

# REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING ENGLISH LEARNERS:

Historical Context, Goals,  
and Power Practices

By Connie Williams

Teacher Writing Center

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**E**nglish learners (ELs)—the fastest growing population in the nation’s public school system—come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and have varying needs that must be addressed in multiple contexts. This article reflects on the historical context of educating English learners, describes the goals of various instructional programs and approaches, and offers 10 simple strategies—“power practices”— to help educators meet the needs of ELs.

### Professional Development Demands



As the number of ELs in our public schools increases, more and more educators need to be prepared to teach this student group. Often, teachers are already overwhelmed with staff development

requirements, including learning about new adopted curricula and approaches, activities that can consume an inordinate amount of time. This is compounded with many school districts’ missions to promote continuing professional development in subject areas or specialties such as technology or reading. This is why it is so critical that all educators understand basic power practices that will enable them to help ELs succeed academically.

### Specialized Classes for ELs

ELs by definition are learners whose first language or home language is not English. These students require language support to develop the full range of social and academic English they need to succeed in school and in society. Creating even more of a challenge, ELs are expected to learn

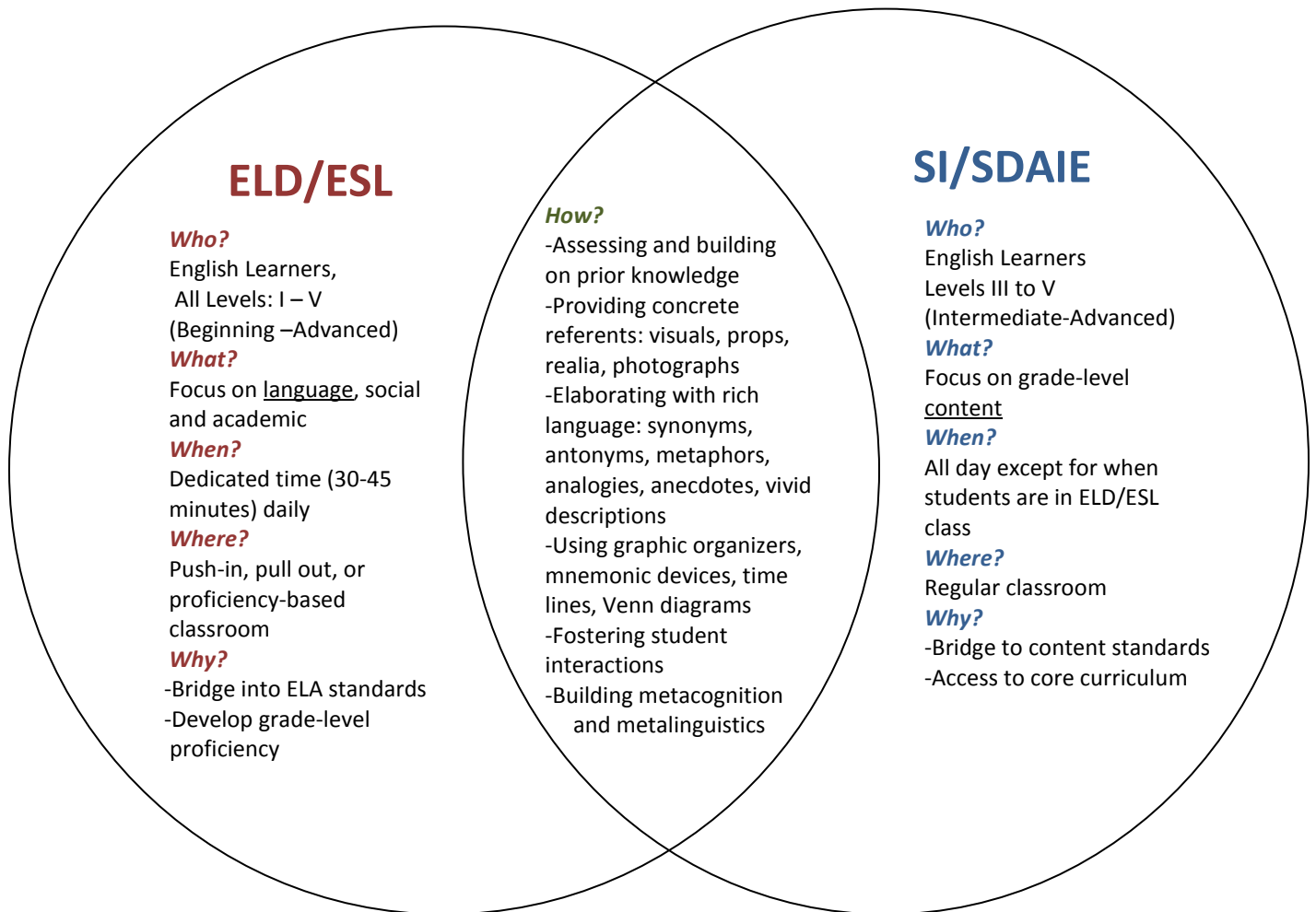
social and academic English while simultaneously progressing academically at grade level. These requirements often result in students enrolling in two different kinds of classes—English language development (ELD) or English as a second language (ESL) classes and sheltered instruction (SI) or specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) classes. Once students reach a certain language level (usually around the Intermediate level), they may transition into mainstream academic classes while continuing ELD/ESL studies; however, the mainstream teacher continues to make accommodations that enable ELs to access the core curriculum.

### ELD/ESL v. SI/SDAIE

Although many of the practices used in ELD/ESL classes and SI/SDAIE classes are the same, each program is distinct in terms of its objectives. The intent of ELD is to provide the linguistic foundation for language development, and ultimately advance students’ academic language proficiency level in an effort to achieve grade-level English proficiency within five years. SI, on the other hand, is designed to provide ELs with equal access to grade-level curriculum. Whereas ELD focuses on language, SI concentrates on making subject matter accessible to ELs through a variety of special teaching and learning strategies. ELD is often taught in a special classroom or grouping environment with students at the same proficiency level, while SI involves students in heterogeneous language proficiency groupings in regular content classrooms, often with native English speakers. While ELD takes place during a dedicated 30 to 45 minutes daily, SI happens throughout the school day. The purpose of ELD is to provide the bridge to the mainstream English language arts standards and curriculum, SI paves the way

for full participation in all mainstream subject-area classes. SI in its purest form parallels the rigors of regular academic instruction at grade level when ELs are at least at the Intermediate level of language proficiency. ELD and SI share the same language and key “power practices” of

instruction. These power practices are rooted in research about effective language instruction as well as effective teaching practices. These power practices, purposely limited in number, are straightforward, easy to internalize, and ready to be implemented immediately.

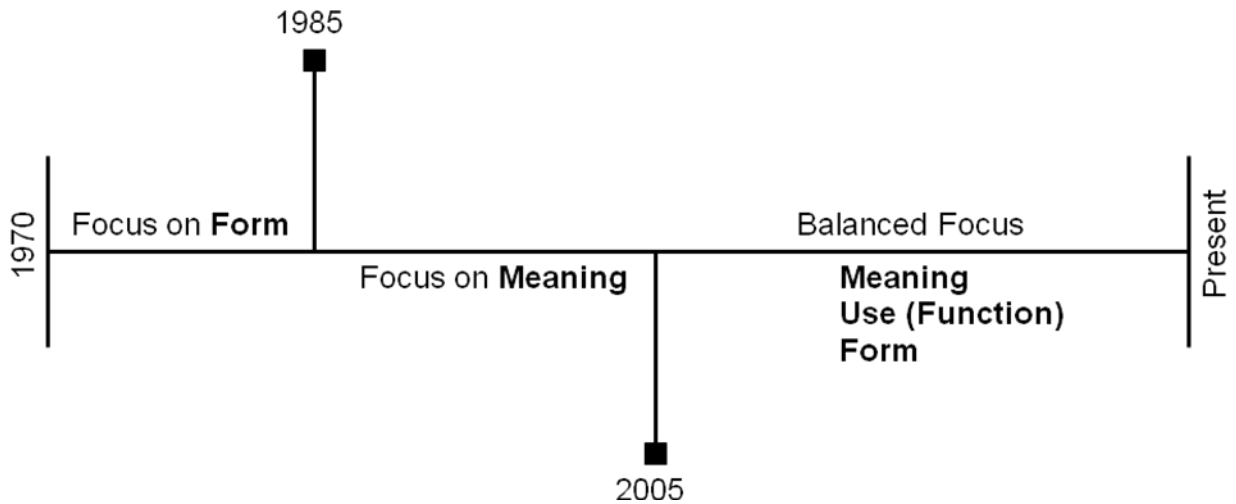


*This Venn diagram illustrates some of the similarities and differences between ELD/ESL and SI/SDAIE.*

## Evolution of ELD/ESL

ELD is about language—it is the dedicated time of the day when students go to English “language” class. Although English is not a “foreign” language in the United States, in many ways ELs go through the same experiences as native speakers taking a foreign language. Of course, ELs have the added benefit of a live laboratory right outside of the classroom. The methods and approaches for teaching ELD/ESL have changed over the past four decades. The

time line below illustrates the focus on grammar form prior to Krashen’s advancement of the input theory, which emphasized communication and meaning above anything else. Communication and meaning continue to be paramount to any type of language instruction; however, today’s ELD/ESL teacher encourages communication and facilitates meaning, and also explicitly addresses grammar and form in order to ensure that ELs have the language skills they need to succeed both socially and academically.



*This time line illustrates the shift in instruction from a focus on form, to a one on meaning, and then to a balanced emphasis on both form and meaning.*

## Evolution of SI/SDAIE

SI/SDAIE has been similarly affected by language and educational research over the past decades. It has taken a long time for educators to understand the intent of SI, thus the name changed initially from Sheltered English to Sheltered Instruction. It is only recently that educators have come to

understand that SI/ SDAIE is *not* watered-down content or a less rigorous form of instruction compared to traditional subject matter classes. Educators now appreciate that SI/SDAIE provides accommodations in the learning environment and does not compromise the integrity of the content being delivered.



*SI/SDAIE provides accommodations in the learning environment and does not compromise the integrity of the content being delivered.*

## Lesson Plan Format

Every teacher knows there is no “one size fits all” lesson plan, but research has confirmed that students benefit when a lesson begins with an engaging exploration of the topic about to be addressed. This is sometimes called the “into” part of the lesson. During this part of the lesson, the teacher is assessing students’ language as well as their prior knowledge of the target topic or skill. By doing this, the teacher can build on students’ current understandings, experiences, perceptions, and insights. The linguistic assessment gives teachers the advantage of “front-loading” the vocabulary and linguistic structures critical for accessing the content.

The next part of the lesson, sometimes called the “through” part of the lesson, involves the actual teaching of the target concept or skill. During this portion of the lesson, students engage in a hands-on, interactive activity with the new learning material. This deeper exploration of the concept or skill is always accompanied by the teacher’s clear explanation or summary of the key ideas. Students must have opportunities to apply that new knowledge by completing tasks and engaging in problem-solving, working both collaboratively and independently. Allowing students to offer their interpretations of the learning provides more exposure to the same concept in a different context, giving the teacher ample opportunity to elaborate further and extend students’ knowledge.



Lessons often end here, but the most valuable part of the lesson, sometimes called the “beyond” portion of the lesson, provides students with opportunities to participate in enrichment activities and move beyond what they have learned, essentially applying new knowledge to their own lives. In addition, during this portion of the lesson students reflect on *how* they learned what they learned, building their metacognition and learner autonomy.

*Students benefit when they are engaged before, during, and after the new learning material is presented.*

## 10 Power Practices that Make Teaching ELs More Efficient and Effective

The notion of power practices is based on the idea that we know there are efficient and effective ways of accomplishing a task because we have repeated them successfully over a long period of time with large numbers of people. There is no limit to the potential power these individual practices

have with ELs. We certainly could add to this list, but listing too many to recall may result in forgetting the most critical ones or not internalizing them at all. For the sake of simplicity, these power practices are listed in a self-evaluation format where a teacher can self-assess with a “yes” or “no” response. The column for evidence is probably the most effective in terms of identifying what future practices need to be emphasized.

Power Practices	Yes	No	Evidence
❶ I <b>check for understanding</b> throughout the lesson and <b>restate</b> important concepts in different ways frequently.			
❷ I support student performance by giving <b>clear verbal, physical, and written instructions</b> for all the tasks students are required to do. I give <b>examples</b> and <b>model</b> often.			
❸ I encourage critical thinking and student engagement by <b>asking open-ended questions</b> and <b>scaffolding</b> them as necessary.			
❹ I <b>review</b> previous concepts daily and <b>preview</b> new material daily as a way to build schema (e.g., graphic organizers, time lines, mnemonics).			
❺ I <b>contextualize</b> all my lessons <b>visually</b> through <b>concrete referents</b> and <b>linguistically</b> through <b>rich language</b> , including synonyms, antonyms, cognates, analogies, vivid descriptions, anecdotes and storytelling.			
❻ I foster <b>metacognition</b> by encouraging students to think, talk, and write about <b>how</b> they learned <b>what</b> they learned. I guide students to think about how they might <b>reuse</b> a learning experience in <b>other contexts</b> .			
❼ My lessons include <b>structured activities</b> that allow students frequent opportunities to <b>practice oral language</b> (e.g., collaborative communities, pairs).			
❸ I <b>explicitly teach</b> forms and functions as an integral part of my content-area and ELD instruction.			
❹ I <b>adjust my speech register</b> to ensure <b>comprehensibility</b> (e.g., clear enunciation, pause time for question, gestures, moderate rate of speech, repetition, intonation).			
❺ I encourage students to use their <b>primary language</b> to <b>review concepts</b> and <b>clarify their understanding</b> . I ask students to <b>translate key concepts</b> into their primary language.			

## About the Author

*Connie Williams, Ed.D.*

Dr. Williams is an instructor and teacher trainer based in Menlo Park, California. She conducts staff development in California and throughout the United States in the areas of bilingual education, sheltered-content instruction (SDAIE), and ELD. Dr. Williams develops curricula for English learners and has authored many articles and materials in the areas of bilingual education and second language instruction.

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