

# 10 Tips for Teaching English-Language Learners

JANUARY 25, 2012

Classrooms across the United States are becoming increasingly diverse with increasing numbers of students whose primary home languages are not English. State-reported data in 2008-09 estimated 10 percent of the US school-aged population (PreK-twelfth grade) as students identified as limited English proficient. Terms more widely accepted and used are English-Language Learners or simply English Learners (ELs).

To adequately assist ELs in learning both content concepts and English simultaneously, all educators need to view themselves as language teachers. Here are 10 tips for supporting ELs in general education classrooms.

## 1. Know your students

Increase your understanding of who your students are, their backgrounds and educational experiences. If your students have been in US schools for several years and/or were educated in their country of origin, are literate or not in their native language, may provide you with a better understanding of their educational needs and ways to support them.

## 2. Be aware of their social and emotional needs

Understanding more about the students' families and their needs is key. When ELs have siblings to care for afterschool, possibly live with extended family members or have jobs to help support their families, completing homework assignments will not take priority.

## 3. Increase your understanding of first and second language acquisition

Although courses about second language acquisition are not required as part of teacher education programs, understanding the theories about language acquisition and the variables that contribute to language learning may help you reach your ELs more effectively.

## 4. Student need to SWRL every day in every class

The domains of language acquisition, **Speaking, Writing, Reading and Listening** need to be equally exercised across content areas daily. Assuring that students are using all domains of language acquisition to support their English language development is essential.

## 5. Increase your understanding of English language proficiency

Social English language proficiency and academic English language proficiency are very different. A student may be more proficient in one vs. the other. A student's level of academic English may be masked by a higher level of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

compared to their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). For example, a student may be able to orally recall the main events from their favorite movie but struggle to recall the main events that led up to the Civil War.

#### 6. Know the language of your content

English has a number of [polysemous](#) words. Once a student learns and understands one meaning of a word, other meaning may not be apparent. Review the vocabulary of your content area often and check in with ELs to assure they know the words and possibly the multiple meanings associated with the words. For example, a "plot" of land in geography class *versus* the "plot" in a literature class. A "table" we sit at *versus* a multiplication "table."

#### 7. Understand language assessments

Language proficiency assessments in your district may vary. Find out when and how a student's English language proficiency is assessed and the results of those assessments. Using the results of formal and informal assessments can provide a wealth of information to aid in planning lessons that support language acquisition and content knowledge simultaneously.

#### 8. Use authentic visuals and manipulatives

These can be over- or under-utilized. Implement the use of authentic resources for example; menus, bus schedules, post-cards, photographs and video clips can enhance student comprehension of complex content concepts.

#### 9. Strategies that match language proficiency

Knowing the level of English language proficiency at which your students are functioning academically is vital in order to be able to scaffold appropriately. Not all strategies are appropriate for all levels of language learners. Knowing which scaffolds are most appropriate takes time but will support language learning more effectively.

#### 10. Collaborate to celebrate

Seek support from other teachers who may teach ELs. Other educators, novice and veteran, may have suggestions and resources that support English language development and content concepts. Creating and sustaining professional learning communities that support ELs are vital for student success.

#### Suggested resources

Hadaway, N., Vardell, S., Young, T. *What Every Teacher Should Know About English-Language Learners* (Pearson Education, Inc. Boston, MA 2009)

Haynes, J. *Getting Started with English-Language Learners: How Educators Can Meet the Challenge* (ASCD, Alexandria, VA 2007)

Hill, J., Flynn, K. *Classroom Instruction that Works with English-Language Learners* (ASCD, Alexandria, VA 2006)