

SECRETS

for ELL SUCCESS

Four effective techniques for engaging English language learners

A NEW SCHOOL YEAR IS ALMOST HERE, and a new group of students will soon arrive—including many English language learners (ELLs) at varying ages and levels of language acquisition. As educators well know, kids and teens who are learning English as a second or additional language and new content at the same time need extra support.

During my 20-plus years in teaching, I refined four powerful instructional strategies that help give ELL students the tools they need to succeed in school—and as lifelong learners. They are designed to be woven into daily instruction across content areas from pre-K to 12th grade.

Make input comprehensible

Let's say you went to China and sat in a classroom listening to a teacher speak Mandarin all day. You don't know Mandarin. Would you be able to follow along?

The way we deliver information is key to how students receive it. We could stand in front of students all day long and lecture, or use PowerPoint, and be completely ineffective. In order to make content comprehensible, we use techniques that allow listeners to access the language. There are many ways to do this with students.

Using gestures while lecturing or reading a book, repetition, and paraphrasing are a few examples. At the beginning level of proficiency, ELLs benefit from measured speech, which helps them make distinctions between words. Using clear, explicit

language when speaking is also important, while adding extra fluff or figurative language can hinder comprehension.

Total physical response (TPR; ow.ly/IcID30dvjIL), developed by James Asher, professor emeritus of psychology at San José State University, teaches language by incorporating physical movement. This simple yet powerful instructional strategy effectively boosts vocabulary development. Adding movement to critical vocabulary also helps students internalize meaning.

For instance, if the word *producer* is important for students to grasp, the teacher might write the word, have students repeat it multiple times, provide a short definition, and ask them to work in groups to come up with a physical movement to represent the term. The use of multiple modalities (kinesthetic,

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ELL-Friendly Classrooms

WHAT YOU'LL HEAR

Less teacher talk and more student conversation



Student groups working together in collaboration

The teacher using repetition and clarification



to support student comprehension

Students using sentence stems to speak and write in complete sentences



I believe



The author with ELL students

WHAT YOU'LL SEE

Desks arranged in groups



Students working collaboratively



ANCHOR CHARTS

that are clear, concise, and user-friendly, with graphic supports

WORD WALLS

that are categorized and supported with visuals

Content and language objectives clearly posted





English language learners working together in a small group.

visual, and verbal) lifts the level of comprehension and recall. The word *tree* might be accompanied by a gesture using arms and fingers to demonstrate what a tree looks like.

Model for your students

If we truly want our students to hit the target, we have to show them what the target is. Model what we expect. Often, when educators feel the pressure of too much curriculum to cover, modeling drops off the lesson plan. But it's essential to a successful outcome.

One way to model is to think aloud, a strategy that works across content areas and supports all learners. This is practiced most frequently in the English language arts setting when teachers model during a read-aloud. In math, we can demonstrate how to problem-solve or read a word problem. In science, we can model how to write a hypothesis or begin an experiment. We model how to select an appropriate book in the library or how to help a friend who has a problem.

Modeling is especially important for ELLs: learning language and content simultaneously, these students are bombarded with information all day. Helping them concentrate on what's important gives them a learning focus and helps them feel successful.

For instance, the teacher might say while holding a book, "I notice that this book has pictures, and each picture has writing beneath it. I also see that there is a time line in this book as well as a few graphs and charts. I'm beginning to think that this book

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NOW, MY WALLS GROW WITH THE CHILDREN.**

is going to teach me something. The text structure tells me that it may be a nonfiction book."

When modeling, be clear and explicit with instructions. Breaking down activities or assignments into steps is essential. Here's an example for elementary students who are in the process of writing about a picture: "Step one: Look at the picture. Step two: Think. What else can I say that I haven't written about? Step three: Try to add more words."

Provide students with attainable steps. Using a gradual release model of teaching—show them, help them, let them do it themselves (ow.ly/MIFU30dvmY)—allows all students to feel independent and successful.

During the "show them" phase, the teacher models while thinking aloud about the process taking place and records it on an anchor chart—a poster that highlights strategies students can refer to later if they need support. The "help them" phase, which should be repeated multiple times, is carried out with partners or in groups: students work together and lean on one another while learning. During the final phase, students work on their own but refer to the anchor charts and to the teacher if they need assistance. Throughout, the educator is there to facilitate, formatively assess, and offer feedback.

Use visuals

Mountains of research have shown that visuals aid comprehension and promote recall. When we show vibrant pictures, sketches, and real items (realia) to students learning new vocabulary, they are more apt to comprehend, store, and recall it when they need it.

Have you ever walked into a classroom on the first day of school and the walls are filled with posters and charts? You might think, "Wow, this environment is perfect for learning to begin."

On the contrary, a classroom with empty walls on the first day may support some learners better, especially ELLs. Why? When we create anchor charts with students, involving them in the process, they are more likely to internalize the information.

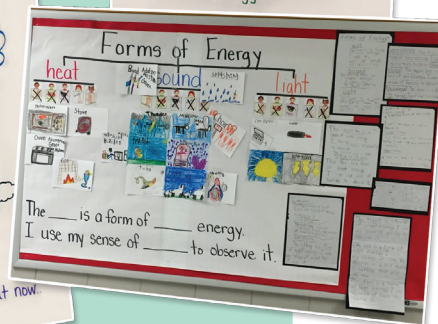
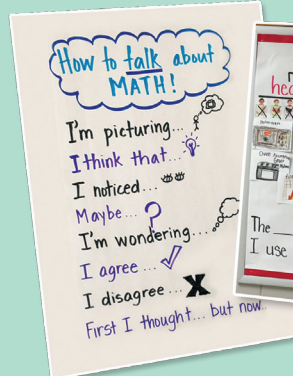
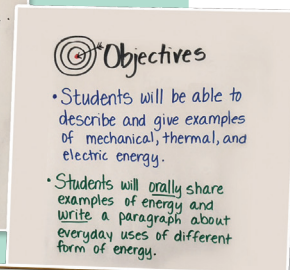
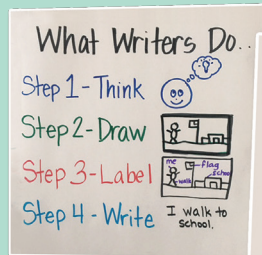
When I was a first-year teacher, I prepared my entire room before school started. I soon learned that my pre-filled walls were often ineffective unless kids interacted with them meaningfully. Now, my walls grow with the children. That doesn't mean that everything has to be created in the presence of or by students. It means that if we have something on our walls, we need to tell our students why it's there and how it's relevant. Otherwise, why put it up? The way we use and display word walls can transform our students' vocabulary comprehension.

Hallmarks of ELL Education

If you walk into a classroom that is highly supportive of ELLs, you might see desks in groups or flexible arrangements, allowing students to work together, rather than studying in isolation at desks arranged in rows. Looking around, you will notice anchor charts that have been made by teachers and students, rather than bought in a store. This room is immersed in language that is supported by visual scaffolds.

Close your eyes...and listen. A place that nurtures ELL students encourages risk-taking and allows students to feel safe to ask, answer, and discuss questions with classmates. You won't hear the teacher praising a quiet class—rather, teachers praise discussion and collaboration. There's an understanding that the goal is teaching students to think creatively, rather than to recall and regurgitate answers.

Visual supports for ELL classrooms, clockwise from top left: a four-step anchor chart, a chart outlining student objectives, the energy-themed word wall, and math-related sentence stems.



The first classroom word wall I created was also organized alphabetically. Now, I organize them thematically or according to a teaching unit, and they are structured like graphic organizers or concept maps. Students interact with them and help create the words.

For instance, if I were teaching a unit about energy, my word wall might be titled “Forms of Energy.” Beneath that, I would create columns. As we learn, students are encouraged to draw and/or label types of energy—heat, sound, light, etc.—and place them in the correct column.

Make output comprehensible

English language learners need to practice the new language in a low-stress environment. Speaking and writing in English in a safe space is critical for their progress.

Output can be categorized in two groups: speaking and writing. One way to maximize speaking is to create opportunities for students to work in cooperative groups. These offer smaller settings where students can problem-solve and think critically while interacting with a heterogeneous mix of peers.

Various cooperative grouping structures include “think-pair-share” and “inside/outside circle.” In the think-pair-share method of student interaction, the teacher asks a question and allows students time to think about it, then students pair up and share their answers. In the inside/outside circle method, a discussion technique introduced by educational researcher and author Spencer Kagan (ow.ly/crZN30dVuFo), students position themselves in two concentric circles. The teacher poses a question, allowing for think time. In pairs, students from

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each circle share answers. Upon a signal, one circle rotates, and students share with new partners. Both of these cooperative grouping structures provide students with a low-stress opportunity to express themselves.

Some students also benefit from sentence stems, which are prompts to start a sentence that the student must complete, and word banks, lists of words, during cooperative groups. Word banks are especially helpful to students who are learning and writing with new, content-specific vocabulary. Paragraph frames, which are skeleton outlines supplying sentence stems and transition words, also support those at beginning and intermediate language levels.

It's vital that ELLs have opportunities to practice oral and written language in all content areas. Writing and speaking in math, science, and social studies differs from writing and speaking in language arts. The domain-specific vocabulary needed to write about a science experiment, for example, and the structure of that type of writing are unique.

These have proven to be my tried-and-true teaching strategies. What are yours? Let me know in the comments section online: slj.com/Teaching_ELLs.

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