

# Supporting English Language Learners in the Elementary and Secondary Classrooms: How to Get Started

**Glee Whitsett:** University of Montevallo

**Janie Hubbard:** University of Alabama

Learning how to communicate and instruct non-English proficient students in a regular classroom is a challenging task, especially for novice teachers. New teachers need to overcome fear, insufficient pedagogical knowledge, and lack of teaching experience; therefore, getting started can be the most overwhelming part of the process. This article attempts to provide regular education teachers with the initial steps for accommodating English Language Learners (ELL) in their classrooms. Perspectives from both elementary and secondary classroom settings are compared, and practical advice about how to assess students' prior knowledge, select teaching strategies, and assess students' ongoing progress is included and discussed.

**H**ow to instruct and communicate with non-English proficient students in the regular classroom is a common fear for teachers at all levels. Some frequent questions are, "How do I know how much English they can speak and read?" "How do I teach them the content if they don't understand what I'm saying?" "How do I know they understand the lesson objectives, if I don't understand what they are saying?" "What if I offend them?" Regular education teachers have limited time for professional development specific to educating non-English proficient students, therefore, this article develops from the experiences of regular educators and attempts to provide classroom teachers with the initial steps for accommodating English Language Learners (ELL) in their classrooms.

## **Step 1 – Access Background Knowledge**

Teachers should first investigate and discover what the students already know. Before classes begin, teachers should study school records and

talk with other teachers. Test scores, possible referrals to special education, information from ELL teachers, and reports from counselors found in a student's permanent record could contribute to an overall picture of the student's profile. Independent Education Plans (IEP), found in permanent records, explain how the classroom teacher can accommodate or modify instruction and learning activities for an ELL student.

In the case of a student new to the school, records transfer from the former school before the student is admitted, so written information should still be available. If, though, a student has not been in school and has no record, a teacher must be more proactive; search for alternative sources and ask about the referral process for obtaining an IEP.

To discover an individual's level of language development, teachers should confer with ELL instructors and study test results. Some school districts give proficiency tests to assess language

skills, so teachers can begin to make decisions about scaffolding based on the data. For example, while a student may read on an eighth grade level in their native language, tests may show that he or she can only function at a first or second grade level in English. In this case, it is crucial that a teacher is aware of this and takes the initiative to locate supplements to the grade level curriculum. If there is little information concerning a specific student's language proficiency in the school record, the teacher must continue to gather more information independently. He or she should attempt to discover if the student has any language skills or is eager to learn English based upon whatever information is available.

After gathering background information at school, the teacher should contact English Language Learners and their families and become acquainted with their values and characteristics. Personal information about an individual supplements and extends generic data that, alone, could lead to stereotyping. As Buttery and Anderson (1999) state,

America's schools are a conglomerate of children from different types of backgrounds. For example, many immigrant families do not speak or understand English. The language gap may be particularly significant for low-income families who have little or no education themselves. (p.114)

The most significant information needed by the teacher would be about a student's family makeup, immigration history, favorite activities, concerns, strengths, perceptions of the value of school knowledge, and experiences with different subject matters (Coltrane, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). It is easier to develop relationships with parents of young children because the classroom teacher normally instructs the same students all day, every day. At the upper levels, however, teachers are likely to see each student about 50 minutes per day. The lack of face-to-face time with students paired with the sheer number

of students limit teachers' communication with parents; consequently, relationships may require extra effort.

Contact with students and families help teachers become aware of and sensitive to cultural differences, which could affect achievement. In today's global society it is common to encounter as many as 30 different languages spoken within a school, and the various languages, beliefs, and attitudes of all the participants converge in the classroom. Within each group there are differences related to dialects, social class, acculturation, and educational background (Lasley & Matczynski, 1997).

Cultural orientation causes people to respond to things differently, thus teachers must acquire a sense of their own cultural identities, values, and prejudices while examining those of their students. Whereas the U.S. culture is individualistic and places a value on competition and individual accomplishment, some Hispanic and Asian cultures are collective. For example, Hispanic students often tend to be more group-oriented and less competitive than their Anglo counterparts. They regard personal and family relationships as important and may form close ties with teachers (Bagby, Cunningham, Lyall & Shille, 2003; Gordon & Browne, 1996; Lasley & Matczynski, 1997; Tileston, 2004). Gordon and Browne observe that, "Children are encouraged to help each other [in collective cultures], and there is less of an urge toward achievement" (p.135). Teachers should be mindful that grades and competition do not always serve as motivators, so they may need to devise alternative techniques to influence student interest and participation.

It is common to create academic alliances with the ELL instructors if they are permanently available at the school. They may offer information about the student's background, current home life, strengths, weaknesses, and concerns. Other communication may include tips or strategies for teaching particular students

and assistance in teaching important parts of the curriculum. Gathering information from a learning specialist is challenging if there is no full time ELL teacher in the building or if he or she floats from school to school within the district. An option would be to consult with a student's previous classroom teachers to gain personal information about the student. They may also share strategies that have been effectively used with the student in the past.

On-site professional assistance with ELL students is often misunderstood. Teachers sometimes have the misconception that full time aides are available to assist classroom teachers, or that ELL's have a period built into their day to visit an ELL teacher and receive help with homework. This may not be the case, as most ELL classrooms do not serve as study halls. ELL teachers ordinarily work on specific English language acquisition strategies instead of assisting students at different grade levels on a variety of subjects. Certainly, there are exceptions, and students with higher English language proficiency may work on language skills within the context of the current curriculum. For example, an ELL teacher might help students learn new vocabulary words for a science class.

## **Step 2 – Teaching Strategies**

The good news is that many strategies and methods teachers may already be using are also effective for ELLs. Examples are (1) slowing down, enunciating words properly and restating as necessary, (2) providing context clues in the form of gestures, actions, graphs, graphic organizers, and other visuals, (3) drawing on prior knowledge, (4) arranging opportunities for group work and activity-based learning, and (5) making careful observations of in-class behaviors and accommodating as needed (Fathman, Quinn & Kessler, 1992; Hansen, 2006; Staple, Smith, Riggs & Dias, 1997; Washburn, 2008). Word walls that highlight basic words and phrases in English and other languages can aid communication (Hansen,

2006). For example, having the phrase “You need a piece of paper” on the wall, with the Spanish translation “Necesita un pedazo de papel” can help the ELL learn the English phrase and can help English learners learn the Spanish phrase as well. Likewise, Agirdag states that students from similar linguistic backgrounds should help one another via peer tutoring (2009), especially with “abstract concepts in math, such as multiplication or mean” (p. 20). Cooperative learning can be a helpful tool, especially when combined with study strategies such as advance organizers and summary frames. Taking the time to teach students note taking or summarizing skills can also be beneficial to ELLs and save class time in the end.

It is important to create a secure environment for English Language Learners. Students seated near the main teaching area of the room can quickly observe what the teacher is doing. When facilitating group work, the ELL is placed with a friend or at least with the same group each time. In one study, advantages were found in middle-school student achievement in reading and social studies when using ClassWide Peer Tutoring (CWPT). CWPT supplements “general education instruction with peer-assisted, collaborative instructional activities, wherein students spend time supporting each others’ learning” (Kamps et al., 2008, p. 120). A same language friend, especially one more advanced in English, can be an ideal working partner. “This is very successful with upper-grade children. [Same language] buddies can sit next to each other during the engage phase so that the English language learner can whisper questions to the buddy in the native language” (Hansen, 2006, p. 23). While using this strategy, sometimes known as “strategic use of language,” can be helpful, Hill and Flynn advise teachers to bear in mind certain pitfalls. Be careful not to (1) overuse it, (2) implement it in classes where it could be overly disturbing to all students, and (3) form a habit of having students teaching students (2008).

The more secure the student feels with the teacher and other students the more likely the ELL is to take risks with language acquisition. Teachers who respect and value their students, for who they are, send out clear messages by recognizing their needs and desires; expecting the best from and for them academically and committing to equity in the classroom (Rodriguez & Kitchen, 2005; Lasley & Matczynski, 1997; Tileston, 2004). In an equitable classroom environment, the atmosphere is open and supportive, and students are encouraged to speak without fear of ridicule or criticism. Teachers create authentic reasons for all students to communicate. The structure of communicative classroom activities, those that necessitate communication and verbal interaction, helps ELL students recognize when others do not understand them. This realization is beneficial for moving students from receptive, semantic processing (listening to understand) to expressive, syntactic processing (forming words and sentences to communicate) (Herrell & Jordan, 2008).

A classroom teacher should also attempt to discover what makes the family comfortable in terms of school interaction. Parents of ELLs may want more involvement with the school and teachers but are hesitant to approach without a personal invitation. Pohan and Adams (2007) make the following point about parents of ELL students,

Although many parents are willing to help their children become successful in school, too many parents are at a loss for how to adequately support their children. An overall lack of information can increase their frustration and result in low levels of participation at school-related activities. (p. 44)

Sometimes the parents prefer to work with an ELL instructor directly, or they may prefer to speak with the classroom teacher. Teachers should make a point to let parents know that they want

to help, invite parent participation, gauge parent comfort level, and then do what helps them work best with their student.

### **Step 3 – Assess Student Progress**

Once a teacher has taught students, she or he must judge if they have mastered the objectives. This is difficult with regular education students and even more challenging when there is a language barrier. One common, informal assessment is to ask for input from students. If confidence with English is undeveloped, students may be embarrassed to speak. Knowing each student's existing stage or level of language acquisition will mitigate many of these problems. These stages are Preproduction (vocabulary up to 500 words); Early Production (speaks in one- or two-word phrases); Speech Emergence (vocabulary up to 3000 words and can communicate in simple phrases); Intermediate Fluency (vocabulary up to 6000 words). It may take an ELL up to ten years to reach Advanced Fluency. When students enter public schools, they must take the WIDA ACCESS Placement Test to determine which stage of language acquisition a student is in. Similarly, each spring, students are tested to assess progress. Asking the district ELL/ESL teacher for this information gives teachers valuable background information for working with students. When applying this knowledge, teachers must be patient and sensitive when questioning, provide adequate wait time, and accept short answers or nonverbal signals if necessary. Similarly, teachers of older students must not make the mistake of thinking that because of a student's age, they will be confident with language skills. Unless they have worked to learn English for several years, adolescent ELL's will have the same fears and struggles with learning a new language that a younger student has. Again, it is extremely important to be well aware of the stage of language acquisition for your English Language Learner. It is also beneficial to document the students' language development progress by "jotting down the date

and a few words to help remember the content and context of verbal interactions” (Herrell & Jordan, 2008, p. 10). Profiles can be stored on the computer and constantly updated. This is a valuable resource to share on report cards as well as with parents and other teachers.

Informal, ongoing assessments designed to fit the actual lessons check that students meet all lesson objectives. Some assessment strategies appropriate for English learners include the use of observation, anecdotal records, performance sampling, and portfolio assessment. Anecdotal records should contain regular, consistent notes on specific incidents the teacher observes. Examples of these are interactions with other students or a demonstration of knowledge using manipulatives. Performance samples are assessments in which the teacher observes a sample of the student’s performance in a planned academic task. Examples of these are working a mathematics problem from beginning to end, responding to a written prompt using the writing process, carrying out a science experiment, or researching a social studies topic and completing a data chart. Anecdotal records, performance samples, and work samples may be stored in a portfolio. Teachers should then review and analyze the contents of the portfolio, searching for progress at frequent intervals (Harrell & Jordan, 2008).

Many formative assessments can be adapted for the ELL, and alternate assessments administered. Alternative assessments assume various formats meant to support the language learner. Typical examples of adaptations would include drawings to show understanding of the lesson objectives, oral answers for test questions, shortened versions of a quiz, and more time for completing a test. “Examples of alternative assessments that are excellent for English language learners include posters, dio- and trio-ramas, brochures, poems, labeled diagrams, products, and projects (Hansen, 2006, p. 25). Ideally, teachers in upper grades would like to create special assessments for each

curricular objective, but they are hindered by high-stakes testing requirements and the great number of students that they would need to assess. For instance, a self-contained elementary classroom may include a maximum of 10 ELLs to accommodate over the course of a day, whereas the secondary teacher may have 70-80 ELLs per day. Secondary and middle school teachers, though, can employ some of the same techniques (drawings, oral assessments, etc.) that the elementary teacher uses, because they are teaching English to someone who may be curricularly on the level of an elementary student if the ELL has studied English for less than five years.

At all levels, formal assessments usually consist of summative classroom content or chapter tests and standardized tests. Some of the usual standardized tests include writing and reading assessments, federally mandated achievement tests, graduation exams, and college entrance exams. Teachers should continuously study informal and formal assessment data and modify instructional practices to provide ELLs with equitable learning experiences.

Assessments are important to help the teacher discover if students are learning the objectives and progressing, but they are also crucial to inform a teacher’s practice. The ongoing question for any teacher is, “What is working or when is it necessary to change my teaching?” For this reason, the importance of having knowledge of each ELL student’s specific English proficiency level or stage of development cannot be overemphasized. It must be understood that listening, writing, reading, and speaking are all forms of language that must be learned by the linguistically challenged student, and students may be in various stages of these four components at different times (Tileston, 2004). Keeping a watchful eye on individual English language progress is necessary, and teachers should study up-to-date research on the stages of English language acquisition for anyone. There are many

readily available resources on this topic; however, one place to start might be to read materials by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium. WIDA is a non-profit, consortium of 19 U.S. states, originally funded by a federal grant, to develop English language proficiency standards, an English language proficiency test aligned with those standards, and ongoing research on language acquisition.

### Things to Remember:

1. Know your students and their backgrounds; cultural values, learning styles, stages of English language acquisition, and motivators.
2. Research teaching strategies and design activities that optimize equitable learning.
3. Continuously and consistently assess student performance, document your findings, and make data-driven decisions.
4. Enjoy your English Language Learners and understand that diversity is a gift; give students opportunities to share the richness of their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, and all of your students will benefit.

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### **Author's Note**

Dr. Whitsett is an Associate Professor at the University of Montevallo. She currently serves as Director of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Dr. Hubbard is currently an Adjunct Professor at the University of Alabama. She has just completed teaching part-time at Asociacion Escuelas Lincoln in Buenos Aires, Argentina.