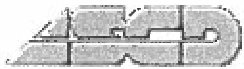
For the Success of Each Learner

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Teacher Skills to Support English Language Learners

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Each year, the United States becomes more ethnically and linguistically diverse. Schools mirror this trend: Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds represent the fastest-growing subset of the K–12 student population. In the 2003–2004 school year, 5.5 million school-age children were English language learners (Leos, 2004)—up nearly 100 percent from a decade earlier, although total enrollment increased only slightly more than 10 percent during that time (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2002).

Unfortunately, as a group, English language learners (ELLs) struggle in school. Compared with native English speakers, ELLs have higher dropout rates and demonstrate significant achievement gaps on state and national assessments (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1999). As they strive to meet high academic standards, ELLs face the added challenge of learning, comprehending, and applying the academic English through which teachers and textbooks deliver important information. Those who teach these students must take into consideration their special language acquisition needs.

Not All the Same

We do English language learners a disservice if we think of them as one-dimensional on the basis of their limited English proficiency. ELLs have diverse backgrounds, languages, and education profiles. Some read and write above grade level in their own language; others have had limited schooling. Some enter school highly motivated to learn because of family support or an innate drive to succeed; others have had negative school experiences that squelched their motivation. Many come from middle-class families with high levels of literacy; others live in poverty without books in their homes. Those whose native language is Latin-based can recognize English words with the same Latin derivations; those who have different language backgrounds, such as Mandarin or Arabic, lack that advantage. Some students' native language does not even have a written form.

Like native English speakers, English language learners have differing levels of cognitive ability. When ELLs struggle with schoolwork, however, teachers should be aware that the problem may be related to background knowledge rather than to intellectual ability. Ask a student from rural Vietnam to write a paragraph about growing rice, and she might have a great deal of

information to share from her personal experience; ask her to write about space exploration, and she may have no background knowledge to draw on.

All these factors affect the ease with which English language learners acquire English proficiency in the academic and conversational realms. Conversational fluency in a new language develops inside and outside the classroom, and students can attain it in one to three years (Collier & Thomas, 1989). The complex academic language that is crucial for school success, however, develops more slowly and systematically in academic settings (Cummins, 2000). The following portraits illustrate different levels of conversational and academic language proficiency that exist even among students of the same ethnic background.

> Salome attended school in Mexico through the 6th grade. When her family came to the United States the following year, she could read and write in Spanish at grade level, but she spoke no English. Well-liked by her peers, she eagerly uses the English words she acquires. Most important, she has an academic foundation on which to build additional learning.
>
> Mariano, Salome's older brother, quit school after the 4th grade to help his father on their ranch. He was 15 when his family arrived in the United States, and he has struggled academically. Although he has picked up conversational English fairly quickly, he lags far below grade level and has little background knowledge to draw on when his teachers talk about unfamiliar topics.
>
> Souka is in 2nd grade and lives with his family in a car. Before entering kindergarten, he did not have any preliteracy experiences, such as being read to, learning rhymes, or counting objects. In fact, his native language proficiency is limited. He often mixes Spanish and English while lacking fluency in either language, and he has made little academic progress in the last three years.

As you can see, although these students are all classified as English language learners, they differ considerably in their approach to academic tasks and in the level of success they experience in school.

High-Quality Instruction Makes a Difference

Another variable that affects English language learners' academic learning is the quality of instruction they receive. Although No Child Left Behind calls for highly qualified teachers in every core academic classroom by 2006, few states require that the teachers of core content areas have any background or training in second-language acquisition, English as a second language (ESL) methods, or cross-cultural communication.

Some fortunate English language learners have content-area teachers who understand their linguistic needs and provide rich, meaningful lessons that support their language growth. These teachers encourage ELLs to interact with their peers and discuss ideas and work on projects that help them understand the content covered in class. Other less fortunate ELLs have teachers who fail to differentiate for diverse ability levels or to make adaptations in response to students' limited English proficiency. These teachers may expect ELLs to complete paper-and-pencil tasks independently, to read textbooks without such supports as anticipation guides and pretaught vocabulary, and to listen to lectures without visual aids. In such classrooms, ELLs are often unsure of the tasks they are expected to perform, resulting in incomplete work and gaps in their learning.

Clearly, teachers need specific preparation in working with English language learners. They need to know who the students are and what their prior education experiences were like. Moreover, teachers need to know how to deliver *sheltered instruction*—to teach content to English language learners in strategic ways that make the concepts comprehensible while promoting the students' academic English language development.

Until recently, no explicit model for effectively delivering sheltered lessons existed, and researchers had conducted few empirical investigations measuring what constitutes an effective sheltered lesson (August & Hakuta, 1997). Many educators agree on the important sheltered instruction techniques that help students comprehend content—for example, slower speech, clear enunciation, use of visuals and demonstrations, targeted vocabulary development, connections to student experiences, and use of supplementary materials (Genesee, 1999). But implementing several of these strategies is not sufficient to ensure ELLs' academic success. Without systematic language development, many students never gain the academic literacy skills needed to succeed in mainstream classes, to meet content standards, and to pass standardized assessments.

The SIOP Model

As part of a seven-year research project,[1] we developed a model of sheltered instruction grounded in two decades of classroom-based research, the experiences of skillful teachers, and findings from the professional literature. We actively collaborated with practicing middle school teachers in refining the model as they implemented it in their classrooms.

The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Short & Echevarria, 1999) is a lesson-planning and delivery approach composed of 30 instructional strategies grouped into eight components: Preparation, Building Background, Comprehensible Input, Strategies, Interaction, Practice/Application, Lesson Delivery, and Review/Assessment. SIOP teachers use the regular core curriculum and modify their teaching to make the content understandable for ELLs while promoting these students' academic English language growth.

The SIOP Model is not a revolutionary approach to teaching language and content to ELLs. Many features embedded in the model are drawn from effective ESL methods developed during the last 20 years. However, the SIOP Model offers a framework for organizing instruction, with key features that promote the academic success of ELLs—for example, the inclusion of language objectives in every content lesson, the development of students' background knowledge, and the emphasis on academic literacy practice. Our research found that ELLs whose teachers were trained in implementing the SIOP Model performed significantly better on an academic writing assessment than did a comparison group of ELLs whose teachers had had no exposure to the model (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2003).

Promoting ELLs' Academic Literacy

Experience with the SIOP Model suggests that the following strategies can help teachers promote academic literacy among English language learners in all subject areas.

Identify the language demands of the content course. Content-area teachers should examine their curriculums from a language perspective. What aspects of English do students need to know and apply to succeed in the class? For example, does the course require students to write comparison/contrast or roblem/solution essays? Read a textbook and take notes? Give oral presentations using technical vocabulary? All these common classroom tasks require facility with academic language. By reflecting on the language demands of their courses, teachers can begin to support students in learning the features of academic English.

Plan language objectives for all lessons and make them explicit to students. Although most teachers address content objectives in their lessons, they rarely discuss language objectives—a crucial area for English language learners. Building from an understanding of the language demands of the curriculum, teachers can develop language objectives related to key vocabulary, reading or writing skills, listening or speaking tasks, or language structures. For example, teachers can help students learn to read and write in a specific content area by conducting prereading activities (such as previewing the text chapter by examining the section headings and illustrations) and prewriting activities (such as using sentence starters and graphic organizers to

record ideas on a topic).

Emphasize academic vocabulary development. Expanding ELLs' academic vocabulary knowledge requires moving beyond the highlighted words in a textbook to include words crucial to conceptual understanding of a topic—not only technical terms but also expressions like *in comparison* and *as a result*, which act like connective tissue in text. Students need multiple opportunities to practice using these words orally and in print. Reading glossary definitions is not sufficient. Strategies such as word walls, semantic webs, and structural analysis can help students organize the new words in meaningful ways. Other vocabulary techniques include demonstrations, illustrations, art projects, and letting students select specific vocabulary words to study.

Activate and strengthen background knowledge. As we mentioned previously, many English language learners struggle with curriculum content because they lack background knowledge of the topic or have gaps in the information they have learned. Teachers must either activate what prior knowledge exists and apply it to lessons or explicitly build background knowledge for these students. For example, immigrant students may not have studied the U.S. Civil War in their native countries, but they may have studied another war or even experienced a military conflict firsthand. By tapping into what students know about such conflict, the teacher can set the context for a lesson on the U.S. Civil War.

Promote oral interaction and extended academic talk. Oral language development can help English language learners acquire literacy skills and access new information. Because much classroom instruction involves discussion, teachers need to encourage ELLs to join in academic talk during class. Teachers should talk less and engage students in extended discussions so that ELLs give more than one-word responses. After a student response, teachers might say, "Tell me more about that" or "Why do you think so?" rather than, "Good. The next question is. . . ."

By establishing discussion routines (for example, asking students to paraphrase one another), teachers provide structures for discussions and teach students to be active listeners. By writing key terms or phrases on the board, teachers give students a resource to use in their own speech. By encouraging ELLs to share their thoughts with a partner before reporting to the whole class, teachers promote both the students' language learning and their confidence in speaking out.

Review vocabulary and content concepts. English language learners regularly sit through a 45-minute class period with most of the content provided through a new language. Focusing on instruction delivered through an unfamiliar language all day long is mentally exhausting, and students may find it difficult to identify the most important information among all the ideas conveyed. Teachers should therefore schedule time for review at the end of each lesson, pointing out the key concepts and associated academic vocabulary and making connections to the lesson objectives and state standards. These strategies will help ELLs know what they should study.

Give students feedback on language use in class. Content-area teachers are usually skillful in giving feedback to students on their content comprehension but less experienced in giving feedback on the students' language abilities. However, these teachers are in an excellent position to tell students how scientists talk about experimental findings or how historians report on past events. We do not expect content teachers to become linguistic experts, but they can talk explicitly with students about word choice, ways to compare information, and techniques for explaining solutions. Calling attention to language use in content lessons will be valuable to ELLs as they work to develop academic language proficiency.

School Success for ELLs

Many English language learners receive instruction from content-area teachers who have not had sufficient training in second-language acquisition to address the students' language development needs or to make content instruction comprehensible to them. Improving ELLs'

academic performance requires implementing high-quality, consistent, sheltered instruction steered by research. Our research has shown that with appropriate training, teachers can help English language learners master academic content and develop academic literacy skills that lead to school success.

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Endnote

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