



## Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners

Researcher and ELL expert Jim Cummins has identified three keys to success in teaching students who are just learning English. Here's how technology can help.

In the Hartford Public Schools in Connecticut, the percentage of students who are English language learners “hovers around 18 percent of our overall population,” said Kelvin Roldan, chief communications and public policy officer for the district.

These 3,800 students come from very diverse backgrounds and speak more than 80 different languages.

“We obviously want to be responsive and deliver a high-quality education to every child in our district,” Roldan said. Yet the diversity of learners with a wide range of native languages and English proficiency levels makes this a complex task.

The programs that Hartford implements vary based on the structure of each school and the number of English language learners it serves.

“One of the misconceptions out there is that you can address the needs and the challenges of every single ELL student in the same manner,” Roldan said. But that’s not the case, he said, “because ELLs are not all the same.”

While Hartford has improved its methods of ELL instruction, “we found it necessary to come up with an innovative and technology-driven approach that would help us drive quality across the district,” Roldan said.

To do this, district leaders turned to Middlebury Interactive Languages, a company with a track record of success in delivering a blend of online and face-to-face instruction in world languages.

In collaboration with Hartford teachers and ELL coordinators, MIL developed a series of supplemental online modules for English language learners in the middle grades, and Hartford teachers are piloting the new content this year.

Using these modules, which are aligned with the Common Core, “will give our students the opportunity for academic discourse and to interact with more complex texts over time,” Roldan said. District leaders hope the modules will help accelerate the language acquisition process for their English language learners.

### The Challenge Facing Schools

Hartford isn't alone in facing a growing ELL challenge,



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—Aline Germain-Rutherford, Ph.D., Chief Academic Officer, Middlebury Interactive Languages

or in seeking creative solutions. Across the nation, an estimated 4.6 million students are learning English as a second language, making English language learners “the fastest-growing student population in our schools,” said Education Secretary Arne Duncan in a recent blog post.

It generally takes English language learners at least five years to catch up to native English speakers academically, said Jim Cummins, a University of Toronto professor and ELL expert. By contrast, basic conversational fluency typically occurs after two years.

Why does it take so long for English language learners to catch up academically? For one thing, “academic language is more complex and less accessible than conversational language,” he said. Academic language is marked by the presence of low-frequency words, and students “don’t find these words in conversation with their peers.” They encounter these words only in classrooms and in printed texts.

Also, native English speakers continue to develop their proficiency with academic English as students who are learning English are trying to catch up.

In essence, English language learners “have to run faster,” Cummins said, “because they’re trying to chase a moving target.”

Given the significant challenge facing schools, how can educators respond? Cummins describes three keys to success in teaching English language learners: (1) Ensuring from the first day of a child’s education that he or she has access to a variety of print resources and is engaged in literacy.

(2) Ensuring that all teachers are prepared to scaffold their instruction across the curriculum, supporting the vocabulary with visuals or demonstrations. This task

shouldn’t just fall to English teachers, Cummins said. “It’s the job of every teacher.”

(3) Ensuring there is a focus throughout the entire school on valuing students’ culture, background, and language. “If the lesson students get is they should leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door, that is not a very affirming message,” Cummins said, adding: “Are we constructing an image of their first language as an asset—or as a problem?” If it’s the latter, then schools are “devaluing their identity,” he said, which research has shown to be counterproductive to learning.

Across the nation, many schools are using ed-tech tools to support their teaching of English language learners by addressing these three keys to success. Here are some examples.

### Engaging Literacy

The Napa County Office of Education serves five K-12 districts in Napa County, California. More than 50 percent of the students in these districts are Latino, and many come from Spanish-speaking households, said Napa County Superintendent of Schools Barbara Nemko.

Napa County administrators were looking for a way to introduce these students to English at a very young age and encourage them to read, so they would be immersed in the language before they started school.

In 2011, they piloted the use of Footsteps2Brilliance, a digital platform for building early literacy skills, with a small group of preschool students.

The product features interactive books that can “read themselves” to children in English or Spanish, Nemko said. As the words are being said aloud, they are highlighted in red so children can learn to associate the written word with the sound they’re hearing. And

kids can click on pictures within the story to see animations that help bring the story to life.

The preschoolers “were so engaged” by the program, she said. “They took to it like ducks to water.”

The books can be used on any device, including smart phones and tablets, so children can access them at home—or even in line at the grocery store.

The results from the pilot program were “phenomenal,” Nemko said. As the children devoured the digital books, assessment data showed a 250-percent increase in their English language skills.

“That’s almost unheard of,” she said, adding that students are learning “hundreds of new words a day” by using the system—and “parents are learning more English and using more English with their kids as well.”

“We found it necessary to come up with an innovative and technology-driven approach that would help us drive quality across the district.”—Kelvin Roldan, Chief Communications & Public Policy Officer, Hartford Public Schools

After this initial success, Napa County partnered with a private, nonprofit foundation called Napa Learns to purchase a site license to the program, so all of the county’s parents would have access at no cost. In addition, all preschool teachers received iPads to use the program in their classes.

“To me, this is a game changer,” Nemko said. “It’s helping us close the achievement gap before students get to kindergarten.”

### Scaffolding Instruction

In Collier County, Florida, nearly 6,000 students—or about 14 percent of the total student population—are “active” English language learners, meaning they’re in the initial stages of English development, said Sandy Stockdale, coordinator of ELL and world language programs for the 44,000-student district.

Florida state law requires schools to educate their English language learners using an immersion model, so they are taught alongside their peers using the

same curriculum that all students receive, Stockdale said.

As a result, when district officials are evaluating products for use in their classrooms, “we look for tools that can support a wide range of students and their needs,” said Traci Kohler, director of instructional technology for the Collier County schools.

One of those tools is Discovery Education’s Science Techbook, an interactive digital textbook that incorporates virtual labs, audio and video clips, and other multimedia features designed to reach different learning styles.

Collier County is using the Science Techbook in its kindergarten through eighth-grade classes. The product includes a number of features that help scaffold instruction for English language learners.

For instance, an interactive glossary provides multi-modal definitions for more than 600 common science terms.

Students can learn these vocabulary words “not in isolation, but in context,” Kohler said, with the help of text, animations and video clips with audio support—including Spanish translations for native Spanish speakers.

The Science Techbook also includes Spanish-language versions of key content, including “Getting to Know” reading passages created for each concept.

What’s more, students can hear the text read aloud, and each word is highlighted as it is said. Visuals further help students make connections between the words and concepts.

The Science Techbook “encapsulates all of our students’ learning modalities,” Kohler said. The product’s supports for English language learners have contributed to significant learning gains for these students.

Fifth-grade ELL students whose teachers used the Science Techbook reportedly scored 14 points higher, on average, on the state’s science exam than ELL

students whose teachers did not use the Techbook as frequently—and English language learners were 66 percent more likely to score at a proficient or higher level in science as a result of using the product.

### Affirming Identity

In Hartford, district leaders were looking for a multimedia curriculum that could be used with English language learners in a blended learning environment to support their instruction in the core content areas. To develop this curriculum, they partnered with Middlebury Interactive Languages, which is now selling the content to schools nationwide.

The modules that MIL developed in partnership with Hartford educators are all project-based, said Aline Germain-Rutherford, Ph.D., chief learning officer for the company and a tenured linguistics professor at Middlebury College.

“We wanted to ensure that students were learning by doing,” she said. “And we’ve tried to scaffold the activities so they can adapt to students at different levels.”

The modules focus on helping students develop the academic English they’ll need to succeed in school. “This is where the coordination with teachers in Hartford was so important,” Germain-Rutherford said. “We looked at the type of texts that were used in the curriculum there, and we created activities to help students develop the skills to read those texts, to understand those texts, to be able to speak and to debate ideas from those texts, to be able to write academically around those texts.”

As Cummins noted, research suggests that English language learners have the most success when they see their own cultural identity affirmed and can relate their own experiences to the curriculum—and this idea is reflected in MIL’s new ELL modules as well.

As students progress through the modules, they are accompanied by a virtual companion who encourages them, suggests strategies, and offers support.

Students can choose their virtual companion from a range of ethnically diverse characters.

In addition, MIL has recorded English language learners from the Hartford schools as they introduce themselves and discuss the content.

“We use these videos to develop students’ listening comprehension skills,” Germain-Rutherford said, “but also as a way to show students their peers within the modules, people like them.”