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Strategic Oral Language Instruction in ELD

Teaching Oracy to Develop Literacy

By Dr. Connie Williams, Ed.D. and Dorothy Roberts

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Is oral language development "in" or "out" in your English language development (ELD*) classroom at the moment?

How important do you think it should be? And how do you think it can be fostered? As of late oral language development has been receiving increasing attention both in studies and in policy documents related to ELD. This paper helps explain the rationale for the latest surge in the popularity of oral language development and shows examples of strategies for supporting it.

During the past fifty years, the popularity of oral language instruction in the ELD classroom has varied widely in response to theoretical pendulum swings. Past methodologies, such as the Audio-lingual Method and the Direct Approach in the seventies, and the Natural Approach and Total Physical Response in the eighties and nineties strongly advocated listening and speaking. However, when the focus of instruction has been on explicit grammar structure, oral language has either shared the stage at the beginning of instruction with reading and writing or has taken a back seat in its role of importance. The current surge in the popularity of oral language instruction emphasizes *academic* oral language, sometimes referred to as "oracy" according to Dr. Aida Walqui. This language is more structured and oriented towards grammatical correctness than informal oral language, and therefore it forms a perfect bridge between oracy and literacy.

Current Research: The Need for Implementing Explicit ELD Instruction

Recent research published by the California Department of Education brings to the forefront the need for "instructed ELD"—systematic and explicit ELD instruction. (Snow & Katz, 2010) Although research in the field is still somewhat inconclusive, a growing body of data points towards the need for increased oral language rehearsal during ELD. However, the extent to which practitioners are implementing explicit oral language practice in the ELD environment varies. Some of the factors affecting the time dedicated to the teaching of oral language are student variables, teacher training background, and the school/district's priorities and emphasis.

*In some states English Language Development (ELD) is used synonymously with English as a Second Language (ESL) to refer to the program required for English learners to master grade level English proficiency.

Student Variables

Student variables, such as their age as well as their level of language proficiency (beginning through advanced), correlate to the amount of time actually dedicated to oral language instruction. Generally, younger students in the primary grades experience more opportunities for oral language practice. In contrast, the urgency to read and write with older students results in an emphasis in reading and writing in the ELD environment. Likewise, English learners (ELs) in the beginning and early intermediate proficiency levels tend to do more listening and talking during ELD instruction. However, once ELs reach the intermediate level and beyond, reading and writing activities fill the greater portion of time. For English-only students, it is the grade level that determines if learning is through oral language or through reading and writing. Generally speaking, once native speakers of English develop basic literacy at about the third grade level, most learning takes place through print and text.

Teacher Training in ELD

In spite of teacher training and professional development in ELD, teachers still grapple with how to effectively implement explicit instruction with oral language practice. Current research points to the need for ELD/ESL teachers to provide direct instruction to English learners on language forms (or grammatical forms) such as parts of speech, sentence structures, idioms, quoted versus reported speech, and so forth. ELs also need direct instruction on language functions such as naming people, places, and things, describing actions, comparing and contrasting, asking questions, classifying, predicting, analyzing, and so forth.

> Current research points to the need for direct instruction on language forms (grammar) and functions.

For example, in order to describe things, ELs need to know how to use adjectives. In order to compare things, ELs need to know how to combine adjectives or adverbs with conjunctions.

Function
Connecting ideas

Form
Conjunctions, adjectives, antonyms

Target Frame
_____ is/are _____, but _____ is/are _____.

Examples
Point to the food in the picture and make comparative statements, such as:
The apple pie is hot, but the cottage cheese is cold.
Sweet potatoes are long, but cherries are round.

_____ is/are _____, but _____ is/are _____.

In this example, "connecting ideas" is the function. "Adjectives," "antonyms," and "conjunctions" are the forms that ELs need to know to be able to connect ideas in complex sentences.

Many teachers have not yet experienced the kind of training that calls for them to directly "teach" and highlight the grammatical forms embedded in the variety of uses of language for social and academic purposes. Even teachers who have been trained in the present paradigm of explicit ELD instruction are challenged with exactly how to effectively and efficiently "make it happen" in the classroom. Often times, the word *practicing* oral language can be intimidating to teachers who recall prior methods involving the rote memorization of drills and dialogues where language was contrived and artificial. Fortunately, today there is a genuine effort to provide teachers with quality staff development in ELD, focusing on the best procedures to insure a high level of student engagement where the kind of language that is generated is authentic and real in its aim to develop automatic and fluent accuracy.

> … instruction must be interactive and the focus must be on listening and speaking.

Implementation Principles for Districts

The recent release of the publication by the CA State Department entitled *Improving Education for English Learners: Research-Based Approaches* provides teachers, administrators, and educational leaders with a body of principles and the strongest research evidence available to inform instructional practices for English learners. Thirty years have passed since such a publication has been created. It represents the best work of a cadre of researchers and practitioners in the field of ELD today. The research supports the notion that providing English learners with a daily dose of ELD instruction in a specific block of time is far superior to not doing ELD at all. The evidence clearly indicates that the instruction must be interactive and the focus must be on listening and speaking. This does not diminish the significance of reading and writing but puts literacy skill development in its proper place. The research further calls for a plan with specific objectives to be in place to ascertain that instruction will be delivered systematically. This evidence regarding what constitutes state-of-the-art ELD or "instructed ELD" brings us to a consensus that raising the language proficiency of English learners and their academic performance will be directly proportionate to the implementation of these principles.

> … spoken language and literacy are inextricably linked …

Reading and Writing in the Language Arts Program

Reading and writing dominate the language arts program. This is a fact for English-only students as well as for English learners. It presupposes, however, that students have the oral language background to support what they read, as well as the syntax, grammar, and vocabulary required for written expression. It is common practice for teachers to teach writing by having students actually write more and more often. This is an acceptable practice for English-only students who need to practice writing in order to become better writers. However, for English learners who are in the process of learning to speak the language, the pathway to proficient writing is through strategically planned oral language instruction. Literacy is more than just the printed word on the page. It involves oral pre-reading activities, the actual reading process that may involve oral or silent question-answer strategies to ensure understanding, followed by speaking and writing activities related to interpreting and responding to the text. Thus, spoken language and literacy are inextricably linked, especially in the school context. The pre-reading, during-reading, and

post-reading strategies and activities call for the use of academic oral language, through which students show evidence that they are learning the content of the text and connecting it with their existing knowledge.

Oral Language As the Foundation for Writing Proficiency

Although intuitively at some level, most educators would agree that oral language proficiency forms the foundation of written language, second language methodology has frequently ignored that premise. A teacher once expressed succinctly, "You cannot write if you have nothing to say." For this reason, if English learners cannot verbalize their thoughts, they will not be able to express themselves in written form. Research shows that ELs who have had ample opportunity for oral rehearsal and interaction with native speakers in multiple contexts are far more equipped to reach higher levels of written discourse than ELs who have had fewer opportunities to do so. This applies to native language speakers as well as second language learners.

Students do not learn a new language in a vacuum or through its written form alone. Balanced language skills are learned best when students have frequent opportunities to engage in all four modes of communication: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Most teachers of reading intuitively know that teaching reading in isolation of the communication skills of listening and speaking produces little more than "decoders" of language and certainly not real readers who comprehend text. More recently, ELD teachers, whose charge it must be to build a strong oral language base as a precursor of reading, are becoming more aware of the critical need to strategically and systematically emphasize oral language during ELD time. The recent findings of the National Literacy Panel concur with practitioners that teaching the key components of reading is not adequate for supporting the overall English language development of ELs. The panel carefully reviewed numerous research studies that indicated that most ELs are quite capable of word recognition and decoding skills. However, the panel disclosed that the gap remains distant from their English-only counterparts with regard to reading comprehension and vocabulary. The fact that literacy is a function of oral language is a fundamental precept and a strong predictor of successful reading and writing abilities. It is hardly a surprise that the panel concluded that "the oral English development provided in most (ELD) programs is insufficient" (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 16) since the emphasis is generally on literacy as opposed to oracy.

Strategic Oral Language Instruction

Renowned ELD researchers and practitioners Lily Wong Fillmore, Aida Walqui, and Elfrieda Hiebert argue convincingly that just as teachers are *strategic* in teaching reading and writing, they must be strategic in delivering explicit oral language instruction. Too often oral language gets the short end of the stick, especially in ELD environments, in an effort to develop literacy. Bearing in mind that oracy, or oral literacy, is fundamental in helping students achieve the full range of language proficiency, oral language practice commands a significant place in daily ELD instruction. According to Dr. Walqui, there is a direct correlation between the academic excellence of

"You cannot write if you have nothing to say."

"... the oral English development provided in most (ELD) programs is insufficient ..."

ELs and the nature of interactions involving the teacher and students. She argues strongly that American schools must develop a high level of oral literacy.

> … instructional scaffolds that explicitly target the language structures are essential for successful oral production.

In order to achieve this goal of strategically implementing oral language practice in the ELD classroom, instructional scaffolds that explicitly target the language structures are essential for successful oral production. For example, sentence frames are an effective scaffold to provide students with the explicit grammatical structure framed within the language function, allowing for greater accuracy in usage. Effective modeling by the teacher prior to using the sentence frame is critical for students to have an understanding of what is expected of them. The framework of the "gradual release of responsibility" is implemented with the teacher modeling the language, followed by student pairs practicing the language using the scaffold, and finally independent individual practice.

Together with clearly supported sentence frames, there are certain classroom routines that can be employed regularly and with consistency to maximize student engagement during oral rehearsal. These specific routines or strategies in turn must be taught to students in order to have them interact with each other in meaningful, purposeful, and productive ways. In the following sections, examples of these research-supported strategies can easily be incorporated in an ELD classroom.

Students Must Do the Majority of the Talking

Evidence from subject matter classrooms reveals that teachers do the majority of the talking. In the ELD/ESL environment, this situation must be reversed. The teacher must make the effort to increase the opportunities for students to use, practice, and reinforce the language. The teacher models the language, but the students must practice speaking and using it to interact with each other and with the language to convey meaning, exchange thoughts and ideas, and solve problems on an oral level first, and then on a written level.

Think-Pair-Share

One of easiest and most common routines is a strategy entitled "Think-Pair-Share."

1. The teacher models a sentence or response using a scaffold such as a sentence frame. Students understand and then repeat the example.
2. Student pairs then create their own original responses based on the model and take turns telling their partner.
3. Students share their original responses to the class.

The positive feature is the physical arrangement of students talking face to face to replicate the natural communicative context of two speakers. In the sharing of their own authentic and student-generated examples to the whole class, the teacher is able to assess and guide further practice to a level where students can work independently in a collaborative setting to generate even more creative responses using the original model as a structure or framework. Of course, students will need many and varying opportunities to internalize the language and take full ownership of it to produce language automatically and with grammatical accuracy. It is important to note here that the framework referred to as "the gradual release of responsibility" is in full operation where the teacher aims to have the students doing the talking.

Practice Makes Perfect

English learners need multiple opportunities for oral language rehearsal, affirming the adage, "Practice makes perfect." Enough research exists to confirm that you cannot learn a language without multiple opportunities for meaningful repetitions.

Picture This

Another simple staple strategy, "Picture This," also known as "See it and Say it," increases meaningful practice by using a captivating visual.

1. The teacher shows an interesting visual and makes a statement about the visual. Students repeat the teacher's example.
2. The teacher solicits different statements from a few students, checking for accuracy and fluency.
3. Student pairs or small groups create new variations of the statement using other visuals that are representative of a similar topic.

Students Need to Take Responsibility for Their Learning

Students must take responsibility for learning a new language just as they are responsible for their own learning in general. Ownership of language is a result of hard work and effort on the students' part. Students should be motivated and encouraged to own their new second language on an oral level as well as on a written level. Students must hear something said many times before they can take ownership of it. Current research confirms that oral language interactions and the chance to produce the language in meaningful ways for both social and academic purposes will provide the necessary practice that is critical to internalize a new language. Students must be assigned robust and rigorous tasks to foster the kind of language and knowledge we want them to internalize.

Each One Teach One

Another structured language strategy where students assume responsibility of the language is "Each One Teach One."

1. Half of the students take on the role of "teacher" and the other half the "students."
2. Following a teacher example of a sentence frame with a visual, students assume their assigned roles.
3. A new visual is displayed in which the "teacher" creates the pattern and the "student" repeats.
4. After a few visuals and sentence frames are practiced and shared among the whole group, the roles reverse with more new visuals of a similar topic.

Oracy Is the Bridge to Literacy

Students cannot write what they cannot say. Oral language helps to form the foundation of literacy and serves as the strongest indicator of students' ability to express themselves in written form. Oral language is a precursor to written language even if we do not write exactly the way we speak. Oracy, beyond just everyday social language, reflects the ability to use language orally for academic purposes. It is as intellectually demanding as is literacy because it involves the participation of a speaker in discourse for purposes such as arguing a point, contrasting a notion, defining, persuading, predicting, or summarizing. All of these uses or functions of oral language require a high level of language knowledge.

Language Relay Talk

One exciting and yet structured routine is to have students participate in a "Language Relay Talk."

1. Students form two parallel lines, facing each other, with an equal number of students in each line. The distance between the two parallel lines is the same distance between two speakers in a face to face interaction.
2. One of the two lines is then designated as the "moving" line while the other remains constant.
3. The teacher first models a sentence about a visual using a sentence frame. Then the teacher provides another example using the same visual and sentence frame.
4. Now, students talk to the person directly across from them and collaboratively try to come up with their own original statement(s) about the visual.
5. At the teacher's cue, students in the "moving line" move one step to the right, thus facing a new individual. Again these two students attempt to come up with more creative statements or even repeat what might have been said to their previous partner in the line.
6. After three partner changes and once all the students have sat down, the teacher reviews with students their creative statements. Students must give recognition to the person who created the sentence by saying, "My partner said …"

Students Must Be Active Participants in the Language Learning Process

A student cannot learn a language without actively using it. Active engagement is critical in the second language learning environment for reasons beyond just listening and responding to represent understanding. Strategies that generate students' oral language must be interactive and task-based in order to engage students in meaningful ways where they are exchanging information, completing a task, or solving a problem.

3-2-1-GO

Another strategy that works well in this instance is "3-2-1-GO" in which the teacher writes three open-ended questions on the board. Organize students into small groups and give them a few minutes to discuss orally the answers to the three questions. Call on groups to share one statement for each of the three questions. For example:

3. Name three fruits.
2. Discuss two ways that two different kinds of fruit are different or the same.
1. Decide which single fruit is the most popular.

Comprehensible Output Is As Important As Input

The language output that students produce is as important as the input they receive. Usually the emphasis is on the precept of "Listen and learn"; however, in reality, it is also critical to acknowledge the concept of "Talk and you might learn more." In other words, two people involved in the act of listening and speaking while negotiating meaning will learn more than one person speaking and the other just listening. Such verbal exchanges will lead to more language, deeper understanding, and greater capacity to think and talk more fluently, automatically, and accurately. It is no longer enough for ELs to get input through listening that is understandable and meaningful. They must also respond to and react to that input in ways that lead them to grammatical accuracy and purposeful language usage in multiple contexts. Talking invites more talking and the more opportunities English learners get to verbalize, the more efficiently and effectively they will command their second language—their vehicle for academic success in school.

Cell Phone Chatter

An exciting and easy-to-use basic routine is "Cell Phone Chatter."

1. Students are paired and designated Caller A and Caller B.
2. A visual is exhibited in front of the room and students are asked to talk about the picture with their partner as long as they can. Sentence frames can be used as a scaffold to help students develop and practice their sentences.
3. At the conclusion of the activity, students are requested to share one statement that their partner said.

Conclusion

The lingering challenge to teachers is how to create an oral language learning environment that is exciting, engaging, and meaningful. Of course, when teachers hear the phrase "practice language," it conjures up the notion that language will then become contrived, artificial, and kind of deadly—the very antithesis of what is meant. Practicing oral language does not mean returning to the days when second language learners memorized phrases and sentences that carried little or no meaning. Rather, it is the opportunity for ELs to experience language in a meaningful context, with the teacher modeling and guiding them to use language creatively, purposefully, and productively. This explicit rehearsal of language will help ELs attain grammatical accuracy in oral and written discourse, and enable them to develop the kinds of language needed for social, academic, and content specific purposes.

Research supports the need for oral language emphasis in ELD instruction with the following characteristics:

- Systematic and structured
- Vocabulary development that is relevant, rigorous, and rich
- Explicit practice of key grammatical forms that are embedded in the functions of language
- Language rehearsal in an engaging and meaningful context supported by the teacher modeling and guiding the language structures
- Multiple opportunities to rehearse language involving interactive and task-based activities

Frames for Fluency™

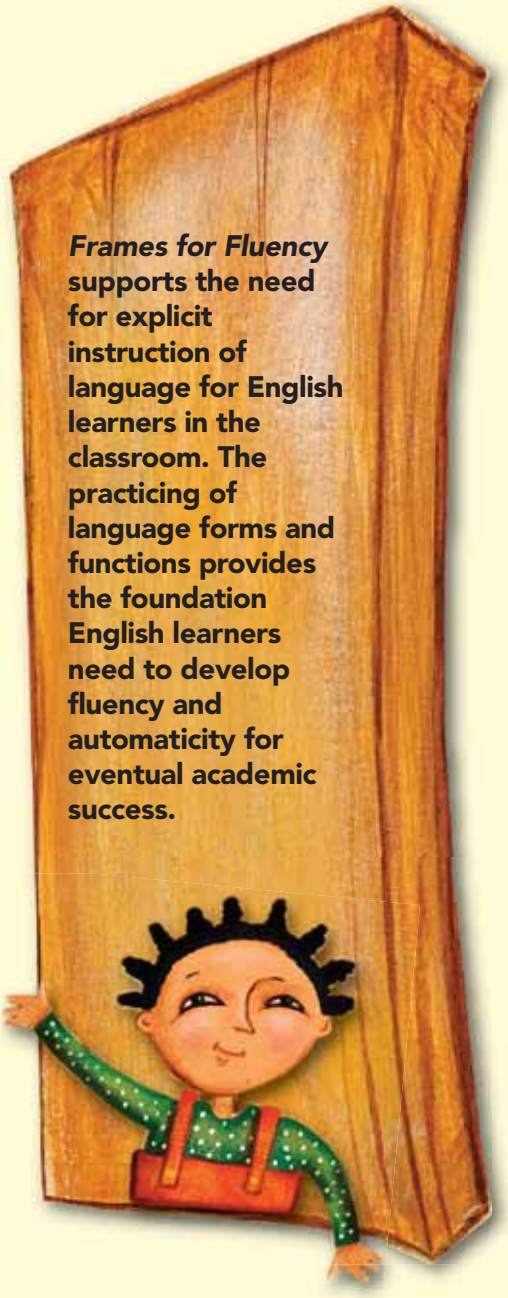
Imagine a toolbox where teachers could pull out the language structures English learners need to develop fluency and automaticity in order to achieve a high level of oracy. *Frames for Fluency* is one such toolbox of more than 550 ready-made sentence frames organized by proficiency level. This easy-to-use tool is a perfect supplement to any ELD program to increase the oral fluency of English learners. The use of the same instructional routine and consistent format allows a teacher to quickly prepare for a lesson. The sentence frames are supported by clear examples as a model for the teacher and students. Teachers follow a simple mental framework to guide ELs, gradually "relinquishing responsibility" to students for practicing the language in very creative ways and in a meaningful context with vocabulary.

Benefits of Frames for Fluency

- Reduces teacher preparation time in searching for and developing the appropriate patterns for practice.
- Systematically and sequentially provides practice for the key grammatical forms that are embedded in the key functions of language.
- Provides the scaffolding students need to reach higher levels of fluency than they might reach without focused support.
- Efficient use of oral language in ELD/ESL classes.
- Simple, easy, and fun to incorporate for daily use. The use of the same practice routine (I DO IT, WE DO IT, YOU DO IT) and consistent format allows the teacher to quickly prepare the lesson.
- More than 550 sentence frames supported by clear examples as a model for the teacher and for the students.

To learn more about *Frames for Fluency* and how it can be incorporated into a daily lesson, visit: www.framesforfluency.com.

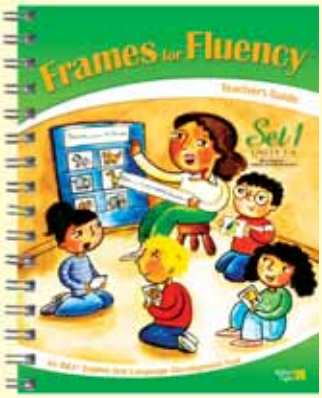
Districts that embrace more of a language acquisition approach to second language learning will find *Frames for Fluency* a viable and complementary support mechanism to this methodology. Given that the focus of language learning in a "language acquisition" environment involves a student-centered emphasis, *Frames for Fluency* will ensure students are producing authentic and meaningful language centered around real communication. A clear balance is struck with *Frames for Fluency* because students are able to use, practice, and reinforce with greater frequency those structures of language that require more attention in order to achieve grammatical accuracy.

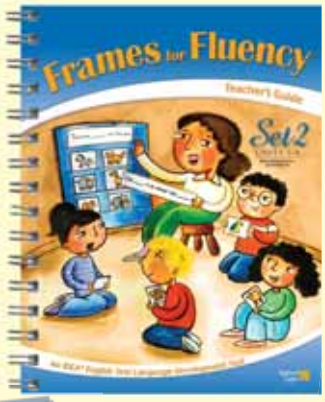


Frames for Fluency **supports the need for explicit instruction of language for English learners in the classroom. The practicing of language forms and functions provides the foundation English learners need to develop fluency and automaticity for eventual academic success.**

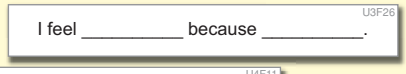
COMPONENTS

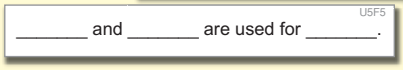
Frames for Fluency is organized into two sets. The eight units are organized by language level rather than by grade level.
Set 1 – for students at the beginning to early intermediate proficiency
Set 2 – for students at the intermediate to advanced proficiency





The **Teacher's Guide*** identifies the language forms and functions that English learners need practice in order to develop oral fluency. This orchestrating component provides instructions on how and when to use the theme pictures and picture cards, as well as provides suggestions for extension activities.

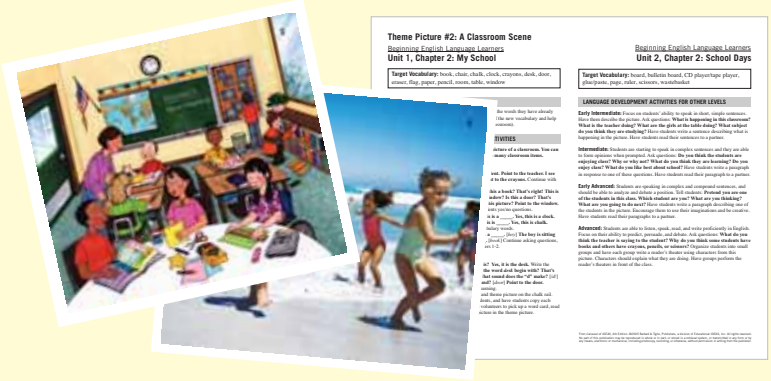




Each set has a box of more than 250 ready-made **sentence frames*** that identify the key language structures for students to practice.
Actual size of the strips is 3"x 23".

*For *Carousel* users: The teacher's guide and box of sentence frames are the only components needed for *Carousel of IDEAS*, 4th Edition program users.

(Pocket chart available separately.)



Picture & Word Cards introduce and reinforce the target vocabulary for the chapter.

Theme Pictures bring target vocabulary alive and provide an authentic context for oral interaction. The reverse side of each theme picture provides teaching tips, additional activities, as well as differentiated instruction for different language levels. Theme pictures are also provided on transparencies and CD-ROM format.

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Dr. Connie Casagranda Williams holds a bachelor's degree in education and Spanish (1965), a master of arts degree in multicultural education (1977), and a master of science degree in public school administration (1981) from San Jose State University and California State University, Hayward. She earned her Ed.D. in second language acquisition from the University of San Francisco in 1989.

Dr. Williams currently conducts professional development seminars across the country on a range of issues related to English learners (EL), including English language development (ELD), specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE)/sheltered English, and bilingual education. She has been an instructor of EL-related certificate programs in the state of California (CLAD and BCLAD), as well as a professor of university courses designed for future teachers of ELs. Additionally, Dr. Williams has authored and co-authored instructional and assessment materials for teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents of ELs, including Action Sequence Stories, Quick Informal Assessment (QIA), Pre-IPT in English and Spanish, Go English 2!, and Go Spanish 2! She has written numerous articles that reflect her research in the disciplines of second language instruction, linguistics, and grammar.

Dorothy Roberts

Dorothy Roberts received her degrees in business administration from California State University, Pomona. She has been the owner of Ballard & Tighe for the past 21 years and is actively involved in product development of EL materials. She currently serves as chairman of the board of directors and held the position of CEO and president for 16 of those years. Prior to Ballard & Tighe, Ms. Roberts held administrative positions at a major California university for 15 years and served as a training consultant and developer at a major corporation for five years.

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