



Students in bilingual kindergarten at the award-winning P.S. 181, in New York City.

“BIENVENIDOS” “HUANYING” “WELKOM” “TULOY KAYO”

WELCOME

By drawing on ELL students' first languages, you can help make learning English easier—and a little less scary.

By David Freeman & Yvonne Freeman

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS, according to research, learn best through instruction that draws upon their strength in their first language. But it's unlikely that any teacher would have knowledge of even a fraction of the languages that are spoken by students in American classrooms. Some large school districts report as many as a hundred different home languages. In this excerpt from their new book *English Language Learners: The Essential Guide* (Scholastic, 2007), experts David Freeman and Yvonne Freeman share 10 simple and effective ways ➤➤



best practice

to support your ELL students by drawing on their first language—even if you do not speak their languages or teach in a school with a bilingual program.

Pair a newcomer with a partner who speaks the same primary language.

When newcomers enter a mainstream classroom where the teacher does not speak their first language, they're often overwhelmed. An excellent way to support these newcomers is to assign them a first-language buddy. The buddy can introduce the new student to classroom routines. It's important to make the position of being a buddy one of prestige. Let students know that they were chosen because of their welcoming spirit and their special bilingual abilities.

Host read-alouds in their primary languages.

It's always great to have the support of a bilingual paraprofessional, but whether you do or not, consider inviting

parent volunteers to read. Georgiana, a first-grade teacher, set up a reading schedule at the beginning of the year for bilingual parents. Parents watched her read to the children first, as a model. The children loved having parents visit and found it interesting to hear books read in other languages.

Allow ELL students to talk in their primary languages.

Some teachers believe that prohibiting students from speaking in their first language will encourage them to use more English. But just the opposite is true. When students cannot speak English, they often become silent and disengaged from what is happening in the classroom. You can keep students engaged by grouping together students who speak the same first language, having them use the language to clarify concepts for each other as they complete their tasks in English. You can invite younger

students to speak in their first language at share time, having bilingual students or paraprofessionals translate.

Build a classroom library in students' primary languages.

When you provide books in ELL students' primary languages, you demonstrate that your students' first languages are valued. Use bilingual books for oral and written language development in English by asking students to talk and write about the books in English. Students can also use the books to further develop their first language, or as a resource when they are reading in English. You can carry out language comparisons by looking together at texts in English and another language.

Organize bilingual tutoring.

You can arrange this extra help by partnering with a teacher friend whose students are in an older grade. Susana,

a second-grade teacher, was concerned that her Vietnamese students were not getting enough first-language support. So she asked fifth-grade Vietnamese students to come into her classroom as tutors. Susana worked with the fifth graders on their role as “Vietnamese teachers,” showing them the science books in English that her students were reading, and asking them to summarize in Vietnamese the key concepts. The half-hour science period went by quickly for Susana’s second-grade students because they were so engaged in the lesson. Plus, the fifth-grade students benefited from the added self-esteem they got from their role as teachers.

Give students pen pals.

One authentic way to encourage students to write using their first language is to have them write letters to others who speak their language. Teachers can organize pen-pal letters between differ-

ent classes in their school, and they can find teachers in other countries whose students can be pen pals. For example, if your class has Mexican-American students, you might have them write to a class in Mexico. It is easy to arrange pen-pal correspondence via e-mail. Try sites such as www.epals.com or www.studentsoftheworld.com.

Encourage primary-language journal writing.

When students are allowed to respond in their primary language to what they have understood of the English-language instruction, they deepen their comprehension and also begin to transfer complex ideas and vocabulary to English. Elena, a teacher we know, invited her student Kim, a Korean girl, to write a journal in Korean. Kim’s mother shared that Kim’s entries told about what she was learning in class. Over the next weeks, Kim began to write some words in English. Kim was using >>

WHERE TO FIND BILINGUAL BOOKS



www.icdlbooks.org

At the International Children’s Digital Library, children can choose to read books in English or other languages, including Arabic, simplified Chinese, and Tagalog (Filipino).

www.panap.com

At this site, you can locate bilingual books for children in 35 languages, ranging from Arabic to Yoruba.

www.shens.com

This site has multicultural books from Asian countries and Latin America.

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best practice

her primary language to extend her content learning while she was acquiring the second language.

Publish books written in students' primary languages.

To increase the primary-language resources in your classroom, invite resource teachers to create books, or publish books of student writing. Teresa, a second-grade teacher, invited Navy, a Cambodian student, to write a book in the Khmer language. Navy created a book of Khmer numbers, letters, and words, and Teresa laminated the book and placed it in the class library. It soon became a favorite, and other students asked Navy to explain the Khmer alphabet and teach them how to pronounce the words.

Use primary-language storytellers.

Inviting bilingual storytellers to come to class can benefit all students. Katie,

a kindergarten teacher who had several Hmong students, invited a storyteller to come to her class to tell "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" in Hmong. Beforehand, Katie had read several versions of the folktale to her class in English, and had students act out the story. By the time the storyteller arrived, the children knew the story so well that even the English speakers could follow along. When the storyteller came to the part where the goats cross the bridge, students shouted in delight at the "Trip, trap, trip, trap" spoken in Hmong.

Ensure that classroom environmental print represents students' primary languages.

Several schools we've visited that have English- and Spanish-speaking children have welcome signs and labels in both languages. In addition, students' work in both languages is displayed, showing that both languages are valued. Betty,

STEP-BY-STEP: USING



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KIDS' FIRST LANGUAGES IN YOUR LESSONS



This three-step strategy can work in classes with ELLs from one or several primary-language backgrounds, and it can work whether or not you speak the students' languages.

1 PREVIEW (First Language) Give students an overview of the lesson or activity in their first languages. A bilingual student, paraprofessional, cross-age tutor, or parent can give a brief oral summary. You can also have students brainstorm in same-language groups what they already know about the topic.

2 VIEW (Target Language: English) Conduct the lesson or activity in English, using strategies to make the input comprehensible, such as pictures or props. With the help of the preview, students will be able to follow the English better.

3 REVIEW (First Language) Have students meet in same-language groups to discuss the main ideas of the lesson, to ask questions, and to clarify their understanding. Then have students report back in English.

a kindergarten teacher, sought the help of paraprofessionals and parents to put color words up around the room in the different languages of her students. One day, a Cambodian girl walked up to Betty and pulled on her skirt to get her attention. "Teacher," she said, pointing to the word *orange* written in Khmer, "that's me." The inclusion of their languages means so much.

Creative teachers constantly come up with ways they can support their students' first languages and cultures. Once you see how the use of native languages encourages learners and promotes learning in English, you too will be convinced that the efforts you've made are well worthwhile. □

David Freeman is a professor of reading and ESL, and Yvonne Freeman is a professor of bilingual education at the University of Texas at Brownsville. This article was adapted from their newest book, *English Language Learners: The Essential Guide*. To order, call 1-800-SCHOLASTIC.



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