



SEAL
Sobrato Early Academic Literacy

A CLOSER LOOK

SEAL is a preschool-third grade pilot program of the Sobrato Family Foundation.

SEAL is designed to build the capacity of preschools and elementary schools to powerfully develop the language and literacy skills of young Spanish-speaking English Learner children, and to close the academic achievement gap by fourth grade.



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This material builds upon previous work the SEAL Director (Dr. Laurie Olsen) has done with the PROMISE Initiative, the Los Angeles County Office of Education Bilingual Network, and California Tomorrow's Leadership for English Learner Success initiatives.

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The Sobrato Family Foundation's mission is to help create and sustain a vibrant and healthy community where all Silicon Valley residents have equal opportunity to live, work, and be enriched.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SEAL MODEL

SEAL is a comprehensive model of enriched language and literacy development that brings parents and educators together in support of a child's academic success. It is based on research on first- and second-language development, bilingual brain development, age-appropriate early literacy approaches, and effective instructional practices for English Learners.

What does the research tell us? What does it actually mean for classrooms and programs?

Let's take a closer look!

SEAL OVERVIEW

SEAL is a comprehensive and age-appropriate model of enriched language and literacy education designed for English Learners.

As a preschool through third-grade model, the goal is age-appropriate literacy skills in English and Spanish, grade-level mastery of the academic curriculum, and high levels of motivation and confidence as learners. SEAL seeks to develop students who love reading and writing, are proficient in two languages, and are curious and active learners—off to a powerful early start toward academic success.

The SEAL model includes six related components of a comprehensive approach to enriched language and literacy development:

- *Academic language and literacy in both English and Spanish*
- *Language-rich instruction with an emphasis on oral language development and vocabulary*
- *A text-rich curriculum and environment that engages children with books and leads to the appreciation and love of reading and writing*
- *Development of language through an enriched academic curriculum*
- *An affirming learning environment*
- *Teachers and parents working together to support strong language and literacy development at home and at school*

THE EARLY YEARS: PRESCHOOL

For academic success, preschool English Learners need a coherent and well-articulated program that prepares children in an age-appropriate manner for the kindergarten curriculum and later academic learning. This program is not the same as adapting the curriculum for grades 1–3 to a preschool context. In young children, the development of language and literacy cannot be isolated from physical, social/emotional, and cognitive development. An age-appropriate curriculum and environment recognizes that a young child’s success in school requires more than a focus on academic curriculum—it also values a child’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development equally.

Language and learning are shaped by children’s experiences and are developed through experience-based learning and interaction. Children are active as learners. How children engage with their world and learn to relate to one another is a primary point of learning and development. An age-appropriate curriculum is made up of learning activities that emphasize interaction with other children and adults. Children work and play with one another in small groups that emphasize interaction, exploration, and cooperation.

Preschool curriculum needs to involve planned interactive group time, structured interactions among children, as well as intentional staff-child relationships. This environment invites curiosity and engagement. Young children learn best when they are highly engaged in the topics and activities and where the curriculum is built around this natural curiosity. The curriculum includes materials that are real and relevant to the lives of the children. It is integrated, meaningful, and thematic, with many opportunities for hands-on engagement. This environment is the context and backdrop for comprehensive and high-level language development.

THE PRIMARY GRADES: KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THIRD GRADE

As children advance through the grade levels, the curriculum and the grade-level standards become increasingly challenging. Use of every opportunity to develop language skills and literacy requires that direct instruction in language arts be complemented with an enriched curriculum that builds both language skills and background knowledge. This curriculum engages children in talking, reading, writing, and thinking about the world. All subjects become vehicles for language development, and planning for every unit involves identifying the kind of language and life experiences that will support comprehension and language.

Children in the primary grades are capable of developing two languages to a high degree of proficiency. SEAL's vision is *biliteracy*, or bilingual literacy, for children. Biliteracy occurs through well-designed and implemented programs in which the two languages are used intentionally, separately, and with attention to transfer. Children become successful users of both English and Spanish in programs where there is age-appropriate instruction in both languages, strategies for equalizing the value of the languages, and interaction with good language models in each language. Children need multiple opportunities for meaningful use of both languages. They benefit from songs and chants using newly learned language structures, from well-planned interactive activities, and from intentionally designed "language experiences." All four domains of language should be brought into these activities, but an emphasis on rich oral language development is especially important in the young years.

Not all classrooms can mount a strong biliteracy approach. In English-taught classrooms, the use of the child's primary language should still be encouraged, valued, and seen as an important asset. Parents need to be provided with support in how to engage in language and literacy experiences with their children in the home language, and in ways that will support the child's acquisition of English in school. The language-rich approaches of the SEAL model—with an emphasis on a text-rich environment, oral language development, and language experience—are all equally appropriate in an English-taught classroom.

Teachers in a SEAL model see their students as full of potential. They examine their role in each child's language and literacy development, and engage in professional development and collaboration that support them in working successfully with each child. SEAL is a success when teachers feel highly competent in teaching language and literacy skills for English Learners and in providing an enriching learning environment and experiences, and when children proudly leave third grade with proficiency in two languages.

SEAL COMPONENT 1

DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN BOTH ENGLISH AND SPANISH

English Learners, by definition, need to learn English. They need to develop high levels of proficiency and literacy in English in order to succeed academically in school and to participate fully in our society. To achieve such proficiency, a strong program of English Language Development (ELD) is needed. In addition, to an ELD program, exposure to and interaction with English models and a strong foundation in the home language are also important. Focus on both languages is essential for strong English development.

It is also advantageous for students to develop high levels of proficiency and literacy in their home language in order to participate fully and be able to bridge across their language and cultural communities. High levels of bilingualism result in cognitive, social, economic benefits. A strong program of language development and literacy supports and builds on a child's home language, providing simultaneous development of both English and Spanish. This program also provides intentional support and access to opportunities to learn in both the home language and English.

- *A child's home language is a crucial foundation for cognitive development, learning about the world, and emerging literacy.*

A strong foundation of language development (regardless of the language) is the basis for later literacy and successful academic learning, and conceptual language is usually best developed in the child's first language. From birth, children learn language in the context of their family and home culture. Children who develop a rich vocabulary and learn to use language for various types of interaction and expression have a strong foundation for literacy. Later, this language foundation helps them to thrive academically.

- *Development of a child's home language enhances the development of a second language.*

Research shows that the development of rich oral language and expression in the home language supports the development of a second language. It also demonstrates that learning to read in a student's first language promotes reading achievement in the second language. Literacy instruction should follow attainment of a reasonable level of oral proficiency, and initial literacy instruction is most effective when it is provided in the native language of the child.

Skills and concepts learned in one language "transfer" from one language to another. For example, children who are taught how to read in their primary language learn important comprehension skills that support them in making meaning while reading text. These skills do not have to be taught again when students are taught how to read in English. Students use the same reading skills and strategies they have learned in their first language when they approach text in English. In fact, this kind of transfer from one language to another actually shortens the development of literacy in the second language. This language transfer is particularly true for Spanish speakers learning English. There is a specific positive transfer of Spanish language literacy to English in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary, as well as transfer of comprehension strategies. Transitioning into English literacy too soon (before children have developed and established a foundation of oral fluency in their own language) can impede academic progress in the long run.

- *The development of English is facilitated by an articulated, research-based ELD curricula and opportunities for interaction with English speakers.*

To learn English, English Learners benefit from thoughtful exposure to the language in authentic contexts and from direct instruction that helps them learn the features of English. Comprehensive ELD approaches include both this direct instruc-

tion as well as opportunities for meaningful interaction with English speakers (adults and peers). Children who are learning English need many occasions to use and practice English in interesting and engaging situations. Care needs to be taken so that children are exposed to people who are good language models in both languages.

- ***There are important benefits to early development of two languages.***

Young children have the capacity to learn multiple languages simultaneously when they are supported by a focused and high-quality language program and are provided opportunities for literacy development in both languages in school and in the community. The early years are a unique window of opportunity for the development of native-like fluency in two or more languages.

Mastery of more than one language pays off for young people academically. They show a cognitive advantage over monolingual peers, and they are better multitaskers. Children who experience extensive and systematic early exposure to both of their languages quickly grasp the fundamentals of both languages—becoming better readers than monolingual children of the same age.

Bilingualism is correlated with more creative or abstract thinking, as well as higher levels of reading and math achievement. In addition to the advantageous cognitive development that occurs when children have the opportunity to develop two languages, there are important social dimensions of bilingualism as well. These include the skills to participate in a diverse and global community and to move between two languages and two cultures.

WHAT A BILITERACY PROGRAM LOOKS LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM

A biliteracy classroom in which simultaneous development of English and Spanish are being supported includes:

- ***Curriculum, support, and access to opportunities to develop rich home language***
- ***Curriculum, support, and access to opportunities to develop English***
- ***Strategies that support the transfer of skills and concepts from the first language to the second***

In the early grades, the majority of the school day emphasizes learning in and through the home language. Students are engaged in a strong program of Spanish language arts. A smaller proportion of the day is spent providing exposure to English and providing an explicit curriculum of English Language Development (ELD). The two languages are intentionally separated. Teachers carefully identify what is to be taught in English and what is to be taught in Spanish.

For example, in preschool and kindergarten, teachers emphasize oral language development in the home language—with high-quality questions and many opportunities for students to talk and engage in describing their feelings, experiences, and observations of the world. Children work on the alphabet and phonics and are engaged in early literacy activities that lead to reading and writing in their first language before they learn to read and write formally in English. This foundation in oral language and in literacy in their first language supports students in their formal learning to speak, read, and write in English.

Academic learning occurs through thematic units created in the student's primary language whenever possible. These units emphasize *conceptual* understanding in the student's first language as well as the development of *skills* in the student's first language. During the English Language Development portion of the day, students sing songs and chants and hear books in English related to the themes they have been studying in their primary language. During this time, they work on learning the English alphabet. Children are helped to become aware of the differences and similarities between Span-

ish and English. For example, teachers make explicit the differences between the sounds of the letters in Spanish and the sounds of the letters in English. Children are encouraged and supported to dictate and create books bilingually (as they feel ready), gaining experience in expressing themselves and talking about their world in two languages.

As children get older (first grade through third grade), they spend increasing time reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English, and are increasingly able to transfer the skills learned in Spanish. All four domains of language are still emphasized. ELD curriculum continues as an important part of their academic day, through a dedicated program of instruction. Spanish is still, however, the language of instruction for much of the day. Students become increasingly aware of language structures, the differences between languages, and the fact that they are bilingual. Teachers are able to capitalize on this awareness by making explicit the differences and transferability between Spanish and English. Teaching for transfer includes helping students recognize the unique and shared features of each language. By the end of third grade, the curriculum is taught 50 percent in English and 50 percent in Spanish, with both languages used for high-level academic learning. Students continue to study both languages as they move into the upper grades.

In English-taught classrooms, the use of the child's primary language should still be encouraged, valued, and seen as an important asset. Parents are provided with support in ways to engage in language and literacy experiences with their children in the home language, and in ways that support the child's acquisition of English in school. The language-rich approaches of the SEAL model, with an emphasis on a text-rich environment, oral language development, and language experience, are all equally appropriate in an English-taught classroom. Teaching strategies are used to provide scaffolding, context cues, and other approaches to help students access grade-level content in a language that is still unfamiliar to them. Where teachers can use the primary language as support, it is beneficial. While students in an all-English-taught curriculum will not become biliterate, if the classroom is a place where their home language is respected, ties between families and school will be strengthened and students will learn to value their family language and culture.

SEAL COMPONENT 2

LANGUAGE-RICH INSTRUCTION WITH AN EMPHASIS ON ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND VOCABULARY

The environment for all young children should be a language-rich environment that supports the development of children's first and second languages. To develop a language, children need many opportunities to practice using language. Language development involves four domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In the early grades, English Learners need a curriculum that expands their vocabulary substantially, and supports them in learning to talk about, describe, and imagine their world. A language-rich environment is where oral language activities emphasize speaking and listening in a safe and supportive environment. Children need to hear language in use through exposure to authentic and high-quality language and through interaction with people who speak English and Spanish proficiently. Strong oral language and listening skills are the foundation for reading and writing and for successful academic learning.

In a language-rich curriculum, teachers engage children in conversation and extend and amplify their vocabulary in the process. Children participate in cooperative and small group projects that require them to actively communicate with their peers about authentic academic tasks. At the preschool level, children learn pre-writing and early reading skills in tandem with oral language by creating books with photos about their own experiences, dictating to adults who write the words as children narrate. Oral language activities include songs, chants, children's rhymes, and choral reading. Through these types of activities, children are given the opportunity to hear the language and also practice producing the language in non-threatening ways. Oral language activities are connected to the themes being studied. Teachers support the development of vocabulary by using realia. Areas of the room are devoted to children being able to construct and retell stories—through the use of flannel boards, puppets, listening centers, and props.

As children move into the primary grades, interactive strategies that promote the use of language are still important. To encourage language development, teachers structure many opportunities for student "language production" through cooperative learning activities and interactive lessons. Teachers ask high-quality questions that require students to put complex thoughts into language. Teachers amplify and elaborate on what students say, providing additional vocabulary and models for use of the language. Students have time to discuss what they are learning and thinking, to practice new words and sentence structures, and to engage in varied types of dialogue. Students are involved in hands-on projects, field trips, and other experiences that build background knowledge and stimulate language learning. The classroom is a place that is rich in language "events" that help children to construct new meaning and understanding, to hear and come to understand rich and expressive language, and to talk!

SEAL COMPONENT 3

A TEXT-RICH CURRICULUM AND ENVIRONMENT

A text-rich curriculum and environment meaningfully engages children with books and the printed word, and leads to the appreciation and love of reading and writing. Children become proficient readers and writers when their development of the skills of reading and writing occur in the context of exposure to a variety of written materials, genres, and types of text that are meaningful to their lives, curiosities, and learning. Development of proficiency requires both a text-rich environment and a text-rich curriculum.

Children are given the opportunity to become familiar with both their first and second languages through the presence of many books, materials, and posters in the language of the home as well as in English. The materials use rich language. Objects in the room are labeled in both English and Spanish. The visible presence of both languages in the classroom signals to both the children and their families that their first language is important and valued.

The classroom should also be print-rich with the products of student work. Student-produced texts exist side by side with interesting books related to learning themes, and with high-quality literature. Reading books is emphasized. Books are appropriate and accessible, and classroom libraries are available and organized to promote self-selection. Students have comfortable locations to sit and read. Students have access to a wide variety of books for independent reading, and are provided time and support to do so—including opportunities to take books home.

In a text-rich environment, teachers structure a variety of activities, such as “shared read-alouds.” Talk is an important element that accompanies reading. Teachers talk about books and model language for summarizing, predicting, and extending what students have read. Students are helped to make connections between what they are reading and their own lives. Teachers ask high-quality questions to prompt students to use language in responding to and thinking about books. They invite children to retell stories in their own words. The experience of hearing people talk about books models for children the ways in which books can connect to our lives and experiences. Talking about books brings them alive.

To help students engage with reading and to bolster their reading comprehension skills, a teacher can preface reading with various activities that scaffold students’ understanding and interest in what they are about to read. Teachers “access students’ prior knowledge.” Teachers use “anticipatory activities” and “frontload” the vocabulary. Class activities build background knowledge that prepare students for the texts they are about to read. Students’ questions, curiosities, and predictions are elicited before engaging with text. Students develop understanding of text, respond, and relate it to their experience.

Reading and writing are closely related. Children should be engaged in actively producing text as well as reading. Preschool and kindergarten classrooms can encourage this activity through setting up writing centers with paper, pencils, notebooks, envelopes, and mail boxes to encourage children to write. Adults should be available regularly so students can dictate stories. Class events become class-written stories. Teachers have access to laminating equipment and binding machines so student writing can be produced as books. Cameras and printers are available so actual photographs of classroom activities and experiences can illustrate books. Children can literally see themselves in literature.

SEAL COMPONENT 4

DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE THROUGH AN ENRICHED ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

Language is developed not only through explicit language arts curriculum, but also through the use of language as a vehicle for learning academic content and for learning about the world. A comprehensive program of academic language development recognizes the importance of immersing students in a full curriculum—in science, social studies, math, and the arts, in addition to explicit and direct language arts curriculum. Language is learned through interesting and engaging activities. Academic language develops as students read about and hear about academic topics, talk about what they are learning, make observations, and synthesize what they are studying. They develop key vocabulary and concepts, and learn the structures and forms of language used to talk about academic content. A second language is learned, in part, incidentally in the context of doing something.

For teachers, this program means developing explicit language objectives when they prepare for any academic lesson. Students receive simultaneous delivery of language and academic content instruction. Based on an understanding of student language proficiency levels, the teacher uses scaffolding strategies to help students access the content and learn key concepts.

Science, social studies, and the performing arts are particularly well suited to developing language. Children are curious and interested in their physical environment. Science curriculum encourages engagement with the environment and offers many hands-on opportunities to observe the world, describe what they are seeing, wonder and ask questions, make predictions, and posit theories. Social studies actively engages students in exploring, learning about, interacting with, and wondering and talking about their social world. And a performing arts curriculum can actively engage students in rich and expressive uses of language.

SEAL COMPONENT 5

AN AFFIRMING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Children learn best where they feel safe, supported, and affirmed—where their language, culture, and community are respected; where they are provided with support for developing social skills; and where they can engage respectfully with each other.

A learning environment that facilitates socio-emotional growth—and affirms a child’s culture and language—is essential for participation and healthy identity development. This environment supports children in bridging across and integrating home and school contexts.

Young children learn through interaction with other people. The ways in which adults interact with young children and establish the environment impact all aspects of child development. An enriched, safe, and affirming environment supports children’s emotional and social development. For English Learners, an affirming environment is where their family is embraced, and where their home language and culture are incorporated. The classroom is a place where they are able to participate fully in the activities and curriculum, and where lack of proficiency in English does not serve as a barrier to inclusion.

The school atmosphere of accepted and acceptable social attitudes and behaviors creates a “hidden curriculum” that powerfully informs children and their families whether or not they “belong.” English Learners and their parents are often isolated and face language and cultural barriers to full participation in school opportunities. Newcomer families often do not yet understand the social norms and culture of the school—and teachers and staff often do not yet understand the social norms and culture of the home and community. Children need, therefore, an environment that provides bridges between the two “worlds”—a school environment that works to integrate home-school contexts, and ensures that children and parents feel that they belong, feel safe, and are included. This environment provides the foundation for development and learning.

Teachers recognize that how children learn to relate to each other is a primary point of social learning and development. Building self-identity and skills for social interaction are two major developmental tasks for young children. An emphasis on age-appropriate activities, interactive group time, and structured opportunities for interactions among children help ensure that English Learners are neither isolated nor marginalized.

Creating a safe, affirming, enriched environment involves intentional strategies for supporting students to understand and respect differences, and actively imparts the value of diversity. In the early years, children learn how they are the same and different from others, and how they feel about that difference. What they learn in school greatly influences whether they will grow up to accept, value, and comfortably interact with diverse people or whether they will succumb to the biases that result in unfair treatment of others because of their identity. What children learn in school sets the foundation for whether they will feel pride and acceptance or shame that leads to rejection of their home language and culture.

WHAT AN AFFIRMING ENVIRONMENT LOOKS LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM

In an affirming classroom environment, pictures, posters, and other materials reflect the cultures and ethnic backgrounds of children and families. If the classroom has a dramatic play area, the props are culturally diverse. Books reflect the different cultures of children and families in the classroom, and children also read books exposing them to various life experiences of cultures and ethnic groups other than their own. Tabletop toys and other accessories depict people who are representative of the various cultural and ethnic groups in the community.

Teachers work to create a sense of community in the classroom so that children feel they belong and are able to build positive relationships with other children, teachers, and adults. Through cooperative learning strategies and explicit activities (such as anti-bias curriculum), students gain skills in positive interaction. As students interact with each other, the teacher discourages children from using racial and ethnic slurs by helping them understand that certain words hurt others. Books and other printed materials are screened for negative cultural and ethnic stereotypes before sharing them with children and parents. Children are helped to develop a language for talking about their feelings, resolving conflicts with others, and expressing compassion.

In an affirming classroom environment, a sense of joy permeates the classroom, and children's learning and capabilities are recognized and supported by adults with delight. Children's curiosities are taken seriously and they learn to take pleasure in learning and achieving. High expectations are communicated to students, and students gain confidence in their ability to learn.

SEAL COMPONENT 6

TEACHERS AND PARENTS WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT STRONG LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AT HOME AND AT SCHOOL

The integrity and well-being of families is the foundation for a child's early learning and development. Children develop within the context of their families and communities. Creating strong partnerships between families and schools is a critical component of a child's development. Strengthening families and supporting parents as a child's first teachers are at the core of school readiness and early academic success.

Active family engagement is a hallmark of schools in which children thrive. In these schools, teachers understand the cultures, families, and communities of their students. Parents have the information to support their children's learning at home, are active in the classroom, and help teachers bridge and connect to community knowledge and resources. English Learner parents, however, face both language and cultural barriers to such involvement. Many are unaware of the expectations and ways of doing things in U.S. schools. Many do not have a strong educational background in their own lives. Schools that do not intentionally create inclusive, welcoming, and supportive conditions for English Learner families can inadvertently create additional barriers to involvement.

SEAL emphasizes respectful and collaborative communication between parents and educators, and the development of shared strategies for supporting strong language and literacy development for children. Schools seeking such partnership encourage the use of the home language at school, and encourage parents to continue to use the home language at home—reassuring them that they are not holding their children back. Programs are instituted to provide materials, direction, and training for parents in how to support literacy development and numeracy at home. Family Literacy programs help parents become involved in their children's education. Book loans, workshops on reading to children, and Virtual PreK kits are examples of programs and materials that schools can put in place to help parents actively support their children's schooling. Leadership and learning opportunities are provided for parents—through structured parent leadership and education programs that build confidence and capacity to effectively support their children's development at home.

In addition, the school plays an important role in providing parents with encouragement, as well as information about and access to ESL classes. Schools create mechanisms to help English Learner and English Only parents to build relationships with each other. Parent workshops teach parents about the U.S. schooling system, expectations, how to be an effective advocate and support for their children in school, and how to support academic success.

For parents to feel welcome in the classroom, teachers need support in how to communicate across language/cultural barriers, and help in thinking through how parents can support what is going on in the classroom. Active outreach is needed so parents feel genuinely welcome on campus.

Good relationships between educators and parents require intentional strategies to create linguistic and cultural congruity between home and school in support of children's development (social, emotional, cognitive, and language development) and learning. Two-way partnerships between home and school are essential to creating that congruity—drawing on the knowledge, the expertise, and the cultural capital of families as assets. Staff and parents need to talk to each other about cultural expectations and ways of parenting and teaching young children. These conversations are used to inform and strengthen supports for children in bridging across different cultural and language worlds. These conversations require, of course, translators when teachers do not speak the languages of the families.

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