for ELLs
- The importance of best practices
- The significant impact that degree of implementation has on student achievement
- How long it takes to acquire English
- Characteristics of the new and growing population of English learners

**D**espite many opinions to the contrary, numerous recent research studies have made clear that the classroom teacher is the most influential factor in student achievement.<sup>1</sup> At a time when the number of English language learners (ELLs) in classrooms is increasing dramatically, we are in desperate need of research into what works specifically with these students. States across the nation are facing growing numbers of English learners, in places that have traditionally had high numbers of English learners

and places that have not. As of 2004–2005, the following states and territories had the largest number of ELLs:<sup>2</sup>

California	1,591,525
Texas	684,007
Puerto Rico	578,534
Florida	299,346
New York	203,583
Arizona	155,789
Illinois	192,764

The projections for the population show that this demographic will continue to grow.

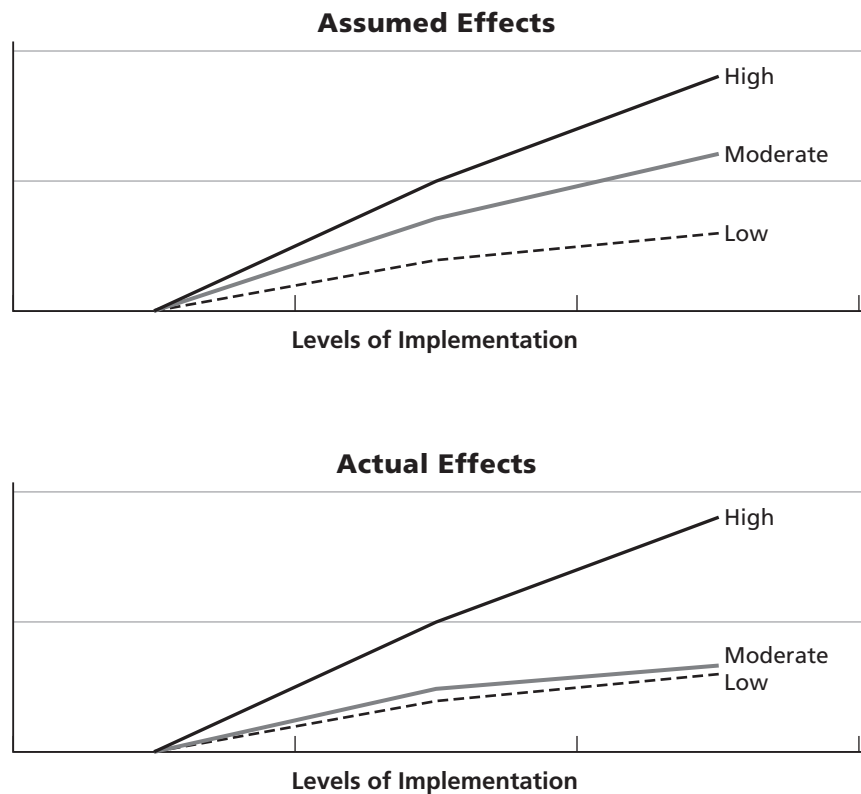
## What Works with ELLs

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In their landmark 1997 research, Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier made the case for long-term research into what works for ELLs.<sup>3</sup> The urgency of that study has not diminished today. Collier and Thomas also brought to light the fact that long-term studies into program efficacy for ELLs need to take place. In fact, their findings show that while in the short term some practices show promising results, these very practices prove detrimental in the later years of an ELL's educational career. They also remind us to not judge a program's efficacy based on its label, but rather on the actual content of that label.

Over the course of my career, I have had the opportunity to visit K–12 rural, suburban, and inner-city classrooms across the country. As a result of what I have seen and learned, I want to challenge a couple of previously held opinions. In my eighteen years of working in a suburban school district with high levels of poverty and students for whom English was a second language, I developed the notion that our students and their needs were unique. I would listen suspiciously to researchers or authorities in education who would propose strategies and ideas that had worked in other districts across the country. My answer always was, “Sure that may have worked in that school or district, but our students are different and I don't think we can assume it would work here.” While my instincts were partially correct, they were also partially mistaken.

The one thing I have witnessed in classroom after classroom, state after state, rural and urban populations alike, is that good teaching strategies work everywhere. But I have also seen good teaching strategies fail in classrooms where the teacher has not taken into account the needs of the students and has not differentiated the instruction appropriately for the group of students in front of her. So while the teacher may be using the strategy, the fact that student needs have not been accounted for affects the degree of implementation. Full implementation would mean that the strategy is being implemented at the highest degree and is being appropriately differentiated for the students. We know from research that the element that matters most is degree of implementation. In fact, Doug Reeves has found in study after study that while we may assume that results increase with each incremental



**Figure 1.1 Assumed and Actual Effects of Degree of Implementation**

*Source: Reeves (2010).*

improvement in implementation, the research shows that the greatest gains come from deep implementation and that there is a negligible difference between low and moderate levels of implementation.<sup>4</sup> In fact, in some cases, moderate implementation had a worse effect on achievement than no implementation at all (Figure 1.1).

This research should send a loud and clear message to teachers who work with ELLs that not only do we need to ensure that we are using the most effective strategies but that we need to be deeply implementing those strategies. Even more important, we need to be differentiating those strategies to meet the very diverse needs of the students we are working with.

## **Is It Only About Degree of Implementation?**

English language learners have very specific needs, and those needs change depending on several factors, including:

- Proficiency in the primary language. A student's proficiency level in his or her primary language has been shown to be a predictor of success in acquiring a second

language. A child who arrives in our schools with a solid foundation and a high level of proficiency and literacy in his or her native language will have a leg up on learning English.<sup>5</sup>

- Stability. A student's language acquisition is negatively affected if he or she has a high rate of transiency during his or her educational career.
- Maintenance of the native language. Students who maintain their native language are likely to outperform their English-only peers.<sup>6</sup>
- If the ELL has had previous educational experience, then success in our school system is only a matter of acclimation because his or her previously learned skills can be transferred to the new environment.

Factors such as these greatly impact the learning needs of the individual ELL. These examples illustrate why working with ELLs requires not only that we deeply implement high impact strategies, but also that we appropriately differentiate those strategies based on the very specific needs of each ELL. In Chapter Ten we will see firsthand the difference that differentiation makes for ELLs.

## How Long It Takes to Acquire English

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This is perhaps the most frequently asked question regarding ELLs, and there is no easy way to answer it. Like everything else surrounding the teaching of ELLs, the answer is complicated. The rate at which a child acquires a second language is dependent on several factors, with the most influential one being the amount of formal schooling the child had in his or her primary language. The most comprehensive study we have is a longitudinal study conducted by Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier from 1982 to 1996.<sup>7</sup> In that study Thomas and Collier looked at the language acquisition of 700,000 students. They considered factors ranging from socioeconomic status to number of years of primary language schooling. Of all the factors considered, the amount of formal schooling prior to arriving in U.S. schools outweighed all other variables. Other findings from their studies include the following:

- Students between the ages of eight and eleven who had two to three years of formal schooling in their native language took five to seven years to test at grade level in English.
- Conversely, students with little or no formal schooling in their native language who arrived before the age of eight took seven to ten years to test at grade level in English.
- Students who were below grade level in their native language also took between seven and ten years to reach just the fiftieth percentile, and many of them never reached grade-level proficiency.



Cummins's research found that a significant level of fluency in conversational language can be achieved in two to three years. However, academic language required between five and seven years to reach near native proficiency levels.<sup>8</sup>

The number of immigrant, migrant, and refugee students in the United States who have limited English proficiency is growing exponentially. In fact, students who are learning English as a second language are the fastest-growing segment of the school-age population. Although the number of ELLs nationwide has skyrocketed, their academic achievement lags far behind that of their native English-speaking peers.

## **The New Wave of Immigration**

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The populations of elementary and secondary schools across the United States continue to change as a result of record high numbers of immigrants entering the country. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of school-age children of immigrants grew from 6 to 19 percent. The 1990s saw the number of children of immigrants grow more than 72 percent in secondary schools and 39 percent in elementary schools. This is particularly significant because many secondary schools are not yet structured to promote language acquisition and content-area mastery designed specifically for newcomers.<sup>9</sup>

## **A Growing ELL Population**

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Along with a growing number of immigrants, the population of ELLs has also grown dramatically. Between 1993 and 2003, the ELL population grew by 84 percent as the overall student population rose 12 percent. The number of ELLs in elementary schools from 1980 to 2000 increased from 5 to 7 percent, while in secondary schools, the number increased from 3 to 5 percent.

Populations of immigrants have increased for states with traditionally high numbers of ELLs as well as in other states. The following states experienced the largest increases:

Nevada: 206 percent

North Carolina: 153 percent

Georgia: 148 percent

Nebraska: 125 percent

These shifts have especially affected the large urban centers in these states that have become gateway cities, such as Las Vegas, Nevada; Charlotte, North Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; and Omaha, Nebraska. The data show that ELLs are highly concentrated in a few urban schools that are also highly minority, low income, and disproportionately likely to fail federal standards.<sup>10</sup> In areas that are newly experiencing an influx of ELLs, the burden



is often overwhelming because they often lack the resources and properly credentialed teachers to meet the needs of so many students. Such demographic trends have led to a crisis in educating ELLs.

## Characteristics of the Current ELL Population

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After English, Spanish is the most widely used language currently spoken in the United States. While it is estimated that approximately 20 percent of the school-age population speaks a language other than English, 14 to 16 percent of those children speak Spanish as their primary language at home.<sup>11</sup> The remaining 4 to 6 percent of these children speak a language other than Spanish. When we consider the K–5 population of ELLs, we find that the majority, 76 percent, speak Spanish and are of Latino/Hispanic background.<sup>12</sup>

The statistics for children who are about to enter our school system are important. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of Kindergarten Children, a national study that looked at more than twenty-two thousand students who were about to enter kindergarten in 1998, found that 68 percent of the children were classified as native English speakers, while 18 percent were classified as language minority (LM).<sup>13</sup> About 13 percent of the total sample were classified as Spanish speaking, 2.7 percent were identified as Asian speaking, and 2 percent spoke a European language. The majority of these language-minority students (52 percent) lived in high levels of poverty; strikingly, 80 percent of the Spanish speakers who were initially identified as being the least fluent in English were in the lowest two socioeconomic status quintiles. These data not only point to an increasingly diverse population, but also clearly show that many incoming language-minority students, particularly Hispanic, live in impoverished homes. These facts have clear implications for schools. We will see later in this book that the school becomes a lifeline for many of these students and their families, often offering resources that they would be unlikely to access otherwise. They reinforce the importance of connecting with these families on a much higher level than we may be accustomed to.

While most families in the United States consider school a place where children go to experience learning, for families living in poverty, school becomes a caretaker that provides their children such necessities as meals and health screenings in addition to an education.

Having taught in an urban setting with high levels of language-minority and low-socioeconomic status students, I saw firsthand the effect that poverty had on instruction. I often had students who had not eaten since having had lunch at school the previous day. Other than the obvious impact, these often desperate situations also brought to light the intense and often painful distractions that many of my students were dealing with while trying to learn. When even the most basic of needs are not being met, students face tremendous challenges to reaching academic and language proficiency.