

Preparing English Learners for College in ELT

by [Yasuko Kanno](#)

Dania, an Ethiopian English learner (EL), was scared to apply to college because she thought that college was only for native-English speakers. Alexandra, a Latina EL who was perfectly capable of being admitted to a state university, missed the last SAT before the university application deadline because she did not know how to coordinate test-taking and filing college applications. Through my teaching and research, I have met a number of ELs for whom going to college proved to be an elusive goal. A recent study found that only 19% of ELs go onto 4-year colleges upon high school graduation as opposed to 45% of students for whom English is a first language, while almost 50% of ELs do not reach postsecondary education at all (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). Although many of the barriers inhibiting ELs' college access are systemic, there are a number of concrete actions that individual EL teachers can take. In what follows, I outline some of the ideas that are likely to facilitate ELs' access to and preparation for college.

Accelerate English Learners' English Development

By now it has become common knowledge in TESOL that it takes 4–7 years for ELs to develop academic English proficiency (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Although I do not dispute this claim itself, I contend that the way that this information has been interpreted at the classroom level has been less than productive. Some teachers have come to understand this information to mean that ELs' English language development (ELD) inevitably involves a long haul no matter what teachers do.

That ELD takes multiple years does *not* mean that the methods and quality of instruction make no difference. ELs who receive effective ELD instruction do learn academic English faster. Although accelerated ELD would require its own series of *TESOL Connections* articles, readers will benefit from reading concrete guidelines such as [Saunders, Goldenberg, and Marcelletti](#) (2013). ELs need to be producing much more English throughout the day: Many ELs, especially those placed in low-track classes (see the following section, "Teach Demanding Academic Content While They Are Learning English"), go through the school day being silent, while native-English-speaking peers placed in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses enjoy stimulating discussions with their teachers that foreshadow the typical discourse patterns in college classrooms. If we are not providing ELs with opportunities to speak English in the classroom, how can we expect them to get better?

That said, ELs' accelerated ELD is as much a matter of envisioning students' futures as a matter of teaching methods. High school EL teachers usually have a good sense of the linguistic leap that ELs need to make to reach college, whereas elementary-school EL teachers have a harder time connecting their practice with college readiness because college is a long time away. But ELD is a multiyear project: The instruction that ELs receive in elementary school has a real impact on what they will be doing in high school and beyond. Wenger (1998) speaks of the power of imagination by citing the story of two stone cutters who are asked what they are doing: "One responds: 'I am cutting this stone in a perfectly square shape.' The other responds: 'I am building a cathedral'" (p. 176). Similarly, the practice of an EL teacher who responds, "I am

nurturing future poet laureates,” is likely to be qualitatively different from one who responds, “I’m teaching how to decode long vowels.”

Teach Demanding Academic Content While They Are Learning English

A lack of urgency to accelerate ELs’ ELD is particularly harmful when it is coupled with an assumption that students need to reach a certain level of English proficiency before they are ready to learn challenging academic content. At the high school level, this assumption results in ELs’ limited access to advanced college preparatory courses (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Given that ELD takes several years, we cannot afford to wait for ELs to develop grade-level English proficiency before their academic preparation for college takes place; rather, ELD and academic content instruction must happen concurrently.

EL teachers can work with guidance counselors to develop a flexible system of course and level assignment. Eligibility criteria for taking honors and AP courses that rely less on standardized test scores and more on previous teachers’ recommendations and previous course grades should provide a more equitable way of assessing ELs’ readiness. A late course-drop date past one marking period would allow ELs to try an ambitious course, with the option to drop it later if it turns out to be unrealistic. In other words, the rule of thumb in deciding on ELs’ academic course leveling should be: When in doubt, level up rather than level down.

EL teachers also have an important role to play in coaching general education teachers to set the language objectives of their lessons. General education teachers can usually articulate content objectives with ease, but they are not in the habit of considering the vocabulary, grammatical features, and language functions embedded in their lessons. EL teachers can help their general education colleagues, first, to become aware of the linguistic features of their lessons, and second, to develop plans to incorporate explicit linguistic instruction into their lessons. This does not mean that EL teachers must work with every content teacher in the school. Rather, if they can identify a general education teacher, say a math teacher, who has a desire to teach ELs better, they can start with that teacher. And once that teacher develops the skill to set language objectives and recognizes the effectiveness of the change, *that teacher* can then go on to coach other colleagues in his or her department.

Give Them College Knowledge

Going to college is not just about meeting rigorous academic standards; it is also about knowing how to navigate the system. The concrete knowledge of how to prepare for and apply to college is called *college knowledge*. Although many parents of ELs have high educational aspirations for their children, they themselves often lack a college education and are not able to provide concrete guidance in college planning. If such guidance is not available at home, it has to be provided at the school.

This is another area in which EL teachers can play a pivotal role. For example, before ELs attend a school-wide college orientation, EL teachers can teach them a prelesson, providing some basic background knowledge about U.S. colleges and going over the key vocabulary that is likely to come up in the orientation, such as *FAFSA*, *tuition*, *Common Application*, *early admission*,

majors, letter of recommendation, and Pell Grants. EL teachers can also work with guidance counselors to develop an EL-specific college guidance and orientation program. Much of such guidance needs to be hands-on and practical. For example, taking ninth-grade ELs on a campus tour of a college nearby will help them develop a more concrete image of college, with real buildings and people, early in their high school careers. A FAFSA workshop for both ELs and their parents with interpreters present is another important element of college preparation for ELs. Completing the FAFSA forms is a convoluted process that frustrates many middle-class, English-speaking parents. A FASA workshop that enables students and parents to submit their application by the end of the session will go a long way in ensuring that ELs secure the financial aid for which they are eligible.

What I outlined in this article goes beyond the usual job descriptions of EL teachers. At the same time, we EL teachers are the institutional advocates with the expertise to translate ELs' needs into concrete policies and practices. If we do not speak up for ELs' equitable access to college and act on it, who else will?

References

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***Yasuko Kanno** is associate professor and director of language education in the School of Education at Boston University. She works with graduate students who are training to become English as a second language teachers in public schools in Massachusetts, USA. Recipient of the 2015 TESOL Award for Distinguished Research, Kanno is interested in English language learners' access to postsecondary education and how K–12 public schools shape ELs' postsecondary choices.*