

## **Eradicating Learned Passivity: Preventing ELs from Becoming Long Term English Learners**

**By Elizabeth Jiménez Salinas**

### **Introduction**

In an era of data driven decision making, administrators need to be clear that data is not the same thing as information. Data is only turned into information by applying our observations and asking questions.

English Learner (EL) data is collected nationally on the number and percentage of ELs by grade level, by language, and those reclassified to fluent English proficient. Systematically overlooked is longitudinal data showing the length of time each EL remains at each proficiency level. This has obscured a significant group of ELs who enter US schools in kindergarten, but whose English acquisition progress becomes static, where they languish in and around the intermediate proficiency level.

Anecdotally, many EL educators noticed this trend and discussed it, sometimes referring to these students as “Forever LEP, and ESL Lifers”, but specific data was not available, leaving the scope of the Long Term English Learner phenomenon unclear. The category Long Term English Learner (LTEL) came about because of the observations of EL educators asking questions about what the data didn’t reveal.

Researcher Dr. Jim Cummins, describes that it takes from 5-7 years to acquire the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) of a new language. Cummins states that while many children develop native-like conversational fluency within two years of immersion in the target language, it takes between 5-7 years for a child to be working on a level with native speakers as far as academic language is concerned.

## **What is a Long Term English Learner (LTEL)?**

In 2012, California adopted an official definition of Long Term English Learners. This small but significant step was instituted to identify this group and to further study the causes of their stalled progress, what works to prevent them from getting stuck, and what is effective in accelerating their success.

### **Statutory Definitions**

**Long Term English Learner** means an English learner who is enrolled in any of grades 6 to 12, inclusive, has been enrolled in schools in the United States for more than six years, has remained at the same English language proficiency level for two or more consecutive years

**English learner at risk of becoming a long-term English learner** means an English learner who is enrolled in any of grades 5 to 11, inclusive, in schools in the United States for four years, scores at the intermediate level or below on the English language development test

## **How can Long Term status be prevented or reversed?**

In the 2010 study *Reparable Harm* ([www.californianstogether.org](http://www.californianstogether.org)) Dr. Laurie Olsen explores a number of systemic causes of LTELs which must be remedied at the systems level such as limited access to the full curriculum, LTELs being over-assigned to and inadequately served in intervention and reading support, incorrect placement in Newcomer classes, and inappropriate placement in the mainstream without a specialized program. The study also discusses one contributing cause

that can be remedied in the classroom; the characteristic of Learned Passivity.

### **Unlearning Learned Passivity**

Passivity is defined as the trait of remaining inactive; a lack of initiative. *Learned Passivity* is a learned behavior which can be prevented or unlearned through intentional, active engagement. The study examines how and why LTELs acquire this learned behavior and how we can prevent it from developing in young ELs and reduce the incidence of Learned Passivity secondary English Learners.

A key remedy is to increase the engagement expectation so students aren't reinforced to avoid participation and teachers can gather an accurate picture of student comprehension. Several critical techniques for engaging English Learners are (1) providing primary language support, including through technology where students can preview the content of a lesson, or learn new material in English using interactive that scaffolds through visuals, toggles to the primary language, and provides plenty of patient repetition. (2) Designing response routines that support total participation such as individual white boards, paired discussion using sentence frames, and structured cooperative groups. (3) Teaching self-advocacy skills such as initiating a request for a classmate to speak louder or repeat an idea, and teaching students to build on what other students contribute rather than just listening, as a few respond.

### **Eliminate Toxic Questions**

Traditional American classrooms share some long-engrained practices, traditions and routines that are culturally embedded and accepted. One is the expectation of individual responses to a set of traditional questions which tend to discourage participation. Replacing these toxic questions

with healthy alternatives starting in the early grades, is an excellent prescription for eradicating Learned Passivity.

### Three Toxic Questions

1. Who can tell me something about today's topic?
2. Are there any questions?
3. Do you all understand?

#### **1. Who can tell me something about today's topic?**

This question is often used to begin a new topic. Starting in elementary school, students quickly figure out that the teacher has a specific answer in mind, and is really eliciting that response. English Learners may hesitate while processing language to find the right words to answer. Other students may answer first, reinforcing a sense of “why bother”. Over time, frustrated ELs learn to passively wait while others jump in.

Teachers report that when they ask, “Who can tell me \_\_? few students raise their hands. Learned Passivity is unintentionally reinforced when enthusiastic students offer an answer that is not exactly on point, to which the teacher acknowledges the attempt, (“well, that’s interesting”) but then selects another student to answer. The student with the “interesting” answer quickly realizes that they did not guess the response the teacher was looking for. Early on this hesitation is repeatedly reinforced. Students who are unsure of their answer decide it is better to wait than take a chance.

Learned Passivity greatly increases when no one raises their hand and the teacher proceeds to give the answer anyway, reinforcing that there is no accountability for non-participation. Redirecting the class to quickly

jot down their thoughts or share with a partner, can break the self-imposed silence and reduce passivity.

### **The Healthy Alternative**

When teachers ask, “who can tell me...” they are eliciting prior knowledge which is a solid strategy for differentiating instruction, but the question itself is limiting. “Who can tell me” implies that only one person should answer.

The healthy alternative reformulates the question and engages students in teams or partner discussion with, “What comes to your mind when you think of [the topic]?” The teacher can circulate to assess accurately their prior knowledge. In pairs, students may be less reluctant to answer.

In one second grade classroom the teacher asked, “Who can tell me something about fossils?” One student sheepishly volunteered, “is it a watch?” The class erupted in laughter, causing him to retreat. By slightly altering the question to “What comes to your mind when you think of fossils?”, then directing students to pair/share, anxiety might have been reduced and wider participation achieved, allowing her to quickly assess their background knowledge. Additionally, the student who mentioned the watch, would not have been “incorrect”.

### **2. Are there any questions?**

This toxic question, is one used in a variety of settings – classrooms, staff meetings, etc. This yes/no question subtly implies that if students had been paying attention, there wouldn’t be any questions. A more inviting alternative is, “What kinds of questions do you have?” which conveys the assumption there are questions and invites them to be asked. Providing wait time, and not looking directly at the class, allows students to think about what they need to ask. If there are still no

questions, teachers can ignite engagement by challenging pairs to formulate a question they think someone else in the class might have.

### **3. Does everyone understand?**

The typical answer to this toxic question, is an affirmative head nod which causes some ELs to look around and potentially self-criticize (“Everyone else seems to get it but I don’t understand what the teacher is talking about. They must be smarter.”). The healthy alternative is for students to demonstrate, write about or tell what they understand. They can explain to a partner, or answer on a white board, exit ticket, draw an illustration or diagram, or show their level of understanding using fist of five, or other signal.

#### Healthy Alternatives to Toxic Questions

1. What comes to your mind when you think of \_\_\_\_\_?
  - a) What made you think of that?
  - b) What strategies did you use to arrive at those answers?
2. What kinds of questions do you have?
3. Show me (tell me, describe in writing,) what you understand.

### **Eliminating toxic questions and eradicating Learned Passivity**

Increasing active, class-wide engagement and comprehensibility is critical to stem the development of LTELs. Eliminating toxic questions, using interactive technology with primary language support, and consistently increasing accountable talk are critical for eradicating Learned Passivity, reducing the creation of Long Term English Learners and effective implementation of the Common Core with English Learners.

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