

Best Practices in Teaching English Language Learners

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Abstract

Teachers face many challenges, including that of educating English language learner (ELL) students. These students are often placed in regular classrooms and create extra demands on the classroom teacher. Many strategies can be employed with ELLs that relate to best teaching practices. Potential trouble areas are discussed, as are the strategies that classroom teachers may use in educating ELLs. When teachers use these best practices with their students, student achievement is increased and better academic results are obtained. Case study examples garnered from the writer's own teaching experiences serve as illustrations throughout this article

Teachers in rural Saskatchewan face increased challenges in educating students who are English language learners (ELLs). The most obvious difficulty is the language barrier: students and teachers have difficulty communicating verbally with each other. Teachers often feel that they have inadequate training in order to teach ELLs (Berg et al., 2012). There are also cultural differences that create difficulties in the classroom when teachers use students' body language to interpret actions and understanding. Many students who arrive in rural Saskatchewan are uprooted from their home country in hopes of a better life in Canada and feel angry because they had no choice in coming to Canada. This anger can often enhance feelings of resentment toward the school and teacher, and impair students' willingness to learn. Once students are willing to attempt to learn the English language, they often start with learning elementary vocabulary to build a base of English words. There are many techniques, tools, and strategies that can be used in assisting ELLs to develop their English vocabulary and language skills, in order to increase their chances of success in the public school system.

Difficulties

Teachers need to begin interactions with ELLs in a way that creates acceptance. Jane,¹ a grade 10 student, came to Esterhazy from the Ukraine with her family in 2012. When she arrived, she had very weak English skills and could not comprehend many verbal instructions. Jane had to leave her friends from the Ukraine. She did not know anyone at the school. She was very angry at her parents for bringing her to Canada and she did not want to be in school. Teachers need to recognize that the anger displayed by some ELLs is not attributed to a specific class or action. Teachers can ensure that ELLs feel welcome in the classroom by creating "a culture of acceptance" (Usselman et al., 2010, p. 10). This acceptance is necessary to dissolve the hostility that often sets in with immigrant ELLs who want to go back to their home country and be with their friends. Mike, Rick, and Jarret attended grade 10 in Esterhazy as Taiwanese exchange students. They returned to Taiwan after attending only one semester, because they could not cope with the challenges of learning in a different language. Jane was greeted in her Russian language by some teachers. When teachers spoke to Jane in Russian, they connected to her culture and made her feel welcome (Cipriano, 2011). Teachers assist ELLs in the classroom when they ensure that student interactions are positive and welcoming in the classroom, starting with the first class.

Once the initial emotional barrier to instruction is broken, teachers can focus on the other difficulties encountered by ELLs, such as idioms. Teachers should avoid using idioms if they do

¹ Pseudonyms are used to protect the individual identities of students used as examples in this article.

not first explain them to ELLs (Usselman et al., 2010), because the direct translation of idioms can be confusing. Idioms can be a motivating factor that makes learning English fun for ELLs when teachers carefully explain them (Reiss, 2008), and they help students to understand more of the English language (Cipriano, 2011). Idioms can be confusing for ELLs, but when used appropriately they can assist ELLs in acquiring English.

Learning the English language also involves difficulties with homonyms. Jack, a very intelligent grade 12 student, experienced confusion when a teacher said, "The car brakes to slow down to a speed of 30 km/h in a time period of 2 seconds." Jack understood that the car "breaks" or that it was broken, which created additional difficulty for him to calculate the car's acceleration. Jack was able to solve the problem once he understood that the car was still functional and only slowed down. Teachers of ELLs have to be careful when using homonyms.

Teachers and ELLs can sometimes misunderstand gestures and body language, due to cultural differences. Teachers may feel that a student who does not make eye contact is not paying attention, when that student may be avoiding eye contact as a show of respect (Usselman et al., 2010). Lawrence attended grade 10 in Esterhazy High School during the 2011-12 school year. Lawrence would never look at the teacher when conversing, presumably because he felt that he was displaying respect for the teacher. ELLs will not usually speak out loud in the first stage of language acquisition, as this silence is the norm when learning a new language (Berg et al., 2012). ELLs display many signals that may be confusing in interpretation for teachers. Teachers need to recognize that these signals may be misleading because of the cultural differences between students and the teacher.

Cooperative group learning can create additional difficulties for ELLs. Some cultures do not use cooperative groups in order to develop projects or solve problems (Usselman et al., 2010). Jim and Allan came to Esterhazy from Taiwan in 2008, and would not work in groups on their grade 11 physics labs. They would not discuss questions with their group members, but preferred to work on their own. Some teachers would see this lack of communication as an act of defiance; however, the students may think that it would be cheating to discuss answers with other students. Once the teacher explained that sharing information was acceptable and necessary in group projects, Jim and Allan were able to distinguish between cheating and collaborating. ELLs require time to learn how to learn cooperatively in a group, and to contribute their ideas in a safe environment without fear of being ostracized or showing disrespect.

Strategies

The many difficulties in working with ELLs can be alleviated by using key classroom strategies, such as visuals. Visuals help students to connect the English words with their thought processes and make meaning of their work (Ely, 2010-2012). Students experience more engagement when teachers post visuals, such as Venn diagrams, story maps, and supporting detail schematics (Bongolan & Moir, 2005). When students are able to focus on the most important concepts immediately upon introduction, they can figure out the important ideas and begin to internalize those concepts.

One specific visual technique that teachers of ELLs can use is "chalk-talk." Teachers who write key vocabulary words on the board facilitate student understanding of those key words (Reiss, 2008). ELLs may have extreme difficulty in distinguishing between words as spoken by their instructors, but have an easier time identifying the words when they are written on the board. Joyce, a grade 11 student, would often write down all terms that were written on the chalkboard. It was apparent that she would look up each term and record its Mandarin equivalent in an effort to learn each term. Joyce was using the visual aid in order to clarify which word may have been spoken. ELLs may hear a specific word and not recognize it, because they may have previously silently mispronounced the word when they read the word to themselves. Teachers can help ELLs to recognize key words when they write them down for the student to see as they talk about and pronounce these words.

Graphic organizers are another tool for ELLs to demonstrate their understanding of concepts. If the understanding of a concept is more important than the demonstration of that understanding by creating a written report, then ELLs may achieve greater success in using “sequenced pictures” (Reiss, 2008, p. 140). Students who are unable to write formal paragraphs on a certain experiment or topic may be able to explain their ideas using a set of sketches with labels. ELLs often understand a concept but lack the vocabulary to express it in formal writing. This writer has taught many ELLs who were able to create labelled sketches of scenarios over a time period, but could not write a paragraph that explained the scenario. Teachers should encourage ELLs to use a graphic organizer and sketch out a series of steps and key words in order to demonstrate their understanding of a particular process or series of events.

ELLs, who are learning a new language, benefit from having photos, maps, graphs, and sketches in front of them to represent what they are learning. Students may not necessarily know the word for an object that is shown in a photo, but as soon as the teacher speaks the word and refers to the photo, students may understand that word. The concrete representation of the referenced object will also allow students to associate other terms and descriptions that may belong with the object as well (Reiss, 2008). Pictures are universal in language and will help students to correctly match the English name of an object with the object in question.

Teachers should also ensure that they are using media, when appropriate, in the classroom. A videotape or DVD may assist in introducing or reinforcing a concept to ELLs (Reiss, 2008). Teachers should give the students lists of key words to focus their listening on, as some videos can overwhelm ELLs with new vocabulary at a pace that is too fast. Alex, a grade 10 boy from Taiwan, did not like watching some videos because he could not process the speech fast enough. Alex did enjoy using the Internet to research topics on websites, and PowerPoint software in order to provide written support for his presentations. ELLs may require different levels of supporting media: from using a pre-made PowerPoint presentation to using jot notes to debate and justify one point of view (Castaneda & Bautista, 2011). Many ELLs respond positively to interactive learning found on Internet web sites. Teachers can use a variety of media to motivate, encourage, and support student learning in the classroom.

Another visual technique used by teachers and appreciated by students is when teachers bring realia into the classroom. Realia are “real-world objects that illustrate a concept” (Reiss, 2008, p. 77). When teachers use objects that students can see and touch, the students make connections with prior experiences. Realia generate more interest in a topic by being physically present in the room when the discussion takes place, rather than just mentioning a word to which students attach no meaning. A teacher could bring in a copy of a credit card statement in order to teach students about interest and how it is calculated. Students would relate more to the concept of interest because they can see how it is calculated and charged on the statement. Teachers should use realia in order to demonstrate concepts that may be unfamiliar to students, as realia allow concrete connections to be made to pre-existing knowledge.

Performance assessments may be used as a strategy to assist ELLs in demonstrating knowledge. The instructions given for the performance assessment may be a factor in the degree of success experienced by students (Lyon et al., 2012). ELLs benefit from the individual interaction that often accompanies performance assessments in the classroom. Graphics, portfolios, projects, debates, reports, presentations, laboratory tests, and procedures are all examples of performance assessments that ELLs may achieve well on, as compared to a traditional pen and paper test (Bautista & Castaneda, 2011). ELLs should be presented with past projects as exemplars to show the teacher’s expectations and required elements of the project (Reiss, 2008). ELLs can achieve good results on performance assessments, when given the appropriate supports.

Teachers can use other supports in the classroom that are fun for ELLs, such as handheld mobile devices (HMD). When ELLs use HMD, they experience higher levels of engagement in learning a new concept (Billings & Mathison, 2012). Students who are genuinely interested in what they are learning along with the instructional method will achieve better test results than if

they were not interested in the topic. Jill, a grade 10 student, regularly used a Blackberry playbook in class in order to help herself master the content studied in class. She can use applications on the playbook for watching video demonstrations of topics and practicing quizzes. The applications provide an extra level of motivation for her to practise and study course material. Students can use HMD to supplement other resources in the classroom and experience greater achievement when they do.

Another tool that can be brought into the classroom to enhance student learning is the classroom response system (CRS). This writer has used the Senteo clicker CRS in the classroom. Typically, when using CRS students are shown a question and use handheld remotes in order to input their answer. Teachers can encourage students to discuss the answer in small working groups before they select an answer. Immediate feedback is given to correct any misconceptions that students may have about the wrong answers, and the correct answer is reinforced. Student participation and meaning making both increase when students use CRS (Langman & Fies, 2009). Students enjoy using a CRS to learn and demonstrate their knowledge, and students volunteer their answers often when they use the CRS.

Students enjoy working on assignments with their peers, especially if their peers speak the same language. Some schools will train students as peer instructors in the classroom in order to provide supports for ELLs in their primary language. One study showed that discussion in ELLs' first language with peer instructors was effective in increasing achievement for ELLs (Gerena & Keiler, 2012). Peer instructors also used strategies that are effective in assisting ELLs to acquire English content and skills, which also increased achievement in ELLs. Both peer instructors and teachers use strategies to help ELLs in the classroom and students appreciate it, although they would prefer that teachers used these strategies more often (Webster & Hazari, 2009). It is important to consider that ELLs may learn more from their peer interactions than what they learn from the teacher (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). This peer discussion time is a relevant use of time and should not be seen as a waste of instructional time. Peer instructors can be an effective tool that teachers can use in order to help ELLs make deeper connections to the content being studied.

The classroom teacher, peer instructors and educational assistants should work together with the student to develop content-specific vocabulary. Content-specific vocabulary can present challenges to students as they read new and familiar words that are used in unfamiliar ways (Barr et al., 2012). These challenges can be alleviated with direct instruction on key terms that are subject specific. In this writer's experience as a teacher of ELLs, if students encounter enough difficult terms in a reading passage that they do not know, they may become frustrated and give up instead of persisting through the task. Teachers can reduce frustrations when they help ELLs learn subject-specific vocabulary.

Conclusion

In the past, students with a second language were often the responsibility of a second language specialist. With the recent immigration of many families to Canada from countries that do not speak English, the instruction of ELLs has shifted to the classroom teacher. These classroom teachers often feel unprepared to teach ELLs and require some strategies to deal with the difficulties of instructing ELLs. Many strategies presented here relate to good teaching practices that should be implemented in every classroom: using visuals, scaffolding off prior knowledge, and allowing group discussion in the classroom. Technology and real-world objects may be brought into the classroom to generate excitement about learning. ELLs bring many cultural experiences to the classroom, and can contribute unique perspectives and ways of knowing to a class. Teachers can use the strategies mentioned in this paper to assist in teaching ELLs. When teachers embrace the best practices used in teaching ELLs, the students are comfortable and learn more than if they had been taught without these best practices.

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