



Product Research & Documentation

English Language Learners Strategies Guide

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Schools must respond to an ever-growing population of students with varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds. English learners are the fastest growing population in our public school system (Leos, 2004). Pearlman (2002) notes that by 2015 more than 50% of the public school K-12 student population in the United States will be English language learners (ELLs). These students will be learning the language of instruction while learning the grade level standards and a wide range of literacy skills. In 2016, Scott Sargrad for the U.S. News reported, “America recently passed a remarkable milestone in public education: For the first time, minority students – Black, Hispanic, Asian-American and Native-American students – now make up a majority of our public school students.” Thus, a need arose for Mentoring Minds to develop a product that would positively affect the success of English language learners in the classroom. The English Language Learners Strategies Guide is a resource that provides educators with techniques and strategies for helping the English Language Learner (ELL) achieve success.

Teachers must have access to tools that help them design high-quality instruction and respond appropriately to English language learners. While the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) states that ELLs are included in the law’s requirements for assessment, the most recent legislation [Sec. 1111(b)(1)] in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Mandlawitz, 2015) requires states to adopt English language proficiency standards. Schools have to address this accountability requirement since the scores of ELLs are often a part of the decision that determines if a school is making adequate yearly progress or not. Teachers and administrators must respond to the challenges prevalent in their classrooms by successfully addressing the needs of English language learners. The national standards for teaching English

language learners were considered before developing this educator’s resource (TESOL, 1997). The revised standards (TESOL, 2006) were also reviewed. These standards provide guidelines to support the instruction of such learners. The ELL Strategies Guide is an easy-to-use tool that provides educators with direction in creating an environment for effective learning and improving the delivery of high-quality instruction for ELLs in all content area settings. The guide provides specific ways to include parents, to recognize the importance of culture, and to offer techniques to implement instruction that motivates students and helps them become successful in meeting performance standards.

The ELL Strategies Guide is a compact guide that contains 14-tabbed sections. Each section in the guide features strategies or techniques to help the classroom teacher or any educator who works with English language learners (ELLs) provide focused educational support. The role of a school is to assist these students in acquiring both the English skills and content knowledge they need to participate in learning activities equally with their peers and to meet grade-level expectations. This resource provides specific direction to help ELLs reach success in an educational setting.

Parents of English language learners should be involved in the education of their children. The parents are making a cultural adjustment and opportunities to ease this transition must be provided to the parents. King and Fogle (2006) advocate ELL parents communicating to their children in their home language. This communication supports cognitive and linguistic development. Sometimes parents and teachers feel that only English should be spoken in the home. Based on teaching ELLs and conferring with numerous teachers and specialists, Samway and Taylor (2008) noted that teachers should encourage

native language communication in the home. Furthermore, teachers should share the advantage of being able to communicate in more than one language.

Culture may affect classroom behaviors, but it may also influence comprehension of content. The role of the school and the teacher is critical in creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere that supports the development of these students as bilingual learners. Teachers have a unique opportunity to utilize the culture that ELLs bring to school to broaden the learning of all students in the classroom. Freeman and Freeman (2001) stress the importance of accepting the primary languages and cultures of ELL students as they are learning English.

Understanding and showing value for the cultures of all learners helps to overcome any misinterpretations and reduce anxieties that may exist. Acceptance and utilization of the home culture of ELLs may lead to increased performance and improvement in attitude (Gardner, LaLonde, & Moorcroft, 1985). English language learners come to school with a wide range of life and educational experiences due to their diverse backgrounds. The comprehension or understandings of these learners varies. When teachers ease cultural adjustment issues for English language learners, this helps students acquire a new language and become acclimated to a new educational climate. Suggestions for teachers are provided in the ELL Strategies Guide that explain how the knowledge of the culture of ELLs can become a positive instructional tool.

Reinforcing the effort of students helps them see that a relationship exists between what they do and what they achieve. Effort and achievement are related. Because ELLs are learning content in addition to acquiring a new language, they need reinforcement continually (Hill & Byork, 2008). Acknowledging that English language learners need feedback to know how well they are progressing toward a specific learning goal led to a section in the ELL resource that focused

on this essential topic. Realistic and timely feedback helps students improve their performance. Teachers should provide feedback throughout the day as ELLs acquire knowledge and as they are involved in opportunities to practice, apply, and review that knowledge.

Environment plays a vital role in the instruction of ELLs. Students need many opportunities to interact with language and not merely an introduction to English. Swain (1993) advocates an environment that promotes and encourages participation and invites English language learners to become active learners. Teachers who use strategies that increase participation maximize the potential for learners to demonstrate what they know. The increased participation helps ELLs begin to experience feelings of academic success. Canagarajah (2006) indicated the necessity of shifting to process-focused practices versus those that accent only product or correct responses. These practices promote increased involvement of students.

Motivation is a powerful influence on the learning process. Opportunities for students to experience success are an important part of creating classrooms conducive to potential learning. Lowering anxiety among English language learners, making content meaningful, and connecting learning to prior knowledge are some of the ways to promote success in learning. All of these elements set the stage for increasing student motivation.

When teachers make efforts to integrate a cultural dimension within their classrooms, student learning, comprehension, and excitement appear to surface. Bringing a multicultural perspective to the lesson is a way to show English language learners that their diverse experiences and backgrounds are valued. Such an addition to a lesson can motivate ELLs to become interested in subject matter content and deepen their understanding of concepts. Without the cultural connection from the home to the school and the absence of teachers being open to the resources brought by English language learners, these students can easily become disinterested in in-



struction (Lee & Luykx, 2006). Gay (2000) supported a classroom environment that integrated cultural backgrounds while Jimenez (1997) advocated the use of culturally relevant texts to engage students in learning.

Reeve (1996) noted that internal and external factors both affect student motivation. Internal factors include the individual characteristics or behaviors of students such as their interests, values, perceptions of themselves and of their abilities for learning, and responsibility for learning (Ainley, 2004). Recognition should be given to students for actual achievement; otherwise, the effect might have a negative impact on motivation and achievement. Praise may be given, but it should be personal and culturally appropriate. English language learners may be hesitant to perform or speak because they fear they will not understand a new task, they do not have the confidence to communicate, or they perceive the school does not value their culture.

Schools can affect the external factors in a positive or negative manner. The learning environment can support and change student motivation. Ainley (2004) identified “classroom features, peer groups, instructional practices, [and] tasks” as some of the factors that schools could influence. Other practices implemented to encourage motivation include providing relevant instruction that actively engages students and helping students form positive peer connections.

Several other researchers agreed that schools could positively influence student motivation and promote educational success (Einspruch, Grover, Hahn, Guy & Deck, 2001; Shore, 1998; Yair, 2000). Schools could implement techniques such as creating an open and caring campus environment; using and integrating a variety of instructional strategies and resources; employing a wide range of student supports; conveying high expectations that all students are capable of

achieving; and promoting student-learning conversations between and among faculty. The related literature on motivation resulted in a section in the ELL flip chart on motivation with suggestions for classroom teachers.

Every culture has its own rules when it comes to speaking, and the rules can vary across cultures. Asking questions may be viewed as disrespectful depending on cultural beliefs. Some students may not answer unless called upon, while others may view asking questions during class time or asking for clarification as disrespectful to the teacher.

The response time can also vary among cultures due to their beliefs about courtesy and respect. Teachers must become aware of these differences among learners and get to know their students. When English language learners are asked a question, they must first understand the question before they can respond appropriately. If the question calls for a written response, the organization of content into written language becomes another challenge.

Krashen and Terrell (1983) recommend leveling questions to match the language acquisition stage of students. Teachers should be cognizant of how ELLs interact with others in English, so the questions can be adjusted to help ELLs successfully and confidently answer in English or use gestures. Such questions can be used in any content area and at any grade level, note Herrell and Jordan (2008). Hayley & Austin (2004) suggest leveled questions promote involvement and progress of students.

Callahan (2005) notes that there are times when the low language proficiency of ELLs appears to lower the expectations of teachers toward the perceived abilities of ELLs to perform. This unfortunate perception causes the level of questions to be at a much lower level of thought for ELLs

as opposed to the level of questioning posed for English-speaking students (Verplaetse, 1998).

The review of literature about ELLs also supported the inclusion of a section in the ELL Strategies Guide about grouping. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2003) reports that verbal interaction occurs more frequently in small group settings because it is comfortable for ELLs. Students appear to be interactive and talkative probably due to the absence of pressure when they are among their friends.

All students should be taught how to set up a culture of friendly learning. Working in small groups provides opportunities for students to help each other. Zehler (1994) recommends that the peer grouping strategy is effective when group members are chosen carefully so that each student is responsible for using his/her skills and contributing to the group. Zehler notes that this strategy is beneficial when the other students within the group assist the ELL student. If ELL students are permitted to choose their own partners, sometimes they may choose peers who speak their native language. This may lead to off-task behavior or a lack of skill use, so teachers need to be observant of this possibility. In conclusion, English language learners benefit from small group instruction because of the language modeling experiences and meaningful interactions that occur. Small group instruction is also a strategy that engages students in verbal interaction and provides opportunities for students to extend the ideas of others, all of which relate to the TESOL standards, a publication of Pre-K–12 ESL Standards (TESOL, 1997; TESOL, 2006).

English language learners need instruction that is tailored to their needs. A format that appears to be successful and provides student interaction is the use of skills groups. Skills grouping provides focused instruction for students who have common needs (Gibbons, 1993). This is an effective technique for students because skills grouping instruction is scaffolded to address the present level of functioning. Teachers must observe the

language and skills level of English language learners carefully so the groups are formed appropriately. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) indicate that skills grouping reduces anxiety among ELLs, thus making it an effective format for teaching skills that are difficult to comprehend.

Practice is provided for students to reach a specified level of proficiency for a skill or for a process. When you think students have mastered a skill or a process, practice must continue though prior practice sessions have occurred. English language learners must be provided opportunities to practice previously learned knowledge and what they are presently learning. Hill and Bjork (2008) acknowledge the importance of practice to prevent ELLs from learning incorrectly. Observation and monitoring by the teacher is necessary to ensure that ELLs practice procedures carefully. Focused practice leads to automaticity.

Based on the research about practice, Hill and Bjork (2008) state, “It is not until students have practiced a skill process about 20–24 times that they reach 80% competency and can use the new skill on their own.” Newell and Rosenbloom (1981) and Anderson (1995) advocate that students must receive focused practice to achieve mastery of skills. Healy (1990) notes that it is recommended that students practice only a few skills at a time at a deeper level. Complicated tasks should be broken into smaller segments with built-in practice time, state Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001). Research generalizations on practice were incorporated into the ELL Strategies Guide to help educators understand how to improve homework and classroom practice for ELLs.

Assessment allows teachers to make informed decisions about the learning of English language learners. Assessment provides information about the individual growth and the language development of students. Such knowledge shapes the structure of appropriate instruction and adjusts teaching strategies based on the competencies and progress of the students.



Studies have shown a connection between English language proficiency and performance of ELLs on written assessments. Students who have difficulties communicating in English often appear to know more about a content area than scores indicate. The challenge of paper and pencil content-area assessments makes it difficult for ELLs to communicate their actual knowledge. Thus, the ELLs' performance on such assessments is not always an accurate measure of their knowledge or understanding.

Some researchers report that the complexity of the language on tests can increase the gap margin between ELLs and English speaking students (Abedi, Lord, Hofstetter & Baker, 2000). Implications from this finding lead educators to use appropriate accommodations for ELLs. State guidelines delineate such accommodations. Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera (2006) stress that state approved accommodations be used during the year prior to the administration of the state assessments. These opportunities not only provide practice leading up to the assessments, but accommodations help ELLs achieve success in ongoing classroom instruction. The one accommodation found to demonstrate effectiveness consistently for ELLs is the usage of English dictionaries and glossaries.

Assessment strategies provide measures to form evaluative judgments of students' levels of competencies in given areas. These judgments determine the educational needs of students and offer direction to the teacher in planning effective instruction. Assessments should be both informal and formal. These varied assessments should be utilized before, during, and after instruction.

The information derived from assessments is a powerful tool to monitor the development of student understanding, to revise instruction, and to provide reflection for learners. It is noted that effective teachers utilize assessment tasks as qual-

ity learning experiences (NRC, 1996). Assessment feedback supplies the learner with self-assessment information, but it also enhances motivation, which is crucial to achievement. Learning improves with consistent feedback (Heath & Glen, 2005; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

Rubrics provide students with established informative criteria for success by clarifying desired learning outcomes for students. Crooks (1988) shares that criterion-referenced feedback provides the guidance for improving student understanding. Self-assessment and reflection are important due to the feedback students can ascertain for themselves. Effective learning appears to result from students who provide their own feedback by monitoring their work against preset criteria presented to them in advance of the work task or assignment (Trammel, Schloss, & Alper, 1994; Wiggins, 1993).

Another section that warranted inclusion in the guide in helping English language learners was vocabulary. Vocabulary is a central element in language development programs for ELLs. (Meltzer & Hamman, 2005; Nation, 2001). Cummins (2000) and Scarcella (2002) support the finding that vocabulary is key to academic success. Students have to understand vocabulary to comprehend the academic content they encounter in school. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) reveal that when specific vocabulary from academic subject areas were selected as the focus of instruction, the result was a 33% increase in vocabulary comprehension. Therefore, it appears that when students are taught specific content vocabulary in each subject area at each grade level, they have an excellent opportunity to acquire the academic background knowledge they need to understand the subject area content. One widely used system for determining which words to teach is a framework that organizes vocabulary terms into three tiers (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002). This

system could provide a starting point for vocabulary organization. Tier 2 terms are usually taught to all students, and ELLs who are at the early stages of language will need help with Tier 1 words and common idioms. Tier 3 vocabulary terms are often reflective of specific content areas.

Teaching content vocabulary using a systematic approach appears to be a powerful tool for student success (Marzano & Pickering, 2005). Furthermore, research firmly documents that academic background knowledge has an effect on academic achievement. Any intervention for the achievement of students should identify increasing students' content vocabulary knowledge through direct instruction as a leading priority (Marzano, 2004). Word-learning strategies include learning how to use reference aids. Word-learning strategies are important for English learners and native English speakers as reported by Carlo, August, and Snow (2005).

Goldberg (2008) indicated that students whose teachers and parents acknowledge their developing language skills are more likely to feel confident and take the initiative to learn a new language. Goldberg further stated these students take risks in learning English when English is not presented as a "substitution" for their primary language, but more as an "addition." Freeman & Freeman (1994) report that it is effective for students to be encouraged to use home language vocabulary when they are not able to find the appropriate English term.

Content-specific words and complex academic vocabulary make written language difficult for English language learners. Non-linguistic strategies improve the ability of students to extend or represent knowledge by using mental representations. Visuals can create a support for ELLs and increase lesson effectiveness. Genesee (1999) supports integration of this finding in lesson plans. Gibbons (2002) advocates the importance of scaffolding content and language instruction. Scaffolding strategies and other vocabulary strategies are listed in the ELL Strategies Guide.

Vocabulary strategies should be used to facilitate comprehension of the academic language in content areas integrating the language within the content (Zehr, 2009). Teachers must teach strategies to English language learners so they can process and learn new information. Lessow-Hurley (1990) recognizes preview/review as an effective strategy for English learners. This strategy introduces students to content vocabulary in their home language, followed by a lesson in English, and then a review of academic vocabulary in the home language. Active engagement of ELLs in this manner before and after a lesson builds numerous opportunities for vocabulary comprehension (Nation, 2005). It appears that researchers suggest multiple approaches be used to teach vocabulary in addition to direct instruction. Because vocabulary learning must become a routine part of classroom instruction across content areas, it was essential that vocabulary become an integral part of the ELL Strategies Guide.

Goldberg (2008) concluded that research indicates it is difficult to know the precise reason ELLs score low when tested in English. The resulting reasons may be because of gaps in content area knowledge and skills, limited proficiency in English, other factors, or a combination of things that interfere with test performance. Thus, educators must be aware that learning content can be difficult for English language learners.

Instructional techniques that are effective for students in general are also effective for English language learners. Clearly given explanations supported by visual aids and direct instruction and then followed by practice opportunities are examples of techniques that also benefit ELLs. Although some of the techniques may remain the same, it is necessary that teachers differentiate instruction for ELL students to accommodate the different levels of language development (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006).

The use of select techniques and/or strategies can make a difference in learning academic con-



tent material. Favorable evidence was reported by the National Reading Panel (2000) linking background knowledge to the successful comprehension of reading. August & Shanahan (2006) support background knowledge as important to overall meaning of material. While investigations continue on this topic, the studies and literature indicate that building the background knowledge of ELLs can increase engagement and improve comprehension.

Vocabulary instruction is critical to the content areas because the academic language differs across content areas. ELLs must be provided instructional support to know how to use content vocabulary correctly (Geertz, 1988; Scarcella, 2003). Freeman and Freeman (1998) noted that the depth at which students learn new content is directly related to their background knowledge and/or prior experience. The ELL Strategies Guide acknowledges this finding. Suggestions are made within the product to aid educators in facilitating instructional strategies that promote learning and in maximizing possibilities for success within students.

Numerous individuals report the importance of using visual, auditory, and tactile aids to make content more understandable to ELLs (Carey, 2007; Herrell & Jordan, 2008; Samway & Taylor, 2008). Realia, demonstrations, gestures, and other media serve as valuable support to concept development. Marzano, Gaddy, and Dean (2000) found that using the native language of students as a vehicle to draw upon prior knowledge is an effective strategy. As ELLs learn content more successfully, their self-confidence in their academic abilities increases, which leads to increases in their motivation to learn. Attitude is imperative in the achievement of academic success. In the flip chart, the information suggested within the tab Content Area Strategies offers a guide to teachers as they design activities and assign-

ments. The intent of the instructional strategies is to increase comprehension of content for English language learners.

Federal laws, the 2001 NCLB and the 2004 IDEA, and the 2015 ESSA (Mandlawitz, 2015), direct schools to focus on helping all students learn by addressing academic concerns earlier rather than waiting on students to fail. Both laws declare the importance of high quality, scientifically-based instruction. Both hold schools accountable for the progress of all students in meeting grade level standards. Having knowledge of and applying these strategies within any classroom that serves ELL students will be advantageous. The Teacher Resources Team considered the directives from both laws, the literature on principles of teaching ELLs, and findings from related studies to determine the areas cited in the ELL Strategies Guide and the included strategies.

The ELL flip chart contains numerous suggestions for strategies that develop, reinforce, or extend classroom instruction. Any teacher working with English language learners can use these strategies. The recommended strategies may also be utilized in intervention settings within a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach implemented by a campus. A notable value of this educational resource is to build or extend the background knowledge of teachers about strategies or ideas that researchers and the review of literature have identified as important to effective instruction. In conclusion, the ELL Strategies Guide provides significant insight on what instruction might look like that engages English language learners and leads them to be successful in learning.

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