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## **Teachers' beliefs about English learners: Adding linguistic support to enhance academic rigor**

By Bruce Torff and Audrey Figueroa Murphy

### **Abstract**

A persistent achievement gap for English learners (ELs) has prompted educators to search for contributing factors and pedagogical solutions. Our research shows teachers' beliefs about *rigor of curriculum* may contribute to the problem; teachers supported less rigorous curriculum for ELs, evincing a "rigor gap" likely to exacerbate the EL achievement gap. We suggest that systematic analysis of the linguistic demands of classroom tasks can facilitate the design of appropriate linguistic supports, allowing ELs to engage in academically rigorous instruction comparable to that afforded English-proficient students. Counteracting the rigor gap as such has promise to ameliorate the EL achievement gap.

A large body of research documents the academic struggles of English learners (ELs) as they endeavor to learn not just academic content, but also the instructional language in which content is taught (e.g., Monroy Ochoa & Cadeiro-Kaplan, 2004; Young et al., 2012). Numerous factors contributing to the EL achievement gap have been suggested: These include the obvious effects of English proficiency, as well as in-school factors, such as class size, and out-of-school factors, such as television watching (e.g., Callahan, 2005; Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010).

It has also been noted that ELs tend to take lower-level courses, and they remain underrepresented in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and gifted and talented programs (Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Shi, 2017). This raises the question of whether educators tend to direct ELs toward less challenging educational experiences, perhaps because they don't believe ELs can handle rigorous ones. Our own research indicates that the EL achievement gap likely stems in part from educators' well-intended but counterproductive beliefs about best practice in teaching ELs. Instead of allowing these beliefs to guide students' paths, we encourage teachers to use interventions that may help to ameliorate the EL achievement gap.

## **Teachers' beliefs and the EL achievement gap**

Teachers' beliefs go a long way in determining what happens in their classrooms (Anders & Evans, 2019; Haukås, 2016; Skott, 2015). For example, teachers who believe in nurturance and ones who prefer “tough love” produce very different experiences for students. Similarly, teachers' beliefs about rigor of curriculum affect their decisions about the quantity and complexity of work assigned. Rigor of curriculum is a significant factor in a variety of achievement gaps, and students typically achieve more when challenged (Beard, 2018; Crouch & DeStefano, 2017).

Researchers have found that many teachers believe it appropriate to employ a less rigorous curriculum with students they perceive to be socioeconomically disadvantaged (Torff, 2011, 2014). However, we could not locate any studies that focused specifically on teachers' beliefs about academic rigor in teaching ELs and how these beliefs might contribute to achievement gaps. So we set out to investigate to what extent teachers underestimate ELs' capacity to do rigorous academic work. In their well-meaning efforts to provide appropriate instruction, might they present these students with a less demanding curriculum than they need?

Participants in our study included 205 elementary teachers from two schools in a large and diverse city in the northeastern United States (Murphy & Torff, 2019). These schools have large enrollments of Spanish-speaking ELs and many veteran teachers experienced in working with these students. We asked participating teachers to rate (on a six-point scale) the effectiveness of a number of brief descriptions of classroom activities that required varying degrees of critical thinking (CT), a proxy for rigor of curriculum. (For example, a high-CT activity read: “A science class is studying how an octopus changes color; the teacher gives students the results of an octopus experiment and then asks them to state a question the experiment answers.” By contrast, one of the low-CT items read: “A science class is studying the desert ecosystem; the teacher shows photographs of desert plants while explaining how these plants cope with the lack of water.”) Teachers were randomly assigned to rate the lessons' effectiveness for either ELs or

general-education students. Data were collected at faculty meetings, and all teachers who were asked to take part did so.

Overall, the teachers' responses were consistent with the belief that ELs would benefit from less rigorous classroom work. When told the lessons were meant for ELs, teachers tended to give higher ratings to less challenging activities, and they gave lower ratings to the more challenging activities. However, when told that the lessons would be for general education students, they gave the activities equal ratings. That is, they thought the general education students would benefit from all kinds of lessons (both more and less rigorous) but that ELs would benefit mostly from easier activities, and not so much from rigorous lessons.

We found no differences associated with teachers' gender, ethnicity, age, educational attainment, teaching experience, or administrative experience, or whether they held English as a second language or bilingual certification. In short, participating teachers in all their variety favored less rigorous curriculum for ELs.

Of course, what teachers say about students in private doesn't necessarily predict how they'll behave in the classroom. But in this case it's hard to imagine a false negative — if teachers' survey answers reveal the belief that ELs benefit from less challenging work, then how likely are those teachers to provide them with rigorous instruction? The results, we conclude, indicate a “rigor gap,” which, in turn, contributes to the larger EL achievement gap.

In response, some educators might argue that providing a less rigorous curriculum for ELs allows those students to receive lessons at a developmentally appropriate level. We do not know of any research showing how widespread such views are, but it's certainly possible that many teachers worry they might harm students by pushing them too hard. Further, some researchers have found overzealous teaching to be associated with psychological distress, truancy, and reduced academic performance (Guisbond, Neill, & Schaeffer, 2013; Shute & Cooper, 2015).

However, we're troubled more by the opposite scenario in which a steady regimen of less-than-rigorous instruction for ELs creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: ELs receive undemanding lessons, which limits their performance, which then seems to justify even more impoverished lessons. In the meantime, English-proficient students receive more rigorous instruction, which boosts their performance, and then leads to more rigorous instruction. Academically speaking, the rich flourish, and the poor get poorer (Torff, 2011, 2014).

### **Adding linguistic support to maintain academic rigor**

How can educators challenge the underlying beliefs that contribute to the rigor gap for ELs? We suggest two avenues for teacher change, one focused on curriculum and instruction and the other on professional development.

#### ***Curriculum and instruction***

Within the field of EL education, researchers and practitioners often make a distinction between the academic and linguistic demands of classroom tasks. For example, a student may be capable of interpreting a novel in a sophisticated way (an *academic* achievement) even if she struggles to make her argument in written English (a *linguistic* challenge). This is why many schools, and even whole states, assess these skills separately. For instance, New York State's Regent examinations are designed to measure academic performance but not language skills. Students who are not native English speakers can request that subject-area exams they must pass for high school graduation be translated into their home language. Meanwhile, the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test assesses students' English-language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) without requiring any particular academic content knowledge.

Similarly, educators can distinguish between the academic and linguistic demands of the curriculum and provide linguistic supports that allow ELs to meet the same rigorous standards as other students. For example, imagine a high school science lesson on plate tectonics, in which students are asked to make short documentary videos explaining a specific phenomenon (such as how tectonic shift produces tsunamis). They will have to do background research, prepare a

script, produce the video, and, after the video is screened, take questions from students and the teacher — the content is challenging, and the students will have to think and communicate about it in complex ways.

What will it take to permit ELs to participate fully in this work? That will depend on some careful consideration of the particular ELs in the class and the linguistic demands of the unit. In this case, for example, ELs will likely need some help with scientific terminology, other vocabulary that emerges during the research process, the grammar and punctuation required to write a script, and preparation to answer questions from classmates. Thus, the teacher might want to provide a glossary of key terms in both languages, some explicit instruction in the language and stylistic features of scientific communication, and some coaching in public speaking. Given these kinds of help, though, there's no reason why ELs can't learn as much about plate tectonics as the general-education students.

Researchers have found that the academic performance of ELs improves significantly when such linguistic support is incorporated appropriately in the classroom (Pereira & de Oliveira, 2015; Verplaetse & Migliacci, 2017). Further, the greater the second-language support, the smaller the achievement gaps between ELs and their peers (Oliveira et al., 2015; Viesca et al., 2019).

For many teachers, however, it is not easy to separate the academic and linguistic demands of a given lesson. In the lived, everyday experience of the classroom, teachers tend to hold a single, holistic impression of a given student, rather than keeping track of the ways in which their academic skills do or do not match up with their linguistic skills. Unfortunately, though, to view students as one-dimensional is to place them along a single continuum of achievement, such that students at one end are viewed as underperforming and in need of less rigorous curriculum.

### ***Professional development***

To get teachers to provide rigorous academic instruction to ELs, it may be tempting just to urge them, directly, to rethink their beliefs. But there's little to be gained by simply telling teachers

what to think; typically, they'll nod their heads in agreement, then revert to form (Decker, Kunter, & Voss, 2015; Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000).

And there is reason to suspect that teachers' beliefs about ELs may be especially resistant to change, given the student populations typically classified as EL. Although the EL population encompasses numerous languages and ethnicities, the largest subgroup, by far, consists of Latinx students whose home language is Spanish. As such, the challenges involved in changing beliefs about education for ELs likely overlaps with the challenges of confronting racial bias against Latinx students. Unfortunately, a considerable body of literature underscores how pervasive and resistant to change such biases tend to be (Gay, 2015; Reicher, 2004). Moreover, factors that might be expected to have an influence on teachers' capacity to change their beliefs — including teachers' age, gender, teaching experience, educational attainment, teacher certifications, and subjects taught — typically have little or no effect (Torff, 2005). Accordingly, the beliefs of preservice teachers and 30-year veterans tend to be similar.

But while the education literature is silent on how best to change teachers' beliefs concerning rigorous instruction for ELs, the broader body of work on teachers' belief change — which tends to focus on *reflective thinking* — may be helpful. This includes strategies such as encouraging teachers to identify precisely what they believe, where these beliefs came from, and how they are manifested in curricular planning and classroom instruction (Ghaye, 2010; Zeichner & Liston, 2014). Four sets of reflectively oriented teacher education interventions seem relevant:

First, teachers can be encouraged to reflect on their existing beliefs and personal histories concerning rigor of instruction for ELs by responding, either verbally or in writing, to specially crafted questions or assignments. Some teacher educators advocate interview processes and/or class discussions to induce reflection (e.g., Hollingsworth & Clarke, 2017; Moyer & Milewicz, 2002). Others ask novice and veteran teachers to write journal entries or response papers (sometimes in response to specific questions and sometimes in an unrestricted format) or compile a portfolio (Bain et al., 2002). These reflective vehicles can incorporate carefully targeted questions: Should ELs be made to engage in a debate (a rigorous, language-rich

activity)? Why or why not? What is likely to happen if these learners engage in such an activity? How are students' language skills related to their debate performance, and what does that mean for their content learning? Such questions ask teachers to ponder what they believe, produce a rationale for their beliefs, and possibly consider revising them.

Second, teachers can be asked to reflect on specific cases that prompt them to see how their beliefs might inform their action (Trundle, Atwood, & Christopher, 2002). It can be fruitful to include some models of impoverished practice among the examples — as long as the teachers are guided to figure out what's poor about them and what to do better. Hence, teachers might read descriptions or view videos of classroom practices in which ELs are given low-rigor curriculum and then answer a series of questions: Why did some ELs struggle to answer the biology essay question? Can they be expected to succeed in such tasks? Why? How is language-use a factor here? How is student performance attributable to students' language skills, and how is it attributable to their level of biology knowledge? As with interviews and journals, case-based questions require teachers to reflect on their beliefs and determine whether changes to these beliefs are warranted.

The third technique is actually a variation of the second. Teachers can be asked to analyze and reflect on samples of particularly rigorous and effective EL instruction. How, they might ask, have these educators succeeded in engaging students with limited English proficiency in complex, content-rich lessons? What do students appear to gain from this? Providing models of such classroom practices can push teachers to rethink core assumptions about students' abilities. Videos of expert teachers may be helpful in this regard, as might be field placements (prior to student teaching) in which thoughtfully selected expert teachers demonstrate successful lessons using rigorous methods with ELs.

Fourth, teachers can be asked to create their own rigorous activities and units for use with ELs. Instructional planning has been explored as a way to teach concepts in teacher education (Baylor, 2002). Once such plans are implemented in the classroom, teachers can engage in *reflective practice* — systematic inquiry into their classroom work with the goal of improving their

practice (e.g., Artzt et al., 2015; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2005). Taken together, these various reflective vehicles raise the likelihood of teacher buy-in, without which few professional development initiatives can succeed (Archibald et al., 2011; Hill, 2009).

### **Toward academic rigor for all**

Our research suggests that teachers' beliefs, however well-intended, likely result in less rigorous curriculum for ELs, which likely contributes to EL achievement gaps. Perhaps by making a sharper distinction between academic and linguistic skills teachers will be able to rethink their beliefs about appropriate education for ELs. Preservice and in-service teacher education initiatives that are informed by what's known about belief change in general, belief change among teachers, and teachers' specific beliefs about education for ELs can go a long way in helping teachers make this shift.

But will this be enough? If teachers' low academic expectations of ELs are rooted at least partly in ethnic/racial bias, will it be sufficient to encourage them to distinguish between academic and linguistic demands, or will more need to be done? Whatever it takes, teachers need to set high academic expectations for students with developing English skills so that the academically rich do not continue to get richer and the poor poorer, purely on the basis of English proficiency.

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