

ESL Students in the General Education Classroom

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Help! I have a new student in the middle of February who doesn't speak any English! What should I do? Sound familiar? This often happens at my school. English Language Learners (ELL), or English as a Second Language (ESL) students, are part of a very transient population. Sometimes students will even leave mid-year for a month long vacation back to their home country to visit relatives, and of course they come home just in time for the state exam. For students whose parents opt out of bilingual education in favor of ESL, this can be a very daunting task for the classroom teacher. These students are placed in a age appropriate grade with no reading skills in English. There are many different ways to accommodate these students. Sometimes you have to be creative in order to get your point across. The first thing I do as an ESL teacher is make sure my new students learn where basic things in the school are, such as the bathroom and the nurse. If you or the ESL teacher can't do it, please send the student for a tour with a language buddy. This will alleviate some of the new student's fears.

Here are some other ways to accommodate English Language Learners in your classroom:

1. Scaffold, Scaffold and Scaffold!

The more you scaffold the better. ESL teachers spend more time scaffolding than anything. Always front-load the vocabulary! This population needs to be able to understand and have a grasp of the major content vocabulary words before the actual lesson. If you don't allow for pre-teaching of the vocabulary, the ELLs will spend valuable lesson time trying to figure out the words instead of learning the concept behind the lesson. The more you scaffold the happier everyone will be. You will spend less time reteaching and reexplaining if you take the time out to scaffold.

2. Integrate Language Skills With the Content

When planning your lessons think about the language skills that go with the content. You are teaching language functions alongside the content. For example, when teaching a history lesson you may want your students to also be able to talk and write about the lesson using the past tense. I would include a mini-lesson on what past tense is and why it is used. Have the students practice in a short activity. It could even become a language center in the classroom where students practice the language function you are currently focusing on.

3. Adjust Teacher Speech

A teacher can adjust his or her speech in various ways. Speed is a big factor. Think of when you go to a foreign country for vacation. It feels as if every native speaker is speaking at lightening speed. Now imagine going to school in that country. If you have beginner ESL students in the room, you need to be aware of how quickly you speak. Slower is better for beginner learners. They need the extra time to process and translate what is being said. Beginner speakers are still translating the new language into the native language in their head. Pauses are also important. **By pausing at certain points you are giving the student a chance to process the content of what you said.** Speak in chunks with planned pauses.

Repetition is also key. If a general education student needs to hear information multiple times to make it their own, imagine how often a new language learner needs to hear the information! Paraphrasing and restating is exactly what an English language learner needs from a teacher.

You also need to keep in mind how you structure your sentences. Compound sentences and contractions make the sentence difficult to understand for a language learner. Keep your sentences short and sweet and without

contractions. Negative sentences can also be hard to understand. Instead of stating what not to do, state what the student needs to do.

4. Language frames

I've heard people refer to these as sentence starters as well. If you were to ever look at a reading program specifically for ELLs, you would see a set of language frames for every lesson. These give the learners an explicit way to state something in relation to the lesson. This gives the student a prescribed way to express themselves. Don't think of this as giving the answer away. It allows the ELL to have a voice in the new language where they normally would not. **Theses frames give the student a structured technique for using the academic language you are looking for.** You can even scaffold the frames, use simple sentences for the beginner and compound sentences with harder vocabulary for the more advanced student. I often color code my language frames. I'll write them on sentence strips and put them in a pocket chart, or create a classroom anchor chart for the frames.

5. Pick and Choose

I keep this in mind for all my lessons. I can't give the student 20 new vocabulary words to memorize for every lesson. I also can't fight every battle when working with a student on his or her writing. Pick and choose the most important words for the lesson. And pick and choose what to work on with writing. Choose the aspect of the student's writing that is impeding understanding and work from there. You may choose to work on sentence structure one week and then tense the next. Don't do too much at once whatever you do; frustration will set in and the student won't learn. As a language teacher you need to lower the affective filter. The higher the filter, the harder it is for the student to learn. The more you criticize, the higher the filter goes.

6. Teach vocabulary strategies

You probably already do this with your general education students. Think of the strategies you teach when doing test preparation, such as vocabulary in context. This works best with intermediate and advanced level ESL students.

7. Use vocabulary routines

I use a few set routines when teaching vocabulary. It cuts down on transition times and the lessons actually begin to move faster throughout the year because the students know and understand exactly what is expected of them. I use 4-Corner Vocabulary and different types of Word Maps for learning new words. As a class we take polls using thumbs up-thumbs down when encountering a new word. The students also love to play vocabulary bingo and create word poems on new content words. It's up to you to create your own routines, but make sure you choose a few at the beginning of the year and stick with them. New language learners derive comfort from expected routines and vocabulary routines are already academically useful.

8. Language buddies

Your new student needs a buddy when they first get here. Preferably a student that speaks the same language as the new student. I know this isn't always possible, but this is optimal. When a bilingual student with the same language isn't available, think of the most compassionate student in your class. This language buddy should help the student stay on task. They should not be entirely responsible for the new student, as their own grades will suffer, but they should help them follow along, bring the correct books home, and stay on the correct page. When the language buddy fails, a bilingual dictionary is an excellent tool for the new student to use.

9. Visuals and Graphic Organizers

Pictures are immensely helpful for any language learner. Do an image search before your lesson and use the pictures to guide your lesson. Adding pictures to your word wall can be a huge help as well. I often end up drawing on the white board as I'm teaching. The students may laugh at my drawing ability, but they all use the pictures and find them helpful.

Graphic organizers are fabulous. They allow the language learner to organize their thoughts. Use these for absolutely anything. They're great for writing activities and for learning new vocabulary. I always keep some generic ones handy for when I'm in a pinch. My students even know how to make their own vocabulary organizers using paper and a pair of scissors. They learn my vocabulary routines and it makes everyone's life easier.

Whatever strategies you come up with and use for your new language learners, please be sensitive to their needs and their situation. **Also keep in mind that these students can learn and they are smart!** They come to us with a wealth of knowledge, they just can't express it yet.