
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

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Linguistic and cultural diversity is growing within the United States and is mirrored within school settings. With this diversity come growing numbers of children whose native language is not English and who may be described as Limited English Proficient (LEP) or English Language Learner (ELL). There are very large populations of ELLs in California, New York, Texas, Illinois, Arizona, and Florida. However, ELLs are present to some degree in virtually every state. Some of these ELLs are immigrants and refugees, but many were born in the United States.

School dropout rates are often high among ELL populations, and achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL groups have been reported in many schools. However, ELLs come from heterogeneous language, cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The availability of bilingual education, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and other special instructional programs for ELL students differs across states and school districts, and may be offered through self-contained, pull-out, or mainstream classes.

Recent local, state, and federal school reform programs, including the No Child Left Behind Act, require increased school accountability for all students, including ELLs. The responsibility for effectively teaching ELLs should extend to all educators, not just those involved with special language instructional programs. This handout presents information on what can be done to promote academic excellence in ELL students. It is not the intent of this handout to imply that there is one ELL group that is representative of all subgroups or individuals.

Development

Life experiences, family issues, behavioral adjustment, academic performance, and the second language acquisition process are all important for teachers to consider in evaluating the current status of, and planning instruction for, ELLs. The school performance and behaviors of ELLs should be interpreted in light of their individual backgrounds.

Life experiences. Some ELLs may have been exposed to stressful or traumatic life experiences at a very young age. They may have endured war, political strife, separation from parents and siblings, frequent moves, poverty, hunger, overpopulated refugee camps, dangerous exoduses from their countries, and general uprooting. Others who are in the United States illegally live in fear of the authorities and may have limited access to public benefits and services.

Medically, some ELLs who migrate to the United States are in need of services that may not have been affordable or available to them in their countries. Vision, hearing, and general physical and dental exams may be indicated.

Educationally, some ELLs have a history of inconsistent schooling. These students may come from countries where education is not mandatory or even available to all children. Children may have attended overcrowded schools with limited resources. Some may have been forced to drop out of school to go to work while others, especially those with mental or physical disabilities, may have been denied education in their native countries. Lack of availability of special education programs for children with disabilities may actually have been the impetus for coming to the United States. Other ELLs may have strong academic skills in their native language and yet may be overlooked for participation in advanced classes because of a lack of English proficiency.

Culturally, ELLs may come to school with a set of experiences, customs, and values that differ from those of other students. They may celebrate different holidays and may not be familiar with American secular celebrations such as Independence Day and Thanksgiving. Often, they eat different foods and have different meal times. Their clothing may be different. They may have different standards of etiquette.

They may write their names in a different order (e.g., last, middle, first for Vietnamese) or may not write the date according to the U.S. custom of month, day, year (e.g., day, month, year for Hispanics). They may have different concepts of time and punctuality and varying communication styles.

Family issues. Families of ELLs may lack English literacy, and may not be accustomed to participating in the schooling of their children, attending parent-teacher conferences, or asking questions of educators. They may have trouble helping with homework in English and may need school support in that regard. Child-rearing practices may vary, with some ELLs coming from strict, traditional families and others having more permissive upbringings.

Behavioral adjustment. ELLs who have migrated to the United States often go through stages of cultural adaptation. They may experience temporary adjustment problems because of all of the stresses and changes they face in adapting to a new country, language, culture, school, and life situation. They need time to adjust to their new environment and learn rules and expectations. Those who have endured traumatic experiences are more vulnerable to stress disorders.

Academic performance. ELLs come to school with varying degrees of literacy in their own language and in English. Their language may not have the same alphabet as English and so may make learning English even harder.

They may have experienced different teaching styles (e.g., more emphasis on rote as opposed to analytical methods). English oral communication skills are generally mastered more quickly than reading and written language skills. Learning to read in English is often easier to those already literate in their native language.

Current academic performance should be interpreted in light of educational background and life experiences. ELLs may have started school at a different age than is customary in the United States and may have come from schools where grade levels do not correspond with the K–12 system.

ELLs face the difficult task of mastering academic content in English while acquiring the English language. The effectiveness of learning experiences in their native language (L1) and in their second language (L2) will have an important impact on their current academic functioning.

Second language acquisition process. Second language acquisition emerges through developmental stages and is time intensive. ELLs generally acquire basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) well before they attain the higher level cognitive academic language proficiency skills (CALPS) required for success with tasks involving abstract language or in academic

classes taught entirely in English. Proficiency in L1 enhances the acquisition of L2 and academic skills learned in L1 can be transferred to L2. The opportunity for practice in L2, motivation, self-esteem, comprehensible or understandable input, and appropriate instruction, including strategies that help ELLs understand grade level classroom language and content, all facilitate second language acquisition.

Intervention: What Can a Teacher Do?

- Learn as much as possible about the cultural and language background of ELLs by studying, attending courses, and speaking with linguistically and culturally diverse groups.
- Set high expectations and prepare them to meet state and national academic standards and promotion, graduation, and post-graduation requirements.
- Ask by what name they would like to be addressed and how to pronounce it correctly.
- Provide comprehensible instruction at a level commensurate with the language proficiency skills and current functioning. This involves aligning curriculum, assessment, and interventions to meet student needs and using ongoing assessment results to inform and customize instruction.
- Provide native language instructional support while they are learning English, if possible.
- Pair a new ELL student with a bilingual student who preferably can speak the same language and who can be a buddy.
- Encourage homework hotlines and homework support activities staffed by bilingual teachers, aides, and volunteers.
- Teach survival English first (e.g. bathroom, cafeteria, book, pencil), and label common objects in the classroom in English.
- Use, and teach how to use, a dictionary that contains translations from English to the child's native language and vice versa.
- Pair visual cues and nonverbal gestures with verbal communication in the classroom.
- Make English directions short and concise. Avoid jargon.
- Observe to see if they understand what they are to do. Repetition may be needed.
- Encourage natural and purposeful communication in the classroom involving extensive practice in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
- Use mechanical aids such as language masters, tape recorders, overhead projectors, and computers as well as real objects, music, art, games, and hands-on experiences to reinforce learning.

- Adapt materials consistent with their levels of language proficiency, highlighting key points and using, for instance, outlines, lists, diagrams, or demonstrations. Reduce the language demands, not the conceptual demands, of tasks.
- Use cooperative learning groups, role-playing, dialogue journals, and other forms of active and interactive learning.
- Enhance self-image, motivation, and cultural pride by using culturally relevant materials and encouraging presentations and activities highlighting their cultural and linguistic heritage.
- Encourage them to enroll in foreign language classes to further develop their native language skills and pride in their heritage.
- Support their participation in extracurricular activities.
- Encourage their development of talents and special abilities.
- Teach the rules and behavioral expectations of the school environment.
- Facilitate parent involvement. Invite the parents to actively participate in their child's education. Call the family if they do not respond to notes sent home or use social workers to make home visits, and communicate with parents in their native language whenever possible. The use of interpreters or bilingual school staff can often facilitate this.
- Use an inquiry-based, collaborative problem-solving team process to address issues related to their instruction and adjustment.
- Seek help from other professionals such as school psychologists, social workers, and counselors if a student exhibits academic or behavior problems that appear unusual or extreme in comparison to other ELLs.

Resources

- Echevarria, J., Vogt, M. E., & Short, D. J. (2004). *Making content comprehensible for English learners: The SIOP model* (2nd ed.). Boston: Pearson Education. ISBN: 0-205-38641-5.
- Peregoy, S. F., & Boyle, O. F. (2001). *Reading, writing, and learning in ESL: A resource book for K-12 teachers* (3rd ed.). New York: Addison Wesley Longman. ISBN: 0-8013-3249-4.

Product

CultureGrams™ 2004 world edition loose leaf set (2003). London, Utah: Axiom Press. ISBN: 1-931694-58-3.
CultureGrams™ provide summary information on countries around the world and are useful to school

personnel in understanding the language and cultural background of students and families. Topics include areas such as climate, language, population, religion, education, government, family, customs and courtesies, communications, health, and dating and marriage. This product is updated yearly. Refer to the website for other available formats for this product—www.culturegrams.com; phone 800-528-6279.

Websites

- ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics—
www.cal.org/ericcll
Provides an online question/answer service, information digests, an online newsletter, resource lists, and databases on second language instruction.
- National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)—
www.nabe.org
Focuses on language minority students and the professionals in bilingual education serving their interests.
- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs—www.ncela.gwu.edu
Provides practical resources, current research, and policy associated with the education of linguistically and culturally diverse students in U.S. schools. Includes an online library, databases, strategies for effective instruction, and technical assistance.
- National Association of School Psychologists, Culturally Competent Practice—
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence/index.html
Provides links and resources for working with both ELL and ethnically diverse students.
- Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)—www.tesol.org
International professional organization that is dedicated to helping teachers teach English to speakers of other languages.

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