Approximately one in six schoolchildren speaks a language other than English at home, and one in ten is born outside the U.S. Educating children from immigrant and ethnic-minority families is a major concern in school systems across the country. Too often, we have viewed these students only from the perspective of what they need to learn and from what they don’t have. We need to move from this needs, or deficit, approach to an asset-inventory approach. This new view argues for the respect and integration of students’ languages, values, beliefs, histories, and experiences. It argues for increased rigor and higher expectations—all supported by specialized instructional strategies. And it recognizes the active role that students must play in their own learning process.

English Language Learners Today

As we look at the students in our classrooms, we see a picture much different from the classrooms of our childhoods. According to the 2000 U.S. census, approximately one in three schoolchildren is from an ethnic or racial minority group, one in six speaks a language other than English at home, and one in ten is born outside the U.S. The linguistic and cultural diversity of the U.S. school population has increased dramatically during the past decade and will continue to increase. The concept of “minority group” will soon become obsolete, with no one group being a majority.

Educating children from immigrant and ethnic-minority families is a major concern in school systems across the country. Administrators, teachers, parents, and policymakers urge each other to do something different—change teaching methods, adopt new curricula, allocate more funding. Such actions might be needed, but they will not be meaningful until we think differently about English language learners.

A New View of English Language Learners

We are acutely aware that many English language learners come from families that are poor and non-English speaking. Too often, we have viewed these students only from the perspective of what they need to learn and from what they don’t have. We need to move from this needs, or deficit, approach to an asset-inventory approach. That is, we need to perceive students’ native language and culture as resources, or assets, instead of as problems. Students acquire language, culture, and accompanying values in the home and community environment and bring these assets with them to school.

In the past, when we have focused solely on the teaching of the English language, students received instruction to improve their English with the false understanding that learning English was all they needed. English language learners are capable and deserve the same access to the content standards as mainstream students.

These students do, however, need specialized instructional
strategies that will ensure both their access to the standards and their success in achieving those standards. Specialized strategies for English language learners include:

- an interactive environment in which students constantly communicate for authentic purposes
- frequent opportunities to share and connect their prior knowledge and experiences to their peers’ knowledge and to academic content
- multi-level activities and sheltering techniques to allow students at every level of English proficiency access to grade-level concepts and vocabulary
- assessment that tests students in the way they have been taught. That is, teachers assess student progress at benchmark proficiency levels—Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced—in order to see progress on academic standards even as students move through stages of language acquisition.

Developing an Asset Inventory

My wife, Erminda García, put this new view into practice in her third-grade classroom at Alianza Elementary School in Watsonville, California. At the beginning of the year, she asked students to consider this thematic study: “Three R’s: Resourcefulness, Responsibility, and Respect.” Students considered how they could become resourceful, responsible, and respectful in relationship to each other and to what they had to accomplish in the classroom.

Students’ languages were immediately identified as resources. Students then articulated the ways in which other resources (parents, family, books, computers, etc.) could be used to enhance their academic pursuits.

For example, Rigoberto came to Erminda’s classroom in September, after having arrived from Mexico in the last two months of the preceding academic year. A note in his file indicated a set of academic weaknesses. Erminda’s first set of inquiries addressed what Rigoberto brought as resources. She asked him to talk about himself, his family, his community, and his educational experiences orally with her and in an interactive journal using his languages.

This asset inventory allowed her to place Rigoberto in the best academic circumstances, so that he could serve as a resource to others, and to maximize the classroom resources that could be made available to him. That made him an immediate participant in his own and his peers’ education.

Knowing Rigoberto’s resource portfolio allowed Erminda to modify instruction in ways that would support his learning. She began moving him from his native language in his journal into comfortable and skilled writing in English. Knowing what he could do in one language gave her a set of possible instructional “avenues” that she could use to develop English expertise.

Promoting Interactive Learning

Erminda also structures her classroom for interactive learning. She organizes desks in ways that promote the sharing of students’ language resources: children sit in groups of four, with desks facing each other. Even in whole-group instruction, children are paired for interactive response. During instruction, students select from resource materials in English and native languages, often using each other for assistance in selecting those materials. Examples of learning are always put on display in whatever language the learning was accomplished, whether those resources are published works, brainstorm charts, or actual student products.

Establishing Content Benchmarks

Finally, Erminda and all of her school colleagues established content benchmarks for each grade level and then assessed student work on a regular basis. The teachers used these ongoing assessments to identify both strengths and weaknesses; then, they could use specific instructional links to increase student learning. In this classroom, like other effective classrooms we have studied, there is always a concern for instruction focused on the articulated standards and ongoing assessment of student learning.
Guiding Principles for Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

The theory, research, and practices described above can be summarized in a set of North Star principles that can guide the work of educators serving English language learners. The North Star does not tell a traveler the precise way to travel. It does, however, provide an unwavering and ever-present indicator of the traveler’s location in relation to the journey. The following guidelines are meant to inform your classroom journey toward academic success for your English language learners.

The languages and experiences of the student and her or his family and community are recognized and respected.

Curriculum and assessment sometimes ignore students’ primary languages, even when primary language instruction is a major aspect of the program. And too often instruction based on a mainstream curriculum suffers from a mainstream approach. For example, English language learners are sometimes asked to write about vacations or travel; many students—especially those in urban or poor schools—cannot meaningfully participate in such an activity. Teachers need to choose reading material and instructional activities that are more intrinsically interesting, relevant, and motivating for English language learners.

High standards are the basis for curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Most school districts and states have articulated English language arts standards. Standards make clear the expectations for students’ skill level at each grade. Therefore, curriculum, assessment, and instruction for English language learners must reflect and be aligned with the standards; specialized instructional strategies, delivered by quality materials with built-in supports, must provide these students access to those high standards.

Assessment is on-going and makes progress visible even as students move through the stages of language acquisition.

Standardized tests given to students in the spring are not intended to inform instruction, since results of such tests are not distributed or discussed until the fall. Standardized tests have their place in an accountability system, but they are not and should never be understood as the best way to assess specific student needs or to indicate instructional changes required to address the needs.

Instruction needs to provide feedback that informs instruction; therefore, it is imperative that such assessments occur at regular and strategic times during the year and that teachers test what they are teaching and in ways that reflect that teaching. Since most classrooms have students at varying levels of language proficiency and since teachers must use specialized strategies to teach those students, it follows that assessing student learning must be a multi-level activity. Teachers then have access to rich information regarding students’ learning on a continuous basis. Moreover, instruction can be modified to target specific student needs, which have been made visible by the multi-level assessment. Of significance, too, is the development and growth information that becomes available. Theoretically and empirically, we have come to understand that language and literacy development is not linear, that it can be unique to each student. Regular assessment allows us to maximize instructional opportunities.

Teachers are able to use assessment results to inform, adapt, and maximize language and literacy instruction.

Assessment that is “usable” provides information about performance on specific standards in language and literacy. It provides multiple products—authentic products as well as numerical scores—that allow teachers to verify students’ language and literacy engagement. Usable
assessment also makes progress visible and lets the teacher see and explore trends for an individual student, as well as for groups of students. And finally, usable assessment identifies specific instructional strategies for reteaching, which helps individual students develop in specific areas.

**Students are actively involved in the development and implementation of the instructional process.**

The older and more mature the student gets, the more that student is able to be a partner in the teaching and learning process. Students can meaningfully participate in their own education by:

- contributing their prior knowledge to the study of new topics
- examining their own work and sharing their reflections
- reviewing and even expanding on their mastery of the local and state standards. Teachers should always consider it important to let students know the expectations and to provide them with numerous models of student work.

In this manner, students become part of the process and assume a role in assessing their own learning.

**Conclusion**

These guiding principles, much like the North Star directs a night traveler, can give important insights into curriculum design, instruction, and assessment. Following these principles is beneficial to all learners, but imperative in the delivery of high-quality, standards-based instruction to our linguistically and culturally diverse students.

You will find that the curriculum design and instruction in *Avenues* reflects these North Star principles, and the *Avenues Assessment Handbook* provides assessment tools that yield usable results, across the many domains of literacy. Use these tools to monitor student progress across the year and use the results to inform your teaching.

**Selected Bibliography**


**Eugene E. García, Ph.D.**

Dr. Eugene García is an author of Hampton-Brown’s *Avenues*, a K-5 language and literacy program. He is Vice President for University-School Partnerships and Dean of the College of Education at Arizona State University. Dr. García has received numerous academic and public honors and has published extensively in the area of language teaching and bilingual development. He holds leadership positions in numerous professional organizations and regularly serves as a panel reviewer for federal and state agencies. He served as a Senior Officer and Director of the Office of Bilingual Education from 1993–1995 and continues to conduct research in the areas of effective schooling for linguistically and culturally diverse student populations.