Chapter Eighteen

Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners

KEY ISSUES

- ❧ Challenges twenty-first century teachers face in meeting the needs of English language learners

- ❧ Approaches to attaining and organizing background information to help meet the needs of ELLs

- ❧ Stages in second language acquisition

- ❧ ESL strategies to employ in the classroom

SCENARIO

On a bright sunny morning, the school secretary walked into Ms. Garcia's first grade class with a new student. She said: "This is Ika, Ms. Garcia. She's been assigned to your class. She doesn't speak any English. Her parents just arrived from Russia this week." "Welcome, Ika!" said Ms. Garcia, taking Ika by the hand and making a place for her on the floor next to herself. Ika became the eighth English language learner in Ms. Garica's class of 28. Unfortunately, none of the other ELLs speak Russian, though Ms. Garcia has four other languages represented in her class, and she speaks only English and Spanish.

Meeting the needs of a multilingual population is not an easy task for any teacher. Because diversity seems to be the norm rather than the exception in today's society, teachers are continuously challenged to find ways to be effective in their everyday teaching.

BEST PRACTICES FOR ELL INSTRUCTION

What have previous chapters in this textbook outlined and discussed as best practices for ELL instruction? The following have been stressed throughout the chapters:

- providing comprehensible input (using visuals, charts, graphs, etc.)
- providing a supportive environment
- providing dual language instruction
- respecting the stages of oral language development
- employing motherese/parentese/caregiver type language (simple language, slower speech when warranted, rephrasing, repeating, etc.)
- providing meaningful practice
- establishing a link between the home and the school
- providing opportunities for ELLs to engage in lessons by responding non-verbally
- providing instruction addressing varied cognitive styles

In addition to these practices listed, teachers must provide a meaningfully based context-rich and cognitively demanding curriculum. In the American Educational Research Association (2004) published piece on boosting academic achievement of ELLs in terms of literacy, the following critical components are provided: (1) explicit instruction in word recognition through phonological awareness, practice reading, phonics, and frequent in-class assessment and (2) explicit instruction in skills that are needed to comprehend the text, such as vocabulary building in context, strategies to aid comprehension, and academic oral language development.

One of the major understandings that practitioners and scholars have reached is that ELLs cannot be provided special assistance only in the English language. Other assistance such as bilingual education, richer and more sustained collaboration between content area teachers and English language specialists, specifically designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE), and/or sheltered English instruction must also be considered (Varghese, 2005). Other best practices found in the literature include:

- integrating language and content instruction
- developing lessons and units that foster concept development, practice, and application
- building background knowledge by providing concrete experiences
- ensuring that textbooks and trade books are at the students' instructional level

ↄ balanced literacy instruction
ↄ cooperative/interactive learning
ↄ providing a caring and trusting environment
ↄ addressing learning styles and multiple intelligences

(Violand-Sanchez, 2005)

Getting Set

In a review of the literature (Freeman & Freeman, 2007; Verplaetse & Migliacci, 2008; Lamar & Dixon, 2008) on characteristics and optimal conditions in schools and classrooms for ELLs, the following best practices are among the ones most commonly identified and discussed:

1. Know the students in the classrooms.
   ↄ Where are they from?
   ↄ What is their L1 language?
   ↄ How long have they been in the United States?
   ↄ How much prior schooling have they had?
   ↄ How have they performed during prior schooling?
2. Teach language and content.
   ↄ Students get both language and content.
   ↄ Language is kept in its natural context.
   ↄ Students have real purposes to use language.
   ↄ Students acquire academic vocabulary of the content areas.
3. Employ thematic instruction.
   ↄ Language is taught in meaningful contexts.
   ↄ More exposure to the "same" language for an extended period of time provides ample opportunities for language acquisition.
   ↄ Instruction is organized through "Big Question" themes.
   ↄ Integration of themes through other content subjects aids in building academic concepts and vocabulary more easily.
   ↄ Through themes, instruction can be connected to ELLs' lives and backgrounds.

4. Draw on ELLs' language and culture by previewing, viewing, and reviewing in the students' L1.
   ↄ The preview in L1 makes input more comprehensible and allows for students to connect this input with prior knowledge they may have on the particular subject/theme.
   ↄ Provide an oral summary by reading a book on the theme in the first language(s).
   ↄ Ask key questions and allow ELLs to work in same language groups to brainstorm what they know about the theme.
   ↄ Ensure the use of comprehensible input by employing all necessary techniques.
5. Emphasize meaningful reading.
   ↄ Instruction should focus on text level skills to engage ELLs in reading for comprehension.
   ↄ Effective instruction follows a sequence in which responsibility for reading gradually shifts from the teacher to the student.
   ↄ Employing varied teaching reading approaches, such as "read-alouds," shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading, which leads to more successful readers.
6. Maintain high expectations.
   ↄ Students will perform at higher levels when expectations are high and teachers project the attitude that "ELLs can achieve at higher levels."
   ↄ Provide scaffolding to aid in achievement of higher expectations.
   ↄ Employ real language plentifully; watering down the curriculum is ineffective and leads to lower achievement levels.
7. Demonstrate concepts and ideas.
   ↄ Use manipulatives and realia, role-play, and non-verbal gestures assisted by visuals to help in the clarification of concepts.
8. Emphasize critical information.
   ↄ Use bold letters, underlining, and high-lighting important facts and information to call attention to critical points.
   ↄ Use supplementary materials with pictures, charts, and graphs to assist in grasping main points of lessons.

- Allow and encourage ELLs to draw pictures of main ideas.

Other Ways to Provide for ELLs

The following are other ways to provide for ELLs:

- Engage students in many activity-oriented and hands-on experiences to provide concrete experiences that makes input much more comprehensible for English language learners.
- Emphasize small group work and teamwork to allow all students to contribute at their own levels. Small group activities also encourage ELLs to share in a less threatening environment. Teams/small groups must be balanced, taking into consideration ELL's English language development.
- Provide a "print rich" environment, but ensure that it is comprehensible to the students. Labeling everything in the classrooms is an excellent way to provide this "comprehensible input." Word lists (with pictures) of vocabulary/concepts are also helpful in providing a print rich environment.
- Set time aside to read to the students, making sure numerous pictures and objects are used to introduce and clarify new vocabulary/concepts. Big books, predictable books, and pattern books are particularly effective for ELLs.
- Welcome the richness of cultural diversity in the classroom. Using ELLs' places of origin as part of social studies units gives geography, for example, a new meaning. It is a golden opportunity for native speakers to learn about different parts of the world in a more meaningful way.
- Study the art, music, cuisine, and language(s) of the cultures represented in the classroom. Examining many cultures is a way to help students recognize and value similarities and differences among cultural groups.
- Read multicultural versions of the same fairy tale, which is a great way to learn about these cultures, as it helps students to realize the common elements as well as the differences.
- Use charts and graphs to help English language learners understand new concepts while acquiring the English language. Charts and graphs help

make the input comprehensible because they are less dependent on language.

Diversity in the classroom poses significant challenges to teachers nationwide. The traditional teacher role of imparting knowledge to a homogeneous group of students is a thing of the past. All teachers today are language teachers. The teaching of all subjects, whether social studies, science, or mathematics, is attached to the need to develop language before the students can acquire historical, scientific, and mathematical knowledge and concepts.

As mentioned in Chapter 17, English language learners progress through similar second language developmental stages, although they vary greatly in their acquisition of the new language. This places tremendous demands on teachers who teach ELLs. To meet these demands, teachers must develop a greater understanding of the complexity of second language acquisition and be cognizant of specific strategies needed to effectively meet the needs of English language learners.

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

There are four stages in oral language development:

1. **Silent, pre-production, or comprehension stage**
   a. This stage is similar to the period of time that infants (from birth to approximately nine or ten months) are listening and interacting with those around them in a non-verbal fashion.
   b. Pre-production is used to describe the phase similar to that of the period when infants do not yet produce language.
   c. Comprehension equates with the fact that infants and toddlers initially comprehend much more language than they are able to produce; comprehension precedes production.

2. **Early speech emergence**
   Language begins to emerge slowly; one-word sentences, then two-word sentences, and then simple grammatical structures are employed.

Speech emergence

Language continues to evolve; phrases and short sentences are employed.

4. **Intermediate fluency**

   More complex language is employed; the learner engages in discourse. The use of more complex sentences is evident.

There is a sequential order in which language develops: (1) listening, (2) speaking, (3) reading, and (4) writing. What implications does this theoretical knowledge have for classroom teachers in the twenty-first century?

Stages of Language Development and Teaching Strategies

1. Teachers will have students in their classrooms who are in the "silent period." Though these students are not speaking English yet, they are being exposed to the language constantly while at school. However, this language needs to be made "comprehensible" for them to begin to understand what is being said. There are a series of language modifications teachers can employ to make their input "comprehensible." The ESOL literature refers to these as "motherese" or "parentese" or caregiver speech because they are associated with what mothers or caregivers do when communicating with babies. These are:

   ℃ Use of simple language
   ℃ Use of gestures, facial expressions
   ℃ Slowing down
   ℃ Enunciating clearly
   ℃ Repeating
   ℃ Rephrasing

   In addition to the use of motherese/parentese, teachers must use visuals such as pictures, objects, realia, charts, and graphs to ensure that the input they are providing non-English speakers is comprehensible.

2. During the silent period, English language learners can be involved in lessons. Although they are not yet speaking, they can be involved in activities where they respond non-verbally, such as TPR (Total Physical Response). In this tech-nique, students respond non-verbally to commands given by the teacher. The use of pictures, objects, and realia are excellent ways to get students involved in this fashion. The teacher may ask students to sort pictures, arrange objects, or select specific pictures/objects to ascertain their comprehension of the lesson presented. For example, the teacher may ask students to select pictures of the famous monuments in Washington, D.C., described in the lesson, or to select pictures that show the House of Representatives and the Senate after studying U.S. government. In this way students can participate in lessons before they speak any English. This helps develop a positive self-concept because students feel successful when they are able to be involved in the lessons, though their oral language development is still very limited.

3. Using pictures, objects, and realia is also necessary when introducing new vocabulary in context, since there is much vocabulary students will need to acquire knowledge and concepts. Visuals help students attach meaning to what is being said. They make "input comprehensible" (Krashen, 1981). Another way of encouraging comprehensible input is by simplifying the language and language structures employed in instruction. Repeating key points in different contexts is very effective, as is rephrasing what has been said. Some teachers have a tendency to speak fast; slowing down is essential. These "sheltering" techniques are essential when teaching second language learners.

The following are effective strategies for involving students who are in the "early speech emergence stage":

℃ asking questions that require only a yes/no answer:
   Is this the Washington Monument?
   Is this the House of Representatives?

℃ asking either/or type questions:
   Is this the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Monument?
   Is this the House or the Senate?

asking short answer questions that can be answered with one or two words

As ELLs develop more language, teachers can continue to involve them in activities that require more complex language and language structures.

Meeting the needs of the students in today's classrooms requires teachers to modify their teaching strategies by incorporating second language acquisition techniques. Modifying the language employed to conduct lessons, using visuals, and involving students in lessons by allowing them to respond non-verbally while in the silent stage are effective strategies. By employing these strategies in their classrooms, teachers will begin to make a positive impact in meeting the needs of their diverse student population.

P O I N T S   T O   R E M E M B E R

✓ Background information teachers acquire about their students is necessary and helpful in providing for their needs.

✓ English language learners progress through similar second language developmental stages.

✓ There are four stages in oral language development: pre-production, early speech emergence, speech emergence, and intermediate fluency.

✓ Using visuals, modifying the language employed to teach lessons, and involving students by having them respond non-verbally in the initial stages of second language development are all excellent ways of meeting the needs of second language learners.

✓ Motherese/parentese strategies include: use of simple language, use of gestures and facial expression to convey meaning, slowing down, enunciating clearly, repeating, and rephrasing.

✓ There are numerous modifications teachers must make to provide the optimum learning environment for ELLs.