

# UC Berkeley

## The CATESOL Journal

### Title

Issues in Articulation: The Transition From Elementary to Secondary School

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6bx7g571>

### Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 9(1)

### ISSN

1535-0517

### Authors

Dunlap, Susan

Fields, Sara

### Publication Date

1996

### DOI

10.5070/B5.36524

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## Issues in Articulation: The Transition From Elementary to Secondary School

The population of English language learners in California has increased over 150% during the last decade. Currently, 24% of the K-12 population is limited English proficient (California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit, 1996). California's public schools face the challenge of providing an educationally sound program that meets the needs of these children. Instruction in English language development (ELD), also known as English as a second language (ESL), is an integral part of such a program. In order to serve English language learners, districts provide ELD instruction until students have attained sufficient fluency in English to succeed in a mainstream setting (Dolson & Prescott, 1995). This often means that students receive ELD instruction at both the elementary and secondary level. The articulation of ELD programs as English language learners transition from elementary to secondary school is a key component in providing a sound education for these children.

Elementary school programs include kindergarten through fifth or sixth grade. Students then enter the secondary level at a middle school (sixth through eighth grade) or a junior high school (seventh through eighth grade). In this transition, English language learners move from receiving ELD classes in a self-contained classroom or a pullout program at the elementary level to receiving ELD at the secondary level in classes that are sequential and tied to the stage of English language fluency which the student has achieved. The articulation between elementary and secondary levels is frequently minimal and the transition rocky.

Elementary teachers, while knowledgeable about their students, are unfamiliar with secondary programs and therefore unable to make informed recommendations about placement into the appropriate level of ELD. They

are concerned that their students will not receive the appropriate instruction and will fall between the cracks when no single teacher is responsible for them.

Secondary teachers are equally unfamiliar with ELD at the elementary level. They do not know how the elementary curriculum corresponds to the secondary ELD curriculum. Secondary ELD teachers often move transitioning English learners to a different level of ELD several weeks after the opening of school, having determined that the student's placement was inappropriate.

Secondary counselors are responsible for writing a program for each entering student. They are rarely familiar with the process of second language acquisition. Their decisions are guided sometimes by elementary recommendations, sometimes by their own assessment based on a brief oral interview and a review of the student's records, sometimes by the results of the oral English assessment required by the state, which measures only a low level of language knowledge (Schwartz, 1994), and less frequently by the results of an instrument designed for placement in a secondary ELD program.

Issues in articulation revolve around knowledge and understanding between the two levels, assignment of responsibility for placement, placement criteria which include literacy and correlation to district ELD standards, and lack of formal agreements or policy about transition and placement. Problems facing school districts in addressing the issues involved in articulation include a lack of awareness of the need for clear goals and practices by policy-level administrators, lack of personnel in the district central office or at the elementary and secondary sites to facilitate the process, lack of funding to support articulation practices, and lack of training for personnel involved in the decision-making process for transition of English language learners from the elementary to the secondary level.

### Initial Identification

California public K-12 schools are governed by state and federal requirements about the education of English language learners. These requirements cover issues such as identification and assessment of limited English proficient (LEP) students, redesignation of LEP students to fluent English proficient (FEP), and appropriate programs that meet the three state goals: to develop English language proficiency, to provide equal opportunity for academic success, and to promote cross-cultural understanding. There are also legal requirements for staffing, use of funds, and parent involvement.

All parents must complete a home language survey upon enrolling a

child in a new district. This form consists of four questions about the pattern of language use by the child and his or her family. The responses determine if the child needs to be assessed in English language proficiency. The questions are:

- Which language did your son or daughter learn when he or she first began to talk?
- What language does your son/daughter most frequently use at home?
- What language do you use most frequently to speak to your son/daughter?
- Name the language most often spoken *by the adults* at home.

A response other than "English" to the first three questions triggers the assessment process which determines if the child is LEP or FEP. If the response to Question 4 is a language other than English, assessment is optional.

The school district must assess the child in English listening comprehension and speaking ability, using a state-designated instrument, within 30 school days of enrollment. For students in kindergarten through grade two, English reading and writing assessments are optional. Literacy assessment in English is also optional for students in grades three through 12 if the students are designated LEP on the basis of the assessment in English comprehension and speaking. For students in grades three through 12 scoring fluent in oral proficiency, further assessment of English reading and writing proficiency is required. These students must meet district-established standards in reading and writing for their grade level in order to be initially designated FEP. If they do not meet these standards they are designated LEP. After the assessment is completed, parents are notified of the results. The student is placed in an appropriate program to meet his/her linguistic needs.

There are no state requirements for school districts to review the achievement of students initially identified as FEP. Some young English language learners (K-2) may score as FEP because the assessment used for students at this age is based on a small oral language sample. However, these students may still have significant second language issues. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many of these students are subsequently enrolled in remedial programs in both elementary and secondary school. Because they have been identified FEP, teachers knowledgeable about second language acquisition are not involved in planning how to address their learning needs. Many become "permanent underachievers" and stop attending school. We believe that this is one of the factors contributing to the high dropout rate among linguistically diverse students in California.

As LEP students develop English language proficiency, the district monitors their progress. Students remain identified LEP until they meet the requirements for redesignation to FEP. These requirements include demonstrating English oral proficiency on a state-designated instrument; receiving a teacher evaluation of English proficiency; meeting the district's standards on an objective assessment of reading, language arts and mathematics; meeting the district's standards on an empirically established range of performance in basic skills for nonminority English proficient students of the same age and grade. In addition, parent consultation must occur. On meeting the requirements, LEP students are redesignated FEP. They are no longer served by a specialized program, as they should now be able to succeed in a mainstream program, that is, a program without additional support for linguistically diverse students. FEP students are monitored, according to district policy, in order to ensure that they are succeeding without additional support.

ELD programs are mandated for all LEP students until they are redesignated FEP. These programs provide LEP students with ELD instruction appropriate to their age, grade and English proficiency level, using appropriate materials and methods for English language acquisition. School districts must have an adopted curriculum designed to develop proficiency in English as effectively and efficiently as possible.

In practice, identification procedures are usually followed, but services are not necessarily provided. In March of each year, every school in California must complete the annual language census (R-30). This census includes the numbers of LEP and FEP students, staffing information, program information, and the number of students redesignated since the previous census. Table 1 summarizes the enrollment of LEP students in instructional programs as of March, 1995 (Dolson & Mayer, 1995).

**Table 1**  
**LEP Students in California by Program Category**

<i>Program</i>	<i>Percentage LEP students</i>	<i>Number LEP Students</i>
ELD alone	13.5	178,978
ELD and SDAIE <sup>a</sup>	16	211,386
ELD, SDAIE and primary language support	19.7	260,828
ELD, academic subjects through primary language	30.2	399,340
No appropriate program	20.6	273,235

*Note.* From *Language Census Report for California Public Schools* (p. 16), by California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit, October, 1996, Sacramento: Author. Reprinted by permission.

<sup>a</sup>Specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) is an approach used to make content comprehensible to English language learners with intermediate fluency.

In drawing conclusions based on these data, it is important to remember that data are self-reported at the school site. Students may be listed as receiving a particular program because they are in a classroom where a teacher is certified to provide that program, but the teacher may not actually be providing it; or, an administrator may report students as enrolled in an appropriate program, even though there are not enough staff members certified to provide that program to all the students reported.

Also reported on the R-30 is the number of students redesignated at the school since the prior year's language census. At both the elementary and secondary levels, there may be a significant number of students who have met the criteria for redesignation and who are enrolled in a mainstream program but who have not been formally redesignated. This generally occurs because of a lack of emphasis on this function and a shortage of personnel and resources to gather the necessary data as reported above.

The 20.6% of LEP students who are listed as not being in an appropriate program and who do not receive ELD therefore includes three subgroups of students. The first subgroup consists of students who need the LEP services to which they are legally entitled, and who are not receiving these services. The second subgroup consists of students who have reached criteria for redesignation, but who have not yet been formally redesignated, as described in the preceding paragraph. The final subgroup consists of students who fall short of meeting the criteria in a single area, usually either writing skills or standardized test scores. Program emphasis given to identi-

fying these students and providing course work to target their needs as second language learners would result in more students being redesignated. Appropriate resources should be devoted to all three subgroups.

### Overview of Elementary Education

Most elementary schools are organized into self-contained classrooms, with a teacher responsible for all subject matter for around 30 students. Schools offer a variety of program models to serve the needs of their LEP students.

Some schools with significant numbers of LEP students from a single language group offer bilingual classes. In these classes, content areas are taught in the primary language while at a different time of the day, students receive ELD. In schools which use the "Eastman model", developed at Eastman Avenue School in Los Angeles Unified School District, students are assigned to homogeneous classes based on their level of development in ELD, but spend part of the day in mix time activities in which they interact with more advanced English speakers (Krashen & Biber, 1988). Besides daily ELD, beginning students receive core subjects (math, science, social studies, and language arts) in their primary language, while intermediate students receive core subjects in L2 through SDAIE—an approach used to make content comprehensible to English language learners with intermediate fluency. (For more information on this approach, also known as *sheltered content area instruction*, see CATESOL's 1993 position paper on specially designed academic instruction in English). Thus, LEP students who speak no English receive all core subjects in their primary language, while LEP students at the intermediate fluency stage of language development normally receive only social studies and language arts in their primary language, while science and math are delivered through a SDAIE approach (Dolson & Prescott, 1995).

Schools with students from a variety of language backgrounds may offer classes designed for LEP students, without primary language instruction. In these schools, LEP students also receive daily structured ELD. In some schools, several teachers may group and exchange students for a period of the day in order to offer ELD at different levels; however, classroom ELD generally encompasses a variety of levels. Other elementary schools enroll LEP students in a mainstream classroom but offer ELD, delivered by a certified resource teacher, on a pullout basis.<sup>1</sup>

### Overview of Secondary Education

Secondary schools have a variety of program configurations that include ELD, SDAIE, and primary language instruction. The curricula are departmentalized with ELD as a separate department.

Classes offered in the ELD (or ESL) department are usually sequential, with students moving from a beginning to intermediate to advanced level. In many secondary programs, LEP students enroll in two ELD classes daily, particularly at the early stages of English language development. A recent large-scale study of high school students has shown that the most advantaged second language students in the best instructional programs require five to seven years to reach the 50th normal curve equivalent (NCE) on standardized tests; those with limited schooling in their primary language take seven to 10 years (Collier, 1989). In an effort to address this need for continuing ELD, an increasing number of secondary programs are offering a fourth level of ELD to provide LEP students with appropriate instruction as they near redesignation.

Besides their ELD classes, LEP students enroll in core curriculum classes taught with SDAIE. Depending upon their diagnosed need, they may also take some subjects in their primary language and/or some mainstream classes as well as electives. Secondary LEP students often take English classes in a mainstream setting before they have met all the requirements for redesignation.

### Survey of K-12 Practitioners

In order to get a sense of current practice in the field, a short questionnaire was distributed to professionals involved with second language acquisition programs around the state. Nineteen respondents, representing 19 different districts, completed questionnaires. These respondents have a variety of titles. Some are district directors of bilingual education, directors of second language acquisition, or directors of categorical programs; others are program specialists or bilingual/ELD resource teachers. All are knowledgeable about legal requirements, well-trained in the field, and familiar with the practices in their respective districts. Many also train other educators to work with LEP students.

### Elementary Education in the Field

According to the respondents, the actual programs in elementary schools range from a complete bilingual program to no special program. Elementary schools with a significant population of Spanish speakers are likely to offer bilingual classes, with core subjects taught in Spanish only in grades K through 2 or 3. A district may designate as *bilingual* a class taught by a teacher who is not bilingual but who is assisted by a paraprofessional who speaks the students' primary language. The upper grades, 4 through 6, tend to be taught in English using a SDAIE approach.

For classes with students from diverse languages some districts designate an *LEP cluster* teacher who has been trained in ELD and SDAIE at each grade level. Other districts offer pullout ELD with all other subjects in the regular classroom. One district provides multigrade newcomer classes for students in the beginning levels of ELD.

In any of these models, instructional aides may provide primary language support or extra assistance in English. Unfortunately, some schools provide no special support of any kind for LEP students. It is also unclear, when districts report primary language support, whether students are learning the content area concepts in their primary language, or whether these concepts are being delivered in English and then explained in the primary language.

These districts reported no standard curriculum for ELD. Some respondents said they use a particular publishers' ESL materials as their curriculum. The most frequently mentioned were *Addison-Wesley ESL* and Santillana's *Bridge to Communication*—two ELD series which are currently state-adopted for use in California.

### Secondary Education in the Field

According to respondents, the actual practices in secondary education are somewhat less than ideal. Respondents usually identified the ELD component of the program as adequate; most districts offer at least three levels, based upon student proficiency. Respondents expressed more concern about the core curriculum component.

Few districts offer a complete range of content area classes taught with primary language instruction or SDAIE. One respondent stated that SDAIE classes are "scattered and infrequent." Some districts call these content classes "transition" classes. Another respondent mentioned the small number of teachers in the school with the language development specialist (LDS) certificate; these teachers frequently have both native English speakers and LEP students in their classes.

Respondents mentioned their schools offer "limited" primary language courses or "a few" such courses. Some respondents mentioned the use of bilingual aides as an alternative to primary language teachers; again, it is unclear if these aides assist students with their work in English, or if a primary language curriculum and textbooks are offered.

### Articulation Procedures

Specific procedures for articulation between elementary and secondary schools were described by the survey respondents. In the following section, each question is listed, followed by a summary of the responses.

- Who decides which students will be placed in ESL classes? Who decides what classes they will take?

Many respondents indicated that this decision is made by the secondary school counselor. Some respondents mentioned elementary ELD staff; bilingual office coordinator; secondary ELD/ESL staff; and principals. Some districts have specific criteria for the various levels of ESL courses offered. A few respondents said that parents and students have input in course selection.

- On what basis is this decision made? What, if any, assessment instrument is used?

Most respondents mentioned some kind of testing, using either district developed tests or standardized tests. Some districts review students' elementary school records, using the year-end tests given at the elementary school. A few respondents mentioned using the recommendations of the elementary school staff. However, it appears that many districts treat the entering student transferring from an elementary school just the same as any other entering student; they are given an informal interview or a battery of tests at the school site or at a Newcomer Center.

Tests mentioned by the respondents are described in Figure 1:

**Figure 1**  
**Tests Used for Placement in Secondary Schools**

#### *Oral English Proficiency Tests*

Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM)<sup>a</sup>  
Language Assessment Scales- Oral (LAS-O)<sup>a</sup>  
Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM)<sup>b</sup>  
Idea Proficiency Test (IPT)  
Woodcock-Muñoz<sup>a</sup>

#### *Tests of Literacy*

Language Assessment Scales-Reading & Writing (LAS-R/W)<sup>a</sup>  
Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS)<sup>c</sup>  
California Achievement Test (CAT)  
Idea Proficiency Test (IPT) Reading & Writing  
Woodcock-Muñoz<sup>a</sup>

Note. <sup>a</sup> also available in Spanish

<sup>b</sup> observational inventory which may be done in any language

<sup>c</sup> SABE is a Spanish language version

Four of the oral tests mentioned above, the BSM, LAS-O, IPT and Woodcock-Muñoz, are among the tests approved by the state of California for initial identification of LEP students. The other two approved tests, the Basic Inventory of Natural Language (BINL) and the Quick Start in English (QSE), were not mentioned by the respondents. The CTBS and CAT are achievement tests given to mainstream students. Some districts use one of the standardized tests; some use a district-developed test for reading and writing; some review student grades or obtain a writing sample. It is important to note that there are no state requirements or guidelines for assessment of students for purposes of articulation, nor are there guidelines for placement of students in leveled ELD courses at the secondary schools.

- What is your impression of your district's procedure for handling this transition (elementary to secondary)?

Only about a third of those surveyed were satisfied with their procedure and felt it worked well.

Another third of those surveyed were quite dissatisfied. Some answered this question by saying simply "It's terrible" or "It's a disaster." Another respondent felt responsible for monitoring the entire process; without this person's constant vigilance, students would be misplaced. Reference was made to students "falling through the cracks."

Most of the others indicated a need to improve the process. As one respondent stated, "Procedure is excellent—implementation a bit choppy." Elementary schools may misplace students because they do not understand the different levels of ELD offered at the secondary site or the nature of the secondary curriculum. Secondary counselors may not be trained to understand language assessment. Even when the ELD staff provides data, the counselor may not understand how to interpret it. In many instances, a student is placed solely based upon a brief oral interview with a counselor or site administrator.

Many respondents mentioned the need for elementary school staff and secondary school staff to meet together; some indicated they are already working on this issue. In these meetings, the elementary and secondary school staff try to learn about one another's programs.

Considering that our respondents are among the most knowledgeable and best trained in the state, and that they also represent districts with significant numbers of LEP students, one can only speculate on the situation in districts not included in our informal study.

## Recommendations

In elementary school, the student is part of a self-contained classroom with 30 to 35 classmates and, primarily, one teacher. In secondary school, the student has five or six different classes, each with a different teacher and with the potential for 150 to 165 classmates. This transition is difficult for the adolescent student, particularly for the student who is still mastering English. LEP students may be placed in a program that is not appropriate for their level of proficiency in English. Secondary teachers, each with 150 to 165 students, may not be able to determine if an LEP student is misplaced in this respect.

Based upon our knowledge of legal requirements and second language acquisition research, combined with this overview of current practice in the schools, we have developed the following recommendations for articulation between elementary and secondary school, aimed at ensuring a successful transition from elementary ELD to secondary ELD:

- A standardized assessment instrument designed for secondary LEP students should be mandated in the placement process for LEP students entering secondary school.
- The assessment instrument must include reading and writing, to ensure that placement is not based solely on oral proficiency. Second language learners generally become conversationally fluent within three to four years but may not yet have acquired the literacy and academic language skills to succeed in a secondary program. Therefore, placement must be based on assessment in all of the skill areas, listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- Assessment for placement must be tied to the district's content standards for ELD courses.
- Assessment and placement must be done by certificated staff with expertise in the area of second language acquisition. Counselors involved in programming must receive training in the area of second language acquisition.
- Elementary teachers and secondary teachers should be knowledgeable about each other's ELD programs. Districts must establish professional development opportunities to facilitate this aspect of articulation.
- Districts must establish a coordinated procedure for this assessment, taking advantage of the elementary staff's knowledge and experience of the students but involving the secondary staff who will be assisting students to continue their education and language learning.

One of the survey respondents offered a procedure which appears both promising and workable. In February before programming for the next school year begins, district personnel test all the students who will be moving to the next level. They make tentative placements based upon district criteria. These results are then shared with the feeder school teachers, who have the opportunity to request changes based upon their knowledge of the students. The final lists of the ESL students and their recommended programs are forwarded to the secondary counselors prior to the spring scheduling of incoming students.

As more districts design and implement coordinated articulation procedures, the educational programs offered in our K-12 school system will better meet the needs of California's English language learners.

### Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the program administrators who responded to our survey on articulation practices, and Jan Mayer, Bilingual Compliance Consultant, California Department of Education, who provided technical assistance.

### References

- California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit. (1996, October). *Language Census Report for California Public Schools*. Sacramento: Author.
- California Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. (1993). *Specially designed academic instruction in English*. (Available from CATESOL, 1146 N. Central Avenue, #195, Glendale, CA 91202).
- Collier, V. (1989). How long? A synthesis of research on academic achievement in a second language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23(3), 509-531.
- Dolson, D., & Mayer, J. (1995). *Schooling immigrant children in California: Current policies and practices*. Sacramento: California Department of Education.
- Dolson, D., & Prescott, S. (Eds.). (1995). *Building bilingual instruction: Putting the pieces together*. Sacramento: California Department of Education.

Krashen, S., & Biber, D. (1988). *On course: Bilingual education's success in California*. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Schwartz, W. (1994). *A guide to assessing and placing language minority students*. New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

## Appendix

### Survey of K-12 Practitioners

CATESOL (California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) is gathering data on the transition of LEP students from elementary to secondary school. Your help in filling out this survey is greatly appreciated.

In your district, when LEP students leave elementary school and begin secondary school,

1. Who decides which students will be placed in ESL classes?
2. Who decides what classes they will take?
3. On what basis is this decision made?
4. What, if any, assessment instrument (test) is used?

Please describe your elementary school program for LEP students.

Please describe your secondary school program for LEP students.

What is your impression of your district's procedure for handling this transition (elementary to secondary school)?

*Thank you for your participation.*