

## Supporting ELs with Interrupted Formal Education: Research and Practices from the Field – Part 1

Host:

Welcome to this two-part podcast hosted by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). We are here with Francisco Lopez, an Education Program Specialist from OELA. Joining Francisco for the first part of this discussion about students with interrupted formal education is Dr. Margarita Calderon, Professor Emerita at Johns Hopkins University.

One of the topics of importance in English learner education is how to support students with interrupted formal education, or SIFE. These students often face many serious challenges when attending school and their educators sometimes encounter difficulties in meeting SIFE’s needs.

In addition to supporting SIFE in the acquisition of a new language, teachers may often find that students’ content knowledge is below grade level with some secondary students requiring foundational literacy and numeracy skills instruction. Schools and districts also may need to provide socio-emotional support to English learners who are SIFE, because many of them have experienced extenuating circumstances in their past.

Despite the challenges that SIFE English learners face, they bring many valuable assets to their educational environments. Many students are bilingual or multilingual with advanced verbal skills in several languages, many have practical and pragmatic knowledge of the world and possess trade skills that can be leveraged into acquisition of academic content. Educators who support SIFE English learners have a unique task of helping students overcome the challenges that they face and turn their assets into high academic achievement.

During our conversation today, we will explore the best practices from the field of SIFE education. In the second part of this podcast we will discuss practical considerations and day-to-day programming involved with serving English learners who are SIFE with Teresa Vignaroli, English Learners Supervisor from Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia.

Let’s get the conversation started....

Francisco:

Dr. Calderon, thank you for being with us today. Can you please define the term *students with interrupted formal education, or SIFE* and describe this population of students for us?

Margarita:

Hello, it is good to be here with you today.

American Federation of Teachers has captured the best definition so far. Students with interrupted formal education or SIFE are a relatively small proportion of recently arrived English learners, or better known as Newcomers. About ten to twenty percent of Newcomers are SIFE, but these students often represent the most challenging population of English learners because of their limited first-language literacy skills, gaps in academic knowledge, and critical social and

emotional needs. Many arrive as unaccompanied teenagers, making their need to catch up academically even more urgent.

Francisco:

Can you discuss some specific characteristics of ELs who are SIFE and how they manifest in the U.S. educational context?

Margarita:

Sure! Many secondary ELs who are SIFE are over-age for their grade-level placement due to their below-grade academic skills and limited or inadequate formal schooling. They often have needs that traditional English as a second language and bilingual programs cannot or do not meet, such as approaches and materials that will help them catch up to and compete with mainstream students. Most SIFE have low or extremely limited literacy skills in their first language and in English and have little academic content-area knowledge. Many SIFE are also socially and psychologically isolated from mainstream students and as a result of all of these factors they are at a greater risk of failing or dropping out of traditional academic programs. Richard Fry, of the Pew Research Center, estimates that about 70 percent of SIFE drop out of high school.

Francisco:

I know that you conduct research into the educational needs of ELs who are SIFE. Can you share some findings that resulted from your work with this population of students?

Margarita:

In my research I found that ELs who are SIFE have missed out on quality education. For example, some might have attended school in the U.S., returned to their native country for a period of time, then returned to the U.S again. Some of these students attended kindergarten in English, attended first and second grade in their native language, then switched to all English instruction in third grade, with their reading skills often being below grade level. Some have attended schools in several locations, where the schools did not keep track or forward accurate information about them. This is why all these students are now SIFE. Their schooling or the quality of their schooling has been interrupted.

Francisco:

What are some of the greatest challenges that English learners who are SIFE face when attending school in the United States?

Margarita:

The gap between what students are expected to be able to do and the skill set that SIFE have is often too great, and they frequently give up. This struggle is exacerbated with students' need to work to make ends meet and/or by their living conditions. With such challenges, their social, emotional, and physiological needs have to be met before they are able to fully engage in an educational setting.

Once these needs are embraced by all educators, schools must help students build literacy skills in their home language and in English and fill the gaps in content knowledge, as they continue to support their social and emotional needs. Due to SIFE labeling, students' talents and intelligence are often undervalued. This may keep them out of advanced placement courses, STEM, or exciting project-based learning activities because of the low expectations that seem to be

attached to the terms like Students with Interrupted Formal Education, or Long-Term English Learners.

Francisco:

How do the challenges that SIFE encounter differ for younger children at the elementary level and older students at the secondary level?

Margarita:

Younger children have greater opportunities to catch up to grade level if their instructional program addresses language proficiency — listening and speaking and the five reading components — phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. For younger children, reading is easier because texts contain fewer words. When the five reading skills are well developed along with the words and phrases used in those texts, the foundational writing skills — spelling and grammar develop simultaneously. When students know how to speak, read, write, and comprehend aurally, core content from math, science, or social studies becomes accessible. We now have the research to support that if ELs are taught 3000 to 5000 words a year, provided reading instruction using evidence-based methods specific to ELs and SIFE, and have opportunities to produce text-based writing, they should be able to be proficient by 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

Francisco:

That makes sense and it is encouraging to know that with the right kind of support young ELs who are SIFE can make a lot of gains. What about older students?

Margarita:

When SIFE arrive in middle school, depending on the comprehensive services offered at the school, they can catch up to grade level before entering high school. When SIFE arrive in the last two years of high school, unless the school offers intensive interventions specific to SIFE such as a Newcomers Center, well-structured after school programs, or summer programs, it will be very difficult for English learners who are SIFE to graduate from high school without adding one or two extra years. Of course, many students do not want to stay in school for two more years. This is why so many drop out of school.

Francisco:

This is eye-opening. The challenges of SIFE that you describe do seem very serious, especially at the secondary level. What about some of the challenges and needs that educators face when serving English learners who are SIFE?

Margarita:

The challenges educators face when serving ELs who are SIFE are basically that they are not being prepared to teach them! There are many evidence-based instructional strategies that have been developed for teaching language and literacy skills integrated in all core content areas. However, those strategies are typically not used in core content classrooms. Content teachers need extensive professional development and follow up coaching to learn how to integrate academic vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing instruction into their content lessons.

Social emotional competencies, or SEL should also be embedded and taught along with language and literacy.

Francisco:

So, what are the latest research-based approaches and practices in the field of educating students with interrupted formal education?

Margarita:

The Council of Chief State School Officers recommends supports for secondary school newcomers including those with interrupted formal education. These supports include building environments that respond to the immediate social, cultural, and linguistic needs of immigrant adolescents with limited schooling; Creating structures that transcend high school academic departmental divisions to support simultaneous linguistic and academic development such as revisiting grading and scheduling, and ways of collecting data and sharing data with teachers; Forming newcomer centers to ease transitions for newly immigrated students; Aligning high school programs with higher education and adult education and using the full resources of the community to support immigrant students.

SIFE also need specialized programs such as RIGOR, which stands for Reading Instructional Goals for Older Readers. This program addresses phonics, vocabulary, fluency, reading comprehension, and writing through a series of science and social studies books that start at lower reading levels and increase systematically to cover all the skills. Intensive interventions with RIGOR have had great results.

Francisco:

That is very encouraging. Can you talk about an example where a program such as RIGOR had positive affect on student achievement?

Margarita:

Absolutely! In ten schools in New York City, a teacher used the Spanish science and social studies books during the day and the ESL teacher taught with the English versions (not translations) after school or in Saturday school. Students with interrupted formal education made huge progress in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in one semester. When students see immediate results, their confidence grows, and they begin to participate more actively in all their classes.

Francisco:

It is wonderful to know that there are resources that may result in tangible educational gains by ELs who are SIFE. Now I'd like to ask about some of the approaches and best practices to support educators in providing access to grade-level content for this population of students.

Margarita:

One of the most effective approaches is the Whole-School Professional Development Model for Teaching Language, Literacy and Core Content, which we call ExC-ELL, or Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners. ExC-ELL was tested in middle and high schools with high SIFE populations for five years through grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and U.S Department of Education. Along with an elementary level model called BCIRC, or

Bilingual Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition, the outcomes for students, teachers, and the school were exemplary. Schools went from low performing to exemplary in two or three years based on EL and all other students' achievement. The majority of the ELs were SIFE in those schools. They were able to exit from the SIFE label and do as well on the state tests as general education students, graduating successfully on time. We now have another five-year grant from OELA to continue to test the ExC-ELL model.

Francisco:

This sounds very promising. Can you describe what the ExC-ELL instructional model entails?

Margarita:

ExC-ELL is a model that prepares math, science, social studies, language arts, and ESL or dual language teachers to teach academic language for content genre. This includes vocabulary, discourse, listening and speaking skills, reading comprehension, including basic and close reading, and writing skills for content genre. Social emotional competencies undergird all student activities as they learn to communicate and collaborate in pairs and teams throughout each lesson.

ExC-ELL is a two- or three-year commitment that includes trainers going into a school to systematically coach teachers on a yearly basis. Professional development also needs to include training on how to analyze and change existing school structures that stifle teachers' efforts in supporting and increasing achievement of underserved student populations. Hence, we work closely with administrators to achieve this.

All teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators in a school attend the professional development together. Their shared experiences during professional development and follow up implementation help them to make necessary adjustments in teaching, school structures, and the way they perceive and care for SIFE.

Francisco:

Dr. Calderon, you collaborate with Loudoun County Public School educators. Can you talk about the collaboration and how your work with Loudoun County Public Schools supports educators in meeting the needs of English learners who are SIFE?

Margarita:

My team and I have provided the ExC-ELL training in 3-day summer institutes on teaching academic vocabulary and discourse, reading comprehension and text-based writing in all the core content areas —math, science, social studies, language arts, ESL, as well as specialties — physical education and music. The central and school-site administrators and instructional coaches attended two extra days on how to observe and give feedback on teaching vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing.

About twenty-four to thirty times during the year, trainers coach Loudoun County teachers by observing them teach using ExC-ELL strategies. The principals and instructional coaches shadow trainers and also practice observing and giving feedback. The EL Specialists and Administrators from Loudoun central office also went through the five days of training and join trainers for the class-by-class coaching and feedback days. The observation protocol used during coaching focuses on lesson delivery and participation of SIFE when the teacher is instructing.

Feedback helps teachers and administrators see where students are succeeding and where they need extra help.

We have trained the whole faculty and administration in six elementary, two middle and two high schools in the district. We have invited an administrator from Loudoun County schools to talk about ExC-ELL implementation and the ways that her district supports ELs who are SIFE.

Francisco:

Dr. Calderon, thank you for joining. We appreciate all the information that you shared with us today.

Margarita:

You are welcome! It was my pleasure!

Host:

Thank you, Dr. Calderon for discussing the education of English learners who are students with interrupted formal education. The information that you shared will certainly help educators support this population of students. You have given us many useful ideas to think about as we continue to serve English learners who are SIFE in classrooms across the country. Stay tuned for the second part of this podcast where we will speak with Teresa Vignaroli, English Learners Supervisor from Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia. We also encourage all of you to visit the NCELA website at [www.ncela.ed.gov](http://www.ncela.ed.gov) and check out the many educator resources available there.