



## Literature Review: CELA “Plateau” Phenomenon

### *Why are we seeing plateaus at CELA 3 and 4 as well as from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade?*

Review of the literature suggests complex answers involving developmental, socio-cultural, institutional, and assessment factors.

- *Some plateauing at CELA 3 and 4 reflects normal second language development, i.e., slower growth at higher levels of proficiency.*
- *Long term plateaus at CELA Levels 3 and 4 as well as the plateau/drop from grade 8 to 9 are associated with more complex content and language as students age and become more proficient in English, and for the older students, the stronger influence of sociocultural and institutional factors accompanies developmental changes. This suggests the need for adapting classroom, school and district approaches to meet the specific needs of these learners.*



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## *Neuro-biological development and normal language development trajectories matter!*

- Time matters. It takes time to learn a second or additional language.
- First language matters. Languages more like L2 support more rapid acquisition of L2.
- The individual learner matters. The individual's life experiences and individual developmental trajectory influence language acquisition.
- Age matters. How old a student is when he/she begins learning L2 matters.



*The social and cultural contexts in which learners  
acquire language matter!*

- Current U.S. monolingual ideology matters.
- School make-up, focus, priorities, and community relationships matter.
- Teachers' knowledge of language matters.
- Degree of content complexity matters.
- Explicitness, communication opportunities, and oral interaction matter.



## *Assessment matters!*

- Assessment goals matter. Outcomes-based assessments are not adequate for informing day-to-day instruction.
- Who, what, when, where, why & how matter. Language assessment outcomes are affected by:
  - individual being assessed
  - assessment procedures and assessment context
  - linguistic skill, knowledge and role of assessor
  - timing in relation to the individual's language development process
  - complexity or level being assessed (all content is not equally assessable)



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## *Neuro-biological development and normal language development trajectories matter!*

### ***Neuro-biological developmental factors:***

- The nature of language-related **sensitive periods** changes with age and development.
- Developmental trajectories become less linear with age, as social and cultural influences increase:
  - **Plasticity:** neural networks are built quickly, flexibly, and fluidly in early development;
  - **Stability:** existing neural pathways become more stable and efficient but less plastic;
  - **Multi-lateral change:** brain and hormones begin to interact.
- Brain, hormones, affect, behavior, and social roles confound in a **complex relationship** as children mature.
- **Stress** inhibits the development of new neural pathways; prolonged stress can shut the process down.
- **Access to challenging content** with supports for learning facilitates neural development.



## *Neuro-biological development and normal language development trajectories matter!*

### **Normal second or additional language development:**

- It takes 80% of ELs 4-7 years to become proficient in English.
- Progress from beginning to intermediate proficiency is more rapid than intermediate to advanced levels of proficiency.
- Development is driven by **learners' needs and desire to communicate** (comprehend and explain/express ideas or information in L2 with other native and non-native L2 speakers).
- **Oral language development** in L2 supports the development of literacy.
- Development for intermediate and advanced learners (CELA Levels 3 and 4) and learners in higher grades benefits from direct instruction in and interaction with **oral academic language** as well as literacy in the content areas. Oral language tends not to be emphasized as learners become more proficient in L2 and content becomes more complex.
- The older a student is when he/she begins learning English, the longer it will take.
- The nature of the first language influences the acquisition of the second language. Language families vary in their sound systems, syntactic systems, and orthographic systems - the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 systems affect second language acquisition.



*The social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which learners acquire language matter!*

***Sociocultural factors:***

- There is a strong history of monolingualism in the US, including Colorado, that influences the **attitudes, beliefs, and actions** of administrators, coaches, teachers, and even the students themselves.
- Students learning English as a second or additional language are **stigmatized** as non-English speakers, and often as children of color who are poor.
- The concentration of certain socio-economic classes, violence, and segregation negatively affect language development and EL academic success.
- The relationship between the school and learners' **families** affects language development and success.



## *The social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which learners acquire language matter!*

### ***Institutional Factors:***

- A **school's commitment** to language and content acquisition for all students, and the shape this commitment takes, affect EL success.
- Prioritizing needs and mandates that result in **premature transitioning** of learners, in language and content area classrooms, negatively affects EL development, especially if adequate supports and resources are not provided.
- As the complexity of concepts and the quantity of work increases, **opportunities for talk** provided in the classroom, typically decreases dramatically.
- The generic language structures and words that frequently drive/comprise instruction do not address the **purposes that motivate learners** to develop their language. Language is a tool for communication. Learners must see authentic personal reasons to use that tool in order to develop language proficiency.





## *Assessment matters!*

- High stakes language tests provide a **limited picture** of language development.
- Outcomes-based assessments (standardized, distal, gross measures) do not inform the **frequency and quality** of assistance (instruction: individual, proximal/situated, micro or day-to-day) a student needs to listen, speak, read, and write more proficiently in English, and students' needs in these areas are very diverse.
- As language and content increase in complexity, accurate assessment becomes increasingly difficult because it becomes more individualized and dependent on the assessor's (or teacher's) understanding of both language acquisition and the structure, use, and function of English.
- New frameworks for language assessment emphasize **functionality** as opposed to discreet knowledge and competencies. (Functionality, broadly understood: Is the learner able to function linguistically in the context? What supports may be necessary?) Traditional summative and high stakes testing constitutes its own context, which inadequately maps onto the communicative contexts of mainstream classrooms and life beyond tests.



## *Plateaus at CELA Levels 3 and 4 as well as from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade*

### ***What can we do in schools?***

Develop coherent and consistent institutional practices and beliefs: Coherence of approach to learners of language and language instruction, i.e., a shared language lens, is more important than the language of instruction.

- Cultivate the **shared belief** that **all children can learn** and that **knowing more than one language is an asset**.
- Build a **positive, safe school environment**.
- Provide a **meaningful** and **academically challenging curriculum** and hold **high expectations for all students**.
- **Involve parents: Home literacy practices in L1 or L2**, such as frequency of book reading with children and taking children to the library, also contribute to later L2 oral language and literacy development.
- **Increase school-parent outreach/involvement/interaction/community building** in early grades. This outreach should include encouragement to read (and talk) in the home language especially and English (if the family members are relatively fluent).



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## **What can we do in schools and districts?**

- Provide professional development **opportunities for content and ELA teachers** in the **structure, use, and function of English** (relevant to their areas) so that they can intentionally and explicitly guide learners.
- Provide professional development **opportunities for content area and ELA teachers** about **how languages work** and how languages influence each other.
- **Educate teachers and school leaders in second language (L2) acquisition** and L2 instructional models.
- **Educate teachers and school leaders in strategies for transitioning learners** to higher level courses and content that ensure (a) transition is not premature or (b) if transition is premature, other supports are in place.



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### ***What can we do in classrooms?***

- **Increase academic oral language use** in upper grades and all grades for more advanced speakers in the content areas to support literacy and academic language.
- Use **direct instruction** of language and **opportunities to interact** in the **language** AND with the **content** in **mainstream classrooms**.
- Provide **frequent opportunities** for beginning, intermediate, and advanced learners of English **to communicate in English**. The **purposes** that actually motivate learners must be the **primary drivers of language instruction** - **not generic language structures**. Acquisition of structures is supported by the need and desire to communicate.
- **Use ongoing formative assessment** of oral and written language as well as content knowledge to guide instruction and learning.



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