



english learners and out-of-school time programs

The Potential of OST Programs to Foster EL Success

by Julie Maxwell-Jolly

No matter where we live in the U.S., immigrants and English learners (ELs) are our students. Between 1979 and 2008, the number of children ages 5–17 who spoke a language other than English at home increased from 3.8 to 10.9 million, or from 9 to 21 percent of the population in this age range (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Moreover, between school years 1997–98

and 2007–08, the number of these children who were not yet proficient in English increased by more than 50 percent to almost 5.5 million, or about 10 percent of U.S. public school students. The Southwest and Florida have the largest EL populations, but the Southeastern states are experiencing the most rapid growth in EL student numbers (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2010).

That the EL student population is growing is not a problem, but that ELs are not generally thriving in U.S. classrooms is. ELs score lower on tests, get poorer grades, take fewer advanced or college prep classes at the sec-

ondary level, and graduate from high school at much lower rates than do native speakers of English. Moreover, the likelihood that EL students will receive any post-secondary education or find and maintain stable employment is lower than for other students (Callahan, 2010; Ruiz de Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000; Valverde, 1987).

One reason for this lower level of achievement is *time*. ELs have to learn a new language, learn content through this new language, and learn about the culture of the school as well as the culture at large—all in the same amount of time English-fluent students have in which to learn only content. Out-of-school time (OST)

JULIE MAXWELL-JOLLY, Ph.D., is a senior education researcher and managing director of the Center for Applied Policy in Education in the University of California, Davis, School of Education. She began her career in education teaching English-learner and immigrant students in Los Angeles. She has been an education lecturer, supervisor of student teachers, and community college liaison for migrant education. Her research has focused on high-quality and equitable education for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Julie also served for several years as the coordinator of the Linguistic Minority Research Institute Education Policy Center at UC Davis.

programs have the potential to offer educational benefits to this growing EL population by devoting their valuable resource of *time* to research-based activities that can support ELs facing the dual challenge of learning both English and subject matter content.

The Importance of Time

Time is one of the most fundamental resources in any classroom—the time for teachers to teach and for students to learn (Brown & Saks, 1986, 1987; Tate, 2001). A long-established body of literature on instructional strategy finds that academic gain is related to the amount of time students spend engaged in academic tasks (D’Agostino, 2000; Gamoran, Porter, Smithson, & White, 1997; Gándara, 1999; Kyriakides, Campbell, & Gagatsis, 2000; Luyten & de Jong, 1998). The difference comes not merely from “time on task,” but rather from “engaged” time (Nerenz & Knop, 1983).

So Much to Learn, So Little Time

To be successful in school, all learners need instruction that builds academic literacy skills as well as subject matter knowledge. ELs have the double burden of learning content as they simultaneously learn English (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). As Gibbons (2003) wrote, “For students who are learning English as a second language in English-medium schools, English is both a target and a medium of education: they are not only learning English as a subject but are learning through it as well” (p. 247).

One reason many EL students do so poorly in U.S. schools is that we do not provide sufficient time for them to learn both the language and the content of the curriculum. The goal is not just to gain conversational competence in English. Mastery of academic language, the language of schooling, is crucial for school success (Bailey & Butler, 2003; Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010). To become proficient in academic language, students must learn a wide range of oral and written grammatical styles and genres (Schlepegrell, 2001, 2004). Students who speak a language other than English at home are unlikely to have exposure to these grammatical styles in English. Developing this level of language proficiency takes considerable time. Scholars tell us that students need only two or three years to develop conversational competence in a second language, but that they need five to eight

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years or more to develop academic competence (Baker, 2001). Research shows also that ELs are at risk of failing in school because of the amount of time it takes to develop the advanced literacy skills they need in order to master academic content (Collier, 1987, 1992; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

Though ELs need extra time for extra learning, some argue that they actually spend less time in instruction than do their English-only peers (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003). The practice of “pull-out” instruction for ELs can lead to gaps in their instruction, as well as time lost in the physical transition from room to room (Anstrom & Educational Resources Information Center, 1997; Fleischman & Hopstock, 1993; Gándara et al., 2003). ELs also lose time when they have to wait for instruction to be translated or spend a significant portion of the day not understanding whole-class instruction. In addition, time is lost at the beginning of the school year while schools assess students’ English proficiency before assigning them to an instructional program (Gándara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2000). High school ELs have been shown to be less likely to receive a full academic day of rigorous content area instruction than their English-fluent peers (Minicucci & Olsen, 1992; Olsen, 1997; Olsen & Jaramillo, 2000).

The Quality of Instructional Time

In addition to simple instructional *time*, EL success is related to the *quality* of instruction. Hamann and Reeves (2008) argue that EL students’ access to effective education involves both the time for instruction and how well that time is used. They note that:

...effective instruction includes much more than students’ time on task.... [I]t is important to ask how often students have access to high quality instruction.... It is straightforward to anticipate a learning and achievement gap between those with more access and those with less. (p. 9)

They argue that many culturally and linguistically diverse students are in low-track classes (Oakes, 1985), where they are less likely to experience the high-quality programs that foster achievement.

Another factor is teacher skill. According to Cohen and his co-authors (2003), teachers who have more

preparation can make the best use of all classroom resources, including time. However, research shows that urban schools—the very schools ELs are most likely to attend across the U.S. (Consentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005)—have less qualified teachers and that low-income, low-achieving students of color, particularly those in urban schools, are much more likely than others to find themselves in classes with the least skilled teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996; Hanushek, 1992; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). Research in California also finds a dearth of teachers with expertise in specific EL instructional skills (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2004).

The Potential of Out-of-School Time for English Learners

OST programs have the potential to provide additional support for ELs. In the simplest terms, OST programs expand the school day, providing EL students with more time in which to address their dual learning challenge. Research shows that this additional time can make a difference if used effectively.

In California, which has the largest number of after-school programs and spends more by far on these programs than any other state, OST programs are likely to be present in schools with large percentages of EL students. The EL population of California schools with publicly funded afterschool programs is 38 percent, as compared to the state average of 24 percent. This difference holds true not only for the overall school population but also at each level: elementary, middle, and high school (California Afterschool Network, 2011; California Department of Education, 2011).

Research specifically on the impact of OST programs on EL achievement is just emerging. However, the available studies show promising results. For example, an evaluation of Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Literacy (CORAL) OST programs in five California cities that served 5,300 students, half of whom were ELs, found that ELs made literacy gains similar to those of their non-EL peers after the CORAL program increased its focus on literacy strategies including primary language reading and one-on-one primary language support (Arbreton, Sheldon, Bradshaw, & Goldsmith, 2008). Evaluators of The After School Corporation (TASC) program in New York found that EL students

who participated actively in TASC programs showed greater gains in math achievement than did non-participant ELs (Welsh, Russell, Williams, Reisner, & White, 2002). A rigorous evaluation of LA's BEST afterschool programs found that participants with more regular attendance and greater contact with adults showed a substantial decrease in their crime rate and a moderate increase in academic achievement as compared to non-participant controls (Goldschmidt & Huang, 2007). This evaluation did not focus specifically on ELs, but, since 50 percent of LA's BEST participants are ELs, the findings should be indicative of results for these students. Finally, Vandell and her colleagues (2007) reported on after-school outcomes in eight states, finding that continuous participation in high-quality afterschool programs resulted in academic and other benefits for low-income youth, many of whom were recent immigrants.

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Research-Supported Strategies: OST Programs and English Learners

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- Primary language instruction and support
- Opportunity for practice, interaction, and “air time”
- Understanding of individual differences
- Motivation and engagement
- Connection to home and family

Not all of these factors are unique to ELs, but they are particularly important for these students because of their dual learning challenge.

Primary Language Instruction and Support

A growing body of research indicates that using students’ primary language in instruction is a particularly effective way to make school comprehensible for EL students; the practice helps students develop their language skills in English even as they cover age- and grade-appropriate academic content (Genessee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004). Meta-analyses of studies in the U.S.

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and abroad have shown that students in education programs that include their primary language can succeed academically and can, in fact, do better on English-language achievement tests than do EL students in English-only programs (Krashen & McField, 2005). Abilities that support the development of academic language—those needed to do well in content areas in English—transfer between languages (Cummins & Danesi, 1990; Dressler & Kamil, 2006). Meta-analytic syntheses provide overwhelming evidence that teaching ELs to read in their primary language promotes higher levels of reading in English (August & Shanahan, 2006; Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002; Genesee, Geva, Dressler, & Kamil, 2006). Another body of research indicates that bilingualism and biliteracy provide cognitive and social advantages (Bialystock & Hakuta, 1994; Cummins, 1978, 1979, 1989; Hakuta, 1986). An associated hypothesis maintains that when children obtain a certain competence level—a “threshold”—in their second language, they attain such cognitive benefits of bilingualism as increased IQ (Baker, 2001).

In the content areas, strong evidence shows that instructing ELs in their strongest language, or using both their first and second languages, gives them better access to content area learning and enables more valid assessment of what they know and can do (Abedi, 2004; Escamilla, Chavez, & Vigil, 2005; Figueroa, 2004; Lazaruk, 2007; Mahon, 2006). The *rigor* of the content is as important to EL success as the level of English proficiency (Callahan, 2010). Use of students’ primary language in instruction ensures that they can access age- and grade-appropriate academic content while continuing to gain English proficiency.

Despite the preponderance of this research, use of students’ primary language in school is the exception rather than the rule. In California, for example, where approximately a third of the nation’s ELs attend school, only about 5 percent are in programs that include primary language instruction; about 20 percent receive some primary language support (California Department of Education, 2011). Primary language instruction is rare across the U.S. principally because policies in many states constrain its use. For example, in California, since the 1998 passage of Proposition 227, which limits primary language instruction, the number of teachers earning bilingual certification decreased by almost 40 percent during a period that saw an 8.5 percent increase in the EL population (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

Because OST programs are not subject to the same strictures as school instruction and because they often

employ staff from the same cultural and linguistic background as the students, they can use primary language strategies to support ELs. For example, when OST educators and classroom teachers communicate about classroom content, OST instructors can use students’ primary language to reinforce the content taught in English that day; they can also preview content to be addressed the next day—a strategy that has been shown to be effective for both language and content instruction (Hamann & Reeves, 2008). OST educators can use ELs’ primary language to check how well students are grasping classroom concepts; they can then report to classroom teachers about areas in which students are struggling and use students’ primary language while working with them on challenging subjects.

Opportunity for Practice, Interaction, and “Air Time”

In order to become proficient, ELs need opportunities to practice their English language skills. Though significant attention has been devoted to the importance of making English-language instruction comprehensible to EL students and to the role of comprehension in the development of English proficiency (Echevarria & Vogt, 2008; Krashen, 1985), further research reveals that opportunities for *producing* language are equally important (Lessow-Hurley, 2003; Saunders & O’Brien, 2006; Swain, 2005). When ELs produce language by speaking or writing, they must make grammatical and lexical choices; this process helps them focus on correctness, thereby improving their English proficiency (Snow & Katz, 2010). Producing language allows ELs to automatize their language knowledge and to develop discourse skills (Ellis, 2005).

Social interaction is a critical part of language output; it gives learners feedback on the success of their language production (Lightbown, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Opportunities for interaction can also allow students to use different types of language and to express themselves in a variety of ways (Ellis, 2005). The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol model (Echevarria & Vogt, 2008), which has demonstrated gains in ELs’ language growth (Cuevas, Lee, Hart, & Deaktor, 2005), stresses the importance of peer interaction. In addition, sociolinguistic learning theory holds that learning is largely a social process in which learners construct meaning through interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). An extensive review of the research on students and motivation concluded that student interaction with peers and with text is important to EL student motivation (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004).

U.S. classrooms do not often give EL students many opportunities to produce language in interactive situations. Though the social nature of learning has become part of the education canon (Halliday, 1980, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Tarone, 2007), its incorporation in classrooms is uneven. For reasons of efficiency and practicality, teacher-centered instruction is the norm for many students for much of the school day. Meltzer and Hamann (2004) note that ELs are unlikely to have adequate opportunities for interaction in mainstream classrooms.

OST programs, by contrast, are well suited to provide EL students with opportunities for English language output and interaction. One reason is sheer numbers: teachers with 25–35 or more students in a class may feel it is daunting and impractical to manage classrooms in which students are often interacting and to plan interactive activities. Large student-teacher ratios also limit opportunities for students to produce language in interaction with the teacher. OST programs, by contrast, often have lower child-to-adult ratios. In addition, the smaller groups often formed in OST settings may lessen the pressure on students over their “performance” in English. For adolescents in particular, embarrassment over making mistakes can hinder language production (Gándara, Gutierrez, & O’Hara, 2001; Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004). Children and adolescents who come to know one another in an OST setting that is less restrictive and stressful than the school classroom are likely to feel less self-conscious.

The need to meet accountability goals means that classroom teachers often must stick to strict schedules determined by curricular packages that address the skills included on accountability measures. The pace of prescribed activities may not allow for the interaction and language practice that ELs need. OST programs may be able to offer a broader array of types of activities—including interactive activities—and a wider range of choices for students in areas such as art, music, or movement.

Understanding of Individual Differences

All children show important individual differences in their academic progress. When working with ELs, edu-

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cators must consider the added dimension of English proficiency as well as the myriad other differences among ELs in the U.S., including primary language, socioeconomic status, minority vs. majority or immigrant vs. resident status, home literacy and previous schooling experiences, and ethnicity and culture. These factors influence ELs’ language and literacy acquisition in complex ways. Research on the most successful English instructional strategies supports the importance of being familiar with students’ background knowledge, since instruction that promotes simultaneous content and language learning for ELs builds on students’ prior knowledge (Echevarria & Vogt, 2008; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

The diverse language and academic needs of ELs require a variety of educational approaches. ELs benefit from instruction that helps them apply their skills in a variety of situations and formats, including meaningful learning contexts in collaboration with other students (Hakuta & August, 1998). Instruction should include extensive English input that students can comprehend in a variety of oral and written ways (Ellis, 2005). EL students should be provided a range of ways to access instruction, including activities that link visuals, manipulatives, graphic organizers, and similar materials to oral and written language (Snow & Katz, 2010).

The achievement gap between EL and English-proficient students has been ascribed primarily to lack of language proficiency. However, the evidence suggests that ELs get less instructional time, less time in high-quality instruction, and less time learning rigorous content, even though research indicates that content rigor is critical to ELs’ academic success (Callahan, 2010). Understanding each EL student’s level of content knowledge is a crucial step toward designing instruction that is appropriately rigorous rather than simplified or watered down.

Adults in OST programs have more opportunities to understand the individual ELs they serve and to get to know their families. OST staff can get to know each student better simply because they are responsible for fewer students at a time than are classroom teachers. Staff members who share students’ backgrounds can better

understand individual differences and can learn about ELs' educational and other needs by communicating in the primary language. Freedom from the narrow set of instructional strategies imposed by standardized curricula means that, once staff understand students' individual needs, they have more varied toolkits with which to address them.

Motivation and Engagement

While motivation and engagement in instruction have long been recognized as important for all students (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), an extensive review of the literature by Meltzer and Hamann (2004, 2005; see also Meltzer, 2001) found that motivation is particularly important for EL adolescents. In a later iteration of this research synthesis, Hamann and Reeves (2008) reported that most of these findings about motivation apply to younger EL students as well. Both sets of authors note that the limited curricula frequently offered to ELs significantly hamper engagement and motivation. Often EL curricula are watered down in a mistaken attempt at *sheltering* instruction, which properly refers to modifying instructional strategies in order to make content accessible rather than to modifying or simplifying content (Short, 2002). EL students can also lose motivation because they are placed in lower tracks or provided less challenging—and often less interesting—content (Callahan, 2010). Another perspective that often leads to limited curriculum for ELs is the view that English language development is all they need—at the expense of rigorous and interesting content (Gold & Maxwell-Jolly, 2006).

Based on their literature review, Meltzer and Hamann (2004) present three key principles that are critical to engaging and motivating EL students. One has to do with opportunities for practice and interaction, discussed above. The other two principles are:

- **Making connections to students' lives.** Instruction must connect to ELs' previous learning and experience—to what students already know, what they need to know, and what excites them.
- **Creating safe and responsive classrooms.** ELs need to feel safe and accepted in their learning environments, especially since many already feel marginal to U.S. society. Adolescents are often anxious about doing or saying the wrong thing—particularly in a new social environment for which they do not know the rules. A

relationship of trust with a teacher can contribute to student success, so learning environments need to provide the time for such relationships to flourish.

Evaluations have shown that OST programs have the ability to increase student motivation and engagement. In an evaluation of four afterschool programs, Kane (2004) found that participating youth reported that they were more engaged and paid greater attention in class than they did before joining the program. This finding, though not specific to ELs, supports the potential such programs have to build engagement among all students. An evaluation of five San Francisco Beacons

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Network afterschool centers serving predominantly racial and cultural minority youth revealed that supportive relationships with program staff constituted one of the most important reasons students decided to participate in afterschool activities (Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008).

Evaluators of LA's BEST, which serves many cultural and linguistic minority youth, reported that students who felt supported by staff expressed greater motivation to do well in school (Huang et al., 2007). Evaluators of an afterschool program serving Hmong students found that a key to the program's success was that staff members understood students' culture, history, and family structure and communicated with students in their native language. This cultural competency created relationships of trust that allowed youth to express their Hmong identities (Lee & Hawkins, 2008). Similarly, the Harvard Family Research Project's (2008) literature review on promoting positive outcomes for disadvantaged youth in afterschool programs highlighted the importance of well-prepared staff who can build strong relationships with youth and foster caring interactions.

In addition, many OST programs offer a variety of activities—arts, dance, sports, and more—that can engage student interests, thereby providing opportunities for language and other learning.

Connection to Home and Family

School staff often lack familiarity with the backgrounds of EL students, just as students' families often lack understanding of the culture of school. Yet connections between home and school are important factors in students' education. In a study of 14 urban schools with

high minority populations, researchers found frequent teacher-to-home communication to be a common factor in classrooms where students' academic achievement was highest (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). In addition, research has found a high correlation between parental involvement and minority students' positive academic outcomes (Desimone, 1999; Keith et al., 1998; Nye, Turner, & Schwartz, 2006; Trotman, 2001; Zellman & Waterman, 1998).

Educators and educational institutions need to be able to appreciate the culture of their students. Parents' aspirations for their children and ways of supporting their children's education may not be evident to teachers who are unfamiliar with students' cultural backgrounds (Arvizu, 1996; Valdés, 1996). Educators must learn to view students' families as a valuable asset and to tap home and community resources (Moll, 1988; González et al., 1994). Zeichner (1996) found that teachers whose culturally and linguistically diverse students achieved academic success linked the curriculum to the students' culture. Erstein and Miller (2008) report that:

Research on schools and programs that appear to be closing the achievement gap demonstrates that many of these successes benefit from, or even rely upon, partnerships among schools, community members, and institutions to reduce ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes. (p. 1)

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (1999) includes the need to connect curriculum to students' home culture and community in its standards for effective teaching practice.

Kane (2004) found consistent results across several afterschool program evaluations indicating that parents of participating children became more involved in their children's schools. Though this research was not specific to EL students, it holds promise that OST programs can foster the home-school connections that are vital to the success of ELs. The afterschool program described above that focused on staff knowledge of Hmong students' culture, history, and family structure (Lee & Hawkins, 2008) also illustrates the potential of OST programs to make home-school connections. Furthermore, many OST programs are administered or sponsored by community organizations; whether this is the case or not, community members often work in these programs, either as paid staff or volunteers. Thus, a home-community connection is an integral feature of many, if not most, OST programs. Finally, parents of ELs who feel "at sea" when dealing with school staff or school rules (Torrez, 2004) can con-

nect with their children's education in an atmosphere that may seem less restrictive and daunting than that of the school—particularly when OST educators speak the families' primary languages.

Recommendations

Research supports the potential for OST programs to provide the much-needed resource of time for ELs to meet the dual challenge of learning English while learning content *through* English. An emerging evaluation literature supports the positive effects of afterschool programs when EL students participate regularly and have strong adult support. Moreover, a number of research-supported strategies for improving EL achievement can potentially be applied in OST settings: incorporating primary language use, providing opportunities for practice and interaction in a relatively risk-free environment, addressing ELs' individual differences including a wide range of backgrounds and English proficiency, fostering student motivation and engagement, and promoting connections with students' families and communities.

In order to move from potential to positive outcomes for ELs, OST educators and administrators must plan how best to make use of the precious resource of extra time that OST programs provide. My research review suggests the following recommendations:

Coordination between OST and school staff. The research outlined above suggests that ELs can learn more easily when OST staff employ strategies different from those of the school day. However, these strategies—such as communicating in the student's primary language—can be used to focus on school content, part or all of which ELs may miss. Coordinated planning with school staff will help OST staff address ELs' language and content needs in activities that may not be available during the school day.

Intentional planning. The extra time OST programs offer lends itself to the interactive activities that ELs need to practice their language skills but that often do not fit into the confines of the school day. ELs may also be more comfortable practicing their English in the less restrictive environment of the OST program. To facilitate ELs' participation, opportunities for interaction and practice should be designed to meet specific objectives and should include intentional correction and feedback (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010).

Professional development. While most of the instructional strategies that work for EL students are also effec-

tive with non-English learners, the converse is not always the case (Goldenberg, 2008). OST educators need to understand the specific learning needs of EL students and learn how to address them.

Staffing. OST programs should actively work to recruit, hire, train, and retain staff who share the backgrounds of the programs' ELs and their families. Recruiting people who live in the community where the OST program is situated helps to ensure that staff represent the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural characteristics of the students. Programs should also attempt to attract staff with expertise in working with ELs.

Funding for training and technical assistance. State education agencies should direct technical assistance funding (from 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, for example) toward programs that serve high numbers of ELs. Training and technical assistance should focus on meeting the educational, social, and emotional needs of OST participants.

Economic hardship, increasing focus on accountability, and alarm over the achievement gap between ELs and their English-fluent peers bring parents, educators, policymakers, and the public to seek direction on the best use of scarce resources. However, the emerging evaluation research indicating the potential of OST programs to promote EL achievement is scant. In the future, evaluations of OST programs should include a focus on the effects for ELs. Such evaluations can provide direction on ways to organize and implement OST programs to produce maximum positive impact on EL students.

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