Instruction for English Language Learners

By
Dr. Jana Echevarria
Professor, Educational Psychology
California State University, Long Beach

Instruction for English Language Learners

Across the United States, the number of English learners in our schools has risen dramatically, representing the fastest-growing segment of the student population (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2005). Given these trends, our challenge as educators is to provide English learners with the type of instruction that will lead them to become educated, productive citizens.

Many students today struggle to meet high academic standards, but ELLs have the added complexity of having to learn and use high-level academic English as they study challenging content in a new language. Effective teachers of English learners take into consideration the unique second-language-acquisition needs of these students and deliver lessons that are appropriate for them. In order to tailor instruction appropriately, however, teachers need to recognize that not all English language learners have the same background, language, or educational profile.

Diversity Among English Language Learners

English language learners are considered diverse because they represent different cultures; however, even among English language learners, there is much diversity. Some have limited educational experiences, while others read and write at grade level in their own language. Many ELLs come from middle-class families with high levels of literacy; others live in poverty without books in their homes. Another way ELLs differ from one another is in their level of first-language development. Conversational fluency develops inside and outside of the classroom and can be attained in one to three years (Thomas & Collier, 2002). However, the language that is critical for educational success—academic language (Cummins, 2000)—is more complex and is developed more slowly and systematically in academic settings. Many ELLs have solid conversational skills in English but lack proficiency in academic English.

English language learners require instruction that focuses on developing academic English and is differentiated to meet their academic
and linguistic needs. While ELLs can and should be expected to participate in grade-level, standards-based instruction, they must also have the concepts, skills, and information presented in a way that is consistent with their level of academic background and English proficiency level. Particularly in their first years of schooling, ELLs can’t be expected to perform like native English speakers. The same content can be taught, ensuring that students are making appropriate academic progress, but the presentation of the concepts and skills, the complexity of the language in the reading passage, the type of tasks expected to be completed, and the difficulty of the assignments will vary.

**Best Practices**

Best practices for English learners involve a number of strategies and techniques that make content comprehensible and provide opportunities for practice using academic English (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Echevarria & Graves, 2007). These strategies include the following:

**Using supplementary materials to make the lesson clear and meaningful**

These materials include graphs, leveled readers, Web sites, models, vocabulary cards, and visuals. Supplementary materials bring content information to life through their application and extension of the written word. These materials also provide opportunities for practicing academic English.

**Opportunities for interaction**

English language learners benefit from opportunities to discuss, debate, and explain concepts, ideas, and information using academic English. Oral language development has a direct impact on reading (August & Shanahan, 2006) so lessons should include time for interaction. Whole-group instruction may be best suited for introducing a lesson or unit, for teaching a specific skill, and for modeling. Working in pairs allows students to interact by using academic English in a nonthreatening situation. Small groups may be used to practice and reinforce skills and concepts at the students’ level of proficiency. Another purpose for interaction is to encourage students to use elaborated responses about the lesson’s concepts, moving beyond yes/no and single-word comments (Goldenberg, 1992–93).

**Explicitly linking content concepts to students’ background experiences**

Students come to school with a wealth of experiences, sometimes culturally specific experiences. These funds of knowledge provide teachers with opportunities to make important links between the topic and students’ own experiences (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992).

**Using a variety of techniques to make the content concepts clear**

These techniques include modeling, speaking at a rate commensurate with students’ English proficiency, using visuals, and using gestures—anything that supports and assists students’ understanding of the lesson’s language and concepts.

For English language learners, a “one size fits all” approach will not offer the learning opportunities they need to make adequate academic progress and meet high academic standards. These students face the demands of learning both content and English simultaneously. Linguistically appropriate, high-quality instruction for English language learners must be a priority in our schools.

---

**Biography**

Jana Echevarria is a Professor of Education at California State University, Long Beach. Her professional experience includes elementary and secondary teaching in general education, special education, English as a Second Language, and bilingual programs. She has lived in Taiwan and Mexico where she taught ESL and second language acquisition courses at the university level, as well as in Spain where she conducted research on instructional programs for immigrant students. Her UCLA doctorate earned her an award from the National Association for Bilingual Education’s for Outstanding Dissertations.
Competition. Her research and publications focus on effective instruction for English learners, including those with learning disabilities. She is an internationally known expert on English learners and is a Fulbright Specialist. She has written numerous journal articles and book chapters, has written and produced several videotapes and has co-authored eight books, including Sheltered Content Instruction: Teaching Students with Diverse Abilities, and Making Content Comprehensible for English Language Learners: The SIOP Model. The SIOP Model of instruction is currently used in all 50 states and numerous countries. Currently, she is Co-Principal Investigator with the Center for Research on the Educational Achievement and Teaching of English Language Learners (CREATE) funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES). In 2005, Dr. Echevarria was selected as Outstanding Professor at CSULB.

References


