

“English Language Learners”: An Analysis of Perplexing ESL-Related Terminology

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Abstract

Learners for whom English is not their heritage language are referred to in the literature by a variety of terms. This proliferation of terms and inconsistent use has created confusion and problems in both research and teaching practice. In today's globalized world, it is increasingly important to consciously consider the terminology used when referencing others. The language used in identifiers and definitions has a profound impact on human relationships, identity, and academic success. With an understanding that language and terminology are not neutral, it is evermore necessary for professionals to be conscious about, and attentive to, the underlying messages they communicate. The purpose of this paper is to explore and discuss the perplexing array of loosely defined ESL-related terminology in education. A systematic literature search in major research databases revealed a number of terms referring to the same group of learners, the most common being English Language Learner. Through a discussion of related terms, the key contents of common definitions are explored, and an alternative term is proposed: *Learner of English as an Additional Language (LEAL)*. Rather than utilizing the language learning aspect as a defining characteristic, LEAL is a politically and culturally appropriate and respectful term that utilizes *person first* language while also acknowledging existing language competencies.

Introduction

Frequently, it is socially-constructed terminology and concepts that map the discursive field of a subject and its associated meaning (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007; English, 2009). For this reason, commonly used terminology within any given field must be identified and understood (Baker, 2006). In the field of education, terminology has been used to bind groups of students into distinct categories of learners by common or seemingly related characteristics. Any student termed *English language learner (ELL)*, is positioned in a category outside the category of *mainstream* language learners in the classroom (English, 2009). This categorization of students marks a boundary between first-language English speakers and those acquiring English as an additional language—a boundary which is rarely interpreted as neutral (English, 2009; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). In general, ELLs have been loosely defined in the literature as language learners in the novice stages of English language development, in comparison to same-grade peers, for

academic purposes in the schooling context (Baker, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008; Perez & Holmes, 2010). Nonetheless, students for whom English is not their heritage language are also referred to in the literature by a variety of other terms including: *Second Language Learners (SLL)*, *English as a Second Language (ESL) Student*, *Limited English Proficient (LEP)*, *Language Minority Student*, *English learner (EL)*, and *Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD)*. This proliferation of terms and inconsistent use is confusing to teachers and novice scholars alike (Paulson & Armstrong, 2010). It is necessary to acknowledge the discrepancies that continue to exist in the literature; therefore, for ease of reference, ELLs will be the term applied to this learner group prior to the results section in this paper.

More specifically, the following precise research questions will be explored in the present study: (a) do all ELL-related terms refer to the same entity (interchangeable)? (b) are there subtle distinctions between the terms (meaning)? (c) what is the frequency of usage in academic literature? and (d) are the common terms sensitive, and culturally and politically appropriate for global times? It is of key importance for both educators and researchers to be attentive to term usage and the conceptualization of the terms used (Paulson & Armstrong, 2010). Furthermore, a respectful identifier may also aid in the establishment of inclusive and responsive learning environments. It is our hope that the examination of terms in the ELL area can exemplify the problematic nature of current terminology and provide a more politically and culturally appropriate, sensitive, and competent alternative for both research and teaching practice.

Literature Review

The study and understanding of any research field requires attention to the field-specific terminology and definitions (Henson, 1996; Paulson & Armstrong, 2010). Over time, these terms and definitions are revised or replaced to ensure accuracy and respect. While some definitions verge upon the extreme of being either all-encompassing or remarkably specific, most definitions fall between these parameters. It is important to note, however, that the differences between these definitions are not simply accidental variations; rather, they highlight different values, assumptions, and attitudes, and can all have different consequences (Cummins, 1997; Henson, 1996). Furthermore, these terms are never neutral with respect to the messages communicated. As the theoretical framework of the present study, the work by Cummins (1986, 1997, 2001) purports that language, orientation, and definitions have the power to impact human relationships, identity, and academic success. Consequently, it is crucial to examine terminology usage to clarify or identify discrepancies and interrelations, to examine potential consequences or value assumptions, and to ultimately ensure that the current terms and definitions used are representative and established in the best interest of the learners themselves (Cummins, 2001; Henson, 1996; Paulson & Armstrong, 2010).

Due to the influence of societal power structures, minority languages and minority language bilingualism have been devalued and excluded from education for decades. Yet, educators and researchers alike can potentially exert influence with the value messages that they communicate (Cummins, 2001). If our image of a child includes its wholistic capacities, we reflect and orchestrate our language and interactions to communicate this potential; when we choose to frame children in language that is inaccurate, disrespectful,

non-person-first, and deficit based, “we expel culture, language, identity, intellect and imagination from our image of the child” (Cummins, 2001, p. 654). Similarly, highlighting only the English language (e.g., English language learner) does not represent an additive orientation to language learning. Identifiers used with the intentional absence of the students’ existing language and cultural affiliations and repertoires is inaccurate, disempowering, and problematic (Cummins, 1986).

Throughout the history of education, ESL-related terminology has shifted and evolved to represent a more accurate reflection of ELLs and the process of language acquisition (Baker, 2006; English, 2009; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008; Schon, Shaftel & Markham, 2008). ESL was a previously-used common term referring to students within the program, and it is still used today in many contexts. This term endures since it is internationally used, and is descriptive, even though it may be inaccurate—in cases where English may actually be a student’s third or fourth language, for example (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). Another controversial term is “limited English proficient” which has been commonly referred to in the literature as having pejorative connotations and deficit-based undertones (Baker, 2006; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008; Schon, Shaftel & Markham, 2008). Moreover, the range of terminology has the potential to limit readers from accessing relevant literature and related understanding as they may fail to notice the perplexing array of related terminology. Furthermore, each term within the range communicates a unique value of languages, cultures, intellect, and imagination (Cummins, 2001). With the need for more accurate, inclusive, and positive terminology, many new terms have emerged; nevertheless, minimal literature has been found about the issues of terminology in the area of ELLs.

Language can empower students by showcasing their wholistic potential, valuing their existing ability, and further enabling them to develop the confidence and motivation to succeed academically. The language we use in practice and research portrays a fundamental message about acceptable identities, expectations, assumptions, and goals that we bring to teaching (Cummins, 1997). Educational professionals must utilize terminology that reflects students accurately by acknowledging and building on prior experiences and abilities. With the understanding that language and terminology are not neutral, it is evermore necessary to be conscious about, and attentive to, the underlying messages that we currently communicate as professionals.

Methodology

To identify the breadth of the ESL-related terminology used, a systematic literature search was conducted in multiple databases. Specifically, three major research databases were selected, including the Academic Search Premier, the ERIC @ Scholars Portal, and Education Research Complete. An individual search of each of the following terms was conducted in each of the research databases: “ELL;” “ESL Learner;” “EAL Learner;” “LEP Student;” “ESL Student;” “ELL Student;” “EAL Student;” “CLD Student;” “English Language Learner;” “Limited English-Proficient Student;” “Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Student;” “Second Language Learner;” “Language Minority Students;” and “English Learner.” Quotation marks were used to ensure the accuracy and relevance of search results. The first literature search did not incorporate the

use of limiters—such as date range—as the intent was to capture the overall breadth of terms.

Based on early interpretations of the search results, the Academic Search Premier database was used for a second search of current literature publications (2010-2011) with the same key words. The purpose of this second search was to identify whether particular terms with high frequency are also recent or currently used in scholarly literature. Academic Search Premier was selected as the database for the second search since all terms searched resulted in at least one match. As a result of the search for each term, a general distribution of terms in the literature as well as a general change over time through the comparison was revealed. Such comparison enables an investigation of current terminology trends as well as the influence of time as a factor of change (please see Table 1).

The aim of the search procedure used was not to identify a single “correct” term, but instead to equip readers with the necessary knowledge and insight to interpret research surrounding ELL terminology in the field of ESL. This analysis is intended to provide a theoretical deconstruction within which the major components of ESL-related terminology may be identified.

Results

As evidenced in Table 1, the terms “ELL” and “English Language Learner” present the highest frequency of terminology in literature. This is further evidenced with the narrowed limiter of publication dates from 2010-2011. Of the most recently published articles in the Academic Search Premier database, the terms “ELL” and “English language learner” constitute 95 of the 119 publications found, equating 80% of the literature associated with ESL-related terminology. While some of these publications may be found in connection with more than one of the listed keywords, there is a distinctive indication that ELL is the most commonly used term to refer to students learning English as an additional language.

Table 1

Keyword Search Results in Education Databases

Term	Academic Search Premier	ERIC @ Scholars Portal	Education Research Complete	Academic Search Premier (2010-2011 only)
“ELL”	398	514	790	74
“English Language Learner”	140	241	269	21
“Language Minority Students”	135	590	216	7
“English Learner”	28	65	63	4
“ESL Student”	46	185	65	4

“ELL Student”	10	44	30	3
“ESL Learner”	11	31	16	2
“CLD Student”	2	7	3	1
“Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Student”	4	14	6	1
“EAL Learner”	2	0	0	1
“Second Language Learner”	14	154	50	1
“EAL Student”	3	1	3	0
“LEP Student”	9	0	0	0
“Limited English-Proficient Student”	2	23	10	0

Discussion

In the course of navigating the literature related to ELLs, 14 different identifiers for ELLs have been discovered with each providing its own literature-search results. Table 2 (*Definitions of Commonly Used ESL-Related Terms*) highlights the key contents of the top seven most commonly utilized terms in current literature. Term preference as well as prevalence has changed through history with a contemporary focus on strengths-based diversity such as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) rather than deficit terminology with negative connotations such as Limited English Proficient (LEP) (Baker, 2006; English, 2009; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008; Schon, Shaftel & Markham, 2008). Professionals concerned with the study and education of ELLs in today’s mainstream classrooms include educators, researchers, and administrators—most of whom support the use of terms such as EL, ELL, SLL, and CLD to refer to students in the process of learning English as an additional language (English, 2009; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). Minimal literature is identified on ESL-related terminology; however, there exists a range of key terms and related acronyms in the area of ESL-related studies. Based on the above findings, it seems that many existing definitions related to ESL are inadequate, at both individual and global levels. In addition to highlighting some similarities and main issues, we also culminate the discussion with an alternative term that demonstrates the relationship of language learning components required in an accurate definition of language learners in mainstream classrooms.

Table 2

Definitions of Commonly Used ESL-Related Terms

Term	Key Contents	Sources
Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD)	• Educators focus predominantly on the acquisition of English ◦ Emphasis on what students lack (i.e., English proficiency) rather than the assets they bring (e.g., diverse experiences) • Reminder to consider the whole student and the totality of lived experiences as a foundation for educational efforts • Linguistic dimension is only one of four dimensions	Perez & Holmes, 2010
English as a second language (ESL) [student]	• Originally referred to non-native speakers who were learning the English language in an English language schooling environment • Often used to refer to the acquisition of English as a non-native language • Term is broadly and widely used, internationally	Peregoy & Boyle, 2008
English language learner (ELL)	• Students in English-language schools • First language is not English or is a variety significantly different from the variety used in Ontario's schools • May initially require educational interventions to attain proficiency • Canadian-born or newly arrived • Diverse backgrounds and school experiences • Variety of needs	Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005
English learners (EL)	• Non-native English speakers • Learning English in school • Typically, speak a primary language other than English at home • Vary in proficiency in their primary language and English	Peregoy & Boyle, 2008
Language minority students	• Speak a minority group language other than English at home	Peregoy & Boyle, 2008
Limited English proficient (LEP)	• Beginners to intermediates in English • Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, definition of LEP • Sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding • May deny opportunity to learn successfully (English instruction) • Difficulties in participating fully in society due to place of birth, environment, native language, etc.	Peregoy & Boyle, 2008 Schon, Shaftel & Markham, 2008
Second	• A learner who already has a known language structure and a	Rubin, 1975

Existing Definitions

Of the many ESL-related terms utilized in the literature, ELL appears to be the most commonly used to identify the category of students learning English as a new language for academic purposes (English, 2009). The term ELL has been increasingly used internationally among educators and researchers since it distinguishes learners from the programs that support their language learning needs i.e., the ESL program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

Each term is defined in the literature with key criteria that places varying emphasis on the value of languages, cultures, intellect, development and intervention (Cummins, 2001). Table 2 provides a general overview of the key criteria emphasized for each of the commonly used terms in the literature. Although the term ELL is most commonly used, it is evident that the definition represents a neutral position with a focus on the student and learning context: it overlooks the multifaceted and interrelated nature of the language learning process as a total educational experience (e.g., sociocultural, linguistic, academic, cognitive) and as a partial facet to the development of academic literacy skills (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007; Perez & Holmes, 2010). As illustrated in Table 2, the definition for ELL highlights first language, educational intervention, learning context, place of birth, and personal background/experiences as key criteria to define ELLs. Other terms such as EL students, CLD students and ESL students appear to mainly focus on language proficiency and acquisition. The definitions for Language minority students and SLL are quite broad as the only criterion is to speak a language other than English at home. Among other deficit-type qualities and descriptors, LEP is the only definition with a highly negative undertone, which includes *sufficient difficulty* and *difficulties may deny such individual the opportunity to learn*. In contrast, CLD is the most affirmative and wholistic term used to identify ELLs in the classroom. The CLD definition highlights ELL's assets, the totality of linguistic and lived experience, and the multidimensional nature of the whole student. Despite any contradictions and similarities, none of the definitions noted above includes all of the descriptors deemed necessary as key criteria. Educators label learners in hopes of identifying and explaining students' needs for the purpose of better addressing them. Through the current product-driven process in the education system, these terms or labels often completely ignore the student as a person (Gates, 2010). This issue becomes murkier with the variance in terms and the fact that different authors and researchers tend to adopt their own specific meanings, distinctions, and definitions (Baker, 2006; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). Nonetheless, it is evident that all of the terms mentioned in this paper are used to refer to a similar entity. A call for change for more accurate terminology is therefore recommended and advocated.

The Challenge of a Universal Identifier

All learners in education are English language learners in the most basic sense; and it is necessary to distinguish between those learning the English language at regular school grade levels and those learning the English language as an additional language.

With this in mind, the term ELL appears to be inaccurate. Furthermore, learners are multifaceted: the English language learning component is only one facet of their being (Gates, 2010). The term ELL emphasizes English as a primary definition of the learner rather than an aspect contributing to the whole.

The terminology explored in this paper is not necessarily interchangeable based on the definitions found in the literature. Although it appears that the terminology is referring to the same entity, the definitions indicate contrasting overarching views of learners as fractional language learners or holistic learners. It is best demonstrated with the CLD term which refers to learners as having a unique linguistic profile that is multifaceted rather than being the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals (Baker, 2006). Another contrasting focus is the attention on the linguistic competence of an entity versus the more positive focus on the multi-competence of integrated learners. While attempting to amalgamate the identifiers, it is also necessary to consider the removal of less favourable, negative, and even pejorative terminology (e.g., LEP) and descriptors. This terminology perpetuates the phenomenon of a marginalized and minority status of ELLs in education, as it highlights past and present performance as opposed to the potentials and possibilities associated with possessing fluency in two or more languages (Baker, 2006). Identifiers that highlight deficiencies over proficiencies should be removed from all ELL terminology and definitions.

Although it may be desirable to obtain a universal term for ELLs, it might not be possible to incorporate unique linguistic profiles into a single term. The majority of the variance rests in the definitions, and a universal term would require a universal definition. Even within this paper, it is evident that common terminology was unable to fully encompass the dimensions of ELLs. The challenge truly rests in the definitions of the terms.

An Alternative Term: Learner of English as an Additional Language (LEAL)

We propose that *Learner of English as an Additional Language (LEAL)* may be a more appropriate term to identify and reflect this entity of learners. This term challenges structures of disempowerment through the use of *person first* language, a philosophy which demonstrates respect for people by referring to them first and then referring to their needs/challenges (Bickford, 2004; Blaska, 1993; Cummins, 2001). This educational movement is most evident in special education literature. The use of *person first* principles focuses on the person, rather than their abilities, which is deemed politically correct in present global times. Furthermore, this terminology acknowledges the fact that English may not be the learner's second language, and may in fact be their third or fourth language. While using *person first* language takes more time, more thought, and more words, it is more accurate (Blaska, 1993), and also incorporates the ever important aim of the CLD term while still emphasizing the English language learning aspect. The difference is subtle, but powerful.

It is further necessary to consider the order of words since their sequence greatly affects the images, attitudes, and beliefs that are formed about individuals (Bickford, 2004; Blaska, 1993). In the past, many commonly used terms, labels, identifiers, and descriptors created negative, derogatory, prejudicial, or offensive overtones which perpetuated false stereotypes (Blaska, 1993). This is particularly crucial in educational

atmospheres dedicated to social, cultural and educational equities (Cummins, 2001). Children are shaped by the words they hear; in particular they are highly influenced by the words used to describe people that they have no experiences with or exposure to (Blaska, 1993; Gates, 2010). Language usage is very pervasive and not only impacts society's perceptions of others, but an individual's perceptions of self (Blaska, 1993; Gates, 2010); therefore, all possible means must be employed to enable learners to feel like valued members of society with the ability to achieve their aspirations.

The use of terms when referring to LEALs is very subtle and might initially seem inconsequential. However, when we consider the true significance and impact of language as the primary means to communicate thoughts, feelings, beliefs and attitudes, the significance of the terminology issue becomes apparent. In order to create a truly inclusive environment, the use of respectful, culturally sensitive, and politically correct language must be observed.

When employing the LEAL term, it is necessary to highlight the key criteria or descriptors that define that term. These required descriptors are derived from the overlapping and interacting dimensions of ESL-related terminologies. Based on an analysis of similar terminologies, the following dimensions have been determined to be imperative to establishing an effective and accurate definition of LEALs: (a) degree of proficiency in relation to academic language competence; (b) domain of use and purpose of language use (Baker, 2006; Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007); (c) context of language acquisition; and (d) acknowledgement of cultural and linguistic diversity. Figure 1 demonstrates these four crucial dimensions, and illustrates the necessary and interrelated dimensions for an effective and accurate definition of LEALs. While ELL emphasizes English language as being the primary attribute of the child, LEAL's prime aspect is that it diverts focus from the language and places it instead on the learner, enabling language learning to become a descriptor.

Lastly, the area or the subject of teaching LEAL should be described as English as an Additional Language (EAL). The use of the word *additional* emphasizes the act of *uniting* or *joining* (something) to something else so as to increase size, number, value, or capacity (Hoad, 1996; Stevenson, 2010). Using *additional* in this context thus creates a wholistic, positive, and encouraging nuance that promotes a better understanding and respect with regard to EAL or LEAL.

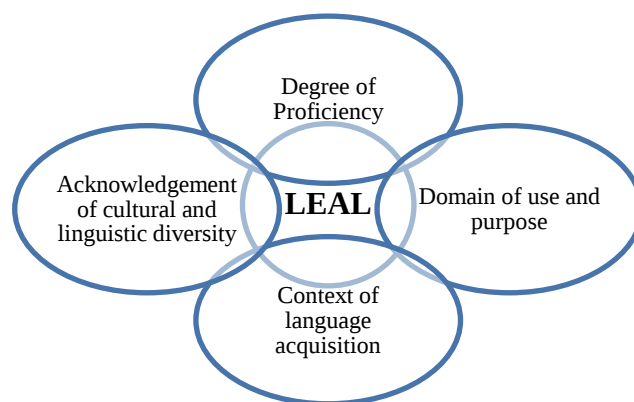


Figure 1. The critical dimensions of LEAL.

Conclusion

A number of terms have been used in the educational field to describe English Language Learners. Such diverse and unspecified terms have created considerable confusion and, furthermore, they are politically and culturally inappropriate. An alternative inclusive term, Learner of English as an Additional Language (LEAL), seems to be politically and culturally competent for this particular group of learners; also, it establishes the learner as the focus of the definition, encompassing all its contributing dimensions (e.g., proficiency, use, acquisition, diversity). Similarly, the area of studies involving such learners should be referred to as English as an Additional Language (EAL). In recent years, there has been a strong movement towards inclusion and the need to accept global diversity. However, the main emphasis of this movement has been centred on cultural diversity and multicultural themes (Blaska, 1993). It is of equal importance to highlight the need to update and analyze other aspects of inclusion and diversity of people, including linguistic diversity and language learning needs in educational settings. Our terminology must be revised in order to more accurately reflect and respect the position of individuals learning English as an additional language. Words are “powerful tools by which a civilization perpetuates its values—both its proudest achievements and its most crippling prejudices” (Radloff, 1974, p. 8), and therefore revisions to English language learning terminology must be represented both in the literature and in the broad field of education.

As educators and researchers, it is imperative that we actively seek appropriate ways of abolishing the perpetuation of prejudices in education. Educators must utilize flawless language with consistent meanings in educational settings. Even with English-only instruction, educators have options in the positioning they adopt, the terminology they use, and the pedagogy they encourage (Cummins, 2001). As the findings of the present study have indicated, all research and practice related to additional language learning should consider adopting a more political, culturally, and pedagogically appropriate terminology—such as Learner of French as an Additional language (LFAL) and French as an Additional language (FAL)—and so forth. Furthermore, when

establishing definitions, it is essential for future researchers to examine the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of the alternative terms (e.g., LEAL, EAL, LFAL, FAL) among individuals who are teaching and learning additional languages. Through this consistency and accuracy of terminology, educators help ensure that LEALs see themselves as learners whose language learning is simply one component of their wholistic selves, rather than interpreting it as a defining characteristic of their identities as students.

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