

Unlocking Potential: Accelerating Reading Outcomes for Emergent Bilinguals in the Middle Grades

Phil Capin, Ph.D.

Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk

University of Texas at Austin



The Meadows Center
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

A bit about me

- Former Teacher in El Centro, California
- Research Faculty, University of Texas at Austin
- Researcher, Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk (meadowscenter.org)
- Investigator, Center for Success of English Learners (cselcenter.org)
- Beginning at Harvard University next month



The Meadows Center
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK



CENTER FOR THE SUCCESS
of ENGLISH LEARNERS

**Who Are
You?**



My Plan

1. Discuss the strengths and challenges that English learners present
2. Describe instructional practices found to be effective in improving reading outcomes among ELs and their native English-speaking peers
3. Preview an instructional approach that exemplifies these features
4. Present Recommendations for moving the needle with ELs

English Learners: Strengths and Challenges

What Strengths Do English Learners Present?



What Are The Strengths of English Learners?

- Knowledge in their primary language
- Cultural knowledge
- Intelligence
- Curiosity
- Work ethic
- Problem solving
- Dedicated

What Language and Literacy Challenges Do ELs Face?

- **Emerging English Language Proficiency**
- **Growing Domain-Specific Knowledge**
- **Developing Reading Comprehension Skills**
- **Some ELs will also have foundational reading skill difficulties**

What Instructional Practices and Policies Contribute to the Current Reading Performance of English Learners?

**What Instructional
Practices and Policies
Contribute to the
Current Reading
Performance of
English Learners?**



“Oh, he is an English Learner. He’ll catch on eventually”

Some educators may believe that if they wait long enough, ELs will “catch on” to reading and overcome challenges that they display in early reading when their English proficiency is developed.



This thinking may prevent some English learners from receiving intervention or special education services

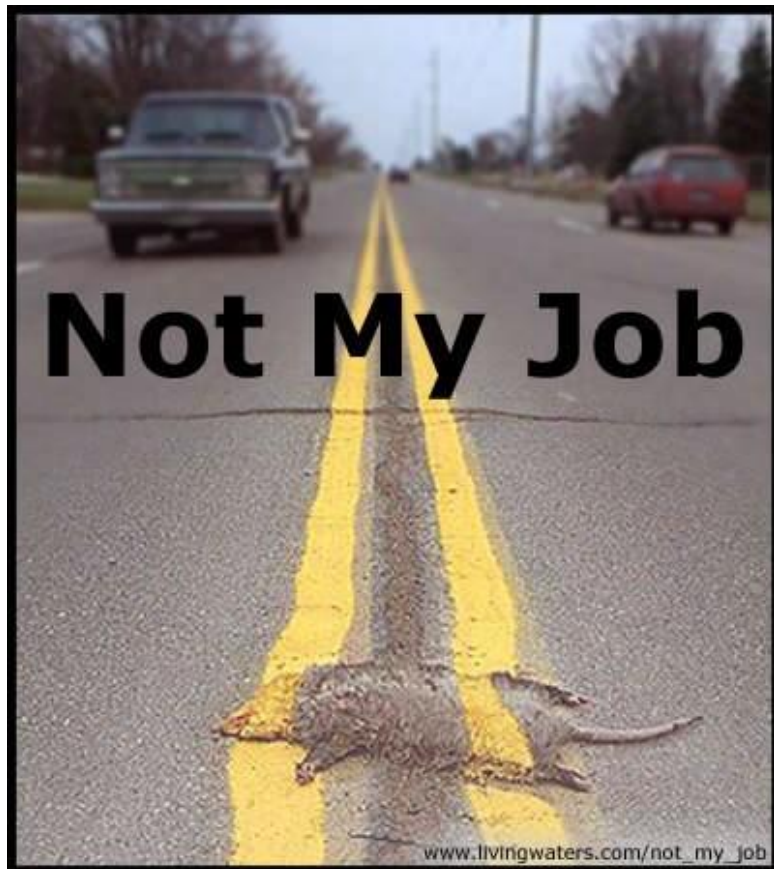
“I’m not sure how to best help him”



Classroom teachers often **do not feel prepared** to support the increasingly diverse students (Banilower et al., 2013; Llosa et al., 2016)

ELs often do not receive the linguistic supports needed to access grade-level course content, which make it difficult for them to **successfully engage instruction** (August & Shanahan, 2006; Lesaux et al., 2014)

“I’m a history teacher—not an ELA or ESL teacher”



Some content-area teachers do not see the development of language or reading skills as integral to their instruction (Bunch et al., 2009)

Some teachers who see value in integration have difficulty putting this it into action (Patchen & Cox-Petersen, 2008)

“I’m not sure they are ready for that class”

Previous research has found that ELs in the middle school and high school grades are clustered and tracked into non-college preparatory classes and classes with simplified curricula (e.g., Callahan, 2005)

ELs in these classes have fewer opportunities to learn complex content and vocabulary and fewer opportunities to engage with peers whose academic language and vocabulary is more developed



Other Challenges In and Outside of School

Due to public policies that lead to school funding inequities, **ELs are more likely to be enrolled in under-resourced schools** (Cosentino de Cohen et al., 2005).

Unfortunately, ELs in the U.S. experience **elevated levels of poverty and other socio-cultural factors** that make them vulnerable to academic difficulties.

What Do We Know About The Reading Development of ELs?

**Tell your neighbor
one thing you know
about the reading
development of ELs**



There is a Ton of Diversity Within the Subgroup of ELs

ELs represent a **heterogenous population of students** with a broad variety of strengths and needs, including varying degrees of academic skills, subject matter knowledge, and proficiency in their native language and in English (Genesee et al., 2006).

English Proficiency at School Entry is Strong Predictor

The average reading growth of ELs who entered kindergarten with adequate English proficiency was indistinguishable from that of their English-only peers.

ELs who entered school with the LEP designation grew more slowly in their reading scores than their English-only counterparts, leading to an increasing achievement gap.

Kieffer, 2008



ELs, by definition, are developing in their
**English vocabulary and language
proficiency**



ELs, on average, have similar performance on phonologically-based tasks. However, **many ELs with reading difficulties also demonstrate difficulties in word reading** (e.g., Capin et al., 2023; Cho et al., 2019; Vaughn et al., 2019).

What Instructional Practices Improve Reading Outcomes for ELs?

EDUCATOR'S PRACTICE GUIDE

WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE™

Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School



**What
Instructional
Practices
Improve Reading
Outcomes for
ELs?**



Good News: Many Evidence-Based Practices for Early Reading are Efficacious with ELs

Evidence-based practices for teaching foundational reading skills grounded in the science of reading appear to be equally effective for ELs with or at risk for reading difficulties (Capin et al., 2021; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2023; Solari et al., 2022).

Of course, it is prudent to leverage students' primary language knowledge and incorporate academic language instruction when teaching ELs, regardless of their grade level



Recommendations for Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School

1. Teach a set of **academic vocabulary** words intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities
2. Integrate **oral and written English language instruction** into content-area teaching.
3. Provide **regular and structured opportunities for writing** for students to develop written language skills.
4. Implement **small group instructional intervention to students struggling** in the areas of literacy and English language development.

(Baker et al., 2013)

National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine Report

1. **Foreground content** to build language through content instruction,
2. **Use engaging and meaningful activities** to students while involving students in the practices of the discipline,
3. Organizing learning in **heterogeneous teams** to promote collaboration, discussion, and social motivation,
4. Integrate the use of **formative assessment** practices.

(Francis et al., 2018)

How do we put it all together into an instructional approach?!?



Let's Look at a Curriculum Focused on Improving Reading and Social Studies Outcomes for ELs and Their Peers

World Generation

Evidence-based Approach to Enhancing World History Knowledge and Social Studies Literacy Skills Among 6th Grade ELs and Their Peers

Instructional materials were originally developed by Strategic Education Research Partnership in collaboration with researchers and teachers in Massachusetts (Social Studies Generation) and then enhanced by UT Austin team for ELs

SERP justify • monumental • surplus • architecture • infrastructure • hierarchy
SoGen Unit 6.2



social studies
generation

THE EGYPTIAN PHAROHS: WISE INVESTORS OR WASTEFUL SPENDERS?

SOCIAL STUDIES ACTIVITIES

Session 1 Reader's Theater Identifying Different Perspectives Generating Arguments and Counterarguments	2–5
Session 2 Building Background Knowledge Evaluating Arguments	6–9
Session 3 Preparing for the Debate	10–11
Session 4 It's Debate Time!	12–14
Session 5 Writing	15–16

SUPPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES FOR OTHER CONTENT AREAS

ELA Video Games About Society and History	17
Math Pyramid Surfaces	18
Science Washington Monument Earthquake Damage	19

FOCUS WORDS

Examining the Focus Words Closely	20
-----------------------------------	----

Key Practices

Comprehension Canopy

- Introduce students to the unit's dilemma through Springboard & Reader's Theater



The Egyptian Pharaohs:

Wise Investors or Wasteful Spenders?

In this social studies unit, students will explore ancient Egypt by learning about the Egyptian social structure and why and how the pyramids were built.

Throughout the unit students will engage in collaborative discussions within teacher-arranged heterogeneous groups and within various grouping structures. A set of social studies disciplinary literacy practices will be targeted. Students will engage with new academic vocabulary, read informational text, identify different perspectives, and produce evidence-based arguments and counterarguments in debate and essay writing. All unit activities relate and build to answer the central question of the unit: Were the Egyptian Pharaohs wise investors or wasteful spenders?

Comprehension Canopy

- Introduce students to the unit topic & question
- Build knowledge through springboard
- Make content relevant through reader's theater

Unit Question: Were the Pharaohs Wise Investors or Wasteful Spenders?

Just got to Egypt after traveling for over 10 hours!! I'm exhausted, but can't wait to be near some of the greatest wonders of the world! #jetlag #adventure



Comprehension Canopy

- Introduce students to the unit topic & question
- Build knowledge through springboard
- Make content relevant through reader's theater

Reader's Theater

Amazing Investment or Money Down the Drain?



Note: You are going to read about an example of spending that some consider an investment and others consider wasteful. Also, think of yourself as a word detective- when you encounter the words in bold or any words you would bold because they are difficult, consider ways to detect their meaning.

Before you begin reading, discuss with a partner a time when you (or your family) spent money wisely. Next, tell about a time when you wasted money.

Key Practices

Comprehension Canopy

- Introduce students to the unit's dilemma through Springboard & Reader's Theater

Social Studies Knowledge Acquisition

- Develop and extend students' social studies content knowledge through brief, engaging texts

Social Studies Knowledge Acquisition

- Develop and extend students' social studies content knowledge through brief, engaging texts
- Integrated academic vocabulary teaching

READING #1

The Pyramids



About 4,600 years ago, thousands of men worked under the hot Egyptian sun to build the Great Pyramid of Giza for their Pharaoh (photo on right). Put yourself in their shoes and imagine what it must have been like to pull a 2.5-ton limestone block on a sled up a steep ramp. It took 20 years to haul more than 2 million of these blocks into place. That averages to about 12 blocks per hour, day after day, year after year. After the blocks were in place, smaller casing stones were used to give the pyramid a smooth covering.



The Great Pyramid of Giza stands about 454 feet tall. For 3,800 years it was the tallest man-made structure in the world. Yet it was built in an age without cranes, trucks, bulldozers, or even simple machines such as wheels or pulleys. And the Great Pyramid of Giza was only one of many pyramids that were built as tombs for the pharaohs. Because the pharaohs were viewed as gods, these tombs were important to Egyptians because they believed their leaders could continue to watch over and protect Egypt even after death. The pyramids were intended to help each pharaoh make the journey to the afterlife.

After our class discussion, what questions do you have about how these pyramids were built?



READING #2

Not Just the Pyramids



Ancient Egypt lasted for about 3,000 years. During that long time, the Egyptians built many pyramids. They also built many other **monumental** structures. These structures included temples, enormous statues, and a great series of tombs carved right into the rock of a large mountain. Many of these structures are in a region of Egypt called the Valley of the Kings. The tombs held important objects that were thought to be necessary for pharaohs to live well after their earthly lives were over. These tombs were filled with beautiful furniture, statues, wall paintings, precious jewelry, and gold. Each tomb also contained writings with advice for the pharaoh to help guide him or her along the journey to the afterlife. These offerings honored the gods and were thought to enable the pharaohs to continue to watch over Egypt.



Turn & Talk:

What can you infer from the text about ancient Egyptian ideas about the afterlife?

Write:



Social Studies Knowledge Acquisition

- Develop and extend students' social studies content knowledge through brief, engaging texts
- Integrated academic vocabulary teaching

Let's first discuss a couple focus words:

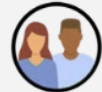
Justify: To show or prove that something is necessary or reasonable.



Turn and Talk:

What is a *justification* for allowing kids to spend time watching television instead of reading or doing homework?

Surplus: extra amount of something over what is needed or used; excess



Turn and Talk:

What would you do with a *surplus* of \$100?

Reading the statements below, can you tell which supports building a swimming pool and which opposes?

*"This pool is easy to **justify**. If we don't build it, the athletes and families will be disappointed!"*

*"Make a fuss! A swimming pool is not the way to spend our **surplus**!"*

Key Practices

Comprehension Canopy

- Introduce students to the unit's dilemma through Springboard & Reader's Theater

Social Studies Knowledge Acquisition

- Develop and extend students' social studies content knowledge through brief, engaging texts

Disciplinary Literacy

- Develop specialized reading, writing, speaking, & listening skills in social studies

Disciplinary Literacy

- Develop specialized reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in social studies

Identifying Different Perspectives

Warm-up:

Reading the statements to the right. Can you tell which supports building a swimming pool and which opposes?

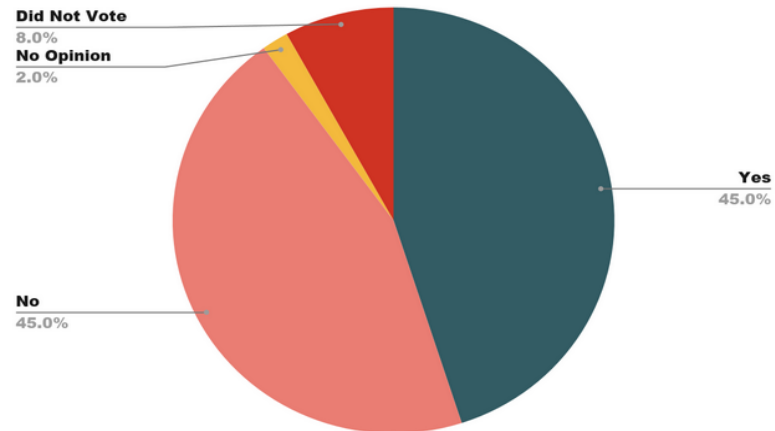
Directions:

During this activity, refer to the Reader's Theater script and work with your partner.

The student body at Horace Mann Middle School voted on whether or not to build a swimming pool. The results are below. Examine the data and answer the questions that follow.

"This pool is easy to **justify**. If we don't build it, the athletes and families will be disappointed!"

"Make a fuss! A swimming pool is not the way to spend our **surplus!**"



Identifying Different Perspectives

Who would say such a thing?

Read these quotations, then match the quotation to the person most likely to have said it. The first one has been done for you.

"Your strike is not justified because you must work hard in order to be rewarded when the pharaohs and priests are happy in their afterlives and watching over you."

"I'll tell you my opinion. Go up, gather your gear, close your doors, fetch your wives and your children, and I'll lead you to the temple of Menmaatre and let you settle down there right away." (actual translation from ancient text!)



Peasant
working near
Deir el-Medina



The **police chief**
in Deir-Medina
(Speaking to the
crafts workers)



A **crafts worker**
in Deir-Medina:
(Speaking to the
officials)



Priest of
Thebes

"Allowing the artisans to strike is a bad idea because the artisans are already well enough off. We work hard every day and give a portion of our crops to the tax collectors. If anyone deserves a better quality of life, it is us."

"The prospect of hunger and thirst has driven us to this; there is no clothing, there is no ointment, there is no fish, there are no vegetables." (actual translation from ancient text!)

Disciplinary Literacy

- Develop specialized reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in social studies




Generating Arguments and Counterarguments

To be a good debater, you not only need to come up with good arguments (reasons to persuade others), but you also need to come up with counterarguments (reasons to oppose other arguments). Furthermore, you need to be able to respond to the counterarguments against your argument! The first column in the chart below lists arguments to support the idea that Horace Mann Middle School should build a pool. The second column lists the counterarguments to the arguments in the first column. The third column lists the reasons to oppose the counterarguments.



Directions:

We will work through this table as a class.

ARGUMENTS	COUNTERARGUMENTS	OPPOSING THE COUNTERARGUMENTS
		
The extra money should not be spent on building a pool because there are so many items at our school that need to be fixed first. For example, the bathrooms and desks!	Actually the argument you just gave is not that strong because the bathrooms and the desks are OK being in a bit of a messy state. It is not hurting anyone or affecting anyone's learning. It seems it would be way more beneficial to have a new pool.	I don't think so! Maybe it is not hurting anyone to have old desks and messy bathrooms, but not too many students will benefit from the pool. EVERYONE would benefit from fixing the bathrooms and desks.

Disciplinary Literacy

- Develop specialized reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in social studies

Debate

Here is a rundown of today's debate. There are four rounds with short breaks in between for teams to strategize.

ROUND 1



Team Representatives present **opening statements**.

Other team members **listen carefully to the other team's opening statement and write ideas for counterarguments**. Use your Thoughtbook to jot down ideas.

→ STRATEGY SESSION:

Each team discusses how to counter the argument presented in opening statements



ROUND 2



Team Representatives present a **counterargument** to the other team's position.

Other team members listen carefully to their representative and the other team's representative. **As they hear counterarguments against their team's position, they write down ideas about how to respond**. Use your Thoughtbook to jot down ideas.

→ STRATEGY SESSION:

Each team discusses how to respond to the counterargument the other team presented.



ROUND 3



Team Representatives **defend against the counterargument** made by the other team.

Other team members hear responses to counterarguments and **write down ideas the team might want to add to the closing statement**. Use your Thoughtbook to jot down ideas.

→ STRATEGY SESSION:

Each team discusses what to include in the closing statement.



ROUND 4



Team Representatives make **closing statements**.

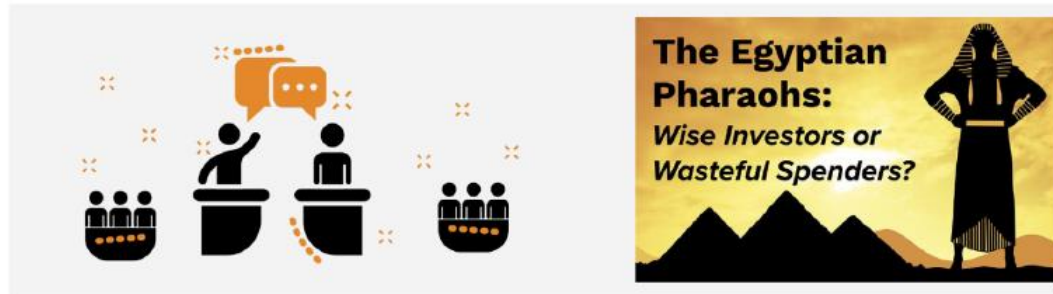
Other team members stand in support of the representative and applaud when they finish. Thank the opposing team for the opportunity to debate them.

Disciplinary Literacy

- Develop specialized reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in social studies

Session 7: Debate Day

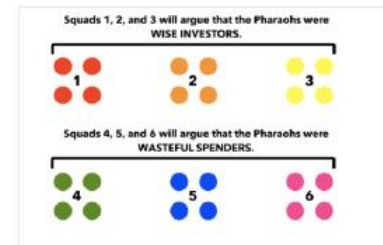
Session Introduction



How to debate effectively:

1. Speak clearly and with confidence
2. Maintain proper body language
3. Maintain eye contact with your opponents and the audience
4. Stay on topic.

You can see how the debate will run by [reviewing the animation](#):



Disciplinary Literacy

- Develop specialized reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in social studies

Drafting Your Essay



You have the option of taking the same position as you did in the debate, OR you can switch sides and write your essay from the other perspective!

Use your Thoughtbook notes and debate statements to help you with your essay.

Here are two examples of ways to structure your essay:

Model #1

Introduction Paragraph

Introduce the topic:	"The Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt used..."
Claim:	"This use of resources was wise/wasteful..."
Introduce your 2-3 reasons to support your claim:	[Reason 1] [Reason 2]

Body Paragraph 1

Reason 1	"One reason..."
Evidence	"For example..."
Explain	"This shows that..." "This proves that..."

Body Paragraph 2

Reason 2	"Another reason..."
Evidence	"For example..."
Explain	"This shows that..." "This proves that..."

Body Paragraph 3 (optional)

Counterargument	"One counterargument might be..."
Evidence against	This argument concerns me because...
Explain	"This does not show that..." "This does not prove that..."

Conclusion Paragraph

Restate your claim and reasons	
End with a final thought	

Key Practices

Comprehension Canopy

- Introduce students to the unit's dilemma through Springboard & Reader's Theater

Social Studies Knowledge Acquisition

- Develop and extend students' social studies content knowledge through brief, engaging texts

Disciplinary Literacy

- Develop specialized reading, writing, speaking, & listening skills in social studies


Thoughtbook

- Writing tool used to summarize and collect evidence daily in preparation for debate & essay

Thoughtbook

- Frequent writing opportunities that support content knowledge and disciplinary literacy skills

 **Work on the following in your THOUGHTBOOK.**

 **The pharaohs were...**

	Wise Investors	Wasteful Spenders
READING #1	Evidence from the text (in quotes from the text)...	Evidence from the text...
VIDEO #1	Explain why this makes them wise (in your own words)	
READING #2		



Thoughtbook

- Frequent writing opportunities that support content knowledge and disciplinary literacy skills

Formative Assessment: Class Check

Read through a sample of students' Thoughtbook entries to check for understanding for the class as a whole and to identify individuals who may need additional support. Prepare to provide feedback at the beginning of Session 2.



Work on the following in your **THOUGHTBOOK**.



The pharaohs were...

	Wise Investors	Wasteful Spenders
READING #1	Evidence from the text (in quotes from the text)...	Evidence from the text...
VIDEO #1	Explain why this makes them wise (in your own words)	
READING #2		

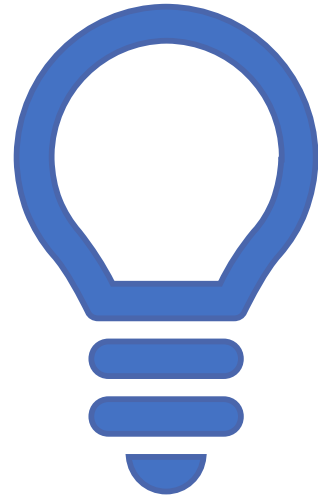


What is one feature of World Generation that you think would motivate students?



What Key Practices for ELs Were Included?

Key Practices	Present?
1. Teach a set of academic vocabulary words intensively	✓
2. Integrate oral and written English language instruction into content teaching.	✓
3. Provide regular and structured opportunities for writing	✓
4. Implement small group instructional intervention to students struggling in the areas of literacy and English language development.	
5. Foreground content to build language through content instruction.	✓
6. Use activities that are engaging and meaningful to students while involving students in the practices of the discipline.	✓
7. Organizing learning in heterogeneous teams to promote collaboration, discussion, and social motivation.	✓
8. Integrate the use of formative assessment practices.	✓



Ideas for Moving the Needle for ELs

1. Develop a School Culture That Supports the Language and Literacy Development of ELs



We are all Reading Teachers!

We are all ESL Teachers!

2. Consider Designing All Instruction to Assure it is Successful for ELs and Watch All Kids Reap the Benefits



3. Cultivate Language, Literacy, and World Knowledge Through Reading and Discussing Complex Texts Every Day



4. Adopt School-Wide Practices to Enhancing Word Knowledge



Cognate or translation for English learners → **compassion (compasión)**

Student-friendly definition → Showing great care or concern

Synonyms or related words → Synonyms: tenderness, sympathy

Visual representation to make the word vivid →

Example Sentences

- 1. The Red Cross workers showed great **compassion** toward the people of Haiti after the earthquake struck by providing food and shelter to many homeless people.
- 2. Mahatma Gandhi is known throughout the world for his **compassion**, dedication to peace, and commitment to nonviolence.

Turn and Talk

- 1. Tell your partner about a time you showed **compassion** toward others.
- 2. Why do you think that Gandhi is known for his **compassion**?

First question relates to students' prior knowledge or experience

Second question relates to your course content

5. Create a Learning Environment that Values and Leverages ELs' Home Language, Knowledge, and Cultural Assets



6. Engage ELs in Complex Tasks Knowing Language Development is a Product of Interaction and Learning, not a Prerequisite



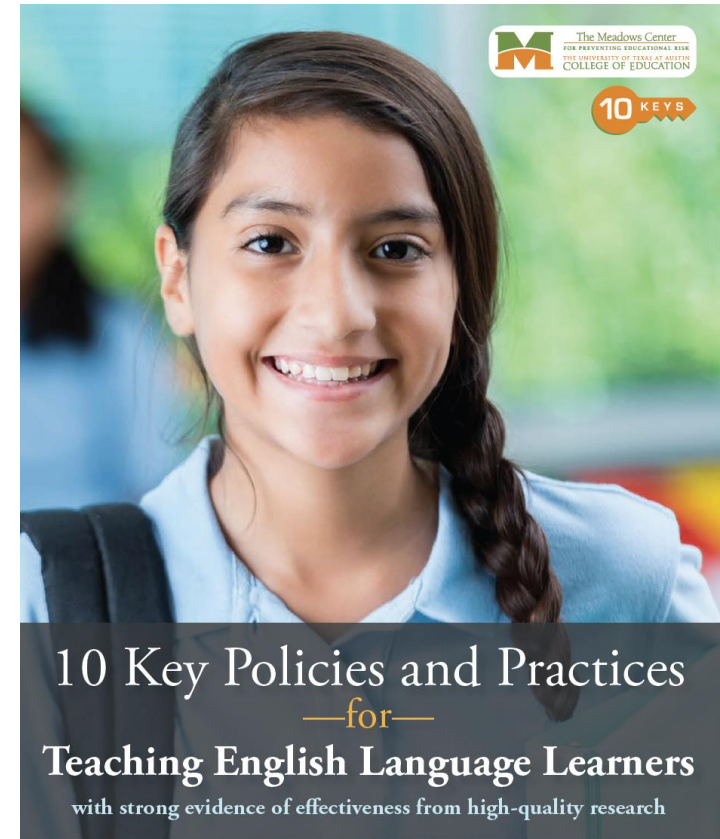
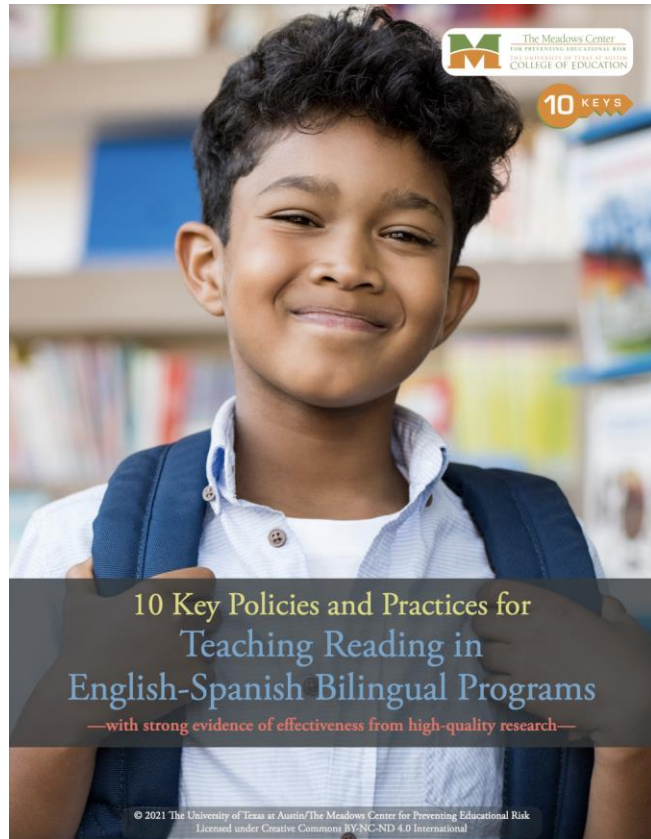
7. Err on the Side of Providing Code-based Instruction and Use Instructional Response to Determine if it is Necessary to Continue



Questions? Ideas?

10 Keys Policies and Practices for Teaching ELs

<https://meadowscenter.org/10-keys>



Interested in Partnering to Improve Outcomes for ELs?

- **Center for the Success of English Learners**
(CSELcenter.org)
 - We are testing effects of World Generation Among 6th Graders

Email me at pcapin@utexas.edu if you are interested.

Thank you

Email: pcapin@utexas.edu

Website: MeadowsCenter.org

Website: CSELcenter.org

Twitter: [@MCPER_EDU](https://twitter.com/MCPER_EDU)

Twitter: [@CSELCenter](https://twitter.com/CSELCenter)