

English Language Learners: Good Teaching and Schoolwide Support Make a Difference

By Cheryl Taitague

Lunalilo Elementary School Vision

*Growing, caring, learning . . . we are a team.
Positive lifelong learners, reaching for our dreams.
Striving for high standards, having fun as we go.
We love this special place called Lunalilo!*

A student-friendly vision sets the tone for a positive learning environment at King William Charles Lunalilo Elementary School. Located in one of Honolulu’s most densely populated urban communities just on the outskirts of Wāikiki, it was recently recognized as one of Hawai‘i’s distinguished Blue Ribbon schools.

It is an accomplishment worth noting, considering that approximately 23% of the 588 students enrolled in kindergarten to 5th grade are identified as limited English proficient (LEP) students. Twenty-three different primary languages spoken at home reflect the diversity of the students’ backgrounds.

Many would view this multilingual and multicultural school setting as a rich context for learning. However, there is a “good news, bad news” scenario for schools that have a high number of English language learners (ELLs). The reality is that many schools are faced with the difficult challenge of meeting the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). As NCLB enters its fifth year, there continues to be a concerted national effort to meet its policies designed to close the achievement gap for LEP and immigrant students. Many educators have discovered that there are no quick solutions to NCLB’s emphasis on increased expectations and accountability for all student learning.

On the other hand, NCLB’s focus on high-quality teaching has put the hallmarks of good teaching in the spotlight. Research has found that a key factor in predicting student achievement is a teacher’s level of knowledge and practice (Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1998). The Teaching Learning Cycle, which calls for the use of data from assessments to monitor students’ progress and guide instruction, plays a particularly central role in the education of ELLs who have evolving language and academic needs (August & Hakuta, 1998). NCLB’s expectations that ELLs attain their full academic potential, combined with an increased understanding of language, language acquisition, and effective research-based teaching practices, have served as catalysts for schools to examine whether they are providing optimal learning environments for ELLs.

What does quality instruction and an effective program look like for ELLs under NCLB? While there may be several successful programs operating throughout Hawai‘i, the probable answer from the 209 ELLs at Lunalilo School would be their own English as a second language learner (ESLL) pull-out program, spearheaded by ESLL teacher Lorraine Ching. “It is through our staff’s collective efforts and collaboration that we are able to boost our students’ academic performance,” maintains Lorraine, a nationally certified master teacher. The highly capable team also includes part-time teachers Kathy Shinagawa, a master’s in education candidate at Chaminade University, Christopher Davis, a University of Hawai‘i (UH) graduate with a master’s degree in English as a second language (ESL); Jennifer Johnson, a Hawai‘i Pacific University master’s candidate in ESL; Angela Kurahashi, a Kapiolani Community College student; and Amy Nakayama, a retired 3rd grade teacher. ESLL classes are held in an expansive print-rich classroom filled with shelves of books, pocket charts, letter and word cards, multiple computers, and multimedia resources, leaving no one guessing whether or not there is a focus on literacy and language development.

Lorraine has always been up for the challenge of teaching ELLs before NCLB made its debut on the educational scene. “If anything, NCLB has helped us to be more content-oriented,” Lorraine shares. “We are integrating more content, like science and math, into our instruction and building more academic language.” A look around her classroom during this time of the year highlights what she means. A recycled aquarium filled with caterpillars and

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Courtesy of Lunalilo Elementary School

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chrysalises, as well as many informational textbooks and charts on butterflies are clearly visible. Another chart at a carpeted area used for small-group instruction displays math vocabulary terms supported with illustrations. It is a busy classroom, where content concepts provide a further medium for reading and language acquisition.

In addition, Lorraine has always made it a point to strive for ongoing monitoring to deliver appropriate instruction based on individual students' needs. Her efforts at a more balanced and integrated approach to language and literacy have resulted in many of her students outperforming their native English-speaking peers on the school's computerized reading assessment system.

Despite successes, closing the achievement gap for all ELLs continues to be a major challenge. Kathy, who works with the students who are new to English and at a lower level of proficiency, is a strong advocate for her students. She believes in high but realistic expectations for her students. Her practices reflect Vygotsky's (1962) influential teaching and learning theories, which emphasize that good instruction occurs when teachers operate within a learner's zone of proximal development. "Many of these students also need time to learn," she states. Studies confirm that while English learners may take up to 2 years to develop proficiency in basic conversational English, proficiency in academic aspects of English usually takes 5–7 years, or more (Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 2000).

Undeterred by what others may consider "roadblocks," Lorraine and her team, like so many other good teachers, are constantly in search of ways to improve their classroom practices. They rely on many resources found on the Web (see sidebar). They also diligently write grants to equip their program with books and resources. There is an emphasis on technology to meet the language and literacy needs of their students. In particular, they recognize that multimedia software has the unique capability to scaffold language with animation, graphics, and audio that engage, motivate, and lower the anxiety level of students who are overwhelmed by the demands of learning in a new lan-

guage. The teachers have observed how their students become empowered by their ability to be successful self-directed learners in interactive multimedia environments.

Some of the array of multimedia programs employed in their classroom include Scholastic's *Zip Zoom™ English*, which builds foundational skills in reading and language; Accelerated Reader™, which tracks student progression and comprehension as they read from selected works of literature; and Rosetta Stone®, a language learning program. The teachers also created a project using the LeapPad® Learning System to extend learning to the home. Successful grant writing yielded enough LeapPad interactive players for each student to use one at home for the entire school year.

Parents are required to attend a mandatory orientation before the interactive players are distributed. Then, students are allowed to borrow from a wide selection of accompanying cartridges of interactive learning books. Students and their families are also encouraged to maintain their primary language and culture at home. This respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity has resulted in parent donations of primary language children's books that have become part of a family lending library.

Lorraine is in agreement with educators everywhere that NCLB has placed ELLs on the educational "radar screen" and provided a necessary forum for discussion on how teachers, schools, and states can consolidate their efforts to provide the best learning opportunities for language

minority students. She is quick to acknowledge that the ESLL program does not operate in a vacuum. Above all, she recognizes that meeting the diverse needs of ELLs is a schoolwide effort that involves all teachers and the administration. Principal Dean Nakamoto provides the necessary administrative support for a free ESLL after-school tutoring and homework assistance program, and volunteers from Honolulu Community College and Punahou School provide additional support for ELLs throughout the school day. This collaborative approach to provide experiences that create positive outcomes for ELLs involves the commitment of many hands, hearts, and minds within the school community. Lunalilo School brings a new dimension to the saying, "it takes a village to raise a child."

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ESL Websites

Reading Program
www.starfall.com

Activities for ESL Students
<http://a4esl.org>

Conversation Questions for the ESL/EFL Classroom
<http://iteslj.org/questions/>

Interesting Things for ESL Students
www.manythings.org

Teacher Resources
www.everythingsl.net
<http://4teachers.org/profd/lep.shtml>
www.eslcafe.com
www.eslcafe.com/idea/index.cgi
www.onestopenglish.com/Lessonshare/index.htm

