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Supporting ELLs in the Mainstream Classroom: Language Tips

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If you are a mainstream teacher trying to figure out how to offer language support to ELLs, you are not alone! Many teachers around the country are working with ELLs for the first time, and they have a lot of questions.

Fortunately, there are a number of ways to support ELLs' language acquisition by adapting strategies already in use. These small things may make a big difference to ELLs. Here are some ideas to get you started. Don't miss the recommended links at the end of the article.

Create a language-rich environment.

English language learners will benefit from increased exposure to print and language. A print-rich environment will include access to books and reference materials, labels and posters, and student work on bulletin boards. Word walls are also a great support for ELLs, and may be organized around a number of concepts, including the alphabet and phonetic sounds, new vocabulary words, sight words, grammar rules, conversational phrases, and writing structures.

Be aware of the relationship between a student's native language and English.

A student's native language will most likely have a strong influence on the way that student learns English. Understanding how this language is similar to or different from English will help you focus on troublesome areas. This influence can provide extra support, such as the case of **English and Spanish cognates** (education and *educación*). The influence also may lead to some ongoing errors in English, which will become evident with time and repeated use by students who have the same native language.

Languages may differ in a number of aspects, such as phonetic sounds, pronunciation, grammar, word order, or sentence structure. For example, in Spanish, the adjective often follows the noun, so a student may write, "We are a family happy." In Somali, there is one sound for b and p — it is mixed. Somali students need to be taught this sound explicitly as two distinct sounds. Otherwise, they may ask for a can of pop and it sounds like "bob."

Native language may also influence students' vocabulary as they translate words or phrases from one language to another. Perhaps a vocabulary word has multiple meanings, a different meaning in each language, or the concept doesn't exist in one of the languages.

Even if you don't know a student's native language, being aware of native language influence will allow you to target your instruction. Help students by providing a model of how to use sounds, structures, and vocabulary correctly in English. In the case of a pronunciation difficulty such as the Somali example above, teachers can demonstrate how the mouth forms the sounds. Have students put their hand in front of their mouths to feel the air in "p" and their hands on their neck to feel the vibration of "b." This is also important as students work to sound out words while writing.

Simplify your language without "dumbing it down."

It may seem difficult to balance this at first, but here are some tips for communicating effectively with your students:

- Avoid slang and idiomatic expressions.
- Speak clearly and naturally, without going too quickly or slowly.
- Encourage students to raise their hand if they don't understand a word.

Remember that ELLs may not understand instructions and key vocabulary words, and that reading something aloud doesn't always help comprehension. You can aid student comprehension by **scaffolding language** (providing extra supports such as realia, **graphic organizers**, visuals, etc.).

ELLs may not have the same background knowledge as their English-speaking peers, especially when it comes to references to American culture and geography, such as the Grand Canyon or Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech. Identify key concepts, vocabulary words, and references before the lesson, and give students as much time and practice with the new material as possible before starting the lesson.

If students are having trouble with an activity, try to identify whether a new concept, set of directions, vocabulary word, or other element is causing the difficulty. Identify some different ways that you can help students move beyond those obstacles. These might include providing a book about the topic in the student's native language or reviewing new vocabulary words together.

Support academic language development.

Academic language is the language that students need to succeed in school. It is different than social language, which many students acquire first. Often students are available to communicate effectively with teachers or peers in social settings, but struggle when it comes to textbooks, tests, assignments, or class presentations. There are a number of ways to support academic language development, such as previewing the text, teaching grammatical structures relevant to a particular content area ("greater than" and "less than" in math class), and showing how the targeted academic language is used in reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Learn more in the following resources from Colorín Colorado:

- **Increasing Academic Language Knowledge for English Language Learner Success**
- **Academic Language webcast**

Discuss word families and how different forms of words are used.

ELLs may have a difficult time knowing which form of a word to use. Help students look for spelling and usage patterns, such as past tense verbs ending in "-ed." Since English has so many exceptions, this isn't always a foolproof strategy, but a basic knowledge of these patterns, rules, and spellings will help. Cognates can also help Spanish-speakers learn English and derive meaning from content. Teachers can explicitly point out cognates for Spanish-speaking students so they begin to realize that this is a useful way for them to increase their English vocabulary.

Help students understand when to use different kinds of language.

ELLs may speak different dialects or use "Spanglish," a combination of English and Spanish, in their classroom

and with their friends and family. It's important to respect the language students use and realize that it is effective for them in certain settings. Rather than looking at certain dialects or slang as "good" or "bad," help students understand when different kinds of language are appropriate — and what the benefits of learning Standard Academic English will be for them in the long run.

Discuss the uses of Standard Academic English in college and career settings, as well as the importance of effective communication on applications and in interviews. One teacher I know calls this English the "green language" because it represents money the students can earn in the future with good English communication skills. Make it clear what kind of language you expect students to use in the classroom, and provide language models or structures when students have difficulty expressing themselves appropriately.

Provide students with frequent opportunities to work together, both in pairs and in small groups.

Cooperative learning activities promote peer interaction, which helps the development of language and the learning of concepts and content. Effective activities may include working on a worksheet together as problem-solver and coach (then switching roles), **think-pair-share**, and book groups. It is important to assign ELLs to different groups so that they can benefit from English language role models. ELLs learn to express themselves with greater confidence when working in small teams.

In addition to 'picking up' vocabulary, ELLs benefit from observing how their peers learn and solve problems. If you decide to assign each student in a team a role (such as reporter, recorder, time keeper, and materials manager), you might want to rotate roles each week or by activity. This prevents what typically happens if students select their own roles — the same students wind up performing the same tasks. By rotating, students develop the skills they most need to practice.

Implement an effective correction/feedback policy.

While it is difficult to know when to correct students, constructive and effective feedback is essential to student progress. It is possible for incorrect language production to become "fossilized" so that students continue to use the same incorrect structures into adulthood. This reduces their chances of being a clear communicator and ultimately limits them in professional settings. Nevertheless, it is important to balance between encouragement and error correction. One way to do this is to focus on one or two concepts at a time when listening to or reading student work. Let students know what you will be focusing on so that they in turn can focus on those particular concepts in the assignment.

Another strategy is to circle errors in writing assignments, and have students try to figure out what the mistakes were. As I always tell my students, "If I correct your English, I improve my English. If you correct your English, you improve yours." Most of the time students are able to correct their own writing errors once they focus on the circled area. If they are still stuck, I give them the answer and ask them to explain why it is correct. If they don't know the answer, I ask them to consult with a classmate. If no one else knows the answer, we review the structure as a group.

Reach out to your ELL/bilingual colleagues, reading specialists, special education teachers, and parents.

Educators and staff who work regularly with ELLs, as well as bilingual parents, may be a valuable source of information about language patterns or difficulties. While it may be difficult to find time to meet on a regular basis, increased collaboration among language teachers, content teachers, mainstream teachers, and support staff will most likely improve student support.

While teaching ELLs may be daunting, there are a number of ways you can support their language acquisition — and in the process get them on the road to academic success!

References

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