Teaching English Language Learners

Tips from the Classroom

With more than 35 years of combined experience teaching English language learners (ELLs), Larry Ferlazzo and Katie Hull Sypnieski understand how students learn. Together, they have written a series of books on the topic, and in this article they share their insights. Chief among them is that ELLs require particular instructional strategies to help them thrive. The following pages specifically focus on three areas: differentiating instruction, encouraging students' intrinsic motivation for academic achievement, and using an affirming form of correcting student errors. The authors explore each area with common scenarios faced by teachers and with research-based and classroom-tested strategies that teachers can apply in response to them. It's important to note that many of these strategies can also work with mainstream students. As the saying goes, good instruction for English language learners is good instruction for everyone.

–Editors

By Larry Ferlazzo and Katie Hull Sypnieski

Differentiating Instruction

There are 20 students in a high school English language development class, ranging from newcomers who haven't had formal schooling for years to those who have had high-quality schooling

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY THOMAS HALLER BUCHANAN

their entire lives, including some English instruction.

There are 35 students in a physical sciences class, including 25 who are proficient in English, five long-term English language learners (who have been ELLs for six years or more), and five intermediate ELLs.

A teacher has 30 students in a mainstream U.S. history class. One day, an administrator brings a newcomer—with no to minimal English skills—and places him in the class.

These scenarios are quite common, especially in our public schools. What can teachers do? Here, we offer some research-based strategies we have used in our teaching careers when we have been (and continue to be!) in these types of situations.

Rate of Speech and Wait Time

Speak slowly and clearly, and provide students with enough time to formulate their responses, whether in speaking or in writing. Remember, ELLs are thinking and producing in two or more languages. After asking a question, wait a few seconds before calling on someone to respond. This "wait time" provides all students with an opportunity to think and process, and especially gives ELLs a needed period to formulate a response. In a typical classroom, the average time between a teacher posing a question and a student giving an answer is one second. Many researchers have found that the quality and quantity of responses improve when that wait time is increased to between three and five seconds.[1] We will often preface a question by first saying, "I'd like you to take a few seconds to think about this question before I call on someone to answer it."

Nonlinguistic Cues

Using visuals, such as pictures and sketches, and nonverbal cues, such as gestures and intonation, helps make language and content more accessible to students. Graphic organizers, including word charts where students can draw visual definitions and write definitions in their home language, can help all students, and particularly ELLs, bring together what they are learning and/or make connections between new and prior knowledge. Teaching with visual representations of concepts can be hugely helpful to ELLs and to all students.[2]

A Modified Version of Preview-View-Review

The "preview-view-review" strategy uses students' native language to facilitate instruction. With this approach, the teacher introduces the lesson in a student's home language, teaches the lesson in English, and then summarizes the lesson in the student's home language. Since we only speak English and Spanish, and many of our students speak other languages, we modify this instructional strategy by accessing the multiple multilingual textbook summaries and videos freely available online. Even though we may not be using the exact textbook that provides the translated summary, we've typically been able to find something to approximate our lessons. We provide these resources to students a day or two prior to the lesson in English and ask them to read or watch them in their free time at home or in class.

Texts Written for Different Levels

There are thousands, if not tens of thousands, of freely available articles on multiple subjects that are edited into easier or more complex reading levels. Sometimes we use these for all-class reading, providing the more accessible versions to ELLs. At other times, we provide them to our ELLs prior to a lesson on the topic (perhaps when we are going to do a close reading of a more complex text) so that they can develop the needed prior knowledge.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning, ranging from the old standby of "think-pair-share" to other small-group projects, creates good learning venues for ELLs because they are more likely to ask peers for assistance, and, in the best of possible worlds, there might be a bilingual student in the group or a paraprofessional in the classroom who can help. As with all these differentiation strategies, the added benefit is that research shows the attributes of cooperative learning benefit all students.[3] In fact, a recent meta-analysis finds this strategy to be particularly effective for students in economically challenged environments.[4]

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Jigsaw

The "jigsaw" strategy can be implemented with a number of different variations. Most involve students becoming "experts" in a section of a text or an element of a broader topic. For example, a student reads about a specific time in a famous person's life,

which he or she then teaches to other students who have become experts in different portions of the text. All students take turns teaching their classmates. Not only is this a great differentiation strategy for ELLs (they can be assigned a more accessible section of the text and are provided a cooperative learning environment), but research suggests that it's an extremely effective, if not the most effective, instructional strategy for all students.[5]

Sentence Starters and Writing Frames

As teachers, we often use sentence and question starters to provide important scaffolds for ELLs—to help with writing and classroom discussions. They can reduce student stress levels, allow students to focus on the key parts of a lesson, and help introduce academic vocabulary. We also use writing frames, which are templates that include sentence starters, connecting words and an overall structure that provides extensive scaffolding to a student responding to a question or prompt. One caveat to note: starters and frames are most helpful to students with little to no English language skills, and relying on them too much may actually hinder learning.

Four elements nurture the development of students' intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence, relatedness, and relevance.

Encouraging Intrinsic Motivation for Academic Achievement

Ahmed is 18 years old and has just arrived from Syria with his family after being out of school for two years. At his new school, he is frustrated by the English language and angered by another student calling him a terrorist. He spends as much time as he can texting his friends when in class and pretty much just goes through the motions during lessons.

Juan fled El Salvador to escape gang violence. He's a 10th-grader but hasn't been in school since he was 7 years old. Juan is in a mainstream math class, and although several of his classmates speak Spanish, he generally puts his head down on his desk and sleeps because he's tired from his night job.

Leslie recently came from Mexico and has a new baby at home. Her aunt takes care of the child while she is in school, but she is hoping to return to her home country next year to be with her baby's father. Leslie is quickly learning conversational English, but she has next to no interest in learning to write or read it. Since she's planning to return to Mexico, she says, "Why bother?"

All students, including ELLs, need our support in building intrinsic motivation for academic achievement. Many of our students show tremendous motivation in other aspects of their lives, whether it is to escape oppressive conditions in other countries, to work tirelessly at jobs to support their families, or to take care of children at home. In addition, many spend countless hours in extracurricular school activities, including athletics and various clubs. So, how can we encourage students to channel and apply a similar drive to academic endeavors?

Researchers have identified four elements that nurture the development of students' intrinsic motivation: (1) autonomy: students have a degree of control over what needs to happen and how it can be done; (2) competence: students feel they can be successful in doing it; (3) relatedness: the activity helps students feel more connected to others and cared about by people they respect; and (4) relevance: students find the work interesting and valuable to them, and useful for their present lives and/or hopes and dreams for the future.[6] Here are a few ways that we have tried to reinforce each of these four elements in our classes with ELLs and others.

Autonomy and Competence

There are many free or low-cost engaging online sites, such as Duolingo (www.duolingo.com) and LingoHut (www.lingohut.com), where students can reinforce their English skills through interactive reading and writing exercises, learning games, and books that provide audio support for the text. Since the software is the only entity aware of any student mistakes, using these sites can reinforce feelings of competence for when students apply their learning in the "real world." These tools can be used on any device in school or at home.

Relatedness

It's critical that teachers develop trusting relationships with all students,* including ELLs. Learn their story—why their family came here, what their interests are, what goals they might have for their lives.† If you cannot speak their home language and/or can't find another staff person or student who can, Google Trans-

*For more on building relationships, see "It's About Relationships" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/ashley.

†For more on the importance of learning students' stories, see "Celebrating the Voices of Immigrant Students" in the Winter 2017–2018 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2017-2018/zehr.

late can be a very helpful tool; using its audio translation mode will automatically provide verbal interpretation.

Another good idea is to provide a peer mentor to your newcomer—ideally, someone who speaks his or her home language. At our schools, peer mentors leave one of their classes for 15 minutes each week to chat with their mentee.

We already discussed the importance of cooperative learning in the differentiation section above. In addition to that specific strategy, we promote a cooperative classroom culture through an "everyone is a teacher" ethos. We first introduce research to our students that shows, among other things, the impact that classmates can have on each other's learning (particularly on ELLs)[7] and the benefits of diversity.[8] Then, we explain to them that the content, whether the subject is English or another subject, is too complex to have just one teacher in the room, and that we must all be teachers. Students then make individual posters listing the ways they can act as teachers, such as by helping classmates who might not understand a lesson or by modeling good attendance. We put the posters on the classroom wall, and students engage in regular reflections on if and how they recently have been teachers.

Relevance

We teach specific lessons highlighting the abundant research showing the cognitive and economic advantages of bilingualism. In addition, we learn about our students' interests and life goals, and try to provide specifically related learning resources. For example, a student who wants to become a cosmetologist will likely be interested in learning some English technical terms of that industry; a Latino student who is interested in astronomy may be interested in reading articles about Latino astronauts.

We also use the world around us for teaching and learning opportunities. Over the years, our students have identified and taken action on issues directly affecting their families and communities. These actions have included organizing a neighborhood jobs fair with 20 job-training providers and 300 people in attendance, creating a neighborhood campaign to complete U.S. Census forms, and writing letters to public officials about government immigration policy.

Using an Affirming Form of Error Correction

Angela, an ELL at the intermediate level, receives her graded essay in history class marked with numerous grammar and spelling corrections. Her teacher has written several comments in the margins that she doesn't understand. She feels defeated, crumples up the paper, and throws it in the trash.

Bin, a newcomer student from China, is confused about a homework assignment. He decides to take a risk, raises his hand, and asks his teacher a question in English. When he uses the wrong form of a word, the teacher instantly corrects him and does an impromptu grammar lesson for the entire class. Bin decides not to ask any more questions.

Ms. Jones is a new teacher. The ELL students at various proficiency levels in her English class make numerous errors when reading, writing, and speaking. She has received conflicting advice about how to address these errors, ranging from direct grammar instruction and overt correction to no grammar instruction or error correction at all. She feels overwhelmed and confused and wonders, "Isn't there a middle ground?"

Many teachers might agree that error correction, particularly how and when to do it, is a key challenge of working with ELLs. Adding to this challenge is the murky research on error correction. Some research suggests that correction (by prompts that point out the error to a student and require an immediate attempt to fix the mistake, or by recasts, when the teacher correctly rephrases what the student has said) can be a useful tool to assist language acquisition.[9] Other studies have found the opposite—that overt oral and written grammar correction can inhibit language learning and generate a negative reaction from students.[10]

This conflicting research, combined with our many years of experience and our common sense, points to the fact that there isn't a one-size-fits-all answer to error correction. However, error correction, when done in an affirming way, can provide ELLs with an opportunity to acquire language and to build their confidence as learners.

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Mistakes as Opportunities

Helping students see that mistakes are opportunities to learn, not commentaries on their intelligence or a sign of failure, can lead to improved academic performance.[11]

One lesson we teach is designed to encourage this type of mindset. It involves asking students to think of a few recent mistakes they have made when speaking or writing in English and what they have learned from these mistakes. We also share mistakes we have made as teachers and what we have learned as a result. Ultimately, we create a class list of mistakes and learnings and reflect on all the things students have learned because of their willingness to take risks and make mistakes in their new language.

These types of lessons help create the conditions for students to be open to error correction and to see it as a positive part of their growth as learners.

Individual Feedback

Providing students with individual feedback is another error correction tool we employ once we have built positive relationships with students and a classroom climate where learning mistakes are encouraged.

When offering feedback on student writing in class, we use a simple technique we have found successful. It involves pointing

to the written mistake as a prompt for students to self-correct. Most of the time, when we point to an error around a concept we have already taught (e.g., a word or punctuation issue), students are able to correct it on the spot.

When it comes to writing comments on student essays, we generally emphasize a few positive aspects of the essay and only point out one type of error. If we hand back a paper with written comments, we also make sure to have a brief private conversation with the student about the feedback. We have also found it helpful to have students focus on one or two grammatical elements (e.g., verb tense or capitalization) as they begin a writing task so they can pay particular attention when practicing those concepts.

In addition, we encourage students to practice writing at online sites that provide immediate feedback. This practice can reinforce language acquisition, and the only one who knows when students make a mistake is the computer.

We want to be as encouraging as possible when our students take the risk to speak in English.

We don't usually correct oral mistakes unless students ask for specific feedback or the mistake is affecting what the student is trying to communicate. We want to be as encouraging as possible when our students take the risk to speak in English.

Group Feedback through Concept Attainment and Games

When we identify common mistakes that our students are making in writing or speaking, we often address them as part of a lesson for the entire class. Two methods we have found to be affirming for students and successful are concept attainment and games. Both strategies create the conditions for students to identify errors and how to correct them.

Concept attainment is a form of inductive learning where the teacher identifies both "yes" and "no" examples (they can be taken from student work—with the names removed, of course) of the intended learning objective.[12]

After identifying a common error (e.g., subject-verb agreement), we develop a sheet that lists both correct and incorrect examples in two columns; the correct examples go under the yes column, and the incorrect examples go under the no column. We then place the sheet on an overhead screen. At first, everything is covered except for the yes and no titles, and we explain that we are going to give various examples and ask them to identify why certain ones are under yes and others are under no.

After the first yes and no examples are shown, we ask students to think about them and share their thoughts with a partner. If no one can identify the difference between the two columns, we keep uncovering one example at a time and continue the think-pair-share process until they figure it out. We then ask students to correct the no examples and to generate their own yes examples and share them with a partner or the class.

Games where students are charged with identifying and correcting common grammatical errors are an engaging and affirming method of error correction. One of our favorites is a simple game we call "correct a sentence." We first type up a list of sentences containing common student mistakes. Students are divided into teams, and each team is given a copy of the sentences. Teams are then given an amount of time (anywhere from five to 15 minutes, depending on the length of the list) to correct all the sentences. The team that accurately corrects the greatest number of sentences is declared the winner. Points can also be given to groups for identifying errors even if they haven't properly corrected them.

Teaching English language learners presents some key challenges in the classroom. However, remembering the many assets that ELLs bring to the classroom—their resilience, their stories, and their multicultural experiences—can help teachers and students view these challenges not as problems, but as opportunities for growth. ☐

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Oral Language

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want to produce individuals who are thoughtful, engaged, and conscious of their own development.

English language learners bring valuable assets and immense potential to school. The role of educators is to realize that potential in deep and accelerated ways. Each classroom teacher must ensure the path to that development is paved with meaningful interactions to help students develop language skills, gain conceptual understanding, and learn academic content. Our students deserve no less. □

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