



# Recommended Educational Practices for Standard English Learners

*Executive Summary*

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## Recommended Practices for SELs

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A full report and executive summary of the *Recommended Educational Practices for Standard English Learners* can be obtained at:

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**Glossary of Acronyms**

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<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Full Term</b>
AAE	African American English
CAL	The Center for Applied Linguistics
CDOE	California Department of Education
C & I	Curriculum and instruction
ELL	English language learner
ELPS	English Language Proficiency Standards
ESL	English as a Second Language
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
LAE	Latino American English
LEP	Limited English proficient
The Panel	The Expert Panel convened for this study
PD	Professional development
SB	Senate bill
SBOE	Texas State Board of Education
SBEC	Texas State Board for Educator Certification
SEL	Standard English learner
SSI	Student Success Initiative
TAKS	Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills
TEKS	Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills
TELPAS	Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System
TEA	Texas Education Agency
TERC	Texas Education Research Center; usages in this report reference the Center at the University of Texas at Austin

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

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In Senate Bill (SB) 1, the 81st Texas Legislature modified the Student Success Initiative (SSI). The SSI, a program mandated by the Texas Legislature, focuses on improvement in reading, math, and postsecondary readiness among Texas public school students. Rider 42, section (I) of SB 1 directs the Commissioner of Education to set aside funds:

...for the 2010-11 biennium to contract with an Education Research Center established under Texas Education Code § 1.005 for the purpose of conducting research to determine best practices in curriculum adjustments, instructional strategies, and professional development for teachers related to second dialects of English speakers.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) contracted with the Texas Education Research Center (TERC) at the University of Texas at Austin to conduct this research. The research included three major activities: a review of the professional literature about students who speak dialects of English, production of a report about possible professional development (PD) strategies and the convening of an expert panel (The Panel) which reviewed project reports and assisted TERC in developing recommendations for serving second dialects of English speakers.

### Defining “Second Dialects of English Speakers”

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The word dialect is “generally used to refer to a variety of a language associated with a regionally or socially defined group of people” (Adger, Wolfram & Christian, 2007, p.1). The development of dialects within a language is a natural phenomenon, and unlike slang or errors, dialects are systematic and rule-governed. However, the term “dialect” is often used to refer only to stigmatized language varieties, this is, language varieties which may call negative attention to individuals who use them (Adger et al.). To avoid these negative connotations, and based on the advice of The Panel, we use the socially neutral term “language varieties” in place of “second dialects of English.”

We define the population referenced by “second dialects of English speakers” as students whose home language is English, and who use language varieties which differ from standard or mainstream English, and we refer to these students as *standard English learners (SELs)*, a term selected and defined by The Panel. Standard English can be defined as the language variety most often used in education, media, government, and enterprise. Educators assume that students who speak English are fluent in standard English when they enter school (O’Neal & Ringler, 2010). Standard English differs from academic English, which is “the language that is used by teachers and students for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills...imparting new information, describing abstract ideas, and developing students’ conceptual

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understanding (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994, p. 40). Academic English encompasses language which is both content and structure specific; for example, the academic English needed for math differs from the academic English needed for social studies (O'Neal & Ringler, 2010). Some students command standard English at school entrance, but all students must learn academic English, and proficiency in standard English is frequently needed to do so successfully.

While research and data about SELs are limited at best, it has been hypothesized that students who are not proficient in standard English may struggle in school and that their academic performance may fall below that of their non-SEL peers (Adger et al., 2007). Further, there is evidence that directly teaching standard English to SELs can improve their literacy skills (Wheeler, 2006).

### Standard English Learners in Texas

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Existing data do not allow the exact number of SELs in the Texas PK-12 student population to be determined. However, it is likely that Texas schools serve large numbers of SELs. Extant research has identified several language varieties and influences across the state. The Atlas of North American English (Labov, Ash & Boberg, 2005) identifies two regional language varieties which are used in Texas. These are labeled "South" and "Texas South". South is the variety used across much of the Southeastern United States, while Texas South is a combination of the varieties brought by settlers from the Lower South (Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana) and settlers from the Upper South (Tennessee, Kentucky and North Carolina). There are a number of areas of the state where students are likely to use African American English (AAE), as estimates suggest that more than half of African American children entering urban schools speak a variety of AAE fluently and that the majority of African American students speak AAE to some degree (Terry, N., 2006). Lastly, language used in Texas has also been strongly influenced by the fact that Texas was a part of Mexico and includes a number of citizens whose language retains features of Spanish (MacNeil & Cran, 2005).

During the 2009-10 school year, Texas served over 4.8 million students in both urban and rural settings (TEA, 2010). TEA states that the 2010 racial/ethnic composition of Texas schools was 48.6 % Hispanic (Latino), 33.3% White, 14% African American, 3.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.4% Native American. These percentages show that the majority of Texas students are members of racial/ethnic groups that are traditionally considered minority. This is significant to the present study, in that minority group membership is often associated with the use of language varieties that differ from standard English. Results of the literature review and the opinion of The Panel suggest that the Texas SEL population includes large percentages of African American and Hispanic students. There also may be other groups of SELs.

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### Lack of Educational Services for SELs

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Examining Texas education law and supporting regulations suggests that SELs currently do not receive services that differ from those provided to their peers who are proficient in standard English. SELs:

- Will be assumed to have the level of English proficiency needed to succeed in the general classroom without accommodation. When parents/guardians or students complete a district's home language survey during school enrollment, responses will indicate that the language of the home is English. Since the student speaks English, no language proficiency assessment is required.
- Will be served by general education teachers.
- May or may not receive instruction which directly addresses the features of standard English which they have not yet acquired. The objectives that guide their instruction will be drawn from the general state curriculum (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills; TEKS), which does not delineate knowledge or skills specific to students who are SELs.
- Will receive differentiated instruction at the discretion of individual school districts/schools/teachers.
- Will participate in state accountability assessments of academic content areas, but will not participate in state accountability assessments of English language proficiency.

By The Panel's definition, SELs have yet to acquire standard English, an important component of the language. However, the services they receive are very different from those provided to English language learners (ELLs). ELLs' language needs are identified at school entrance, they are taught by educators who have been prepared to provide instruction matched to those needs, and their acquisition of English is assessed on a regular basis.

### Study Description and Methodology

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This study was undertaken to explore the needs of the SEL population and to determine how Texas might meet those needs more effectively. Four objectives were defined and each was carried out as described below.

#### Objective 1

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Review literature related to curriculum and instruction (C & I) best practices for SELs, and produce a summary report.

- Data sources included (a) relevant professional literature, (b) a review of other states' policies and (c) data about Texas' student demographics and educational policies.
- Professional literature reviewed included empirical studies, best practice articles and relevant books.

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### Objective 2

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Produce a description of PD best practices for educators who serve SELs based on other states' and national practices.

- The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)<sup>1</sup> was contracted to write a discussion of PD issues and recommendations for SELs. CAL responded to a request from the TERC to address seven PD topics.
- CAL based its report on research regarding effective PD, the authors' own experiences in providing PD on language variety, the authors' own knowledge of language variety-related PD efforts, and research on teachers' implementation of a language variety awareness curriculum conducted by one author.

### Objective 3

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Conduct an Expert Panel review of the C & I and PD reports.

- In the second phase of this research, at the recommendation of the Legislature, the TERC convened an Expert Panel which included members with expertise in: (1) linguistics, (2) curriculum development, (3) PD, and (4) accommodating linguistic and cultural diversity within classrooms. Panel Members were Drs. Lisa Green, Elena Izquierdo, William Labov, Noma LeMoine, Rebecca Wheeler and Robert Williams.
- The Panel met as a group to review and critique the literature review and PD reports and their findings.

### Objective 4

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Develop recommendations regarding best educational practice for SELs, which could include changes to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and to other parts of the Texas Administrative and Education codes that might be used as mechanisms for implementation.

- The Panel assisted in developing the description of best practices and implementation recommendations presented later in this report.

### Literature Review Findings

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We summarize our findings from our review of the literature and of the current practices of other states as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> CAL is a private, nonprofit organization working to improve communication through better understanding of language and culture. Established in 1959, CAL is headquartered in Washington, DC. CAL has earned a national and international reputation for its contributions to the fields of bilingual, English as a second language (ESL), literacy, and foreign language education; dialect studies; language policy; refugee orientation; and the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children.

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**Finding 1:** There is a paucity of research that addresses language variety in the instructional context.

**Finding 2:** The majority of existing research focuses on AAE and there are some consistent trends in findings about the relationship between AAE and academic achievement.<sup>2</sup>

**Finding 3:** The specific relationship between the use of a language variety other than standard English and academic achievement is not well understood.

**Finding 4:** Instruction that is specifically designed for SELs addresses two main goals: acquisition of standard English and increased academic achievement. Standard English instruction is most often carried out using contrastive analysis/code-switching<sup>3</sup>; strategies for increasing academic achievement use features of the student's language variety in instruction. Both types of instructional strategies have been successful, but a full research base on either is lacking.

**Finding 5:** There is little guidance about how students' language varieties should be incorporated into content area instruction.

**Finding 6:** The affective context in which instruction about language varieties occurs (e.g., teacher attitudes and beliefs about language varieties, whether students perceive instruction as adding to what they know and can do or as a demand to stop using their first language variety, etc.) is critical to its success.

**Finding 7:** There are few existing curricula that are designed to address the language needs of SELs.

**Finding 8:** PD for teachers should address four main topics: (a) teacher resistance, (b) teacher beliefs, (c) issues of language, identity and power (e.g., teachers should be prepared to think about the linkages between instruction, language and students' personal and cultural identities), and (d) practical strategies for addressing language varieties in the classroom (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> Studies conducted with elementary students that speak AAE have documented a negative association between use of AAE and early reading skills (e.g. Kohler et al., 2007; Terry, N. 2006) and mathematical reasoning (Terry, J. et al. 2010).

<sup>3</sup> In Contrastive Analysis, the practitioner contrasts the grammatical structure of one variety with the grammatical structure of another variety (presumably the Standard) in order to add the Standard dialect to the students' linguistic toolbox" (Wheeler, 2006, p.17). Contrastive analysis has often been used as a part of teaching ESL; here, it is modified to highlight the contrasts between varieties of English rather than the contrasts between the structures of two languages (Wheeler, 2006, 2008; Baker, 2002). Contrastive analysis instruction is typically paired with instruction and practice in code-switching, that is, changing a sentence or passage presented in one variety of English to another (Wheeler, 2008; MacNeil & Cran, 2005). See Appendix E for more information.

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**Finding 9:** California state policies define AAE and require additional support for students who use AAE if they have difficulty with standard English phonology, structures and/or spelling. Beyond this, we found no state policies that address instruction for SELs, although New York does require that the student’s use of a language variety be considered when language disorders are diagnosed.

### Expert Panel Recommendations

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The Panel began its work with a discussion of the terminology that might be needed to identify SELs and formulate educational policy for them. They offered the following as examples of terms the state might define and use:

- A “standard English learner (SEL)” is a student whose primary language is English and who speaks a variety of English that differs from standard English. The term SEL could be used to describe the students referenced in Rider 42.
- “Standard English” is defined as the language variety most often connected with and used in education, media, government, and enterprise.
- “Nonstandard varieties of English” include English varieties that are systematic and rule-governed modes of communication and are acquired by students at home. They differ linguistically from standard English. Such varieties include but are not limited to AAE, Appalachian English, and Latino American English (LAE).<sup>4</sup>

### Rationale for Action

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The Panel concluded that the State of Texas should make changes in existing educational practices that will help educators recognize SELs as a group and that will help them to meet these students’ unique educational needs. They offered two main reasons for this:

1. Strategies for teaching students standard English are available, and have been used successfully with SELs. Although evidence is limited, available data suggest that these strategies can increase students’ use of standard English features and that this can serve to enhance literacy outcomes (Wheeler & Swords, 2010).
2. The Panel believed that developing educators’ abilities to recognize and meet the needs of SELs, including preparing teachers to deliver instruction that develops features of standard English when such instruction is needed, is one way in which the achievement gap between SELs and their non-SEL peers might be addressed. The Panel recognized that many factors can and do influence the academic achievement of minority students, including SELs. Those identified in the literature include, but are not limited to: school resources and facilities, teacher pay, training and collaboration, teacher and classroom quality, teacher expectations, and student characteristics such as self-esteem and

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<sup>4</sup> The Panel selected the term “Latino American English.”

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socioeconomic status (Connor, 2008; Rickford, 1999). However, members of The Panel noted that an achievement gap between racial/ethnic student groups that are likely to include large numbers of SELs and White students has existed for a long time and continues to exist (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

### Best Practices

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The Panel endorsed the following as best practices in C & I for SELs, and as best practices for PD for educators who serve this group. They recommended that Texas take steps leading to the implementation of these practices:

- Recognize SELs as a group with unique linguistic and instructional needs;
- Assure that teachers are able to accurately assess and effectively respond to the linguistic and instructional needs of this group;
- Provide instruction to SELs that enables them to acquire standard English using contrastive analysis and code switching;
- Provide instruction to develop student knowledge of the language varieties used in Texas by explicitly addressing various regional language varieties; recognizing their value, and addressing the role and importance of learning and using standard English;
- Provide instruction to all students that is grounded in student interests and background knowledge;
- Provide educators with the information, skills, strategies and materials needed to offer the instruction described above; and
- Provide information to parents, families, and other stakeholders regarding the nature and goals of contrastive analysis, code switching and language variety instruction.

### Recommendations for Achieving Best Practice in Texas

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The Panel offered formal recommendations incorporating the best practices they developed and suggested specific steps for their implementation. These were:

#### *Recommendation 1*

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The Panel recommends that the State of Texas recognize standard English learners (SELs) as a group with unique linguistic and instructional needs.

#### Proposed Implementation Recommendations

- a. The state should develop an appropriate strategy that educators can use to recognize students who are SELs. One option is to define the term SELs in the Texas Education Code; another is to assist schools in examining demographic characteristics of the students that they serve to see if it is likely that large numbers of SELs are present and offer PD to those schools; a third is to provide general PD that builds educators' capacity to serve SELs.

## Recommended Practices for SELs

- b. The State Board of Education (SBOE) should include a statement on the academic and linguistic needs of SELs in the introduction to every grade level in the next version of the English Language Arts and Reading TEKS.
- c. The state should commission a study to investigate what language varieties are present in Texas schools and how educators can recognize them and to explore the association between major language varieties with academic outcomes.

### *Recommendation 2*

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The Panel recommends that the State of Texas build educators' awareness of language varieties and their impact on student academic achievement.

#### **Proposed Implementation Recommendations**

- a. The State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) should modify the requirements for teacher and principal preparation to include mention of language diversity.
- b. The state should prepare and disseminate materials that will help educators understand the similarities and differences between ELLs and SELs.
- c. PD should build educator knowledge and awareness of linguistic diversity in the SEL population, including the historical development of different language varieties and their characteristic linguistic features.

### *Recommendation 3*

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The Panel recommends that the State of Texas assist SELs in building their knowledge of standard English by implementing contrastive analysis and code-switching instructional strategies.

#### **Proposed Implementation Recommendations**

The Panel recommends that the state attempt to assure that educators are provided high-quality PD that includes opportunities for follow-up instruction and coaching, rather than a "quick-fix" approach to learning these strategies.

- a. The state should gather information about the language varieties spoken in Texas so that PD and instruction can be adapted to them.
- b. PD must be provided to educators, including teachers and administrators, which explicitly addresses regional language varieties; recognizes their value, and addresses the role and importance of learning and using standard English.
- c. PD should be differentiated by grade level to assure that the strategies educators learn are developmentally appropriate for their students, and should be differentiated based on educators' previous level of experience with contrastive analysis/code-switching instruction so that teachers gain advanced knowledge and skills.
- d. As teachers begin to implement contrastive analysis/code-switching instruction, fidelity of implementation should be monitored.
- e. Districts should be encouraged to evaluate the effects of implementing contrastive analysis/code-switching instruction.

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### *Recommendation 4*

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The Panel recommends that the State of Texas undertake needed actions to assure that instruction that addresses language variety is provided to all students.

#### Proposed Implementation Recommendations

- a. The state should add knowledge and skills that address the language varieties of Texas to the next revision of the state curriculum standards. These might be added to the Grade 4 and/or Grade 7 social studies TEKS.
- b. PD which supports the study of language varieties, including appropriate instructional strategies and materials, should be provided to educators who teach Texas history, and those who supervise them.
- c. PD which helps educators develop an understanding of SELs from both sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives should also be provided.
- d. The state should adopt a formal curriculum which addresses the language varieties of Texas.

### *Recommendation 5*

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The Panel recommends that the State of Texas take steps to create a thoughtful and tolerant environment that ensures the acceptability of these proposed changes to all stakeholder groups.

#### Proposed Implementation Recommendations

Panelists recommended that the legislature and TEA to take a proactive approach in addressing any potential controversy that recognizing SELs as a group and introducing instruction in standard English and language varieties may generate. They suggested that:

- a. The state should make efforts to associate the new program and its instructional strategies with the goal of improved standard English for all students.
- b. Pre- and inservice education for educators should address strategies for communicating with families and communities about program methods and goals.
- c. Schools implementing standard English acquisition programs should make systematic efforts to work with parents and communities.

### *Conclusions and Next Steps*

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Both our literature review and The Panel have presented evidence that SELs are a group whose educational needs should be addressed. The language skills with which SELs begin school differ from the language skills of students who begin school speaking standard English. However, while instruction for ELLs is guided by the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) and by other state policy, this is not the case for SELs. SELs may or may not receive instruction that addresses the features of standard English they do not yet command, and the decision regarding whether this instruction is provided is made by individual districts, schools and/or teachers.

## Recommended Practices for SELs

The overall recommendation of the Panel is to increase teacher capacity such that teachers recognize SELs in their classrooms and offer instruction that addresses their needs. The Panel recognized that further information about Texas's SEL population is needed, but also believed that strategies that can be used to offer differentiated instruction to SELs (i.e., contrastive analysis/code-switching and language variety awareness instruction) exist. They have been used in classrooms and school districts in other states, and there is evidence that they have achieved success in developing students' standard English skills. While two other states have limited policies that address SELs, implementation of The Panel's recommendations would allow Texas to become the first state to have a comprehensive policy regarding instruction for this group. However, for these recommendations to be implemented there is a need to gather data that will allow the state to develop a better understanding of the SEL population in Texas. Policy issues related to addressing the needs of a heretofore unidentified group must also be addressed.

### Recommendations for Future Research

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In considering the state's response to the needs of SELs, it is important to recognize the limits of current knowledge about this population and to address the gaps that exist. A necessary first step in any such efforts would be to commission a study of the Texas SEL population. While examining the demography of the state's student population suggests that there may be large numbers of SELs, it is important to verify this hypothesis, to examine achievement data to obtain an accurate estimate of the number of SELs who are, in fact, in need of additional services, to identify the schools and districts which serve them, and to know how many and which language varieties they speak. Such data could inform efforts to develop a language variety awareness curriculum, and could serve as a needs assessment for PD efforts.

Conducting research to study the SEL population requires that an efficient and accurate method for identifying SELs be developed. At present, only one individual student assessment for identifying speakers of language varieties other than standard English exists (Seymour, Roeper & de Villers, 2003); thus, research that leads to the creation of an identification process is critical. While individual identification procedures might be considered, any study undertaken should first address whether identification of individual students is necessary, or whether identification of classrooms, schools or districts which serve large numbers of SELs might be sufficient to allocate resources to address their needs. Likewise, the study should consider whether direct student assessment is necessary, or whether classroom teachers can reliably identify SELs. Should the state decide to serve SELs as a group, it should commission research that addresses these issues.

Research regarding the similarities and differences between the SEL and ELL student populations is also needed. This research should focus on what instructional strategies may be appropriate for both populations, while also elucidating how instruction for the two groups should be differentiated. Using results of this research, it may prove feasible to envision the state's response to SELs and ELLs as separate parts of a larger policy addressing language diversity in Texas' schools. Results should also be used to inform

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teacher preparation and PD. Since SELs are currently served by general educators, while ELLs are typically served by either bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) certified teachers, it will be important to assure that both groups of educators are familiar with any instructional strategies that are appropriate for both groups, and that they are also familiar with characteristics of best instructional practices that are unique to the group(s) that they serve.

Finally, future research should address the outcomes of using strategies designed for SELs with English-speaking students who have acquired standard English before school entrance (i.e., non-SELs). We were unable to find any research that addressed either achievement or affective impacts of these strategies for this group. However, Wheeler and Swords (2010) assert:

Code-switching helps *all* (emphasis in original) students understand how dialect contributes to character, voice and setting in literature...lessons directly affirm national standards that require students to appreciate diverse dialects and cultures. Further, the technique of contrastive analysis embodies critical thinking—skills of observation, description, hypothesis formation and hypothesis testing—skills of analysis and synthesis that enhance the abilities of all students. (p. 256)

It is critical that any future research or program evaluations address whether these outcomes are in fact achieved. Educators will need data-based guidance regarding which students should receive contrastive analysis-code-switching instruction.

### Policy Implications

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As with any new initiative, the consequences of implementing The Panel's recommendations as written must be fully analyzed.

The following areas may be important to address:

- The state is limited in what it has the authority to execute. The state cannot mandate or establish a curriculum, instead it can only recommend and set curriculum standards. Therefore, the state could consider the adoption of policies which address the language varieties in Texas.
- The way in which the state recognizes SELs as a group with unique educational needs, should this be done, is a major consideration.
  - If SELs are defined as a subgroup in the Texas Education Code, they may become a group whose progress is tracked through the accountability system, and whose progress becomes a part of determining accountability ratings for schools and school districts. There may also be fiscal implications.
  - Assuring that the ELPS are used to guide the instruction of SELs, and that SELs are specifically defined in these standards, offers advantages. A successful system for serving students who are acquiring English already exists, and the ELPs have features that appear to be applicable to SELs.

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They were designed as an enrichment tool for language acquisition, and the ELPS Proficiency Level Descriptors could be used to measure SELs' standard English language development. However, there are some barriers. For example, although SELs could potentially participate in instruction offered through ESL programs, this would be at the discretion of individual districts, schools and teachers. Should SELs be served outside of ESL programs, it is likely that their instruction would be provided by general educators, rather than teachers who hold ESL certification. At present, these educators are less familiar with language acquisition instruction than are bilingual educators.

- Standards specific to SELs, could be designed using the ELPS as a model. This would allow the advantages of the ELPS to be retained, while incorporating modifications needed to address SELs' unique needs. However, even with an existing model, developing a new system would require large amounts of effort and funding, and might lead to the need for individual identification and accountability.
- Finally, methods that do not require changes in statewide legal codes might be considered. For example, districts or schools most likely to serve SELs could be identified, and those districts or schools could be provided with PD or other assistance in meeting student needs.
- The Panel recommended that language variety awareness instruction be provided to all students. However, their suggestion that changes be made in Social Studies TEKS is difficult to immediately implement. The Social Studies TEKS for the next six years have been set. It will be important to consider other, less formal ways in which language variety awareness instruction can be introduced (e.g., providing PD to Texas History teachers which introduces them to the strategies and materials needed to provide such instruction).
- It is important that any new initiative, including recognizing the needs of SELs, be evaluated in ways that assure that all outcomes that ensue, both intended and unintended, are examined.
- Efforts to recognize the needs of SELs must be considered in a context of competing priorities for limited resources.

Clearly, recognizing the SEL population in Texas, and developing the capacity of Texas educators to begin addressing its needs is an ambitious undertaking, and to do so, many important resource and policy decisions must be thoughtfully made. However, it is important to recognize that there are a number of potential benefits to be gained from these efforts. At a minimum, the skills of Texas educators, and their understanding of the students that they serve will be increased, and their ability to assist students in acquiring a critical skill, the appropriate use of standard English, will be enhanced. At best, all Texas students will leave school with an understanding of the state's language varieties and with the ability to use standard English effectively when they need and choose to do so.

## Recommended Practices for SELs

A full report and executive summary of the *Recommended Educational Practices for Standard English Learners* can be obtained at:

<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=2147495222&menu>