Capacity Building Series

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Canadian-born English Language Learners

Why focus on Canadian-born ELLs?

"Our study highlights that Canadian-born English language learners do not reach the same achievement level as their domestic and immigrant counterparts."

(Jang, Dunlop, Wagner, Youn-Hee Kim & Zhimei Gu, in press)

In Ontario schools, over 25 per cent of students are identified as English language learners, a percentage according to Statistics Canada that will continue to increase in years to come. Many factors – from country of origin to home language background to community involvement in education – contribute to the tremendous diversity of this student group. Yet two, perhaps surprising, factors cut across the differences: (1) most ELLs in Ontario classrooms are Canadian-born and (2) Canadian-born ELLs are underperforming academically not only in comparison with their English-speaking counterparts but also with more recently arrived immigrant students (Coelho, 2007; Jang, Dunlop, Wagner, Youn-Hee Kim, Zhimei Gu, in press; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008).

While a wide range and combination of factors determines each individual student's strengths and challenges, for Canadian-born ELLs academic language proficiency is critical. This monograph therefore focuses on academic language proficiency as a starting point for school team discussions on how to set the stage for appropriate instruction for Canadian-born ELLs and in doing so to improve their opportunities for academic success.

Which students in my classroom are Canadian-born ELLs?

Presentation of Canadian birth certificates at school registration may imply that students are fluent in English, yet this is often not the case. Many Candian-born ELLs are raised in families and communities where languages other than English are primarily spoken; for these students English is an additional language. To complicate the Canadian-born language profile further, many have adequate English for social interaction and are

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comfortable in the school setting in terms of making friends and interacting with teachers; this oral language proficiency may disguise the support they need to navigate more complex English language conversations and academic texts.

Canadian-born ELLs may be ...

- First Nations, Métis and Inuit students whose first language is other than English

- Children born in Canadian communities where a distinct cultural and linguistic tradition has been maintained

- Children born in immigrant communities where languages other than English are primarily spoken at home

   (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007)

Most Canadian-born ELLs enter the Ontario publicly funded school system in kindergarten. These students come from a variety of language backgrounds:

- Some speak a language other than English at home and begin to learn English when they start school. They arrive at school with some proficiency and literacy skills in their first language.

- Others are accustomed to hearing a first language spoken at home and using English to respond.

- Still others may use a combination of their first language and English in their homes. Some do not see the two languages as separate.

A smaller proportion of Canadian-born ELLs enter the school system in later grades:

- Some of these students speak a language in their home other than English and attend schools where that language is also the language of instruction. Later, they enrol in English-language schools.

- Others in this group leave Canada at a young age to live with relatives in countries where English is not the primary language. These students enter English-language schools when they return to Canada, often as adolescents.

Canadian-born ELLs may be difficult to identify inititally, particularly in cases where registration forms record English as their spoken language. This is why it may be helpful to learn about the array of languages in a classroom, and specifically which students are Canadian-born ELLs. In fact, activities for doing so can be as easy and enjoyable as co-creating and discussing class profiles, having students interview one another and sharing experiences and reflecting on the benefits of knowing more than one language.

Learning about the Array of Languages in a Classroom

- Create an alphabetical list, with students, of all the languages spoken by students in the class (including English).

- Organize a short brainstorming session about the meanings of the terms *first, second* and *additional* language and encourage students to generate questions such as *Where do you use this language? What is your second language? Where did you learn it?*

- Create a chart with the following headings: *Language; First; Second; Additional.* Invite students to use some of the questions (above) to interview one another and the teacher as well who then places him/herself on the class chart.

- Have students, in pairs, interview one another about their languages. Beginner ELLs might be more comfortable with someone who shares their linguistic background. However, more experienced ELLs should be encouraged to interview someone with a linguistic background different from their own.

- Have students contribute data about their partner to the four-column chart.

(Adapted from ELL Voices in the Classroom – *Capacity Bulding Series*, 2009)

Everyday English ≠ Academic English

With exposure and practice, students are likely to become proficient in "Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills" (BICS). Second language researchers describe BICS as social language which involves the ability to carry on a conversation in familiar everyday settings. Researchers suggest that BICS take two or so years to acquire and represent about 10 per cent of the language and communications skills of an academically competent learner (Roessingh, 2006, p. 92).

What underlies academic success is the mastery of academic English, or "Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency" (CALP). In his classic article, Jim Cummins (1981) suggested that "CALP reflects an individual's access to and command of the specialized vocabulary, functions and registers of language that are characteristic of the social institution of schooling." CALP, according to second language research, takes between five and seven years to develop. What is important for classroom teachers to understand is that regardless of the level of oral proficiency or BICS, students benefit from interventions and strategies to enhance their mastery of academic lanaguage.

While everyday and academic English can and should be developed simultaneously, there are key differences in form and function, as summarized below.

Everyday English	Academic English
Face-to-face conversation	Understand content of presentations, videos, discussions
Talk, read and write about what is happening here and now	Talk, read and write about more abstract content
Use high-frequency and familiar vocabulary in simple sentences	Use low-frequency vocabulary and more complex sentences
Describe "my" lived experience	Describe actions, ideas, theories, frameworks

Creating an Environment that Promotes English Language Practice

PROVIDE AUTHENTIC AND COGNITIVELY CHALLENGING LEARNING TASKS.
Rather than creating alternative assignments for ELLs, and risking what Pauline Gibbons describes as "a reductionist curriculum," we may need to reflect instead on the kind of scaffolding that we are providing so that we are enabling them to participate fully in the classroom learning community. All students need to be engaged with authentic and cognitively challenging learning tasks; it is the nature of the support – in response to student need – that is critical for success. In this sense, having ELLs in a classroom can be a catalyst for providing effective instructional strategies in literacy and language learning across the curriculum which benefits all students (Gibbons, 2002).

Some Tried and True Tips for Supporting a Variety of Language Learners

- State the message in more than one way. Repeat in small groups to ensure understanding. Ask the student to paraphrase instructions to ensure they understand the task. Use simple vocabulary side by side with the sophisticated new terms.
- Simplify sentence structure but explicitly teach new sentence structures. Ensure that the new structures are experienced in a variety of contexts across the day and supported in students' own communication (oral and written).
- Students learning English may be confused by idiomatic expressions. You may need to rephrase or explain the idioms that arise naturally in class so that students are able to use them appropriately (e.g., "I'm all ears!").

(Adapted from Coelho, 2007)

Teachers may be interested in ...

Steps to English Proficiency (STEP)

www.edugains.ca

Steps to English Proficiency (STEP) is a framework for assessing English Language Learners' language acquisition and literacy development across the Ontario Curriculum.

KEEP BRINGING THE WORLD INTO THE CLASSROOM.

Creating a culturally responsive classroom experience requires a very deliberate focus on inclusiveness. Students need to see themselves in the actual content of the classroom learning – in activities and demonstrations as well as in books, music, models, charts, pictures and posters. Not only does this send a message to students and their families that all communities are valued in the classroom, but it also helps to facilitate learning. As research has shown, when teachers are able to incorporate students' experience and background knowledge into classroom work, they enable them to build on their prior knowledge and to make connections between familiar experiences and new ideas, promoting growth in understanding and knowledge building (Gay, 2000; Glaze, Mattingley, & Levin, 2012).

AND TALK, TALK, TALK.

Classroom talk that adopts a "dialogic stance" engages students in conversation in order to share, shape and improve their understanding of a text, a topic or a problem. Research has found that even very young children become aware of new terms/constructions in conversation and try to use them when it is their turn to speak (Clark, 2007). Classroom dialogue therefore stimulates the development not only of new conceptual understanding but linguistic understanding as well. This is an essential component of supportive classrooms for ELLs.

Canadian-born ELLs come to school with different experiences of what talk is. For some, it may be "Come and eat" or "Hang your coat up." Others may have extensive experience with conversation and dialogue in their first language (Ketch, 2005; Hart & Risley, 2003). It is therefore important to work with small groups of students to identify the talk styles they are familiar with and to augment their repertoire of interaction and conversation.

> **Supporting Students in Beginning Stages of English Proficiency**
>
> - Have students share their thoughts and ideas in their first language to encourage participation. Ideas from their conversation can be shared with the larger group by the more proficient English speakers.
> - Provide opportunities to practise oral English in small groups to facilitate the development of a sense of trust and belonging in the classroom.
> - Simplify vocabulary and sentence structure to support understanding.
> - Allow extra response time for opportunities to think in a first language and compose a response in English.
> - Check frequently for comprehension, especially with complex tasks.
>
> (Adapted from *Capacity Building Series* – Grand Conversations in the Junior Classroom, 2011)

Should assessment be different for Canadian-born ELLs?

Teaching is about relationships. The more we learn with and from our students and their families, the more they are likely to learn with and from us. In examining current assessment practices, we need to ask whether we are constructing an image of the Canadian-born ELL as *intelligent, imaginative and linguistically talented* (Cummins, 2007) or are our assessments biased by lack of understanding?

Canadian-born ELLs present particular challenges to "construct validity." For example, we might think we are looking at a student's content knowledge but we may be

assessing elements of his or her academic language proficiency. A student's social language proficiency might create the illusion that he or she is able to navigate academic language as well. When this happens, our perceptions of strengths and appropriate next steps could be inaccurate.

Alternative and supplemental assessment strategies and evaluation procedures may be required to enable Canadian-born ELLs to demonstrate their learning. A few key areas for consideration are suggested below.

LEARN WHAT STUDENTS ARE READING AT HOME.

Many students are read to in their first language, which may have different orthographic systems for writing, sound-symbol relationships, organization of text on the page, direction of reading and so on. Consequently, students struggling with English text may have better facility in their first language in terms of fluency and comprehension. It is important to collect information about students' home reading by talking about and listing their experiences and preferences (Coelho, 2007).

Having information about a student's first language creates a jumping-off point for making connections to English text as well as for anticipating errors that students may make in English and offsetting possible misunderstandings of a student's academic ability.

INTERPRET MISCUES CAREFULLY.

Leaving the "s" off plural words or switching "was" for "were" in first person singular ("I were walking down the street...") are common grammatical errors for some linguistic groups but they may not impact the student's understanding of content. The number of errors, or miscues, in some instances may suggest that the student should be reading simpler text but if the errors are not affecting meaning, the student will be able to read and learn from more complex texts than the miscues suggest.

As well as miscues, it is important to understand the reading behaviours that a student demonstrates. At times, he or she may have the necessary decoding skills and strategies in place for reading a text fluently and on the surface may not appear to be a struggling reader. He or she might need a new set of strategies to read for meaning.

PUT LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT RESULTS IN CONTEXT.

Canadian-born ELLs need strategies and practice to catch the subtle nuances and information in the text features and the questions and prompts that are characteristic of formal complex assessments. It is important with all large-scale, norm- and criterion-referenced assessments to ensure that students understand what is being required of them.

It is important to remember that large-scale assessment results provide some information; results need to be interpreted within the context of working with the student and gathering a more multifaceted body of data such as portfolio work and observations.

> **Some Assessment Hints**
> - Involve students in the establishment of learning goals and success criteria.
> - Include English language proficiency as a learning goal for individual students.
> - Have students contribute to the revision and assessment process, both of their own work and that of classmates.
> - Use first language artifacts, drawings, gestures and oral responses to find out what students are thinking and to identify their interests and strengths and where they need support.
> - Ensure that what is being assessed has been taught directly and that students have had feedback and multiple opportunities to practise.

Wanted: Culturally responsive teachers ...

"Culturally responsive teachers know their students well and build on students' prior knowledge, stretching them beyond the familiar in a safe and encouraging classroom environment. They value the diverse knowledge and experiences students bring to class rather than seeing differences as problems to be overcome. They facilitate respect and empathy among students as members of a diverse society."

(Glaze, Mattingley & Levin, 2012)

Effective Practices
for Developing Skills

Drawing on what students know ...

"There may be a gap between what the schools expect and what students bring, but that does not mean that these students do not bring anything. They each have a language, a culture, and background experiences. Effective teachers draw on these resources and build new concepts on this strong experiential base."

(Freeman & Freeman, cited in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 17)

As students progress through the grades, they are required to read increasingly complex texts in all the areas of the curriculum. Some students, especially Canadian-born ELLs, may be particularly challenged by the vocabulary in subject texts which includes low-frequency and technical words as well as words that derive from Greek and Latin sources. They can sometimes be baffled by grammatical constructions (such as the passive voice) that are not typically used in conversations. Because academic language is found primarily in written texts (novels, internet sites, textbooks and math problems, for example), support must extend across the curriculum and be provided by all teachers, not just by specialized language teachers (Cummins, 2007). Many boards provide short-term intervention programs, but it is important to stress that intervention effects quickly fade if regular classroom instruction does not extend and support language learning.

EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION IS A DELICATE DANCE.

Carefully chosen written text provides students with exposure to and opportunities for using academic language in ways that oral interaction cannot (Cummins, 2007; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2005). Further, students need to see how an expert navigates a text – and to navigate that text with that expert – as well as numerous opportunities to navigate text with peers, looking at similar texts together before trying it on their own. Students' related written work will reflect how well students have grasped the focus of instruction.

Explicit instruction is a delicate dance in terms of choice of words for study. Words chosen for emphasis should be of sufficient frequency to be useful but not of such high frequency that they are likely to be already known (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004). Students can be supported in finding the words that are most important for them through modeled/think-aloud, shared learning and guided reading of a variety of texts related to the content focus.

LEARN HOW WORDS WORK.

Explicit instruction includes teaching word parts (base or root, prefixes, suffixes, etc.) using words found in the text. For example, knowing that the prefix *un* in *unhappy* means "not" helps students understand the meaning of *unsure* and *unclear* as well and gives a clue about what *unkind* might mean. Students can be supported by looking for smaller words inside a larger word that can help them understand new words.

Knowing about word mechanics supports students in tackling new terms with greater independence. To expand their repertoire of strategies to understand unknown words, students can build mind maps of key vocabulary and related words.

WORK ON DECODING.

Canadian-born ELLs need support to grasp the elements of language during their initial exposure to written text. Each of the four roles of the literate learner (Meaning Maker, Code User, Text User, Text Analyzer) are within their grasp if given the appropriate support. ELLs at various stages of English language proficiency, even those with very limited oral language skills, learn to read in their additional language(s) through decoding words (Gersten & Geva, 2003). Therefore, direct instruction in the Code User's skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, conventions, sentence structure and so on, should not wait until students become fully orally proficient; it should start right away and continue as needed across subjects and across the grades (Hart & Risley, 2003).

By equipping ELLs with the skills that facilitate word recognition and the learning of new words, teachers can begin to set them up to successfully navigate the texts they are sharing with their peers while exposing them to a broad array of new vocabulary.

GO ON A "TEXT WALK."

This is a basic strategy for introducing students to words and structures that classroom data suggest will be needed for the successful navigation of a particular text. The teacher strategically uses key vocabulary/terms/constructions while students "scan" for them and record their use for later discussion and deconstruction (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola & Vaughn, 2004). After a first quick reading, students work collaboratively to infer the meaning of the most important terms based on graphophonic structures, context clues and other resources. Students may need additional word work with word/affix families, individual letters and word segmenting to incorporate the new words and constructions into their repertoires.

Pre-reading scans are particularly effective when the teacher and students review the information together and discuss text features like hooks, headings, captions and diagrams. Thinking aloud about what the author might be wanting them to attend to and trying to predict the message and or narrative across the section of text are also good ways to extend academic language. Students can then be left to navigate the text on their own, while the teacher coaches individual readers.

AND THROUGHOUT ... CONSUME TEXT AND PRODUCE TEXT.

"Students learn by doing" is an old adage, but it is particularly apt here. Short daily quick-writes provide immediate opportunity to see what individual students have grasped and understood. Asking students to come up with revised headings for a text they are reading or to respond in writing to a classmate's reflection are other ways to help make the structure of arguments, terms and sentences more immediately transparent to students and to scaffold their use. Feedback and revision can happen as the response is being written or the following day after the text has been examined in more depth.

Affirming identity / building confidence ...

"Identity texts are the products of students' creative work or performances carried out within the pedagogical spaces orchestrated by teachers. Students invest their identities in the creation of these texts – which can be written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic or combinations in multimodal form. The identity text then holds up a mirror to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light."

(Cummins & Early, 2011)

Starting Today

English language learners are a widely divergent student group in terms of their language needs. Some enter school as beginner users of English while others come with more proficiency. Still other English language learners have language needs that are less obvious because their conversational fluency in English is well developed. In Ontario schools, it is Canadian-born ELLs who comprise the majority of ELLs and who are falling behind academically with respect to both their English-language peers and immigrant students.

Understanding this achievement gap and rethinking some classroom practices can lead to some effective first steps. We can start today by:

Identifying the Canadian-born ELLs in classrooms ....
How well do I know my students?
Who are the Canadian-born ELLs?
How proficient are they in their first language?

Ensuring informal and formal assessments reveal strengths and needs ...
Am I supporting my students by building on their strengths?
Am I setting high expectations for my students and providing the necessary scaffolding for success?

Adapting the language environment to ensure comprehension and learning ...
Am I using the languages and cultural experiences of my students to enhance learning in the classroom?
Are the Canadian-born ELLs in my classroom receiving instruction that supports second language acquisition?
Is my classroom environment a safe place for students to practise their language skills?
Am I supporting the use of first languages in my classroom?

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