

# Helping English Language Learners Understand Content Area Texts

English language learners (ELLs) experience intense problems in content area learning because they have not yet acquired the language proficiency needed to succeed in understanding subject-matter content. Because the language of academic subjects (such as social studies, science, math) requires a high degree of reading and writing ability that English language learners do not have, they experience immense difficulties reading their textbooks and understanding the vocabulary unique to particular subjects. This article reviews practical strategies that content area teachers can use to support English language learners in their classrooms.

## Teacher Preparation



- Survey the text for difficulty keeping in mind the levels of English language learners in your classroom; determine your standard or objective; select the concepts to teach; eliminate unnecessary information that will be too difficult for ELL students of low English proficiency; choose key specific vocabulary to pre-teach; develop assessments to test that content.
- Identify vocabulary words that you think might be difficult for English language learners to understand when they read the text. Write ELL-friendly definitions for each - that is, simple, brief definitions ELL students can easily understand.
- Determine which visuals, artifacts, gestures, etc. you will need to make the meaning of the words clear to the ELL students. Visuals are powerful tools for comprehension instruction because they offer concrete, memorable representations of abstract content.
- Use highly illustrated books of various levels of difficulty teaching your content.
- Plan a series of questions and interactions that will help you involve your students and determine their levels of understanding of the words.

## **Building Background Knowledge**



Before reading a selection aloud or before students read a text, try taking seven to ten minutes to build word and background knowledge. This will increase all students' comprehension of the text.

English language learners have great difficulty jumping into new texts without any background support. Students should know at least something about the topic before reading. Some topics may be unfamiliar to students (e.g. recycling or fundraising) if they have never done that before. Pictures, drawings, or short skits can help develop relevant background information. On the other hand, if a teacher is talking about the Civil War, perhaps some ELL students have experienced something similar in their home country, and might be able to understand those concepts better if they understand how it connects to the text.

Students need to know essential vocabulary in order to comprehend the text. Therefore, it is important to use several strategies to build the background that leads to better reading comprehension for ELL students. It can be beneficial to review many words we often take for granted - not only for the benefit of ELL students, but also for students who may not come to school with a rich vocabulary background or exposure to certain experiences. For example, the concepts of democracy may be difficult for all young children to understand at first. Think of examples to which your students can relate.

- Create interest in the subject by using pictures, real objects, maps, or personal experiences. Repeat vocabulary words as often as you can so that ELL students can remember them.
- Relate material to students' lives whenever possible.
- Build text-specific knowledge by providing students with information from the text beforehand, particularly if the text is conceptually difficult or has an abundance of important information. For example, if there are six main topics on the animal kingdom, highlight/discuss them beforehand.
- Explain difficult concepts and label them with key words ELL students can remember. Repeat the word several times in different sentences. For example, "This is the Statue of Liberty. *Liberty* means freedom. The people of France gave us the Statue of *Liberty*..."
- Establish the purpose for reading (i.e. "Today we are going to read to find out: what are the examples of freedom/liberty in our country.").

## **Pre-teaching Vocabulary and Concepts**



Before doing an activity, teaching content, or reading a story in class, pre-teaching vocabulary is always helpful, especially for English language learners. This will allow them to identify words and then to place them in context and remember them. You can pre-teach vocabulary by:

- Role playing or “acting it out”
- Showing real objects
- Doing quick drawings on the board
- Using gestures
- Pointing to pictures
- Doing demonstrations

- Introduce the vocabulary and model its use. Dig deeper into vocabulary! Use every trick you can find to help explain its meaning to the ELL students. Give several examples for each term. Teach words in context – this is much more effective than isolated memorization.
- Ask students to give you their examples of how the word can be used.
- Choose different strategies to teach each word. Use different ways of engaging the students to listen for new words and produce each word in context. Remember: ELL students need 8-20 encounters with the new word to remember it!
- Use hands-on activities and demonstrations to teach academic vocabulary. For example, if the students are learning about a cell, the teacher could introduce academic vocabulary while creating a cell model from Play-Doh with students. The students could work in groups to make their own cell, use the academic vocabulary while doing the activity, present afterwards to the teacher or class, or write a report.
- Post new vocabulary on a word wall, and review the words daily. Swap out old words as necessary.

## **Pre-reading Strategies to Increase Comprehension**



- Explain specific terms of your classroom's interaction to English language learners. Make sure they know instructional words used every day, such as "follow directions", "describe", "start at the top of the page", "read to the bottom of page 4", "highlight the verbs only", "use the steps in your guide", etc.
- Teachers may expect students to understand terms like "caption", "excerpt", "index", "passage", "glossary", "preface", "quotation", "section", "selection", etc., but these terms are unknown to many English language learners. Before working with the text, ELL students need to be explicitly taught all these terms in order to participate in classroom learning activities.
- Explicitly teach and model all learning strategies for ELL students in your classroom. What do we mean when we say "analyze"? How do we do that? What is the language needed to participate in this learning activity? Model the strategy, walk ELL students through the process. Once ELL students have started to develop proficiency in those behaviors, they can concentrate more on the content academic language.
- Review the main concepts from the text you want to teach. Decide how you might best make these concepts relevant and accessible to all of your students including English language learners. This might be through:
  - Film on a related topic
  - Experiment
  - Show and Tell
  - Graphic organizers
  - Discussion
  - Field trip
  - Student reading assignment
  - Text read by the teacher

## **Introducing the Text**



- Use visuals related to the content (real objects, charts, posters, graphic organizers). Before reading, discuss illustrations, charts, graphs found in the text.
- While discussing the text, make the text visible to all students (use an overhead projector); point to the parts of the text, to the sentences and words you are discussing.
- Model thinking aloud about what you are reading, and strategies for figuring out difficult words.
- Model how to summarize what has been read.
- Give ELL students a reason for reading. Before asking the students to read the text, make students aware of what they should look for. If the goal is for them to identify cause and effect, point out several examples of this beforehand. If they are supposed to scan the text and find information filling out the graphic organizer, teach them how to scan. If ELL students don't have the clarity of what they are supposed to do they will end up translating the text word by word and will be able to read only one paragraph instead of scanning ten paragraphs for important information.
- Graphic organizers can be used at all grade levels and at all English proficiency levels. Graphic organizers provide a visual for the kinds of abstract thinking that students are doing when they organize text to understand it. Because of their limited English proficiency, English language learners will not be able to absorb the entire amount of content knowledge that their native English-speaking peers are able to absorb. They need to learn essential concepts and vocabulary of the lesson. Using graphic organizers with ELL students is a way to separate large amounts of content information into manageable pieces of essential information for ELL students.

## **Reading the Text**



- Assign reading partners: pair English language learners with fluent readers. After partner reading, ask them to summarize and discuss what they read and learned.
- Instruct the group/pair to create a graphic organizer while studying. Graphic organizers (thinking maps, sequencing information, categorizing information) can be used as a pre-teaching or post-teaching strategy for introducing or reinforcing key concepts and how they are related. The more connections English language learners make to the organization of the content before reading, the easier it will be for them to understand and focus on what is important. When teachers and/or students use graphic organizers at the end of a lesson, this helps to reinforce and bring greater meaning and understanding to what they have read.
- Develop study guides to guide ELL students through their content area textbook reading by focusing their attention on the major ideas presented. Study guides can include graphic organizers, key vocabulary, and guiding questions.
- In cooperative groups, after silent reading of every paragraph/passage of the text let the groups summarize the gist of the paragraph/passage in one sentence they all agree on and write it down – students will end up with the summary of the difficult text.
- Have bilingual dictionaries for all native languages available to students. Teach students how to use dictionaries.
- While students are working in groups, pairs, and individually, circulate around the room. Provide scaffolding by asking appropriate questions that help students proceed with the task. Model the use of academic language for ELL students and show students concrete examples of how it should be used.
- Keep asking clarifying questions to check understanding. Adjust the format of questions to the English proficiency levels of ELL students. Reword/explain difficult content in different ways, making sure to incorporate non-verbal contextual clues. Instructional conversations are critical to ELL students' learning!
- Encourage students to talk about the text and to use the lesson's vocabulary by giving them appropriate assignments adjusted to the students' levels of English proficiency.

## **Speaking: Production of Oral Academic English**



It is very important for English language learners to talk and think out loud while they are learning from the text. Encourage ELL students to speak in class as much as possible in order to actively practice academic vocabulary. In this way, ELL students will learn and remember the academic English and content area vocabulary they need to succeed. Remember to be sensitive to ELL students who may be afraid to make mistakes.

- Scaffold students' speaking by asking questions appropriate for their level of English proficiency, giving them sentence starters, prompting responses and asking them to say the word/phrase again in different situations.
- Elicit more language. In order to learn academic language, English language learners need to practice content language all the time. Ask them to retell in a group what they read and learned. Ask ELL students to provide more elaborate responses and add more details by saying: "Tell me all you can about...", "Tell me more about..."
- Scaffold their speaking by asking leading questions. Instead of simple "yes or no" questions, ask questions that are interactive and meaningful. For example, "What do you think? What should we change?"
- In cooperative groups, let them prepare questions, conduct interviews and report back.
- Give students the script of an activity and ask them to take turns giving directions to the other members of their cooperative group.
- Use group problem-based and project-based learning strategies (using English for brainstorming, discussing, and presenting). Model solving the problem, then let the groups do that. Let the group work on a project giving appropriate assignments to ELL students.
- Model correct usage of the language. Instead of frequently correcting pronunciation or grammar, reaffirm the student's idea and then restate using correct grammar and in context.

## **Writing: Production of Written Academic English**

Writing is another way for ELL students to demonstrate and extend their understanding of a text and its contents.

- Use modeled writing, guided writing, shared writing, and partner work before assigning independent writing.
- Show a sample of what is expected.
- Relieve ELL students of the “blank page” syndrome – model the task to be done, support, and give students ideas, examples. Provide structure for their writing piece: sentence starters, fill-in the blank exercises, sentence strips, etc.
- Give cooperative learning teams questions to answer together.
- Ask teams to compose questions about the content and use those questions on the test.
- Give students a graphic organizer to complete. Graphic organizers can become prewriting activities that help ELL students organize the information and their thoughts before they write. This will also demonstrate that they understood the concepts and content, even if they only use a symbol or write one or two words for each category.
- Ask students to practice writing short simple summaries of what they read.
- Don't grade the ELL students' work down for grammar and spelling mistakes. Concentrate on the content!



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