



ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING:

Helping Students with Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing in English

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Introduction

Teaching English language learners (ELLs) is a complex process that involves scaffolding instruction in speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar. For some students, English may be their second or third language, and other ELLs may have limited levels of proficiency in their primary languages.

I. Programs for ELLs

In the United States, almost one in ten K–12 students is an ELL (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). ELLs are placed in programs that reflect different philosophies and policies. The most common programs are:

- **Pull-Out/Push-In English as a Second Language:** A language specialist provides specific language support to facilitate student success in mainstream classrooms, or support staff uses a research-based program to assist students' language development.
- **Sheltered or Structured English Immersion (SEI):** ELLs are grouped in a stand-alone classroom for a few hours a day to receive language and academic instruction.
- **Bilingual Instruction:** Students receive academic instruction and language development in both their native and second languages.

II. Academic Language Acquisition

Academic language includes the discourse patterns, grammar, and vocabulary of the task (Anstrom et al., 2010; Scarcella, 2003). For instance, if the task is to read a text which compares and contrasts two concepts, the discourse patterns would address the features and words common to compare-and-contrast writing, the grammar would explain the use of comparatives and adjectives, and the vocabulary would be specific to the two concepts being compared. Academic language implies that students will have opportunities to comprehend and express the complex language required for their grade level (August & Shanahan, 2006).

As noted by Kuhn and Stall (1998, cited in Brandes & McMaster, 2017), incidental vocabulary learning, or learning new words by reading texts that contain those new words, is not an effective way to acquire vocabulary for ELLs because of the possibly limited extent of their existing English vocabulary. Instead, ELLs need strategic and explicit vocabulary instruction.

An effective way of helping ELLs learn academic vocabulary consists of linking new language with what learners already know from their native language (Fillmore & Snow, 2000). For example, pointing out words that are similar in English and other languages (cognates), such as *describir* in Spanish and *describe* in English, is an example of how to build English upon the native language. Comparing affixes is another way. A teacher may point out to native Spanish speakers that the suffix *-tion* has the same function as *-ción* in Spanish, as in *nation*–*nación*, or that *-ty* is the same suffix as *-dad*, as in *liberty*–*libertad*.

III. Speaking

ELLs need to develop oral proficiency in English to be confident and competent in social and academic settings. Effective instruction for ELLs provides ample, meaningful opportunities to use English, along with explicitly teaching English features such as syntax, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and norms of social usage (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 42). The use and development of oral language is particularly important for beginning ELLs in the younger grades, as it serves as one foundation that students use to build early reading skills (Bunch, Kibler, & Pimentel, 2012, p. 3). In intermediate and later grades, oral language proficiency has a close connection with writing proficiency as well (Perin, De La Paz, Worland Piantedosi, & Madigan Percy, 2016).

IV. Listening

For ELLs, listening is an essential skill in a content classroom where students are listening to and processing information in a second or additional language. Preparing ELLs for mainstreaming participation means preparing them for listening to teachers and classmates engaged in academic content (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994, p. 52). For English learners, for whom oral language proficiency plays an important role in acquiring reading skills, active participation by children during teacher read-alouds contributes to vocabulary growth (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011, p. 111).

V. Reading

Reading is a complex skill involving processing, interpreting, and evaluating in order to comprehend written text. For ELLs, reading in English means applying these actions to a new language. ELLs learning to read in English, just like English speakers learning to read in English, benefit from explicit teaching of the components of literacy, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 17; Ludwig, Guo, & Georgiou, 2019).

In addition, to become good readers—to be able to recognize words and comprehend text simultaneously—ELLs require practice at both decoding and fluency. Teachers must thus give equal attention to decoding, or word recognition, and comprehension (Calderon et al., 2011, p. 111). When it comes to reading comprehension instruction, curriculums for ELLs need to be implemented at a language level accessible to them (Irujo, n.d.).

VI. Writing

Like first language writing, second language writing develops gradually over time, with considerable variation in individual learners' progress through different stages of development (Bunch et al., 2012, p. 5). When putting ideas into words, ELLs may find it difficult to express themselves because of limited vocabulary and grammar skills, spelling ability, or a lack of confidence using their voices in English.

As with all students, ELLs must be able to move beyond narrative writing and into genres where they must apply academic and content knowledge. Rigorous new standards demand that students show writing proficiency along a series of genres, including argumentative writing, which is a demanding genre that draws on reading, writing, critical thinking, and bringing together information from different sources (Campbell & Filimon, 2018). These heightened expectations for student writing stand in contrast with the majority of writing practice that students receive in elementary schools, which predominantly involves low-level cognitive tasks (Matsumura, Correnti, & Wang, 2015, cited in Campbell & Filimon, 2018).

VII. Vocabulary

The English vocabulary of an ELL can be extensive or minimal depending on the student's background and learning experiences. To help ELLs acquire vocabulary, they must be given numerous opportunities for exposure to and application of words in authentic and varied contexts, with vocabulary instruction that is focused, deliberate, content-based, and visually supported (Irujo, n.d.).

Vocabulary knowledge and strategies for interpreting word meanings are essential for ELLs to perform academic reading and writing tasks. Vocabulary instruction contributes to overall effective instruction by developing students' phonological awareness and reading comprehension (Calderon et al., 2011, p. 110). Studies of vocabulary instruction also show that ELLs are more likely to learn words when they are directly taught, rather than through incidental learning. Just as with English speakers, ELLs learn more words when the words are embedded in meaningful contexts with ample opportunities for their repetition and use, as opposed to looking up dictionary definitions or presenting words in a single sentence (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 17).

VIII. Grammar

Grammar is the structure and function of language, and when ELLs can recognize the structures and functions of English, they can increase their proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In order for ELLs to be able to access academic language and content, they need explicit instruction in, and meaningful practice with, English grammar.

Grammatical competence for everyday English includes the accurate use of frequently occurring morphological and syntactic features as well as the functions of these features (Scarcella, 2003, p. 14). Understanding and developing a high level of competence in grammar is the foundation for ELLs to gain access to the demanding texts and tasks required by rigorous academic standards.

Learning A–Z Resources for English Language Learners

Raz-Plus ELL Edition

- **ELL Leveled Reader Packs** are correlated to many leveled books and scaffold reading instruction for ELLs at all levels of language proficiency. The packs build speaking skills in the context of academic content and include multiple opportunities to support students' oral language development.
- **ELL Content Picture Packs** provide opportunities for ELLs to develop their oral language skills with visual supports while working with content-area materials.
- **ELL Vocabulary Power Packs** provide differentiated and structured support to promote the success of ELLs in Grades 3–5 by allowing students to record their reading or responses to questions asked in the text.
- **ELL Vocabulary Books** use content-based themes to support students' social and academic speaking skills. Each lesson provides students with proficiency-leveled dialogue frames that support student engagement. The digital resources allow teachers to assign specific books to students, which they can record themselves reading.
- **ELL Language Skill Packs** provide content-based resources for developing oral skills through vocabulary and guided instruction of key language skills and functions, such as describing, comparing, and classifying.
- **ELL Assessments** monitor and track ELLs' progress in academic language skills, including speaking skills.

Raz-Plus and Reading A–Z

- **Leveled Books** at 29 levels of complexity in projectable, printable, and digital versions allow students to read silently, whisper read, or record their reading using built-in recording tools. The listen versions of eBooks contain continuous-play audio and follow-along highlighted text to model fluency with a natural voice. Projectable versions of the books provide opportunities for labeling, circling, or highlighting nouns, verbs, and other grammar elements.
- **Reading Graphic Organizers** can be used with any book and allow readers to organize ideas, practice talking about what they have read, and develop higher-level thinking skills.
- **Vocabulary Graphic Organizers** provide a framework for learning and discussing new words.
- **Literature Circles** help ELLs practice communication skills as they discuss and collaborate on a single text in small groups.
- **Shared Reading Books** help build ELLs' reading confidence with modeled and choral reading, along with group discussion to promote listening and speaking.
- **Reader's Theater Scripts** are adapted from leveled books and allow students to practice reading aloud material they are familiar with and collaborate with a group for a performance.
- **Content Area Reading Editions** of leveled books engage students with science, social studies, mathematics, art and music, or social stories to introduce academic and domain-specific vocabulary in context.
- **Close Reading Packs** contain short engaging reading passages that drive close reading and both small-group and whole-class discussions.
- **Alphabet Books, High-Frequency Word Books, Fluency Practice Passages, Decodable Books and Phonics Lessons, and Phonological Awareness Lessons** help students become familiar with the sounds of English and provide essential foundational reading skills practice.

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