



## STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS AFFECTING COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS IN THE US EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### **Abstract:**

The ability to use English effectively has become a critical factor for success in the modern American economy. For English language learners (ELLs), academic achievement requires more than conversational fluency; it involves acquiring advanced literacy and communication skills that allow them to engage with rigorous content, develop higher-order thinking, and participate in collaborative learning environments. The objective of this research is to examine the challenges and opportunities facing ELLs in meeting college- and career-ready standards while exploring instructional strategies that enhance their academic success. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how teachers can leverage students' cultural and linguistic resources to support both content mastery and language development across subject areas. The methodology applied in this research draws upon a qualitative review of existing standards, instructional models, and theoretical frameworks. Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital serves as a guiding lens for analyzing how students' prior knowledge, cultural background, and linguistic assets can be mobilized as strengths in the classroom. State-level standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and other disciplines were examined to identify the advanced competencies required for student progression. In addition, instructional practices such as scaffolding, sheltered instruction, and dual immersion were analyzed to determine how they address the dual challenge of language acquisition and academic content learning. Findings emphasize that teachers play a pivotal role in identifying the language demands of academic tasks and providing targeted supports. Effective strategies include scaffolding content, organizing peer interactions, and intentionally linking instruction to students' native language skills and cultural experiences. The study underscores that states must ensure alignment among curriculum, assessment, and professional development to sustain equitable opportunities for ELLs. By integrating cultural capital into instruction, educators can foster independence, critical thinking, and readiness for postsecondary success.

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## 1. Introduction

All students in the United States require proficiency in English to fully access academic opportunities and succeed in today's economy. English language learners (ELLs) must meet the same rigorous expectations as their peers while navigating additional linguistic and cultural challenges. This dual burden requires educators, policymakers, and institutions to create systems that provide scaffolding, equitable access, and pathways to higher education and career readiness. The objective of this study is to analyze the structural, pedagogical, and sociocultural systems that affect ELLs' academic success and to propose strategies for strengthening their readiness for postsecondary opportunities.

## 2. Literature Review

The authors' approach to understanding the role of English Language Learners (ELLs) in higher education (IHE) and the strategies for enhancing instructional effectiveness across disciplines is guided by several key theories. These frameworks collectively provide insight into how cultural, institutional, and cognitive systems shape ELLs' academic success. At the same time, a review of these theories and related studies reveals important gaps that justify further investigation and highlight the significance of this research.

### 2.1 Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital

Among the three types of cultural capital identified by Bourdieu (1986)—institutionalized, embodied, and objectified—the institutionalized form is most relevant to this review. This form emphasizes how higher education provides ELLs with opportunities for upward mobility. The cultural capital gained through a college degree can significantly influence ELLs' futures. However, before this is possible, students must first learn the “rules of the game,” a responsibility that often falls to PreK–12 educators such as teachers and guidance counselors, and within higher education, professors and advisors.

Another important form of cultural capital in this context is embodied cultural capital, specifically linguistic capital, which is crucial for ELLs. While often unstable, linguistic capital remains essential for educational success. Existing studies show that ELLs with stronger linguistic capital are better able to access academic content, but research also reveals a gap: limited attention has been given to how schools intentionally cultivate linguistic capital beyond basic proficiency. This gap underscores the need to examine how educators can systematically strengthen both academic language and

discipline-specific communication skills to support long-term college and career readiness.

## **2.2 Actor-Network Theory**

For ELLs, an additional layer of complexity arises at the institutional level, stemming from entrenched power dynamics that are deeply woven into the fabric of American education. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a framework for analyzing these dynamics, particularly by highlighting the “non-human” elements and institutional structures that often reinforce the barriers ELLs face in accessing, participating in, and persisting within higher education (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Latour, 2007). ANT allows for an exploration of the interaction between human and non-human networks—such as policies, curricula, assessments, and digital tools—that can either hinder or facilitate ELLs’ pursuit of academic goals.

Although ANT has been applied in broader educational contexts, there remains a gap in its specific application to multilingual learners. Few studies have systematically investigated how these networks shape the educational trajectories of ELLs, especially within the intersection of policy, instructional design, and technology integration. This highlights the importance of the present research in filling a critical void by examining how interconnected systems influence college and career readiness for multilingual learners.

## **2.3 Zone of Proximal Development**

Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the optimal area for student learning where the teacher provides scaffolded support. Outside of this zone, academic progress is limited: students may feel bored and stagnant when the work is not challenging enough, or they may experience frustration when tasks are too difficult. Scaffolding refers to the support system provided by the teacher, which is gradually withdrawn as the student gains independence.

Scaffolding instructional strategies is particularly critical for ELLs. Gibbons (2009) emphasized the importance of pairing intellectually challenging instruction with appropriate scaffolding. Studies consistently demonstrate that ELLs who receive both high levels of challenge and scaffolded support from their teachers show the greatest academic growth. Yet, despite these findings, there remains a gap in research regarding how scaffolding is systematically implemented across subject areas, especially in ways that integrate both language and content learning. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing strategies that ensure ELLs are not only able to access content but also develop critical thinking and academic independence.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative synthesis approach to examine the structures and systems influencing the college and career readiness of English Language Learners (ELLs). The research process was carried out in several phases to ensure rigor and depth of analysis.

First, a comprehensive review of documents was conducted. Policy reports, state and federal education frameworks, and institutional guidelines were examined to understand how educational standards addressed the dual requirements of content mastery and language acquisition. Key policy sources included the National Research Council (NRC) framework, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and state-level English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards.

Second, a systematic analysis of peer-reviewed studies was undertaken to identify existing research on ELL instruction, teacher preparation, and college readiness. Recent scholarship on Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), culturally responsive pedagogy, and professional development models was emphasized, as these represent evolving approaches to improving outcomes for multilingual learners.

Third, all materials were coded and organized thematically. This process highlighted recurring issues and systemic patterns that either supported or constrained ELLs' educational progression. Prominent themes included language support structures, teacher professional development, institutional systems, family and community engagement, and access to technology.

The analysis emphasized the identification of patterns and conceptual linkages, rather than quantifying frequency. Each theme was interpreted through the guiding theoretical lenses of Bourdieu's Cultural Capital, Actor-Network Theory, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which provided a layered understanding of sociocultural, institutional, and instructional dimensions affecting ELLs' college and career preparedness.

#### 3.1 Limitations of the Study

Despite its strengths, the study faced several limitations. It was based exclusively on secondary data, drawing on published policies, official frameworks, and scholarly literature. As such, it did not incorporate primary data collection methods such as interviews, surveys, or classroom observations, which could have provided direct insight into the lived experiences of ELLs and educators.

Additionally, the scope of analysis was influenced by the availability of published studies, which may not fully capture regional variations or the realities of underrepresented educational contexts. These limitations restrict the generalizability of findings but do not diminish the value of the synthesis, which provides a consolidated foundation for identifying gaps and guiding future inquiry.

### **3.2 Ethical Considerations**

Since the study relied entirely on secondary sources, no direct interaction with human participants took place. Consequently, issues related to consent, confidentiality, or institutional review were not applicable. Nevertheless, all documents and studies were reviewed and cited responsibly, ensuring academic integrity and acknowledgment of intellectual contributions. Ethical rigor was maintained by adhering to accepted scholarly standards, including accurate citation practices and transparent reporting of findings.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

The synthesis highlights six major structures and systems influencing ELL college and career readiness:

### **4.1 Language Support System**

The creators of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) recognized the essential links between language, literacy, and content learning. They designed English Language Arts (ELA) standards for grades six through twelve that integrate language skills within specific subjects—mathematics, social studies, and science. These standards outline the necessary speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities required for literacy in the twenty-first century. The ability to understand and use language for academic purposes is crucial, not just in the classroom and workplace, but also in fostering responsible citizenship and developing a global outlook (National Governors Association Center, 2021).

Students are expected to engage with informational texts, support their writing and research with evidence, and collaborate to present ideas and communicate diverse viewpoints. As they progress through school, students must navigate increasingly complex layers of language and concepts to gain subject-specific knowledge. To meet these expectations, students must apply the language and conventions appropriate to each academic discipline. For instance, the math standards require students to build sound arguments and evaluate others' reasoning. In mathematics, arguments rely on the precise use of specialized expressions that go beyond everyday language (Council of Chief State School Officers & the English Language Proficiency/Development Framework Committee, 2022).

The integration of ELA standards into each content area raises expectations for students to use language to explain concepts and relationships, which become more abstract as they advance through their education (Challenges and Opportunities for Language Learning in the Context of Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards, 2021).

### **4.2 Support Systems for Academic Success**

The National Research Council's (NRC) Framework for K–12 Science Education outlines eight inquiry-based practices in science and engineering, which are aligned with

language-driven performance expectations in the English Language Arts (ELA) standards (National Research Council, 2022). These inquiry methods prioritize understanding through active engagement, rather than focusing solely on broad content coverage or the recall of isolated facts. Language plays a central role in these inquiry practices. The new science standards' content, performance, and language requirements will present challenges for all students, and particularly for those with limited English proficiency. To support English learners, curricula must be thoughtfully designed, incorporating evidence-based strategies and language-focused instruction to make both content and language more accessible.

To construct well-supported arguments based on claims and evidence, students must grasp and apply technical vocabulary specific to each scientific field. Terms like "force" and "energy," for example, have specialized meanings in science that differ from their everyday usage. Additionally, science texts use distinctive structures to communicate information more succinctly and accurately. Readers encounter dense phrasing, complex ideas condensed into shorter sentences, and various representations such as graphs, charts, tables, maps, and equations. Developing a solid understanding of scientific concepts and precise language use will require intentional activities that highlight how language is used to convey scientific knowledge (Understanding Language, 2023).

#### **4.3 Teacher Professional Development**

Teacher professional development refers to the ongoing process through which educators enhance their teaching skills and knowledge to improve student outcomes. For ELLs, PD often includes training on language acquisition, instructional strategies, cultural responsiveness, and differentiation techniques. Professional development for teachers has the potential to create substantial improvements in ELLs' academic performance, particularly in terms of language acquisition, content knowledge, and academic literacy, all of which are crucial for college and career success.

Research shows that teacher PD focused on language development can have a direct impact on ELLs' college and career readiness. Teachers who are trained in recognizing the unique challenges ELLs face and who are equipped with evidence-based instructional strategies can help these students overcome barriers to academic success. For example, PD programs that integrate language and content instruction (e.g., sheltered instruction or content-based ESL) have been shown to improve ELLs' ability to engage with complex academic texts, participate in critical thinking exercises, and demonstrate academic language proficiency (Gibbons, 2019).

Effective PD for teachers of ELLs emphasizes the integration of language development with content instruction. According to the National Professional Development Project (2023), teachers who receive targeted training on integrating language instruction with subject-specific content are better able to scaffold academic language for ELLs. This approach helps students not only acquire English proficiency but

also master subject matter content, which is essential for success in higher education and future careers.

#### **4.4 School and Community Engagement**

Over the past decade, many secondary schools have focused their efforts on pushing just a few more students over a low, fixed bar on state tests, resulting in a system that reinforced ineffective teaching methods. This approach led to low-level tasks and minimal meaningful interaction between teachers and students, which contributed to students' increasing disengagement after grade five (Pianta, 2020).

A 2021 survey exploring why students dropped out of school found that 70 percent of students cited disengagement from their classes as a primary reason (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Burke, 2022). Students, particularly English Language Learners (ELLs), who struggle to understand the language of instruction, often become disengaged more quickly than their non-ELL peers. The shift towards college- and career-ready standards presents an opportunity to rethink the core instruction in high school classrooms that has left many students, including ELLs, struggling to reach grade-level performance. To address this, strong leadership and vision are needed to create conditions where educators can develop a deep understanding of content and instructional strategies necessary to meet these standards. As the National Research Council (2021) observes, "*Learning science is something that students do, not something that is done to them.*"

#### **4.5 Social and Cultural Factors**

There is universal teacher characteristics considered critical by most groups. These include proficiency in speaking and reading, the ability to motivate students to learn English, and the capacity to build students' self-confidence. However, some characteristics are specific to groups (Park & Lee, 2021).

A variety of obstacles hinder the progress of reading and writing in English as a foreign language, making it challenging for students to learn English effectively. According to Cummins, the grammar translation method (GTM) is particularly problematic for English learners, as it encourages imitation of the language rather than using cognitive processes to understand words and sentences. Many English language learners approach writing in a traditional manner, focusing on rules, regulations, and rigid structures (Abbas, Aslam, Abdul Majid Khan, 2021). Contextual factors such as religious practices, socio-cultural traditions, and educational backgrounds play a significant role in how second language (L2) learners perceive the language.

#### **4.6 Access to Technology and Resources**

Technology has significantly transformed the teaching of English language skills, especially with the advent of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), online resources, multimedia materials, language learning apps, and virtual learning environments. These technologies provide students with unique opportunities to engage

with the language in interactive and immersive ways, offering personalized and self-paced learning experiences. Additionally, they provide teachers with innovative tools for creating dynamic lessons, encouraging collaborative learning, and effectively assessing students' progress.

The role of information technology (IT) in English language teaching (ELT) has been widely recognized as a valuable resource. Li and Ni (2020) argue that technology in language instruction enables students to learn independently, engage in communication, and gain authentic language experiences. Similarly, Warschauer and Healey (2011) suggest that multimedia materials, online platforms, and CALL software support the development of various language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Integrating information technology in the classroom enhances language learning opportunities by transcending the traditional classroom setting. Digital tools and resources such as multimedia presentations, online language platforms, and language learning software provide students with authentic, immersive experiences (Liu, 2023). These technologies allow learners to interact with native speakers and practice their language skills in real-life scenarios, improving both language proficiency and cultural awareness (Gao *et al.*, 2022).

Studies have also shown that IT in the classroom increases student motivation and engagement. Chen and Wang (2022) found that online discussion boards and virtual collaboration tools enabled students to participate actively and express their ideas more openly. Gamification strategies and mobile learning apps further capture students' attention and promote independent learning (Sullivan, 2018). Integrating IT creates a classroom environment tailored to students' needs, boosting engagement and active participation.

The integration of information technology also supports the development of a wide range of language skills. CALL applications offer interactive exercises, simulations, and multimedia content that address different language areas such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Wu *et al.*, 2020). Brett (2024) highlights how digital technologies provide immediate feedback, allowing learners to self-assess their language production, pinpoint areas for improvement, and engage in self-directed learning.

Smith and Johnson (2024) found that multimedia resources like interactive movies and online simulations helped students better understand and retain English vocabulary and grammar. Likewise, Wang and Chen (2016) observed that CALL software enhanced college students' writing skills. These studies suggest that IT integration provides engaging and interactive learning experiences, contributing to improved English language proficiency.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

Findings suggest that ELLs face systemic inequities rooted in institutional structures, instructional practices, and socio-cultural contexts. While states have adopted standards



to promote readiness, gaps in teacher preparation, access to resources, and cultural responsiveness persist. Actor-Network Theory illustrates how non-human actors—standards, assessments, digital platforms—mediate ELL experiences, while ZPD highlights the role of scaffolded support in moving learners toward independence. Bourdieu's framework explains how institutionalized cultural capital (college degrees) remains inaccessible without addressing embodied linguistic capital. Together, these frameworks underscore the need for systemic, multi-level interventions.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **6.1 Conclusion**

States are heavily involved in implementing college- and career-ready standards for English Language Arts (ELA), along with creating aligned assessments. These standards specify the advanced language skills students must develop in each academic subject. English language learners (ELLs) face a dual challenge: they need to acquire enough of a second language to participate and gain knowledge in an academic environment while simultaneously learning subject content in multiple disciplines through that second language. As such, it is crucial that states ensure their English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards help ELLs meet these college- and career-ready goals. Once the Next Generation Science Standards are finalized, states will also need to incorporate the language demands of science into their ELP standards. To align with the state's college- and career-ready standards, ELP standards must be thoroughly evaluated to ensure they support ELLs in accessing grade-level content while building their language proficiency.

### **6.2 Recommendations**

#### **6.2.1 Classroom Level**

Teachers must be equipped to understand the language demands of specific tasks and employ various language-support strategies throughout instruction. They need to develop a strong understanding of the vocabulary and language functions specific to their content area, creating multiple opportunities for students to use language in different contexts. The focus of language instruction within content-area learning should emphasize discipline-specific concepts rather than solely focusing on grammar and syntax.

When grouping students and structuring tasks, teachers should evaluate students' language proficiency and prior knowledge in relation to skill targets and progressions. This allows for flexible grouping, both homogeneous and heterogeneous, to support language proficiency, literacy skills, and prior knowledge. Teachers must break down complex tasks into manageable parts, foster productive discussions, give meaningful feedback, and model language production. Support for students' close reading of complex texts should include extensive pre-reading activities that activate English learners' background knowledge. Throughout and after reading, students should have

multiple opportunities to engage in collaborative sense-making with peers and teachers, helping them access the concepts, vocabulary, and ideas within the text.

Furthermore, teachers need a range of strategies to bridge students' native language knowledge, cultural assets, prior knowledge, and develop English proficiency in an academic context. Instruction should be scaffolded, meaning that content, tasks, and support from teachers and peers are systematically structured to help students gradually gain independence in applying new skills and strategies. These practices are applicable across various delivery models for ELLs, such as sheltered instruction, dual immersion, transitional bilingual education, ESL, and general education classrooms.

## **6.2.2 State-Level**

### **6.2.2.1 College and Career Readiness**

States must ensure the effective implementation of college- and career-ready standards by aligning curricula, assessments, and professional development with these standards. In addition, states should create and adopt English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards that address the language demands inherent in the college- and career-ready frameworks.

### **6.2.2.2 Alignment of ELP Standards**

States should leverage the Council of Chief State School Officers' English Language Proficiency Development Framework to align or develop ELP standards that reflect the language demands of the Common Core State Standards and the upcoming Next Generation Science Standards. These state ELP standards must identify the essential language practices that English Language Learners (ELLs) need to master in the content areas covered by the standards. The ELP standards should help both ESL and content-area teachers assess students' language skills, tailor instruction accordingly, and closely track ELLs' progress.

States should adopt a unified definition of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and establish consistent criteria for identifying these learners and monitoring their performance. This includes assessments that measure both English language development and content knowledge aligned with the standards. These assessments, which should be developed in collaboration with initiatives like the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, must accurately measure the language demands embedded in the standards.

### **6.2.2.3 Supporting Flexible Pathways for ELLs**

States should offer flexible pathways that allow ELLs to transition successfully from language development programs to mainstream curricula. English learners benefit from a variety of program options that support language acquisition while providing access to a college- and career-ready academic curriculum. Expectations for ELLs should go beyond simply achieving English proficiency and should include opportunities to engage in challenging academic courses alongside their non-ELL peers, thereby reducing linguistic isolation. Programs that provide access to college-ready opportunities,

including dual credit programs where students can earn both high school and college-level credits, significantly increase the likelihood of college enrollment.

#### **6.2.2.4 Teacher Effectiveness**

States should enhance teacher preparation programs, both traditional university-based and alternative programs by incorporating extensive clinical experiences and developing curricula specifically aimed at preparing teachers to work with English Language Learners (ELLs). Program design and certification requirements should ensure teachers are equipped to address both the content and academic language needs of ELLs.

States should guarantee that ELLs have equitable access to high-quality instruction by mandating that teachers working with ELLs are fully certified. This includes ensuring that content-area teachers possess the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively teach their subject areas to English learners.

Substantial improvements are needed to strengthen the preparation, coaching, and ongoing professional development for teachers of ELLs. Teacher performance assessments and evaluation systems should focus on educators' ability to use evidence-based practices to support ELLs' academic language and content learning. District and school leaders should cultivate a collaborative culture focused on high-impact, research-driven instructional strategies and practices for ELLs.

#### **6.2.2.5 Use of Data**

States should strengthen systems that allow schools to access and analyze data related to ELLs' academic performance and progress. In addition to accountability measures for language proficiency and content-area achievement, states, districts, and schools should build educators' capacity to use a variety of data sources (such as formative, diagnostic, and early warning indicators) to inform classroom instruction and guide interventions. Diagnostic and formative assessment practices help teachers track student progress and plan the next steps for language development and academic growth.

States, districts, and schools should implement longitudinal data systems to monitor the academic performance and outcomes of both current and former ELLs. This tracking should include, but not be limited to:

#### **5.2.2.6 Support Systems**

Students should be provided with the academic and social support needed to succeed, including personalized instruction, targeted interventions to address specific ELL needs, opportunities for extended learning, credit recovery options, and pathways to college awareness and career development.

Stakeholder resources should be maximized through coordination and collaboration with other schools (including feeder schools), partnerships with higher education institutions, community-based organizations, and industry. Additionally, families and communities should be actively engaged in the planning, development, and implementation of programs and support systems for ELLs.

States should establish a state or multi-state clearinghouse for best practices in supporting ELLs, where districts can access successful strategies, lessons learned, new research, and resources. Federal resources such as the National Clearinghouse for Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs and the What Works Clearinghouse: English Language Learners can provide valuable insights on effective models, interventions, and strategies.

#### **6.2.2.7 Curriculum and Instruction Design**

Curriculum developers, content-area teachers, and English language specialists must work collaboratively to design curricula and instructional strategies that ensure the language of science is accessible to ELLs. At the same time, these strategies should focus on enhancing ELLs' proficiency in using scientific language.

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#### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

#### **About the Author**

Francisca Nambiro is an accomplished educator with extensive experience in teaching and advocating for multilingual learners and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. She holds a Bachelor of Education in Arts (English and Literature) from Egerton University, Kenya, and a Master of Arts degree in project planning and management from the University of Nairobi, Kenya. Her professional career spans both Kenyan and U.S. education systems. She has taught at Light Academy, Munyu High School in Kenya and at Muller Road Middle School in Columbia, South Carolina, USA,

where she has been instrumental in promoting inclusive and equitable classroom practices. Her teaching philosophy emphasizes the integration of language development with content mastery, enabling multilingual learners to thrive academically while strengthening their linguistic confidence. Francisca has also earned a graduate certification in Gifted and Talented Education from the College of Charleston, USA. In addition, she holds an endorsement in teaching Multilingual Learners, gained through specialized training in Ellevation, which has enhanced her ability to design instructional strategies tailored to diverse language needs. Recognized for her leadership, advocacy, and innovation in multilingual education, Francisca continues to develop evidence-based practices that empower learners to succeed across academic disciplines. Her work reflects a deep commitment to equity, cultural responsiveness, and expanding opportunities for multilingual students in today's global learning environment.

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