

# Meeting the Needs of International Students in Christian Schools

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## Introduction

Christian schools admit international students for many reasons – a key one being the ministry that we can have in serving students from around the world as God brings the nations to our doorstep. However, international students typically come into our schools without full proficiency in English, and this can pose challenges in meeting their needs. This paper provides a very brief introduction to meeting the needs of English learners (ELs) in Christian schools. This paper is not meant to address *all* the needs of international students, such as those involving culture learning, homestays or government requirements. Rather, its goal is to highlight needs international students may have because they are *English learners*, and how schools might address these needs. For more information on this topic, see my book *What School Leaders Need to Know about English Learners* (2016, TESOL Press).

<https://sites.tesol.org/ItemDetail?iProductCode=14123&Category=PROFDEV&WebsiteKey=62ea1393-07ea-402b-b723-0e66240ee86b>

## What do international students need?

International students need two things in order to be successful in school:

1. **English language acquisition.** At lower proficiency levels, students may still require *English Language Development* (ELD), or, foundational English. At higher proficiency levels, students will still typically need *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP), or development in academic English.
2. **Accessible academic content.** International students may face significant barriers to learning the academic content in their classes. The language barrier is an obvious one, but there are others as well. International students rarely have the cultural background needed to understand subjects such as American history. Even math, science and physical education can have many cultural references which pose barriers to understanding. And students without prior exposure to the Bible will not have the background needed to participate in advanced Bible classes.

## What do international students need at different levels of English proficiency?

One key misunderstanding in meeting the needs of ELs is the perception that the needs of ELs at all proficiency levels can be met in the same way, through the same pullout ESL class. Nothing could be further from the truth. Student who speak very little English require a **Newcomer Program**. This is a course of study focusing heavily on English language development, but also including very visual and experiential classes such as music, P.E. and art. The standards governing a Newcomer Program are ELD standards, not academic standards. Many schools are not equipped to provide services for newcomers, and therefore do well to require intermediate-level proficiency for admittance to the school.

Students coming into middle school with intermediate-level English proficiency can do very well. The middle school years provide time to achieve advanced English proficiency prior to entering high school. These students need continued English language development through pullout ESL classes. They also need **sheltered instruction** for some academic subjects. That is, they need instruction that achieves the same academic standards, but through simplified English. Students coming into *high school* at intermediate levels will need even more support. They may struggle with the more advanced language used at the high school level, and will likely need both pullout ESL classes and sheltered instruction.

Students coming to the school with advanced English proficiency are, of course, at an advantage in both in language skill and academic learning. However, their greater proficiency can mask the gaps they still have in academic language, which can result in their not receiving the **Academic English** that they need. Through both pullout support and conscious language development in all content classes, these students can achieve the considerable language development that they still need in order to catch up with native speaker peers.

A further complication in understanding the needs at various language levels is the fact that students may be at different levels in the different skill areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening. For example, a student may be able to comprehend advanced text, but have pronunciation errors which place him at a much lower proficiency level in speaking. Or, a student may have acquired strong oral social communication skills, yet struggle tremendously with reading and writing tasks.

Here are some resources which may be helpful in understanding language levels: TOEFL scores and levels: <https://www.ets.org/toefl/institutions/scores/interpret/terms-used-at-different-levels>, and brief level descriptors: <https://www.learninga-z.com/site/products/ell/proficiency-levels>

### **What do teachers of international students need?**

Teachers of international students who are English learners need the following skills:

1. **The ability to foster English language acquisition.** Teachers may assume that all needed English language development will occur through pullout ESL classes. In reality, there is simply not enough time in the ESL class to develop all the language that English learners need. Much language development *has to occur in regular classrooms*. Therefore, all teachers need to know how to do the following:
  - a. Add language objectives to lesson plans, and provide instruction to achieve these objectives.
  - b. Provide corrective feedback when ELs speak and write, to further language development.
2. **The ability to make academic content accessible.** Teachers need to know how to modify course content and delivery to maximize English-learner comprehension. All teachers need to know how to do the following:
  - a. Tailor the language used in their classes to the language levels of their English-learner students.
  - b. Assess their course content for background knowledge that international students might not have, and work to provide that background.
  - c. Use principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to provide multiple ways for students to understand the content.

A four-course certificate in “Teaching Language and Content” is available through Messiah College. This coursework helps all teachers develop the skills needed to meet the needs of English learners. See <https://www.messiah.edu/graduate/teaching-language-and-content> Please reach out to me for more information!

### **What do schools admitting international students need to do?**

Following are some guidelines which can help schools meet the needs of international students and their teachers:

1. Have a strong TESOL professional (i.e. a well-trained ESL teacher) on staff. This person can:
  - a. Teach ESL classes (providing ELD and EAP).
  - b. Provide expert advice on placing students.
  - c. Monitor EL progress.
  - d. Co-teach with content teachers in “sheltered” classes.
  - e. Train teachers in meeting the needs of ELs.
2. Provide professional development for *all* teachers on meeting the needs of English learners.
3. Take an individualized approach to placement of international students, considering their language level, prior learning, and individual characteristics. The placement chart below can serve as a guide.
4. Develop a robust admittance protocol, so that students are not admitted if the school does not have the resources to serve them well.

### **Where should international students be placed?**

The following chart provides a guide to which classes English learners at different language levels and in different grades might need to be in or out of, and with what kinds of supports. This chart addresses the placement of students in middle and high school. For the placement of elementary level English learners, see the placement chart in my book (Dormer, 2016). Of course, each student has individual needs and experiences, and this chart is only a guide. It is important to realize that in most cases, even advanced English users are operating with significantly less language and cultural understanding than a typical native speaker. Therefore, it is imperative that *all* regular classroom teachers have training in meeting the needs of ELs, and view themselves as language teachers.

### Key

*Note: These terms are used in many different ways in different programs and by different authors. This key is not meant to define these terms, but simply to indicate their meanings on this chart.*

**Newcomer program** = ELs with very little or no English are placed in a special program that provides intensive language development for most of their school day, while being academically focused.

**ELD** = English Language Development: This is a pullout ESL class focused on developing basic, foundational language.

**EAP** = English for Academic Purposes: This is a pullout ESL class focused on academic language development.

**Note:** It often works well to provide the pullout ESL class at the time when other students are taking their regular English class. Whether or not students can replace the regular English class with the ESL class depends on many factors, such as whether they receive comparable writing instruction in the ESL class, and whether they can be successful in literature-focused English classes by perhaps doing some of the reading in their native language.

**Sheltered instruction** = This is the provision of academic content through simpler English. Sheltered instruction may occur within the regular classroom, as the regular teacher or an ESL teacher provides modified instruction for ELs. Or, it may occur in a separate classroom, either with the ESL teacher or the content teacher. In sheltered instruction, *the goal is to cover the same content standards, with simplified language*. If the sheltered instruction is provided by an ESL teacher, the best model is usually to have the ESL teacher push in to the regular classroom, with the content teacher still supervising the content that is provided, and still responsible for the EL’s learning.

**Regular instruction with support** = Student is in the regular classroom for all (or most) subjects, but with

a teacher who knows how to modify content for ELs, and foster continued language acquisition.

Grade	Level 1 Beginning	Level 2 High Beginning	Level 3 Intermediate	Level 4 High Intermediate	Level 5 Advanced
6-8	Newcomer program	Sheltered for most subjects; ELD	Regular for math and science; sheltered for social studies and Bible; ELD	Regular for math and science; sheltered for social studies and Bible; EAP	Regular; EAP as needed
9-10	Not admitted	Provisionally admitted; Sheltered for most subjects; ELD	Regular for math and science; sheltered for social studies and Bible; ELD	Regular for most subjects; sheltered for Bible (and possibly social studies); EAP	Regular; EAP as needed
11-12	Not admitted	Not admitted	Rarely admitted; Regular for math and science; sheltered for social studies and Bible; ELD	Regular for most subjects; sheltered for Bible (and possibly social studies); EAP	Regular; EAP as needed

### Conclusion

The saying “It takes a village...” is apropos when talking about the needs of international students who come to our Christian schools. It truly does take a school community to address the multiple layers of language and learning needs which pose challenges for these students. God has entrusted us with this opportunity, and the good news is that as we take concrete steps to meet these challenges, the whole school community will benefit, as God’s heart for all nations and peoples is reflected in our schools.