

Results in Brief:

Supporting English Learners through Technology: What Districts and Teachers Say about Digital Learning Resources for English Learners

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English learners (ELs) are one of the fastest growing student demographics in the United States, and are a diverse group, representing over 400 different language backgrounds. In the 2015–16 school year, there were 4.8 million EL students in grades K–12 in U.S. public schools, accounting for 10 percent of all enrolled students. Also, over past decades, grade K–12 teachers in public schools have gained increased access to computers and digital technology for instruction, and many report using digital learning resources (DLRs) to enhance and differentiate their students' language and content area instruction. This Results in Brief describes findings from a national study of how districts and teachers are using Digital Learning Resources (DLRs) for instructing EL students. In addition, the study developed two toolkits for practitioners, one to inform educators about the range of DLRs that are available and considerations for using DLRs to support their EL students, and one to assist educational technology developers in improving the usefulness of DLRs for instructing EL students.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How do districts and teachers identify DLRs for instructing EL students?
2. What types of DLRs do teachers use and how do they use DLRs in instructing EL students?
3. What are supports for and barriers to DLR use in instructing EL students?
4. How can educators and technology developers improve the usefulness of DLRs in instruction of EL students?

STUDY DESIGN AND LIMITATIONS

The study collected data during the 2016–17 school year through a nationally representative survey of districts that enrolled EL students, a teacher survey that included both mainstream teachers and EL specialists, and case studies of six districts to provide more in-depth information about district and teacher practices. The district survey sample included 999 public school districts, stratified by level of EL-student representation in the district (high-EL, moderate-EL, and low-EL districts). The purposive case study sample included 12 schools within six districts that varied in the number and percentage of EL students enrolled.

The findings describe data based on survey responses from 767 districts and 706 teachers, and qualitative data from 65 case study interviews with district administrators, principals, and teachers of EL students.

The final teacher sample included both randomly selected teachers and teachers selected by principals. Roughly half of the responding teachers were randomly sampled. However, many schools did not provide rosters of teachers of EL students; at these schools, principals were asked to select teachers of EL students to take the survey. While the principal-selected teachers responded similarly to the randomly selected teachers, these data are not nationally representative and should be interpreted with caution.

Highlights

- Most teachers surveyed reported that they identified specific DLRs for instructing EL students based on the recommendations of fellow teachers and district or school administrators.
- Teachers were more likely to report weekly or daily use of general education DLRs than of DLRs designed primarily for EL students (85 percent vs. 65 percent).
- About two-thirds of teachers surveyed reported using digital references and resources, language tutorials or practice tools, and academic tutorials or practice tools weekly or daily in instructing their EL students.
- The majority of teachers reported that EL students often used DLRs when working independently (61 percent) or as part of a whole class activity (60 percent); few teachers reported assigning EL students to use DLRs outside of class.
- High-EL districts were more likely than low-EL districts to report providing professional development workshops, coaching, and in-class assistance related to DLR use in instructing EL students.
- Across all districts, EL specialists reported fewer hours of professional development in DLR use than did mainstream teachers.
- Frequently reported barriers to using DLRs with EL students were students' lack of DLR access at home, and teachers' needs for EL and technology expertise and for time to learn and use DLRs.
- Educators suggested that DLRs could improve by engaging students in academic content while building language and literacy skills; embedding visual, auditory, and other support features; providing multiple languages; and providing grade-level content and age-appropriate design for older beginner-level EL students.

IDENTIFYING DLRs FOR EL STUDENTS

Surveyed teachers most commonly reported that they identified specific DLRs for instructing EL students based on the recommendations of fellow teachers (91 percent) and district or school administrators (86 percent).

Other frequently reported sources were district professional development sessions (74 percent); online searches (73 percent); technology coaches or specialists (69 percent); and the school's EL specialist (65 percent).

Most districts reported using teacher requests as a source for identifying DLRs for EL students.

Districts reported using requests from classroom teachers (81 percent) and EL specialists (78 percent) to identify some or most DLRs for EL students. Other sources were district and school administrators and committees.

High-EL districts were more likely than low-EL districts to report considering certain support features such as visual and auditory supports, as very important when selecting DLRs for use in instructing EL students.

For example, DLRs may use images or video to help students understand new words and content. Audio supports include text-to-speech features that enable students to hear a text.

Ninety-one percent of districts reported providing language tutorials or practice DLRs for EL students specifically.

Also, most districts reported that they provided DLRs for EL students that were references and resources (84 percent), translation tools (80 percent), academic tutorials or practice tools (79 percent), and presentation tools (79 percent).

USE OF DLRs IN INSTRUCTING EL STUDENTS

Eighty-five percent of teachers who instructed EL students reported using DLRs in their EL students' instruction.

There were no significant differences between mainstream teachers and EL specialists regarding DLR use for EL students.

Teachers were more likely to report weekly or daily use of general education DLRs than of DLRs designed primarily for EL students (85 percent vs. 65 percent).

In case study interviews, some mainstream teachers explained they often used general education DLRs, rather than DLRs designed for EL students, in order to not single out the EL students.

Teachers most commonly reported weekly or daily use of digital references and resources, language tutorials or practice tools, and academic tutorials or practice tools (60 to 65 percent).

About half (45 to 48 percent) reported presentation DLRs, general websites, and information organization DLRs.

The majority of teachers reported that EL students used DLRs often when working independently (61 percent) or in a whole class activity (60 percent); few reported assigning EL students to use DLRs outside of class.

Forty-five percent of teachers reported that EL students often used DLRs when working in pairs or groups that included both

EL students and English speakers, and 40 percent reported they used DLRs often in pairs or groups of EL students only. Teachers were least likely to report assigning EL students to use DLRs to continue learning outside of class (16 percent) or at home with a family member (10 percent).

SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS TO USE OF DLRs FOR INSTRUCTING EL STUDENTS

High-EL districts were more likely than low-EL districts to report providing workshops, coaching, and in-class assistance related to DLR use in instructing EL students.

For example, high-EL districts were more likely to provide workshops on a specific DLR (72 percent vs. 36 percent), and on integrating DLRs in instruction (60 percent vs. 30 percent).

Across all districts, EL specialists reported receiving fewer hours of professional development in DLR use than did mainstream teachers.

During the three-year period from 2014–15 to 2016–17, 84 percent of EL specialists reported receiving 10 or fewer hours of professional development related to DLR use, compared with 47 percent of mainstream teachers.

Barriers to using DLRs with EL students that were most frequently reported by teachers were students' lack of access to DLRs at home, time to learn to use DLRs, and time to set up or troubleshoot DLRs.

About four out of five teachers reported these barriers. Other reported barriers were time to find DLRs, lack of knowledge of DLRs, costs, and need for training on how to use DLRs.

The barriers to using DLRs with EL students most frequently reported by districts were students' lack of home access to DLRs, teachers' needs for expertise in instructing EL students, teachers' level of technology skills, and lack of knowledge of DLRs appropriate for EL students.

Eighty percent or more of districts indicated these were barriers to DLR use to some extent or to a large extent.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE DLRs FOR INSTRUCTING EL STUDENTS

Districts and teachers provided ideas on how developers and educators could improve the usefulness of DLRs.

Educators suggested that technology developers design DLRs to engage students in academic content while building language and literacy skills; embed visual, auditory, and other support features; provide supports in multiple languages; and provide grade-level content and age-appropriate design for older beginner-level EL students. Some teachers suggested "read-aloud" features, supports in students' home languages, and videos or other visuals to show vocabulary and concepts.

Educators also recommended that district leaders provide greater access to opportunities to learn about DLRs and how to use them for teaching EL students.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The complete report and toolkits are available online: www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports.html#ells