



ERADICATING LEARNED PASSIVITY: PREVENTING THE FORMATION OF LONG-TERM ENGLISH LEARNERS

By **Elizabeth Jiménez**

Introduction

English Learner (EL) data is collected nationally on the number and percentage of ELs by grade level, 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 stagnates, and they languish in 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 (LTEL) phenomenon unclear. The LTEL is receiving attention today due to the keen observations of EL educators probing for what the data didn’t reveal.

Researcher Dr. Jim Cummins suggests that it takes 5–7 years to acquire the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) of a new language. So, even though many children develop native-like conversational fluency within two years of immersion in the target language, 5–7 years are required 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 further study the causes of their stalled progress, including what works to prevent them from getting stuck and what is effective in accelerating their success.

Statutory Definitions in California

“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), 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.”

Reversing 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 development of the trait can be prevented in young ELs and the incidence reduced in secondary ELs.

A key remedy is to increase the engagement expectation so students are anxious to participate and teachers can gather an accurate picture of student comprehension. There are several critical techniques for engaging ELs. (1) Provide primary language support, including the use of technology to preview a lesson or learn new material in English; the use of interactive scaffolds through visuals; toggles to the primary language; and lots of patient repetition. (2) Design response routines that support total participation, such as individual white boards, paired discussion using sentence frames, and structured cooperative groups. (3) Teach 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.

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?

Toxic Question #1: “Who can tell me something about [topic]?”

This question is often used to begin a new topic. Starting in elementary school, students quickly figure out that the teacher, who has a specific answer in mind, is really eliciting that response. ELs may hesitate while searching for the right words. Other students 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. The teacher acknowledges the attempt (“Well, that’s interesting”) but then selects another student to answer. The student with the “interesting” answer quickly realizes they did not guess the response the teacher was looking for. 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 a hand and the teacher proceeds to give the answer anyway, reinforcing the conclusion that there is no accountability for non-participation. Redirecting the class to quickly jot down thoughts or share with a partner can break the self-imposed silence and reduce passivity.

Healthy Alternative: “What comes to your mind when you think of [topic]?”

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. It implies that only one person should answer.

The healthy alternative—“What comes to your mind when you think of [topic]?”—reformulates the question and engages students in teams or partner discussion. The teacher can circulate to accurately assess students’ 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?” and directing students to pair/share, anxiety may have been reduced and wider participation achieved, allowing the teacher to quickly assess the students’ background knowledge. Additionally, the student who mentioned the watch would not have been incorrect.

Toxic Question #2: “Are there any questions?”

This toxic question is one used in a variety of settings: classrooms, staff meetings, etc. It subtly implies that if students had been paying attention, there wouldn’t be any questions.

Healthy Alternative: “What kinds of questions do you have?”

This alternative conveys the assumption that there are questions and they should 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.

Toxic Question #3: “Do you all 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 than I am.”)

Healthy Alternative: “Show me (tell me, describe for me) what you understand.”

The healthy alternative is for students to demonstrate, write about, or tell what they understand. They can explain to a partner, answer on a white board or exit ticket, draw an illustration or diagram, or show their level of understanding using “fist of five” or other signals.

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

If educators are to curtail the number of LTELs, they must increase active class-wide engagement and improve comprehensibility. 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 LTELs, and effectively implementing the Common Core with English Learners.

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