

Key Issues for Teaching English Language Learners¹ in Academic Classrooms

By Karen A. Carrier

Shaking her head and looking troubled, Sarah Johnston walks into the teachers lounge. "I just don't know what to do with my three kids from Mexico," she explains to her fellow teachers. "I really want to help them, but they still don't know enough English to really get anything out of our class activities. And forget giving them a test. They can't even read the directions! I have to do something, so I give them simple worksheets and hope it helps them learn a few things. I know I should be doing more, but what? They never taught me how to work with these kids in my teacher ed courses. Where do I start?"

Sarah Johnston's dilemma is playing out in many teachers lounges and classrooms across the country as the composition of our school population continues to change. Over the past 10 years, the number of English language learners (ELLs) in the nation's schools has increased by 95% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2004a). The latest statistics show that there are currently 4.7 million students who are in the process of learning English as a second language while learning academic content (NCELA, 2004a). Many content teachers² now have ELLs in their classrooms, because ELLs spend only a small part of their school day in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. For the remainder of their school day, ELLs are assigned to regular classrooms for their math, social studies, science, and other content instruction, which is usually conducted in English.

Despite this ongoing change in the characteristics of our student population, most content teachers have had little or no preparation for working with ELLs. Only 12.5% of teachers report having received eight or more hours of training on teaching ELLs (Gruber, Wiley, Broughman, Strizek, & Burian-Fitzgerald, 2002). Consequently, many content teachers want to know what they can do to help their ELLs succeed academically.

The Search for Information on Working with English Language Learners

On the positive side, there are a growing number of professional texts, articles, and online resources for

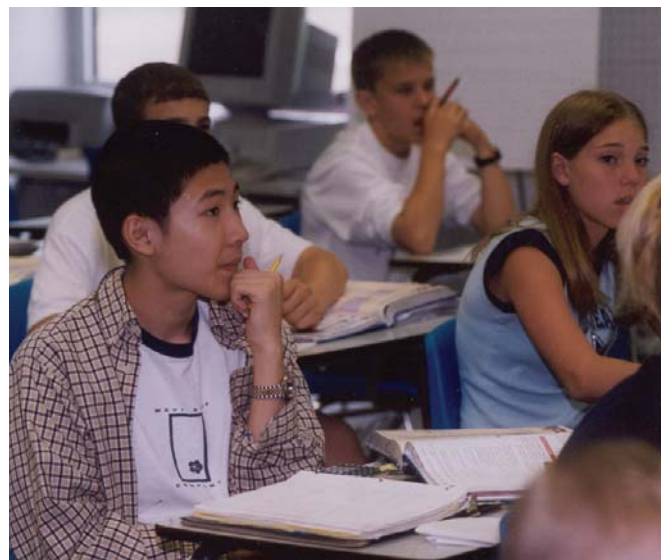


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English language learners are engaged in two academic tasks simultaneously: learning new content and learning a second (or third) language.

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teachers about working with ELLs. These resources cover topics such as making content comprehensible (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004); teaching strategies (Herrell & Jordan, 2004); integrating language, culture, and content (Short, 1993); assessment (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996); and language development (Adger, Snow & Christian, 2002), to name just a few. We can be encouraged by the growing body of research-based information.

On the negative side, however, the sheer volume of information is sometimes overwhelming. Consequently, teachers can succumb to the allure of strategy books. Extracting strategies from books without an understanding of ELLs' unique language and learning needs is like building a house without understanding the basic principles of construction. Our house may begin to fall apart before we even move in.

Equally important in this age of accountability is the need for teachers to be knowledgeable about the scientifically-based evidence that underlies their teaching decisions. Teachers not only have to make informed pedagogical decisions about teaching their ELLs, they have to be ready to justify their decisions to administrators, parents, and teacher colleagues as well. This responsibility can be a difficult one precisely because of the lack of preparation in the teaching profession about how best to serve students who are simultaneously learning English and academic content.

To answer the question of how to begin building the necessary understanding of ELLs' language and learning, we need to consider three key issues that underlie the education of ELLs. They are (a) the amount of time required for second language acquisition, (b) the two jobs that ELLs are doing in the classroom, and (c) the use of multiple modes of input and output. An understanding of these issues can help us use the best and most current information available on working with ELLs. They also serve as a road map for designing effective instruction for ELLs.

The Three Key Issues

The amount of time required for second language acquisition

The first, and perhaps most important, issue is the amount of time that it takes to acquire a second language for school. While it takes one to three years for ELLs to develop conversational proficiency in English, they need five to seven years to develop

academic English; that is, the English needed for reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the content areas (Collier, 1999; Cummins, 2001).

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Most people seriously underestimate how long it takes to fully develop academic language skills, so it is understandable that many teachers dispute the five- to seven-year figure. Teachers often hear their ELLs talking to other students in the hallways, at recess, and socially in the classroom in reasonably accurate English. Often, especially with younger students, there is very little or no accent to their English. It seems these students have "learned" English well enough to comprehend all that is happening in their content classrooms, and to participate fully without any special modifications. However, when we talk about the language proficiency needed by our ELLs, we are talking about the level of English required to comprehend academic content and to participate in activities and assignments.

If we examine our state learning standards and our lessons for middle school students, it becomes clear that students must master new, content-specific vocabulary as well as understand the concepts they represent. This vocabulary, often very technical, is less frequently used than the conversational English we hear our ELLs use so easily. In addition to this new and higher level vocabulary, ELLs must learn to use higher level language functions such as analyzing, predicting, explaining, and justifying.

In a typical unit on population growth, middle schoolers learn social studies vocabulary such as population shift, growth, and trend, as well as math vocabulary such as percent, increase, decrease, and rate of change (Burkart & Sheppard, 2004). Of course, our ELLs need to learn this new vocabulary, too, but they also need to know how to incorporate this vocabulary into well-formed sentences to explain and make predictions using the new vocabulary. For example, our ELLs must learn how to construct sentences such as "The population on the East Coast shifted *when* _____." or "Population growth happened *because of* _____." or "If economic growth happens, *it's likely that* _____ will happen."

These sentences require much more than simply knowing the content-specific vocabulary. The italicized words and phrases in the examples above are critical to formulating these sentences, but they are not the kind of sentence structures that ELLs usually acquire in their conversational English. While specialized vocabulary is highlighted in many texts, language functions and the sentence structures used to accomplish the functions are not necessarily brought to students' attention as language learning objectives.

When we modify existing lessons to address ELLs' specific language needs, we integrate these students into the classroom and curriculum, instead of having to create a separate and often less rigorous curriculum for them.

With this understanding about the second language acquisition process, we can help our ELLs by providing extra support in developing not only the content specific vocabulary, but also the academic sentence structures. We can analyze our lessons and use word walls and word sorts, among other techniques, to help ELLs practice and acquire the vocabulary they need to understand the main points of the lesson. We can also determine the kind of sentence structures needed to talk and write about concepts in the lesson (e.g., *It's likely that ...; When I added __, I got __*). We can model these sentence structures, post them in the classroom, and encourage our students to use them. We can also point out their occurrence in written text to help students recognize them in their reading and use them in their writing. By adding vocabulary and accompanying sentence structures as language objectives that support each lesson's content objectives, we ensure that our ELLs develop the specific academic language they need to participate in the content classroom (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

When we modify existing lessons to address our ELLs' specific language needs, we integrate these students into the classroom and curriculum, instead of having to create a separate and often less rigorous curriculum for them. This focus on academic language also benefits our native English-speaking students who may be struggling with reading or

writing. From this perspective, the consideration of ELLs' needs in lesson planning has potential benefits for other students as well.

The two jobs of English language learners in the classroom

The second key issue is that ELLs are doing two jobs at the same time: learning a new language while learning new academic content. ELLs are moving between the two worlds of their ESL classroom and their content classrooms, and they have to work harder, and need more support than the average native English-speaking student who has an age-appropriate command of the English language. The focused language instruction that ELLs receive in their ESL classroom is critical, but it also reduces the time they spend in the content classroom. For this reason, it is very important that content teachers become partners with their students' ESL teacher.

The ESL teacher can more effectively support the academic language development of our ELLs if we provide them with the main ideas, the content specific vocabulary, and the sentence structures related to upcoming lessons. This information can be used as a basis for academic language instruction for ELLs in the ESL classroom. In this content-based approach to ESL instruction, ELLs have opportunities to practice the new language—reading, writing, speaking, and listening to it. When content teachers share this information with the ESL teacher, a link is established for ELLs between what they learn in ESL and what they use in the content classroom. This collaboration between teachers increases the amount of time ELLs spend on content related information, and promotes coordinated instruction for them.

When we understand that ELLs have two jobs in the classroom, we realize the work that ELLs are doing is not only time-consuming but also frustrating. It is easy for ELLs to get discouraged with their apparent lack of progress when they compare themselves to their native English-speaking peers. Helping students keep portfolios of their work over the school year, and helping them assess their progress at regular intervals is especially effective with ELLs. They can see that, although they may not yet have reached the achievement level of their native English-speaking peers, they are making real progress in both language acquisition and content learning.

We can also support our ELLs by recognizing that they will not always be able to understand and retain everything that their native English-speaking peers do. However, creating lessons for ELLs with

low-level, ostensibly “easy” concepts and language or simple worksheets results in watered-down content and denies them access to the grade level curriculum. The negative effects of a watered-down curriculum for ELLs multiply as ELLs are promoted through the grade levels without the basic foundational knowledge they need. Rather than simplifying the curriculum content for ELLs, we can focus our efforts instead on determining the major concepts and processes in the curriculum that students must know and sharing this information with their ESL teacher. These concepts, along with their associated academic language, can then become the main focus for our ELLs, supported by their ESL teacher.

Helping students focus on the most important concepts brings the task down to manageable size for ELLs. The workload is less overwhelming and more productive for both students and teachers. Valuable time is spent on what is most important. Focusing on main concepts and the academic language needed provides opportunities for success for ELLs and nurtures a growing sense of accomplishment for ELLs as well as their teachers. Having content teachers who create a supportive and comprehensible learning environment is very motivating for ELLs as they tackle their two jobs.

The use of multiple modes of input and output

The final key issue is using multiple modes for creating comprehensible input and output. We realize that our ELLs have not yet developed their English language proficiency to a level where they can understand all the oral and written information they encounter in the content classroom. Therefore, we have to present content in ways that are less dependent on language. The good news is that teachers already have a great deal of experience with the techniques used to make input comprehensible; that is, the use of manipulatives, realia, pictures, videos, demonstrations, movement, gestures, drama, graphic organizers, multimedia, and activities that are experiential and hands-on. These techniques do not rely so heavily on language to convey information and, thus, are extremely helpful to ELLs.

Graphic organizers, in particular, are powerful tools to use with ELLs because they display information with pictures, labels, or short phrases, thereby reducing the language load. Also, they are much less visually intimidating than full text. Graphic organizers can be used to present major concepts and the relationships between them, comparisons and contrasts, processes, cause and effect, and

attributes, to name just a few of their uses. They also help ELLs focus on key vocabulary, instead of having to search for it in an overwhelming amount of text. Graphic organizers have the added advantage of serving as prewriting organizers and unit study guides.

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ELLs need to be fully involved participants in their learning, which includes demonstrating what they know. In other words, ELLs need to produce comprehensible output (Swain, 1985). We need this output from our ELLs for lesson planning and for assessment purposes. Oftentimes, ELLs know information but have difficulty expressing their knowledge in English. The same multiple modes of input we use to present information can be used by our ELLs to demonstrate their understanding of the information. For example, instead of writing a composition that requires a high level of language proficiency, ELLs can use pictures, graphic organizers, demonstrations, and drawings to show their understanding of academic concepts. Performance based assessments, in which students demonstrate their procedural knowledge (what they know how to do), are ideal for assessing ELLs because of the lighter language requirement. These techniques can also be useful for native English-speaking students who need assistance to adequately demonstrate their content knowledge.

When we look at lesson planning from the perspective of how we can present important concepts in multiple, less language intensive ways, designing instruction for our ELLs becomes a matter of adjusting current practices to integrate ELLs into the learning rather than creating separate lessons that isolate ELLs and fragment valuable instruction time. Working from a language learning perspective, teachers can use what they already know to help their ELLs.

With an understanding of these three key issues for working with ELLs, teachers have a solid foundation for approaching the wealth of information that is available for helping ELLs succeed in the content classroom and for designing effective instruction. Extension courses and workshops are

valuable tools for learning more about working with ELLs, of course. But teachers need not wait to start working on their own (see Figure 1).

Conclusion

As the population of students who are second language learners of English increases in our classrooms, content teachers need to find a starting point for understanding the needs of ELLs in their classrooms. The three key issues for working with ELLs (time to learn a second language, the two jobs of ELLs, and multiple modes of input and output) can provide that starting point and provide direction for teachers. Understanding these issues can assist in the search for more information on effective practices for teaching ELLs in content classrooms. Such understanding also encourages teachers to examine and integrate their current knowledge and practice into designing effective instruction for ELLs.

Figure 1

Resources for Teaching English Language Learners

Information about the process of acquiring a second language is available in *What teachers need to know about language* (Adger, Snow & Christian, 2002) and in *Meeting the needs of second language learners: An educator's guide* (Lessow-Hurley, 2003). Law and Eckes (2000) offer *The more-than-just-surviving handbook: ESL for every classroom teacher*, a thorough and practical guide for creating a supportive learning environment for ELLs.

Teemant, Bernhardt, and Rodriguez-Munoz (1997) offer advice on collaboration between ESL and content teachers, as do Chamot and O'Malley (1994). Chamot and O'Malley also provide helpful guidelines and checklists that teachers can use to determine key concepts, vocabulary, and sentence structures that can help ESL and content teachers coordinate their instruction.

Information on how to make the language of math, science, and other content areas more comprehensible can be found in both *The CALLA handbook: Implementing the cognitive academic language learning approach* (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) and *Making content comprehensible for English language learners: The SIOP model* (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004). These books help both ESL and content teachers alike with lesson planning, preparation, and instructional delivery. The *CALLA handbook* also includes guidelines on how to select and focus on major concepts from the curriculum, to help ELLs balance the demands of their two jobs of language and content learning.

Herrell and Jordan (2004) provide excellent strategy tips for teachers in *Fifty strategies for teaching English language learners* and O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) provide sound advice for assessing ELLs in *Authentic assessment for English language learners: Practical approaches for teachers*.

The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (2004b, 2004c), at www.ncela.gwu.edu, is an online resource for every teacher. Their publication, *In the classroom: A toolkit for effective instruction of English learners*, illustrates different strategies teachers can use to make content comprehensible for ELLs. Searches of the Web site's online library will yield articles on working with ELLs in different content areas (e.g., Short, 1993, 1998) and the most recent research on working with ELLs. Information on selecting and adapting materials, techniques, and lesson planning is available as well (Burkart & Sheppard, 2004).

By understanding these issues of working with ELLs, content teachers can be facilitators and partners in their students' language and academic success.

Notes

¹“English language learners” (ELLs) is used instead of “limited English proficient” (LEP) to refer to students who are in the process of learning English as a second language so that the focus is on the development of these students' language and academic abilities, rather than assuming they are limited in their abilities.

²“Content teacher” refers to those teachers whose primary population of students are native English speakers, and who teach their subjects through the medium of the English language. “ESL teacher” refers to teachers who teach English to students whose native language is not English.

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Readers Respond

Small, Private K-8 Schools Need To Be Included in the Conversation

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading your entire September issue of *Middle School Journal*, which focuses on the question of reconfiguring middle schools to smaller K-8 schools. There seem to be many questions about whether such a system will work. Yet, in the entire issue I found no reference to either Lutheran or Catholic schools that have been doing this since before the formation of our nation (the oldest existing Lutheran school, located in NYC, was established in the 1740s or 1750s). It just makes an incredible amount of sense to me that the public school system would want to take a look at how K-8 is being (successfully) done before jumping into it. Certainly, if I wanted to convert my home to solar energy and knew that my neighbor had done so, I would want to talk extensively to that neighbor.

I do so wish that parochial education in the United States would be recognized by public educators for what we are—schools that, by and large, provide quality education within the framework of our system of religious beliefs. We do not exist to be in opposition to public schools but to stand apart because of who we are.

That, primarily, is my thought on this subject. If this is, indeed, a question that is seriously to be looked into, then why not be as informed as possible?

After all, it's the children who matter the most in this—or any—question. Shouldn't everything possible be looked at *for their good*?

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