

Improving Literacy for English Learners: What Teachers Need to Know

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The future of the United States will be impacted by the quality of instruction offered to English learners. If that statement sounds like hyperbole, consider that the number of English learners in our schools has reached nearly 5 million, comprising about 10 percent of the U.S. school population. English learners are also the fastest growing student population, far exceeding the growth of the overall school population (NCES, 2016).

Although many English learners are immigrants, the vast majority of English learners were born in America, providing the opportunity for teachers to have a positive influence on their learning from the outset of their school careers. Amid increased academic rigor and high standards for all K–12 students, teachers are challenged to prepare their students to be college- and career-ready. They are concerned for English learners in particular since these students must make academic progress in English language development, academic content, and literacy simultaneously. The large—and growing—numbers of students who are English learners underscores the necessity for the kind of literacy instruction and language development that supports their learning. The status of English learners in schools has prompted an increased number of studies that have investigated effective instruction for these students.

Research-Based Practice

Best practices for English learners include a number of strategies and techniques that make content comprehensible while developing their academic English (August and Shanahan, 2010; Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2017; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian, 2006). Although English learners learn in many of the same ways that English speakers do, their unique linguistic needs require that additional supports be provided. For example, setting clear goals and objectives to direct and focus the lesson is a common and effective technique.

The objectives are reviewed at the beginning of the lesson so that students are aware of the expectations and are able to more fully participate. Also, linking new learning to previous learning makes important connections for students and reinforces previously taught skills and concepts. Effective teachers model new skills and procedures as part of the learning process (e.g., “I do,” “You do,” “We do”). Once students see how to accomplish a task and practice doing it, they move more quickly to working independently and completing the task. Finally, active engagement and participation by students enhances learning. Students cannot be expected to learn unless they are provided opportunities to engage in meaningful instructional activities during lessons.

Additional Supports for English Learners

English learners require additional supports beyond what we know are effective practices for all students. Some of these supports are intended to build English learners’ language proficiency in English, and others are designed to provide access to academic content. English proficiency is the greatest predictor of academic success for English learners, more than all other factors combined (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova, 2008). The academic language required for school tasks—reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English to learn and demonstrate an understanding of lesson concepts—differs from conversational English in that it is more complex and not typically encountered in everyday settings. Thus, it is the type of language that, in many cases, must be explicitly taught (e.g., key vocabulary terms or functional use of language such as how to confirm information, describe, and disagree). Using academic language is particularly challenging for English learners who are acquiring English at the same time that school tasks require a high level of English usage. English learners also need instruction adjusted so they can access academic content. Imagine trying to learn a new, difficult concept when the person explaining it is speaking a language that is unfamiliar to you. That is the situation English learners face in class every day. Effective teachers of English learners use teaching techniques that make the spoken message and written text more comprehensible for them (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2017). The kinds of supports that facilitate access to content and develop English language proficiency include:

Using multiple media - Words and concepts are brought to life for English learners through the use of a variety of supports. Through retelling cards, students are exposed multiple times to the story’s sequence and ideas or the informational read. Video clips are especially useful for introducing the concept of the week and for showing vocabulary words visually (e.g., armadillo, hibernate, and lightning). Technology offers a myriad of options for creating a context, illustrating a word or concept, and organizing information into chunks that are more easily learned and remembered.

Providing additional practice and repetition - Learning new information, words, and concepts in a new language is quite challenging. English learners need multiple exposures to new material and can benefit from opportunities to practice interacting with it in authentic ways.

Building background knowledge - The experiences and knowledge that English learners bring to a lesson are important resources on which to build. To improve comprehension and make lessons relevant, teachers tap into students’ backgrounds by linking the lesson’s concepts to students’ knowledge and experience.

Providing explicit instruction of literacy skills - English learners benefit from exposure to grade-level texts and discussions to build their language and literacy skills. However, focused, purposeful teaching of the skills they need will help them become more effective and efficient readers and writers. The result will be greater participation in lessons and overall achievement.

Highlighting and teaching vocabulary - English learners need enhanced, explicit vocabulary development. Instruction of high-frequency words and abstract words is critical for supporting comprehension. Since these students need to acquire thousands of English words to be proficient, vocabulary learning can be expedited through the teaching of word learning strategies such as understanding word parts (e.g., roots and affixes). Also, Spanish speakers benefit from learning cognates so that they see the relationship between Spanish and English (e.g., artículo/article and ejemplo/example).

Ensuring opportunities for oral discourse - Allotting specific time for oral language practice is essential for developing language and literacy skills. Collaborative conversations, including those around productive group work, provide these opportunities. Further, teachers provide additional practice when they engage with English learners in interactions that are differentiated by students' language proficiency levels. Academic language development is often hindered by a lack of planned opportunities for oral language practice. The more exposure students have, and the more time students spend using academic language, the faster they will develop language proficiency (Saunders and Goldenberg, 2010).

Capitalizing on students' native languages - Although literacy in English can be developed without proficiency in the native language, academic literacy in the native language facilitates the development of academic literacy in English. Students' native languages are a rich resource that can be used as a foundation for learning.

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The Importance of Fidelity

Research confirms the importance of using the best practices discussed in this paper to help English learners perform well academically. Since we know these practices provide the support English learners need to access content and develop English proficiency, they should become part of every teacher's instructional repertoire. When teachers use these practices only occasionally or selectively, their students do not achieve as much as those students whose teachers use them consistently and to a high degree (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, and Rattleff, 2011). To improve literacy and language development for English learners—and to help them become college- and career-ready—research-based practices need to be part of each and every lesson.

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