

Strategies to Support ELLs in Mainstream Classrooms

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Schoolteachers are facing a growing concern in today's classrooms: how to improve the reading achievement of English language learners. The reality is that ELLs score among the lowest in reading achievement nationwide. With a significant and growing percentage of American schoolchildren coming from families whose primary language is not English, classroom teachers must grapple with a much wider range of language development and literacy skill levels than in the past. Many of these students are in bilingual classrooms, including two-way dual language programs. Many are not. Current policy in several states, including California, Arizona, and Massachusetts, places the great majority of ELLs in mainstream classes (Gandara, et al., 2005, p. 8). More than ever before, a large number of ELLs are taught in mainstream settings. Teachers find themselves having to address the different academic needs of native and fluent English speakers, and ELLs, in the same classroom (Gandara, et al., 2005, p. 8). Mainstream teachers "are called on to meet the challenge of teaching English learner students every day" (Gandara, et al., 2005, p. 1) They must provide "students with the skills and knowledge they will need to survive and thrive in U.S. society" (Gandara, et al., 2005, p. 2). All must learn English and meet rigorous literacy standards. Mainstream teachers need special skills and training to effectively accomplish this task (Gandara, et al., 2005, p.1).

Meeting the needs of ELLs is particularly important as demands require higher levels of literacy and language proficiency than were needed by previous generations. Teachers must provide students with the tools to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and apply and appreciate a wide range of topics. Acquiring a



second language takes a long time, yet students are expected to learn to read at grade level, and to learn content and language simultaneously, in a short time (Gandara, et al., 2005, p. 7). These students require special assistance to meet rigorous academic content standards while also learning English (Gandara, et al., 2005). Addressing their needs is critical.

In order to accomplish this, mainstream teachers must provide excellent educational experiences for ELLs. The following are some strategies.

Build on Students' Prior Literacy Experiences

Take advantage of home language and literacy experiences that lead to the development of key print concepts. According to CIERA (1998), the language of children's homes is especially critical for school to build on when children are learning to speak, listen to, write, and read English. There is considerable evidence that the linguistic and orthographic knowledge students acquire in speaking and reading their first language predicts and transfers to learning to read a second language. When teachers capitalize on the advantages of bilingualism or biliteracy, second language reading acquisition is significantly enhanced" (CIERA, 1998). Thus, find out which children are reading fluently in their own language and use their knowledge and experiences to introduce them to English print. Encourage parents and students to continue developing literacy skills in their native language.

Engage Parents and Families

According to Tinajero and Munter (2004), "although the educational achievement of children from minority groups depends in part on what the schools do to help them, it is also clear that schools alone cannot

win this battle” (p. 79). The most effective schools and educational programs recognize the vital roles of families’ and communities’ perceptions and responses to the cultural and language differences facing them, and have developed effective and creative approaches to bridging the gaps through celebrating families’ roles in the education process (Epstein, 2001). Thus, it is important to view parents as assets to the school program and welcome them as important partners in the education of their children. Parents have many talents and experiences. When we tap into these talents, a wealth of information can be shared. Parents can help children who are still developing literacy in their first language by reading and responding to journal entries. Parents can read books in their children’s languages and tell stories from their oral traditions. When children see their parents providing valuable experiences for their peers, they not only feel a sense of pride but also share positive feelings about their language and culture. Parents can also monitor homework and television viewing. Both are associated with gains in student achievement. (CIERA, 1998).

Establish a Nurturing Environment

Classroom environments have a significant effect on ELLs’ language and literacy development. The physical and social environment of the classroom, teacher beliefs and attitudes about ELLs, the types of activities planned, and the strategies and techniques used by teachers all affect the opportunities children have to emerge as readers and to acquire a new language. We know that young children acquire English most effectively in classrooms that provide a nurturing environment—an environment that is language-rich and as natural as the one in which they learned their first language. An important dimension of creating such an environment is to integrate, whenever possible, children’s first language, cultural backgrounds, values, and beliefs into all aspects of classroom life so that children feel positive about themselves as an integral part of your class. For example, a discussion about families can take into account that students may come from extended families in which grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins play important roles, often with the nuclear family.

In written concept sorts, students sort words related to ideas they are studying.

Engage ELLs in Daily Oral Language Activities

According to Peregoy and Boyle (2000, 2005), English language proficiency stands out as the defining difference between native and non-native English speakers. English proficiency refers to an individual’s general knowledge of English, including vocabulary, grammar, and discourse conventions, which may be called upon during any instance of oral or written language use (Peregoy & Boyle, 1991, 2000) (p. 239). Some of the best ways to encourage language development are to provide children with many opportunities to interact with other children during play and other natural language activities, such as singing, hearing and chanting poems, listening to stories, and playing games. Cooperative learning activities provide students with opportunities to practice their English by increasing the frequency and variety of interactions among students—ELLs and proficient English speakers.

Allow opportunities for them to act as resources for each other and thus assume a more active role in learning. Incorporate creative classroom arrangements that encourage talking, writing, modeling, and acting out ideas and concepts encountered in the reading program. All of these are effective means of teaching language because they allow children to hear natural English while providing a meaningful, motivating, and enjoyable context for learning.

The use of cooperative learning also allows for opportunities for conversation and cultural exchange.

In such classrooms, ELLs take an active part in their own learning, engage in activities they view as meaningful, build on their own understanding and efforts, and participate in collaborative and socially constructed contexts for learning to read.

Use Multilevel Strategies

Multilevel strategies allow for the participation of all students no matter what their level of English proficiency. By integrating multilevel strategies, the level of participation and responses required of students during a lesson can be tailored to address varied levels of English proficiency. For example, students at the beginning level of English proficiency can be asked to participate in answering questions which require yes/no

responses, to point to pictures, or to draw a graph. These students can also be asked questions that require short-phrase responses or short explanations about a reading passage. Students at the intermediate level may be asked to provide short explanations, descriptions, and comparisons. On the other hand, students at the advanced fluency levels can be asked questions that require the use of varied grammatical structures and vocabulary.

Directly Teach Vocabulary

The National Reading Panel (2000) identifies oral vocabulary as key in making the transition from oral to written language. Because vocabulary knowledge is so closely tied to reading comprehension, students must develop a broad vocabulary base in order to be effective readers of English. When ELLs encounter a large number of unknown words while they are reading, their comprehension is disrupted. Students may misinterpret a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire reading selection if they do not know the meaning of one or more key words. For this reason, it is extremely important for teachers to directly teach key vocabulary and provide opportunities for students to use this vocabulary orally and in writing (Tinajero, 2004). At early stages, basic vocabulary can be presented visually—using pictures and drawings on the board. Another strategy is to help students access meaning with audio support. At more advanced stages, unknown words can be highlighted within text, and definitions can be viewed within a glossary to support understanding.

Provide Background Knowledge and Personalize Lessons

Reading is an interactive process directed toward the sharing of meaning. Thus, to effectively engage in this process ELL readers must be able to draw on their own language, literacy, and socio-cultural knowledge to reconstruct the author's message. In other words, comprehension is directly related to what a reader already knows. The more a student knows about something, the easier it is to talk, read, and write about it. We also know that comprehension is enhanced when students have opportunities to connect new concepts with their personal experiences and past learning. It follows then that the more familiarity students have with certain aspects of a text, the easier it will be for them to comprehend it.

To make lessons more comprehensible, teachers can draw examples from the experiences of students as the basis for teaching new concepts encountered in reading passages. Use analogies to relate the teaching of new concepts to experiences in ELLs' backgrounds, homes, and neighborhoods. Personalize concepts and content being taught by using the names of people and places familiar to students and using the students' names and familiar objects in assignments and activities. Elicit experiences and activities that relate to the native culture of ELLs.

Take time to seek support and advice from teachers with specialized training on working with ELLs. Collaborate with colleagues and seek professional development opportunities to learn about the developmental and other characteristics of ELLs to help you understand your students and how best to serve them.

Closing. ELLs need a variety of teaching strategies to support both language and concept development. Mainstream teachers can provide ELLs with this support by integrating a variety of strategies that can be best described as an orchestrated visual and verbal performance that makes learning understandable and meaningful for students.

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