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Effective Curriculum for English Learner Success:

## Curriculum for the Diversity of English Learner Needs and Contexts



## EL Curriculum Brief Series

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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is the third in a four-part series, “Effective Curriculum for English Learner Success,” written for foundations supporting schools in which English learners (ELs) have meaningful access to an intellectually rich, culturally responsive, and linguistically supportive education. Curriculum development and curricular reform present an opportunity to advance the goals of educational equity and an EL responsive education. This third brief speaks to the diversity among EL students and educational settings and to the implications for curriculum materials.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

There is tremendous diversity within the population of students grouped together as ELs. Curriculum has to be constructed to make it possible for ELs with a range of needs to access and master the standards. Subgroups requiring specialized curriculum and materials include: newcomers, Students with Limited and Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE), and Long-Term ELs (LTELs).

Ensuring adequate materials and curriculum for effective and targeted EL education is complex. It requires multiple adaptations and supplements to the core curriculum plus an array of specialized curriculum materials reflecting the diversity of the EL population and the different goals and pedagogy of various language program settings, including structured English immersion settings as well as bilingual and dual language immersion programs. This is an area ripe for philanthropic investment in piloting, developing, and disseminating curriculum.

The education field needs a deeper understanding of the diversity among ELs, the benefits of EL responsive curriculum, and the shortcomings and harms that result from curriculum that is not responsive to ELs. Curriculum developers need incentives and direct support to create materials for specialized populations and settings. At the same time, teachers need professional learning to differentiate their instruction for the different types of ELs and to be able to adequately meet their students’ needs. These are all important areas of investment for philanthropy.

## Introduction

There is tremendous diversity within the group of students grouped together as ELs. They vary in their educational trajectories, national backgrounds and immigration experiences, and levels of language proficiency and literacy in English and their home language.

This diversity has implications for the kind of educational supports and opportunities ELs require to gain access to, participate in, and succeed in schools. As teachers are called upon to respond to this reality, so too are curriculum materials needed to provide the background knowledge plus the targeted language supports and scaffolds that together create educational opportunity.

The education of ELs takes place in various settings that call for different kinds of curriculum.

Is the setting a heterogeneous classroom with only some ELs? Or is the setting designated just for ELs with a particular set of needs? Is the setting a fully English-taught classroom? Or is the setting a bilingual or dual language program classroom requiring bilingual instructional pedagogy and the strategic alignment of curriculum and materials across two languages? The diversity of settings and student needs has implications for the content, instructional pedagogy, texts and materials, and teacher guidance a curriculum has to offer.

Curriculum and instructional materials should address the diverse needs of ELs in separate specific settings, such as courses and programs, and in heterogeneous classrooms. Designated settings allow for direct targeted supports that can accelerate progress and learning; but these require a critical mass of students with shared needs for schools to assign staff. Heterogeneous classrooms, where students engage in the core curriculum and ELs spend most of their school time, must include accommodations and differentiation for ELs. Without this direct attention within the core curriculum, ELs typically struggle.

**While the commitment to providing grade-level, standards-based schooling is the same for all students, the curriculum must make it possible for ELs with a range of needs to access and master those standards.** This requires responding to the linguistic needs of students at different English proficiency levels, providing the background knowledge needed by ELs from a variety of cultural



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and national backgrounds in order to comprehend the curriculum, and incorporating material that speaks to the specific challenges and barriers faced by subgroups of ELs. The curriculum must be usable in the variety of classroom and program contexts as well. Curriculum that is only available in English is not adequate for California, a state committed to a dual language education and the goal of biliteracy for all students.

This brief describes the diversity among ELs, honing in on a few of the typologies that call for specific attention in curriculum beyond what ELs generally and normatively require: newcomers, including students with interrupted prior schooling and those at grade level, and Long-Term ELs (LTELs). It reviews the basic program contexts and settings in which curriculum for ELs is delivered and discusses the curriculum implications of each. Finally, the brief discusses how philanthropy may address this diversity within the curriculum field overall, support the development of important but smaller-market curricula and supplementary materials, and ensure appropriate materials for extended learning and settings beyond the classroom.

## **ELs' diverse needs: Implications for specialized and embedded curriculum**

ELs are students who enroll in school from homes where a language other than English is spoken and who, based upon an initial English language proficiency test, are found to not yet have the English proficiency to fully access an English-taught curriculum. Yet, there is no single EL profile. Beyond the single label, the EL population is diverse. They are not a homogeneous group and should not be served as such. All aspects of EL responsive schooling, including curriculum, begin with understanding their diversity and committing to managing the range of challenges and addressing the varying types of needs within the EL group.<sup>1</sup>

Specialized curriculum and differentiation within the core curriculum should consider: varying levels of English language proficiency, the special needs of newcomers, including their prior schooling and the national schooling systems they attended prior to life in the U.S., and the complexity of academic and engagement challenges facing LTELs.



**All aspects of EL responsive schooling, including curriculum, begin with understanding their diversity and committing to managing the range of challenges and addressing the varying types of needs within the EL group.**

<sup>1</sup> In California, state policy formally recognizes EL diversity. According to the EL Roadmap State Policy adopted in 2017, California schools share a mission to “affirm, welcome, and respond to a diverse range of EL strengths and needs.” Additionally, principle #1 in this policy, which calls for “assets oriented and needs responsive schools,” states: “Recognizing that there is no single EL profile and no one-size approach that works for everyone, we strive to create programs, curricula, and instruction that are responsive to different EL student characteristics and experiences.”

## THE DIVERSITY IN THE LEVELS OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AMONG ELs CALLS FOR DESIGNATED AND INTEGRATED ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT (ELD) CURRICULUM:

ELs progress along a continuum from knowing no English to becoming fully English proficient. This process normally takes five to seven years. Throughout this process, schools are legally responsible for providing ELs access to the core curriculum and to curriculum and instruction that help them overcome the language barrier and achieve English proficiency as quickly and effectively as possible. Paying attention and responding to where students are in this process towards proficiency is a basic element of differentiated instruction and curriculum for ELs. An effective, responsible approach to EL education must be attentive to these needs.

First, Designated ELD curriculum should move students through the progression of language acquisition and second language development to gain proficiency in a range of rigorous academic English language skills essential to fully participate and succeed in school. Designated ELD is a protected time during the regular school day where teachers focus on the ELD standards to develop the critical English language skills, knowledge, and abilities needed for content learning in English. It therefore requires a separate curriculum built around the ELD standards, but responsive to the grade-level linguistic demands ELs are facing throughout their studies, aligned or linked to content taught in other core areas. A strong Designated ELD program is an essential linchpin in EL schooling. Such a program requires strong standards-based and grade-level responsive ELD curriculum.

Second, because language development occurs in and across all curriculum areas in what California calls Integrated ELD, the instructional materials for all subjects have to clearly support ELs. This includes explicit attention to the linguistic demands of the content (e.g., vocabulary and the language structures implicit in the content standards) along with sufficient additional supports for participating in class activities and for comprehending the content (e.g., visuals and primary language resources). Integrated ELD is neither a separate course nor a separate curriculum. It occurs in all content courses in all disciplines throughout the day as teachers ensure ELs can participate in and be successful with core content learning. It focuses on content with the language support needed for the subject matter demands and student participation during content instruction. Integrated ELD addresses the content standards, but uses the ELD standards to scaffold learning, language use, and language development. This means that **all curriculum materials for all subjects need to address adaptations for ELs at different English proficiency levels**, include extensions and supplementary materials focusing on the language structures and vocabulary needed by an EL in engaging with the content, and provide guidance to teachers on grouping strategies and resources to enable ELs to leverage their home language in service of their content learning.

## NEWLY-ARRIVED IMMIGRANT STUDENTS REQUIRE CURRICULUM ADDRESSING NEWCOMER NEEDS:

While there is no standard formal definition of a newcomer student, it generally refers to students who are born abroad, are newly arrived to the United States, and are in their first years of schooling here. They are diverse economically, educationally, and culturally. They arrive at all ages with different levels of prior education. Each of these circumstances generate a great diversity of needs. However, all newcomers face the challenge of adjusting to a new culture, and those who are newly arrived grapple with culture shock and benefit from special orientation and transitional support.

From the moment they arrive in the United States, immigrants have to make their new world comprehensible and learn how things are done in the new country. Providing a setting (e.g., a newcomer class for the first month) offers a landing space and supports in the initial transition. But regardless of the setting, either a separate setting just for newcomers or a regular classroom with newcomers and other students, the curriculum needs to offer orientation and support for the newly arrived. This curriculum should provide basic survival English, an orientation to the school and community, socio-emotional support for culture shock and transition, and facilitated social connections. Separate newcomer settings need an orientation and transition curriculum. Teachers incorporating newcomers into regular classrooms require supplemental materials for newcomers, plus activities and materials to use with the whole class related to incorporating newcomers and building social connections.



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There are two significant subgroups of newcomer students with differing curricular needs: some arrive with strong prior academic backgrounds and strong literacy in their home language; others with minimal or interrupted formal schooling.

- **Well-Educated Newcomers:** Students who arrive with excellent prior education. Their preparation may even exceed the expectations of U.S. schools, and they can manage well in a typical U.S. high school curriculum even if they come with little to no English language proficiency. Their effective study habits, foundation of solid content knowledge, strong motivation, high sense of efficacy, and self-esteem as a learner help them learn difficult content in English.

Curriculum and resources available in their home language (books, internet, etc.) facilitate learning by providing context and background for academic courses. These students are often able to graduate from high school with their grade-level peers under certain conditions, such as: receiving appropriate credit for coursework completed in their home country, having access to curriculum and reference materials in their home languages, and having access to materials that fill curriculum gaps specific to the U.S.

- **Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE):** Students who arrive with limited or interrupted previous formal education due to dislocation, poverty, war, migration, and refugee status. They often come without foundational literacy in their home language or basic academic skills. Their math skills often mirror low-literacy abilities. They generally acquire English slowly and require an intensity and variety of ELD curriculum, approaches, and support that other newcomer ELs may not. In some cases, schools place them in classes with students who are much younger than them. In other cases, schools place them with their age cohort, but the academic level is far over their heads. Both situations can be deeply demoralizing.

Schools should make every effort to teach literacy in their native language; provide a specific curriculum to build academic skills, foundational literacy, and math; and, if the students are adolescents, provide options for extended time in high school with fifth- and sixth-year options to be able to complete the requirements for a diploma. There are also differences between SLIFE newcomers who are wholly new to print, those who are somewhat familiar with print and are developing literacy, and those who are at grade level on literacy in their home language but are grappling with other academic skills and content gaps due to interrupted prior schooling.

Foundational literacy curriculum and materials for SLIFE newcomers must include age-appropriate text, connect literacy to oral language, engage students in making meaning, and explicitly teach the mechanics of decoding words along with the sound system of English and vocabulary building. Typically, SLIFE newcomers receive materials geared for younger children that are not engaging or relevant for older students. These materials are also often void of cultural and content relevance, focusing instead just on the foundational literacy skills. As a result, the students struggle to make meaning of the text, which does not adequately reflect authentic language at a crucial stage when ELs are trying to develop a sense of how English works.



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## **LTELS REQUIRE CURRICULUM ALONG WITH ADAPTATIONS AND SUPPORTS:**

The term EL often conjures an image of a student who is relatively new to the U.S., yet there is a significant population of students in most secondary schools who are still ELs but have been in U.S. schools since primary grades. Many were born in the U.S. and schooled here their entire lives. In California, the formal definition of an LTEL is a student who has been in U.S. schools for six or more years, has not yet achieved sufficient English proficiency to reclassify, and is stalled in their progress towards English proficiency and reclassification.

LTEs have academic gaps that have accrued from years of sitting in classrooms without adequately comprehending the content. Most are orally fluent in English, and English may even be their dominant language by the time they arrive in upper elementary grades and secondary schools due to the loss of their home language. Their academic subject teachers in middle and high school often do not realize they are ELs, simply viewing them instead as students who are struggling academically. LTEs usually read and write significantly below grade level. Some are discouraged learners, but many are overly optimistic about their prospects of graduating.



As with newcomers, schools need curriculum specific to LTEL courses focused on the specific language and academic needs of the students, as well as content curriculum that includes supports for clustering and serving LTELs within heterogeneous classrooms. The LTEL-specific courses are a specialized form of ELD, focusing on the language needed for engagement in academic work. Unlike general intervention courses for struggling students, the curriculum should be designed around the ELD standards and address LTELs as second language learners. It should focus on oral language and discourse, recognize that oral language is the foundation for stronger literacy, and emphasize structured oral language practice, instructional conversations, and multiple opportunities for participating in authentic academic discussion. It should also emphasize academic language and textual linguistic features and structures, and brings this together around a focus on expository text (reading and writing). Recognizing that LTELs have years of accumulated academic struggles, an LTEL-specific ELD curriculum establishes consistent routines, engages students in goal-setting and self-assessment practices, develops study skills, and designs an accelerated and rigorous approach to engagement in academic language.

Materials should be high interest and relevant because re-engagement after years of academic struggle can be a challenge for LTELs. The curriculum should explicitly provide opportunities for active engagement with a focus on oral and written language development. The materials should align with and connect to other grade-level academic content, and touch on the following essential components: academic language and vocabulary development, multiple genres of text, all four domains of language, high-interest relevant materials, accountability responses, active engagement, grammar and language structures in English, and English forms. LTELs need more context-building for vocabulary and comprehension than other students do, and they benefit from cross-language connections to their home languages.



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When schools mix LTELs in heterogeneous classes with other students, which is the case for all subjects other than the LTEL-specific ELD course, the curriculum and materials need to accommodate LTELs by applying the same principles of a dedicated ELD course: emphasize oral language and discourse, offer supports and accountability for active engagement, use consistent routines, focus regularly on study skills, and provide high-interest and relevant material. As with all ELs, the curriculum should accommodate a flexible pacing guide and provide guidance for teachers on differentiated scaffolding and task design.

In addition, LTELs benefit from world language courses designed for native speakers of those languages. By activating their home language along with the development of their English proficiency, the overall language and literacy proficiency of LTELs improves. Thus, curriculum developers should create that curriculum for native language speakers.



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EL type and need	Key Characteristics	Implications for curriculum and materials in various settings
<b>ALL ELS</b>	Students are assessed on where they are along the continuum towards English proficiency. They require a curriculum that is differentiated and targeted to their level of English proficiency, designed for learning English, provides scaffolding for accessing the content curriculum, and delivers supports for overcoming the language barrier to ensure their equal participation in the academic program.	<p>Designated ELD curriculum is aligned to the ELD Standards, focused on these standards, and is responsive to linguistic demands of grade-level content. It has a strong oral language component as the basis for attention to all four domains: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.</p> <p>All content curriculum incorporates an Integrated ELD approach through: cross reference to the ELD standards; consistent and structured attention to the linguistic demands of the content standards, vocabulary language structures, and forms; and scaffolding and differentiated supports, pacing, and tasks by English proficiency level.</p>
<b>ALL NEWCOMERS</b>	A recent arrival in the U.S. (generally two years or less) with minimal or no English proficiency.	<p>Orientation and transition curriculum modules and materials support the cultural transition to the U.S., build survival English skills, and provide an orientation to the school and community.</p> <p>The curriculum should accommodate enrollment throughout the school year through supplementary and modular newcomer materials aligned to the course content and grade-level curriculum.</p> <p>Guidance and professional learning for teachers and staff should focus on the specific cultures of newcomer students and the comparison to how other national schooling systems approach content, etc.</p> <p>Curriculum content should incorporate the literature, histories, and experiences of the cultural groups represented among the newcomer population.</p>

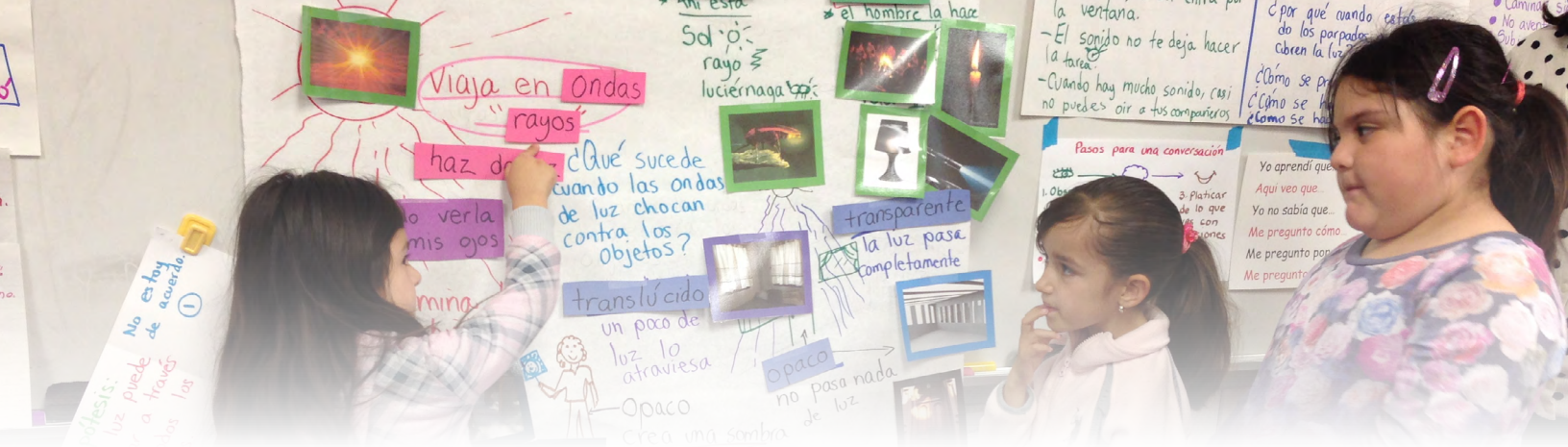


Photo courtesy of SEAL

EL type and need	Key Characteristics	Implications for curriculum and materials in various settings
<b>WELL-EDUCATED NEWCOMERS</b>	<p>A recent arrival in the U.S. (generally two years or less) with strong schooling in the home country, and strong literacy skills in the home language. They are often highly motivated and can make rapid progress toward English proficiency.</p>	<p>In addition to a module curriculum support for cultural transition and survival English (see above), the well-educated and literate newcomer should be placed in courses appropriate for their grade and skill level.</p> <p>The Teachers' Guide should provide guidance for teachers in incorporating and supporting well-educated newcomers within the core curriculum. Key features include modifications in performance tasks and specific scaffolding for participation.</p> <p>Reference materials, texts, and resources should be available in the home language and aligned to the course content.</p>
<b>SLIFE NEWCOMERS</b> <i>(Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education)</i>	<p>A recent arrival in the U.S. (generally two years or less) with little to no literacy in their home language. Their schooling was interrupted and disjointed, with gaps in academic skills and content. They have a slower acquisition of English proficiency.</p>	<p>SLIFE newcomers need curriculum for intensive specialized full-year ELD in a SLIFE program and specialized curriculum focusing on foundational literacy and basic math that incorporates home language development wherever possible.</p> <p>All materials should be age and content appropriate, language rich, culturally relevant, and linguistically supportive. The curriculum should include an orientation to U.S. schools and culture (see above).</p>



EL type and need	Key Characteristics	Implications for curriculum and materials in various settings
<b>LTELS (LONG-TERM ELS)</b>	Students in the U.S. for six or more years without reaching English proficiency. They have stalled or slow development of English proficiency. They often have oral fluency and are English dominant, but may have lost or not developed their home language. They typically have academic gaps.	<p>LTELS need specialized LTEL ELD or an academic English course curriculum focusing on academic oral discourse, writing and academic literacy, goal-setting, study skills and routines, cross language connections, and relevant and high-interest materials. The curriculum should be appropriate for the student's grade level.</p> <p>All materials should be age and content appropriate, language rich, culturally relevant, and linguistically supportive.</p> <p>Teachers need guidance on differentiating and scaffolding core content curriculum and learning tasks to support LTELS within heterogeneous classes grades six to 12.</p> <p>LTELS benefit from native language courses such as world language curriculum designed for native speakers.</p>

## **The development of specialized curriculum for newcomers, SLIFE newcomers, and LTELS is an area of great need for investment.**

Because so little is available, it has mostly fallen to teachers to create their own curriculum for these students. There are multiple opportunities for philanthropy to engage in this area by: supporting curriculum development, convening teachers who have been creating approaches to cull what has been found to be effective, promoting awareness among curriculum developers of the need for attention to these subgroups in the development of overall curriculum, and piloting and evaluating curriculum approaches.

**In investing in curriculum development or dissemination, funders should always ask: "Who is this curriculum serving, and in what ways does this curriculum support teachers in addressing the needs of newcomers? SLIFE newcomers? LTELS?"**

## Curriculum for different language program contexts and goals

As discussed above, ELs who are instructed in heterogeneous English-taught settings require materials that supplement, extend, and accommodate their needs. To accomplish this, Teachers' Manuals should suggest ways to modify learning activities to support the language development and access needs of ELs at different proficiency levels. Supplemental materials are able to augment the core curriculum with emphasis on the background knowledge ELs need to comprehend the content. Curriculum designed, on the other hand, for specialized settings—such as newcomer classes, LTEL courses, SLIFE foundational programs—are able to design the entire learning experience around the needs of subgroups of ELs.

Another factor is the diversity of settings where ELs learn. Curriculum has to address the specific language program model in which ELs are enrolled. Instruction and curriculum for ELs are contained within a language program, and those programs have different approaches and goals. Curriculum and materials need to match and support the program model. Language acquisition program models for ELs include:

- Dual language programs (one and two-way immersion)
- Transitional and developmental bilingual programs
- Structured English immersion programs (English-taught)

The structured English immersion program is basically a separate Designated ELD focus plus Integrated ELD across the curriculum and school day with the goals of English proficiency and mastery of grade-level academic standards. It is the primary base program for ELs. All classroom instruction is provided in English, but with a curriculum for pupils who are learning English and designed to support a second language development process and access to content presented in a second language. The discussion in the prior section of this brief about core curriculum that accommodates differentiation for varying levels of English proficiency applies to the structured English immersion program setting.

The other language acquisition models involve instruction in two or more languages. Research on effective programs for ELs consistently identifies the benefits of dual language and biliteracy approaches for ELs. California state policy's vision of schooling for ELs also calls for programs that provide options for developing bilingualism and biliteracy. The goals of these programs are somewhat different from the goals of structured English immersion programs: the development of proficiency in two languages, engaging in





academic study in two languages leading to mastery of grade-level standards, and developing cross-cultural competence.

The academic, cognitive, and social benefits of biliteracy depend upon students receiving a strong curriculum of dual language development. For this reason, dual language and bilingual programs require: curriculum written in and authentic to the target language in addition to English, strategic alignment of literacy and skills across the two languages, a bilingual pedagogy, including cross-language connections and transfer, and content focusing on the cultures that are embodied in the languages being studied.

Schools and districts offering dual language and bilingual programs need parallel curriculum that maintains coherence and equity across their structured English and their dual language and bilingual programs and classrooms. The alignment of content and instructional pedagogy supports grade-level coherence across the system, facilitates collaboration and connection among teachers across the program settings, enhances integration, and fosters vertical alignment. But while the content is aligned, a curriculum for use in a dual language and bilingual program setting is not just the same curriculum used in English settings translated into another language. Effective dual language and biliteracy curriculum incorporates the following:

- Parity and equity of materials across the two languages
- Strategically aligned and coordinated development of literacy across the two languages building on the transfer of skills
- Language instruction and development authentic to each language system, based upon appropriate scope and sequence for each language, and where available aligned to the standards for each language (e.g., Spanish Language Arts Standards or Common Core en Español)
- Texts that are culturally and linguistically authentic
- Cultural content that provides context for languages, including incorporation of content about nations, places, peoples, and key experiences of communities throughout the world in which the languages are spoken
- Materials and a scope and sequence for intentional coordination regarding the uses of the two languages for academic study, using content as a bridge across languages
- Cross-language connections and transfer lessons, materials, and learning experiences



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SEAL and Ben Gibbs  
of Early Edge CA*

- Bilingual assessments
- Guidance for use of the materials in various biliteracy models, establishing clear guidelines for language allocation (what is done in which language and how much time per language), strategic separation of the languages, and the use of curriculum materials appropriate to each language allocation model

## Conclusion

Today, in California and across the country...

- The teacher who suddenly has a newcomer student show up in their classroom in the middle of semester has to find or create materials on their own. They have to figure out how to adapt the core curriculum, if that is possible, to support the new student's participation and comprehension in their class.
- The teacher with LTELs in their class may attempt to use strategies and materials from the Struggling Readers Lab to engage the students in grade-level academic tasks. But lacking guidance on addressing language development needs, they are repeatedly frustrated.
- The adolescent newcomer with interrupted prior schooling sits with a book written for six-year-olds because there are no high-quality foundational literacy materials available in the district that are written at a relevant and age-appropriate level.
- The teacher in a dual language program struggles to equalize the status and engagement of students with the target language, given how few content and language rich materials are available in the target language compared to what is available in English.

**Teachers are too often in the position of trying to create materials and make up for the lack of adequate curriculum. They do so without the skills and capacity for curriculum design and materials development, and without time and supports for this task. Despite their best intentions and efforts, this is not a viable, effective, or equitable solution to the need for curriculum and materials that serve the diverse ELs in our schools.**

Ensuring adequate curriculum for effective and targeted EL education is complex. It is not about a simple modification or single supplement to standard core curriculum, but rather about multiple adaptations and supplements to the core curriculum plus an array of specialized curriculum for the diversity of ELs and various language program settings.

Schools and districts may not have a critical mass of one type of EL. Therefore, they have to build awareness of the diversity among their ELs and of the need for curriculum that speaks directly to the needs of those students. They have to deepen their understanding of the shortcomings and harms that result from curriculum that does not adequately address the real needs and barriers faced by ELs. They have to put in place professional development and supports for teachers to grow expertise in differentiation and be able to address the different typologies and needs of their ELs. In turn, curriculum



developers need incentives and direct support to develop materials for specialized populations and settings. In all of these cases, philanthropy can contribute in meaningful ways to the creation of schools in which ELs are full participants, have meaningful access to a standards-based education, and thrive.

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