

Rethinking Schools *Online*

Working Effectively With English Language Learners

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As communities across the United States are becoming more diverse, many new teachers are finding that their responsibilities include teaching both academic content and language skills to English Language Learners.

There are many different types of bilingual ed/ESL program (see the box below), and great differences can exist between programs that purport to serve students in similar ways.

Regardless of the type of program you're in, remember that it's your responsibility to deliver instruction to these students in a way that is understandable. That means organizing your teaching practice in a way that meets their needs, as well as "working the system" to ensure that these students are getting the services, such as extra support for taking tests, that they need.

As a starting point, find out what kinds of services your school offers to support English Language Learners — and to support you as their classroom teacher. Ask your administrators, colleagues, or district bilingual/ESL office. Then do a little of your own research about English Language Learners and how their needs can best be served. (See the resource list below for some places to start.)

Strategies For Improving Instruction For English Language Learners

- **Speak slowly, audibly and clearly in whatever language you use in the classroom.** Avoid asking students in front of the whole class if they understand. Instead, ask students to volunteer to repeat the instructions in their own words, in English or in the students' native language.
- **Prepare English Language Learners for challenging whole-class lessons ahead of time.** In a small group, teach the second-language vocabulary that students will need to know. In addition to vocabulary, introduce the concepts that the whole class will be learning. Use materials that are geared for the specific group of English Language Learners (i.e., use materials in the students' home language and/or materials in English that are appropriate for the students' English reading level). That way when you teach the whole class lesson, English Language Learners have a head start because they've already had one comprehensible lesson on the topic.
- **Use lecture and verbal instruction as little as possible.** Use visual cues such as posters, overhead pictures, slide shows, videos, and illustrated books. Use active methods of learning such as games, skits, songs, partner interviews and structured conversation with classmates. When necessary, explain concepts in the students' home language (have a colleague, parent volunteer or student help if you are not able to do this). Finally, be prepared to spend additional time helping English Language Learners do the work. To keep things in perspective, try thinking about how your performance on the assignment would change if you were doing it in a language in which you were not yet fully proficient.
- **Use whole class instruction as little as possible.** English Language Learners sometimes get lost and/or tune out during this kind of lesson. Whenever possible, work with small groups of children, or get students working on an assignment and circulate among them as they work.
- **In reading class, use literature — in English or the students' home language — that**

features the students' language/cultural groups. Give English Language Learners lots of attempts to be successful in a low-stress environment. Choral reading, echo reading, and partner reading all allow students to work on fluency and pronunciation without putting them on the spot. Rehearsing a sentence, paragraph, or page before reading it aloud to a group can help students to improve fluency one chunk of text at a time. Plays and skits provide a wonderful excuse to encourage students to practice the same lines over and over until they master them, and presenting a play or skit in their second language gives students a great sense of accomplishment.

- **Encourage students to maintain and develop their first language at school, at home, and in the community.** Research shows that students learn English more effectively, and don't lag as far behind their English-speaking classmates in other subject areas, when they do more academic work in their native language. And when students are pushed to learn English only, and aren't given the chance to continue learning their home language, they lose the opportunity to be bilingual, a skill that's increasingly valued in society.
- **Don't assume a student has special education needs just because they're struggling academically.** It could just be that they lack the language skills to successfully complete more academic work in English. At the same time, don't ignore potential special education needs either. Seek out resources in your school, district and community to help you determine what is going on with a particular student.

Strategies For Becoming More Culturally Competent

- **If you do not yet speak the languages of the children you work with, start learning.** Even if you do not master your a student's language, learning a few words and courtesy phrases is a sign of respect and effort on your part. If you already speak your students' languages, congratulations! Continue to work at improving your skills.
- **Learn about the cultures of the children you teach.** Listen to your students and show interest in their cultures while being careful not to put students on the spot or assume that they're experts on their cultures. Plan assignments that bring students' cultures, families, languages, and experiences front and center. Talk with colleagues, parents, and friends who share the students' backgrounds. Read, see movies, listen to music, travel to the students' home countries if possible. This is a lifelong process.
- **Find ways to communicate with parents in their first language unless they ask you to speak with them in English.** For example, find out if an interpreter is needed, and arrange for one ahead of time.

Types of ESL and Bilingual Programs

English as a Second Language

Emphasis is on learning and using English in the classroom and on preparing English Language Learners to function in "mainstream" English-language classrooms. English Language Learners may be placed in an English as a Second Language class, "sheltered English" classes, or they may participate in a pullout ESL class. ESL teachers may also support classroom teachers in their classrooms. Other languages typically are not used in ESL programs.

Transitional Bilingual Education

(also sometimes referred to as "early exit bilingual education")

Students' native language is used in classrooms to help students learn academic content while they are learning English. As soon as possible (usually two or three years), students are moved into instruction in English only. The goal is proficiency in English, not continuing to develop the student's

native language skills.

Developmental Bilingual Education

(also referred to as "maintenance bilingual education" or "late exit bilingual education")

These programs develop and maintain proficiency in students' native language as well as English. Students entering developmental bilingual programs as kindergarteners are typically taught to read and write in their native language first, and then literacy skills are transferred to English. Once students function in both languages, they continue to learn language and content in both languages.

Dual Language Education

(also referred to as "two-way bilingual" or "two-way immersion")

These programs serve a mix of English Language Learners and native English-speaking students. They teach language and content in both English and in a target language (for example, Spanish, Japanese, etc.) The goal is for all students to become literate in both English and the target language, and to develop and maintain both languages.

Resources for Working with English Language Learners

Help! They Don't Speak English: Starter Kit for Primary Teachers

Oneonta, NY: Eastern Stream Center on Resources and Training (ESCORT), 1998.

The Power of Two Languages: Literacy and Bilingualism for Spanish-Speaking Students

edited by Josefina Villamil Tinajero and Alma Flor Ada

New York: McMillan/McGraw Hill, 1993.

Dual Language Instruction: A Handbook for Enriched Education

edited by Nancy Cloud, Fred Genesee, and Else Hamayan

Philadelphia: Heinle & Heinle, 2000.

Learning and Not Learning English: Latino Students in American Schools

by Guadalupe Valdés

New York: Teacher's College Press, 2001.

Dr. Jim Cummins' ESL and Second Language Learning Web

<http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/index.htm>

This site offers details about Cummins' work researching second language acquisition and literacy development, and links to other web resources.

Stephen D. Krashen's Website

<http://www.sdkrashen.com>

Information about Krashen's many informative articles and other writings about language learning.

Rethinking Schools Special Collection on Bilingual Education

http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/bilingual/resources.shtml

a more in-depth listing of articles and resources for teachers working with English Language Learners.

Downloaded from the website for The New Teacher Book, published by Rethinking Schools, 2004.

For more information visit www.rethinkingschools.org/newteacher

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