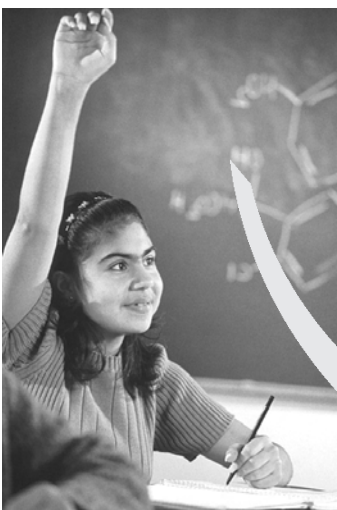
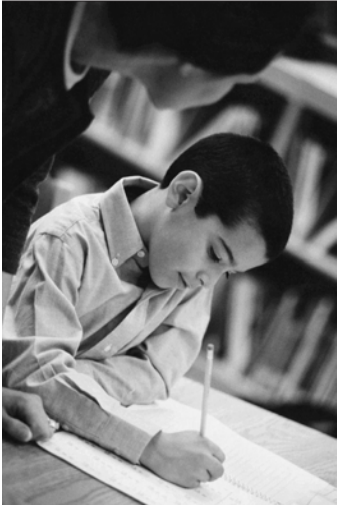


A SCOE Publication, September 2009



## *Structuring language instruction to advance stalled English learners*

**A**t a conference held at the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) last spring, several speakers addressed the topic of second-language learners who become “stalled” at the intermediate level of language proficiency. When students plateau in their language development and fail to become proficient in English, it is extremely difficult for teachers to help them achieve academically. This is especially true in the upper elementary and secondary grades, where there are large numbers of English learners who have stopped progressing.

Conference speaker Kevin Clark has worked with schools, districts, county offices of education, and state governments on language-focused projects as diverse as two-way immersion, late-exit bilingual, newcomer centers, and structured English immersion programs. He recently studied English learner achievement in over 100 districts and concluded that our current methods of teaching English are yielding “dismal” results.

Clark says that a full 60 percent of the second-language learners in the districts he studied scored at the intermediate or early advanced level on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Most of these students had been enrolled in United States schools for more than three years, including many who had been attending American schools since kindergarten. Half of the students were

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participating in English Language Development (ELD) programs, but the other half were not. Among older students, many had not attended ELD classes since elementary school.

That these students were also doing poorly in academic subjects that require structurally correct language was no surprise. The vast majority had poor reading comprehension, showed a high incidence of grammatical errors in writing, and scored well below proficient on the STAR tests for their grade level.

“This program effect is sad when students are in the second grade, much worse at seventh grade, and nothing short of a tragedy at eleventh grade,” said Clark. “These students simply lack the fundamental language skills to do even near grade-level academic course work.”

### ***What is ELD and why isn't it working?***

Kevin Clark believes that vague definitions and mixed messages about ELD have contributed to the staggering number of students who reach intermediate English proficiency, then stop progressing. “We talk about it, ask teachers to implement it, require

administrators to monitor it, and buy materials for it, but does anyone really know what ELD is?” he asks.

Part of the problem is that we’ve tended to define language as a theoretical process, rather than as a set of skills to be taught, and this has led us to think of language instruction in the same way. We believe that language is a naturally occurring aspect of being human that enables us to communicate, but that doesn’t help us answer the question, “How do we *teach* it?” We know how we learned our own first language and recognize that the brain is good at finding patterns, so we’ve allowed a natural approach to language instruction to dominate our schools, hoping our English learners “will just figure it out.”

“We’ve made the mistake of thinking that something that takes a lot of time in the natural environment—learning a first language—can be replicated in a school classroom with just 30 minutes of daily instruction,” says Clark. Current research, and our own experience, is telling us that this approach is not working.

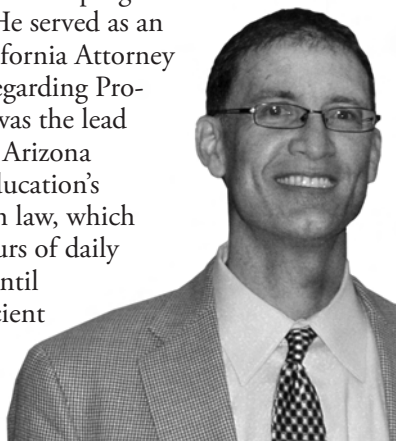
English is a foreign language for our second-language learners and it must be explicitly taught if we expect students to achieve beyond a third-grade level. This requires schools to more clearly define ELD and to provide teachers with additional guidance on *how* and *what* to teach. Specifically, Clark believes that ELD programs must:

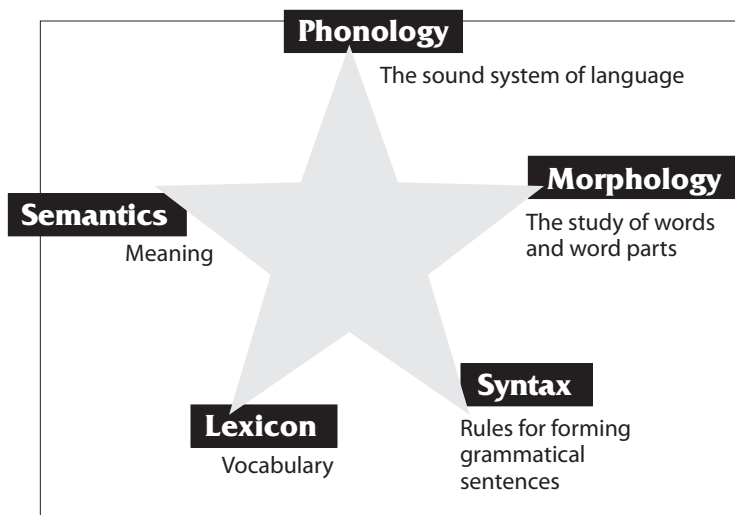
- Allow sufficient time for English language instruction and teach it directly and explicitly.
- Provide discrete language skill instruction—pronunciation and decoding, word and sentence structure, parts of speech, etc.
- Teach to a skills-based hierarchical syllabus that “makes sense” of the English language and supports the learning process.
- Develop foundational English language skills before grade-level content.

Increasingly, schools, districts, and even some states are using guidelines like these to re-orient ELD for greater effectiveness. Arizona, where Clark has consulted on English immersion, provides one such example. Here, ELD is mandated for four hours per day until a student is classified as English proficient. A state task force was

#### **About Kevin Clark**

**K**evin Clark is the president of Clark Consulting and Training, Inc., a California-based organization that has provided services to schools and districts across the country since 1989. Much of Clark’s work focuses on helping schools design, implement, and evaluate educational programs for English learners. He served as an adviser to the California Attorney General’s Office regarding Proposition 227 and was the lead consultant for the Arizona Department of Education’s English immersion law, which mandates four hours of daily ELD instruction until students are proficient in English. ♦





formed to give teachers specific guidance on what to do during this four-hour time span. They began their work by clarifying the definition of ELD:

ELD is distinguished from other types of instruction, e.g., math, science, or social science, in that the content of ELD emphasizes the English language itself. ELD instruction focuses on phonology (pronunciation – the sound system of a language), morphology (the internal structure and forms of words), syntax (English word order rules), lexicon (vocabulary), and semantics (how to use English in different situations and contexts).

The Arizona task force also specified the amount of time each element should be taught, the teaching methods to be used, the order in which to teach language skills, and how to monitor student progress.

Clark described Arizona’s components of ELD as “linguistics 101” and illustrated them as the five points on a language star. Each point on the star is a core element that is fundamental to learning English and should be explicitly addressed during core ELD instruction. (A short video of Kevin Clark explaining these components is posted on the SCOE website, [www.scoe.org](http://www.scoe.org).)

Kevin Clark’s description of how ELD instruction is structured in Arizona made sense to a number of Sonoma County educators who are seeing their own students become “stalled intermediates.” With support from the Sonoma County Office of Education, these teachers have begun to purposefully integrate phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, and semantics into their ELD programs.

This Aiming High Resource brief captures some of the research and experiences these local educators

have brought together to advance this work. By directly teaching the five linguistic components of English, they hope to help their students continuously advance in language proficiency and to decrease the number who plateau in their learning.

### *Phonology: Tuning the ear to the sounds of English*

All second-language learners need to be able to hear the structure and sound of words spoken in English. Teachers can address this need through lessons that show how spoken language can be separated into smaller units—sentences into words, words into syllables, and syllables into phonemes (the smallest unit of sound). By using rhyme, alliteration, sentence segmentation, syllable blending and segmenting, onset-rime blending and segmenting, and phonemic awareness, teachers can help English learners “tune their ear” to the sounds of English and build understanding of how those sounds are organized and used. Instructional activities that tune the ear are generally independent of printed words. In fact, you might say that they can be done in the dark.

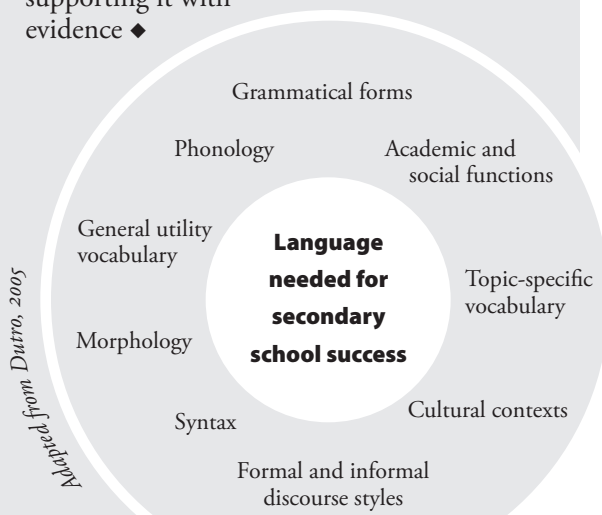
Developing sound sensitivity involves both the “big picture” of spoken language—sentences, words, and syllables—and the awareness of individual sounds or phonemes. Helping students understand how words are composed of sounds, and how to manipulate those individual sounds into spoken language, is one of the most difficult and important skills in this area of language instruction. In particular, explicit and direct instruction that teaches the phonology elements of English that don’t naturally occur in the students’ primary language is critical. Students also need guidance to develop the ability to listen for and hear the subtle differences of our spoken language.

For example, teaching sound-symbol relationships between *b* and *v* can help students overcome one of the “tricky differences” between English and Spanish. In Spanish, both of these letters represent the /b/ sound. If English learners have had instruction associating sounds to letters in Spanish, they won’t be familiar with the /v/ sound. Specific, direct instruction on how to make these sounds (that is, how to form the mouth and position the teeth and lips to correctly produce the sound), as well as

### An ELD model for grades 6-12

The components of ELD described by Kevin Clark are aligned with the California Department of Education publication due out this fall, *English Language Development: Issues and Implications at Grades 6-12*, by Susana Dutro and Kate Kinsella, Ed.D. In this document, the authors describe the components of English language instruction as shown below.

- **Phonology**, the individual sounds of a language. Examples: /th/ or the subtle differences between long-i and short-i.
- **Morphology**, meaningful parts that comprise words. Examples: un-, dis-, -struc-, -able, -ology
- **Vocabulary**, knowing the meanings of both general utility words and topic-specific words. Examples: characteristic, produce, integer, simile, plasma
- **Syntax**, how words are ordered to generate sentences. Examples: subject-verb-object, dependent clauses
- **Formal and informal discourse styles**, including language for different disciplines, genres, and settings. Examples: scientific inquiry, expository writing, informal social event, classroom discussion
- **Academic and social functions**, responding to the cognitive task at hand. Examples: giving directions, comparing a book and movie, stating a position and supporting it with evidence ♦



instruction to associate the sounds with their symbols, will greatly benefit native Spanish speakers.

A second sound-symbol correspondence that can be difficult is the *th digraph*. Not only do these two letters make one phonemic sound when combined, but the sound varies in different English language words. In the word *think*, the tongue is held against the upper teeth and air is forced through and out the mouth. In the word *the*, less air exits the mouth and there is a vibration in our throat to create this sound. Students learning English must be able to hear the difference between these two sounds, be taught how to make them, and learn when each sound occurs.

One instructional routine for guiding English learners to distinguish contrasting sounds involves the use of minimal pairs (see box, next page). Minimal pairs are words that differ in only one phonological element—they have one contrasting sound surrounded by similar sounds. For example, *base* and *vase* are minimal pairs, as are *tap* and *top*, and *bead* and *beat*.

Activities involving minimal pairs are one way to equip students with the knowledge of sounds that they need to comprehend speech and support decoding. Vocalized reading and jazz chants are two additional strategies.

### *Morphology: Learning the parts that comprise words*

Morphology is the study of words, including how words are built or changed to create different meanings. With a first language, the rules and patterns for building words are learned throughout childhood from the process of “error correction” by parents, family members, and friends. Second-language learners in our schools can’t be expected to discover the rules of English in this way, nor do they have the luxury of time that’s needed for this method of learning. Their acquisition of English will be greatly enhanced if they are specifically taught how base words combine with affixes and how verbs conjugate in their new language.

One way that teachers can support this area of language learning is by creating ELD lessons focused on affixes. This example of an instructional routine that is being used by Sonoma County teachers illustrates one strategy for highlighting affixes in ELD lessons:

## Activity using minimal pairs

Begin by using a T-chart or Tree Map to create a graphic organizer for the contrasting target sounds. Write sample words on the chart, then add pictures, objects, or action demonstrations to illustrate the words you share with the class.

Say both words in the minimal pair (repeat as needed), emphasizing the contrasting sound as you point to the pictures and letters that make the sounds.

**For consonants**, demonstrate the differences in placement of tongue, teeth, and lips and the volume of air needed to produce each sound. Explain what you do to form the sound. Have students practice, using a mirror if appropriate.

**For vowels**, demonstrate the shape of the mouth as you make the sound. Have students practice via choral responses or with partners.

**For voiced/unvoiced distinctions**, ask students to cover their ears and note the difference between the sounds. Have students practice.

/t/	/ch/	/p/	/t/
<i>time</i>	<i>chime</i>	<i>map</i>	<i>mat</i>
<i>top</i>	<i>chop</i>	<i>sip</i>	<i>sit</i>
<i>talk</i>	<i>chalk</i>	<i>pop</i>	<i>pot</i>
<i>tick</i>	<i>chick</i>	<i>cup</i>	<i>cut</i>
<i>two</i>	<i>chew</i>	<i>sweep</i>	<i>sweet</i>

Continue modeling and adding words to the chart using word or picture cards, practicing the sounds, and identifying the correct column placement.

Revisit the chart multiple times and provide additional daily practice before moving to an independent activity.

Create a sorting chart for independent, partner, or small group practice. For more advanced students, include several sets of contrasting sounds.

Monitor independent work to gauge progress and correct errors. Follow up with more opportunities to practice. ♦

- The teacher begins by introducing one or more prefixes and describing their meanings.
- On a chart, she writes a root word, the prefix, the new word, and a sample sentence.

When teachers use this instructional routine, they limit each lesson to only a few words/word parts at a time and provide sufficient practice opportunities for students to use the new affixes with words they already

know. Additional examples of words with the target affix are introduced as practice continues over time and

Root word	Prefix	Meaning	New word	Sample sentence
happy	un-	not, opposite of	unhappy	The boy is unhappy because it is raining.
view	re-	again, back	review	The umpire will review the play.

She has the students repeat the words and sentences in choral responses, then asks them to turn to an elbow partner and repeat the sentence (students can refer to the chart).

- The teacher directs the students to think of another sentence using the new word and *say* it to their partner. She monitors partner practice, listening for good examples, then calls on several students to share their sentences. She writes the sentences on the board for students to reference.
- The teacher shares other words that use the prefix, then has the students create new sentences with the target words and *write* them in their notebooks. The students must read their sentences to their partner to complete their assignment.

when the lesson is reviewed on subsequent days.

Direct instruction of verb tenses is another key aspect of understanding morphology. Second-language learners tend to master the simple verb tenses fairly quickly, but get stuck when the verb tenses become more complex. To ensure that students reach English language proficiency and can access academic content, it's critical that they be taught the full complement of English verb tenses and have opportunities for oral and written practice. The Verb Study Routine (see box, next page) can be adapted and used for this purpose, keeping in mind that there are 12 verb tenses every English learner must master, plus wording variances for declarative, negative, and interrogative statements.

## *Syntax: Understanding how words form sentences*

The study of syntax focuses on the arrangement of words, including the rules about how to combine words to form grammatical sentences. ELD instruction should expose students to grammatical forms and structures, provide clear explanations about how they are used,

and engage students in using them in a variety of meaningful speaking and writing activities.

When learning a second language, students begin speaking and writing in phrases, progress to simple sentences, then advance to compound and complex sentences. Activities emphasizing sentence construction—the taking apart and putting together of sentences—can help students learn proper sentence

structure. This is particularly important for students who are stalled at the intermediate level of language proficiency. To move beyond their language plateau, they must know how to read and interpret academic texts that use complex grammar and to write using similar grammatical structures.

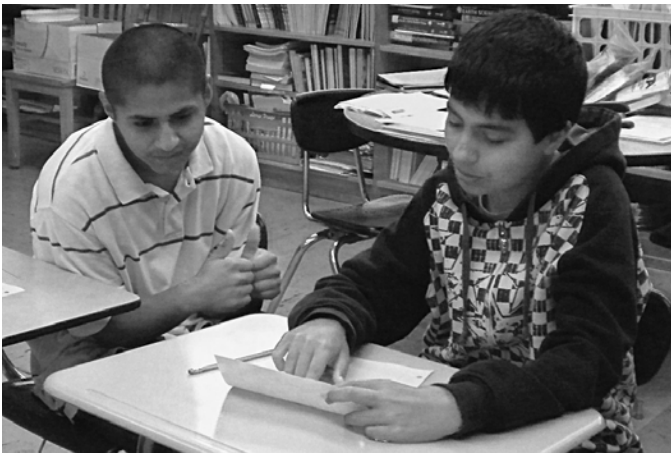
Using graphic organizers to learn about sentence construction provides an instructional routine that helps students move from forming simple to complex sentences and increase their use of academic English (see examples, page 8). It can be applied to sentences formed from singular nouns and verbs, then progress to well-developed noun and verb phrases by adding adjectives, adverbs, determiners, and prepositional phrases. As additional grammar elements are introduced, the complexity of the graphic organizers—and the sentences they represent—increases.

Following an “I do it, we do it, you do it” format, teachers can model how to use the graphic organizer to construct sentences, then guide the class in building sentences together. When students are ready for individual work, they can construct their

### Verb study routine

- Begin by choosing a verb tense based on students’ proficiency level. Prepare example sentences and sentence frames for student use.
- Write the command/imperative form of a verb on the board: *Write*
- Review the purpose of the verb tense, “Today we will work with the present progressive verb tense. When we speak or write in present progressive, we use the helping verbs *am*, *is*, or *are* with an action word ending in *-ing*. These helping verbs show that something is happening at the time we are making the statement.”
- Say and write an example: *I am writing a sentence.*
- Ask the students to repeat the sentence chorally.
- Read the sentence again while pointing to the words.
- Write the verb *sit*, then sit down and write: *I am sitting down.*
- Ask a student to stand up, then sit down, and ask, “What are you doing right as you bend and sit?” *I am sitting down.*
- Ask all the students to stand and sit, then repeat the sentence: *We are sitting down.*
- Repeat for additional singular and plural examples, modeling the sentences by writing on the board and having students repeat the sentences chorally.
- Guide students in writing sentences by giving them a verb and the person or persons to be represented: *Juan and Imelda are walking to the door. Maria is standing by her desk.*
- Continue to write model sentences on the board and monitor students’ written responses for correctness.

Note that this routine provides a natural opportunity for review and practice of pronouns while reinforcing the verb tense. *I am writing. You are writing. We are writing.* It can also be used to review several verb tenses at once. In that case, the routine would move more quickly and alternate between verb tense examples, helping students distinguish the differences in meaning and word construction between the tenses. ♦



*At Washington School in Cloverdale, Miguel Torres gives a “thumbs up” each time Christian Figueroa uses a signal word in the compare-and-contrast sentences he is reading.*

own sentences by working in pairs or independently. Opportunities for both oral and written practice must be included.

Once students learn to form sentences, they should be actively encouraged—or even required—to speak in full sentences. This one activity can make an incredible difference for second-language learners who too often respond in class with single-word answers or short phrases. Last spring, Waldo Rohnert School in Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified experimented with this idea when the *entire* staff agreed to require complete sentences for student responses. Across the school, teachers found that as they uniformly expected complete sentences in all classrooms, students had more opportunities to practice and the level of academic response increased.

### ***Semantics & Lexicon: Knowing words and using them appropriately***

Language acquisition also requires students to understand and be able to use general and academic vocabulary in both formal and informal discourse. This means that students must learn the words and word usage appropriate for specific applications—knowing, for example, that describing something to a friend requires different vocabulary and language than presenting a position in class and supporting it with evidence. They must also learn the cultural nuances that word usage and expressions carry in spoken and written language.

Vocabulary instruction is a key aspect of this component of language learning. Research has found that students’ general vocabulary knowledge is a good predictor of whether or not they will understand a written text. Due to its strong link to comprehension, vocabulary knowledge can affect students’ overall success in school.

The most effective vocabulary instruction is carefully thought out and planned. When teachers develop vocabulary lists for ELD or content area instruction, they should consider these questions: How useful is the word? How important is it? How does the word relate to other words and concepts that students know or are learning?

But instructional activities that build students’ knowledge of words and increase their vocabulary involve much more than word lists. The ability to know and understand the meaning of words is greatly enhanced when teachers focus on these areas of word instruction:

<p><b>Word knowledge</b></p>	<p>Students practice identifying the meaning of ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Synonyms</li> <li>■ Antonyms</li> <li>■ Homophones</li> <li>■ Homographs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Morphemic elements</b></p>	<p>Students practice identifying the meaning of ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Prefixes</li> <li>■ Suffixes</li> <li>■ Root words</li> </ul>
<p><b>Word meaning</b></p>	<p>Students practice using prior knowledge, references, and inferences to identify the meaning of words. Instruction highlights ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Glossary use</li> <li>■ Dictionary use</li> <li>■ Compound words</li> <li>■ Multiple meanings</li> <li>■ Idioms</li> <li>■ Analogies</li> </ul>
<p><b>Word analysis</b></p>	<p>Students practice categorizing, classifying, and identifying similarities and differences among words based on ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Noun endings</li> <li>■ Verb endings</li> <li>■ Word origins</li> </ul>
<p><b>Words in context</b></p>	<p>Students practice identifying the meaning of words by using ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Context clues</li> <li>■ Text structure (descriptive, expository, persuasive, etc.)</li> </ul>

Students can also develop academic vocabulary through oral and written activities that call attention to signal words or phrases. For example, middle school teacher Jackie Rose used “signal word charts” to increase the variety and complexity of words used to compare

	Sentence construction				
<b>Simple sentence</b> CELDT levels 1-2	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Predicate</i>	<i>Punctuation</i>		
	Lions	hunt	.		
<b>Compound</b> CELDT levels 2-4	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Predicate</i>	<i>Conjunction</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Predicate</i>
	Female lions	hunt	and	male lions	protect the pride.
<b>Complex</b> CELDT levels 3-5	<i>Independent Clause</i>		<i>Dependent Clause</i>		
	The lions began their hunt		as sunlight shifted to the western slopes.		

and contrast ideas in a summer ELD class in Cloverdale. The lesson began by engaging the grade 7-8 students in an activity that involved comparing and contrasting the characteristics of two shoes. Similarities and differences were discussed as the teacher orally repeated and wrote students' ideas in model sentences. The signal words

**Vague definitions of ELD have contributed to the staggering number of students who reach intermediate, then stop progressing**

in these sentences—*both, same, similar to, in common, different than, in contrast*—were identified and recorded on a chart.

Students then worked in pairs to think of and share a sentence using the target vocabulary and

academic signal words. Following this oral practice, they each wrote a paragraph comparing and contrasting two items using the academic signal words from the chart.

The next partner activity was designed to ensure active engagement of all students. As one student read a paragraph, the other student signaled a “thumbs up” for each signal word used. The teacher also gave each student the opportunity to read their paragraph to the class as the rest of the students listened and tallied the use of the signal words. Throughout this lesson,

the teacher provided ongoing encouragement and positive feedback—and the class was engaged and enthusiastic. When Mrs. Rose told them they were all “college bound,” the students responded with self-conscious laughter, yet the exchanged looks also expressed hope and possibility.

As Kevin Clark points out, *teaching English* is vastly different from teaching *in English*. Strengthening English Language Development (ELD) instruction can stimulate “stalled” students and keep them advancing on the English language proficiency continuum. By incorporating the ideas from his five-point linguistics star, teachers in both elementary and secondary classrooms are getting a better sense of what and how to teach English to second-language learners. The clarity and structure of the model are being praised by educators who recognize the importance of providing efficient and effective language instruction to English learners. ♦

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