



Executive Summary Part 1:

**A Real Literacy Challenge for
Elementary Schools -- Oral
Language Acquisition (OLA).**

About 1 out of every 10 students in U.S. public schools are learning to speak English.¹ Educating the five million English Language Learners (ELL) represents one of the biggest, most complex, and expensive challenges faced by the U.S. education system today.

School systems have long struggled with identifying the best approach to oral language acquisition. As the vast majority of states embrace one of two English proficiency assessment systems -- WIDA or the ELPA 21 -- there is a growing body of research to assess approaches. As this work develops, five issues have been identified that administrators and school systems must address to meet the needs of the expanding ranks of ELL students.

Student Growth and Performance

Supporting schools, administrators, and teachers want to help students show growth and succeed. However, ELLs face some of the most pronounced achievement gaps of any student groups. According to the National Center for Education Statistics released in March 2015, ELL students graduate from high school "at the lowest rate of all student subgroups."²

In New York State, for example, the overall high school graduation rate stands at 78 percent. For ELLs, though, it's 37 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Among those who do graduate, only 1.4 percent take college entrance exams like the SAT and ACT.

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Regulations/ Funding

Federal requirement for ELLs trace back to a 1974 case *Lau v. Nichols*, in which the U.S. Supreme Court found Chinese American English learners were denied equal access to education if not given educational accommodations to help them learn English. In 2015, new federal guidance noted districts should use instructional and effective practices and programs, backed by scientific evidence, in helping students speak, listen, read, and write English.

These mandates come at a time when there is a premium on using taxpayers' dollars to accelerate student learning. Supporting OLA in students that are not at grade level by grade 3 is high, adding nearly \$30,000 per student, as they go through grades 3 to 12 according to national statistics.³ Even while funding contracts, the issue enlarges. In Salem, Massachusetts, for example, students represent 37 different language backgrounds, from Albanian to Vietnamese.⁴

Gaps in Education

Some ELL students are immigrants who may not have gone to school in their home countries. They are often three or four years behind their age educationally, providing more complications to school systems struggling with funding.

Marie Moreno, a principal at a Houston school, told the Los Angeles Times about the challenges of dealing with a recent immigration surge of additional students, 260 from Central America. "They're low-proficiency," she says. "We have some kids ...[who] ...were illiterate in their first language, which makes it difficult to learn a second language."⁵

The issue becomes even more pronounced with younger children. "Even for children who speak English, a lack of access to early childhood education makes it hard for them to catch up in later years, because they are always chasing a 'moving target' as their peers continue to build on the academic knowledge they gained in preschool," explains EEL educator Kristina Robertson.⁶

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Keeping Kids Engaged

Students and teachers succeed when given morale-boosting experiences that they enjoy and make them feel like they are part of something bigger.

Studies have identified four factors as necessary to set up children to succeed in acquiring a second language: a low-anxiety environment, repeated practice, comprehensible input, and drama.⁷ “Drama,” in this context, refers to excitement and engagement through activities like dramatic plays, puppetry, and narrating wordless picture books. According to research, this approach both assists in the development of oral language as well as introduces children to oral reading and rich literacy experiences and responses in a classroom setting.

Student engagement, which is denoted by the joy of learning, can have a pronounced and intertwined effect on the equally important element of teacher engagement.

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Program Effectiveness

The need to demonstrate effectiveness in ELL programs is growing. A landmark study in 2000 found students in both bilingual programs and programs that group them by their English proficiency typically took three to five years to become proficient in oral English, while academic English proficiency took five to seven years.⁸

However, federal K-12 law has become more stringent – districts have three years to bring students to full proficiency and can include former English learners in the ELL accountability subgroup for up to four years.

An investigation by NPR found most ELLs are struggling because they have little or no access to quality instruction tailored to their needs. One reason is ELLs are concentrated in low-performing schools with untrained or poorly trained teachers.⁹

Supporting schools need to provide teachers with tools that will enable them to help students succeed. A program needs to fit with a school's strategic plan, leading to success in all subject areas, not just reading.

As the ranks of ELL students grow, so does an appreciation for the severity of the issue. Studies have found a strong correlation between early language development and success in school. Research shows that if children are not reading at level by the time they enter third grade, they have a difficult time catching up, and may never do so.

While the challenges and issues of educating ELLs are coming into clearer focus, so too are the solutions. In Part Two of this series, we will examine the emerging best practices and programs which are helping to engage students and build their language proficiency more quickly, giving them tools to succeed in the classroom and in life.

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References

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About GrapeSEED

GrapeSEED is an innovative language acquisition program based on the principles of natural language development. Research-based and success-proven, GrapeSEED closes the achievement gap in language and increases reading fluency. This dynamic and interactive ELPA21 aligned program features increased student-teacher engagement which accelerates learning, confidence, and results in improved test scores. Oral language proficiency is the foundation for academic success, providing a bridge to reading and writing for English Learning (ELL) and English Language Proficiency (ELP) students in preschool and elementary classrooms. Around the world in 19 countries, including the U.S. education leaders who struggle with OLA and literacy achievement challenges, rely on GrapeSEED for increased literacy test scores and academic progress for English Language Learners and at-risk students. For more information, visit www.grapeseed.com, contact info@grapeseed.com or call 800.449.8841.