

December 2012

Comments to Institute of Education Sciences regarding New IES Research Topic, “Continuous Improvement Research in Education”

Understanding Language: Research & Impact Work Group

The newly-adopted¹ Common Core State Standards² (and the soon-to-be-released Next Generation Science Standards) reflect a cutting-edge understanding of the interdependent nature of language and academic content, and helped spur the creation of the Understanding Language (UL) initiative, a Stanford University-based, grant-funded³ national partnership of practitioners, administrators, academics, policy experts and other education professionals. Bringing together a range of perspectives on language and content instruction, UL aims to help practitioners, administrators and policy makers interpret and implement the new educational standards effectively for all students, including the five-million-strong and rapidly-growing⁴ population of English Language Learners (ELLs). UL’s Research and Impact Work Group was impressed by the proposed new IES Research Topic, “Continuous Improvement Research in Education,” and suggests that IES include a fourth potential broad objective for proposed projects, centered on the relationship between language- and content-learning.

We suggest the following fourth objective, focused on the role of language in the classroom, which we believe complements the other three listed objectives (“*Creating a safe, orderly and supportive learning climate for students from preschool through high school*,” “*Improving students’ transition to high school*,” and “*Increasing access to college and post-secondary training*”) but emphasizes the disciplinary and language-related practices that students must master in order to have a successful transition to post-secondary college and career experiences:

Developing K-12 students’ complex and discipline-specific academic language practices. The new Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards reflect a growing understanding that language learning and content learning are highly interdependent. The new content standards require that students use the specific language and practices associated with each discipline to acquire and demonstrate

¹ The CCSS have been fully adopted in 45 states.

² <http://www.corestandards.org>

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⁴ <http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov>

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academic content knowledge. For example, in science, they must be able to make predictions, describe observations, select and present key evidence to support or refute claims. All students, but especially the rapidly-growing number of ELLs, face significant obstacles in content classrooms and professional settings if they are not supported by “systemic, district-wide approaches to curriculum design and instructional delivery that intertwine language development and content” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012, p. 2). In a complementary manner with respect to English language learning, ELLs acquire English most efficiently when given challenging, grade-level-appropriate content material in English and pressed to actively search and negotiate for linguistic meaning, while provided with appropriate strategic supports (Walqui & van Lier, 2010). Grantees could investigate, for example, the effectiveness of different types of supports and scaffolds designed to aid students as they learn standards-based content through emerging English, the types of participatory activities that will result in both subject matter learning and language development, and the ways in which teachers can be prepared to discover and employ varying instructional approaches to deeply engage all students in the disciplinary discourse.

This proposed fourth objective will also help students make the crucial transitions to high school, and then on to college and post-secondary level, because to succeed at both transitions students need to understand and compose complex, abstract, challenging texts. The various registers and styles used in classrooms as well as the registers used in written texts are students’ greatest stumbling blocks in school, beginning as early as fourth grade (Chall & Jacobs, 2003).

This fourth objective would be a timely reflection of changes in demography and policy as well as linguistic and pedagogical theory, and it would help address the problem of the growing number of “long-term English Language Learners,” or students who have had the official Limited English Proficient designation for seven years or more (Olsen, 2010). Given the new RFA’s focus on “how to make systems work and make them work better,” UL believes that it would be helpful for IES to address a crucially weak link in the existing system by helping students of *all* language and culture backgrounds access a high level of challenge in U.S. schools.

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