

## English Language Learners: Classroom Practices that Really Work

Gina Estrada Danley

You are standing inside the Sistine Chapel, your neck stretched, reaching toward the sky, eyes gazing up at the grand scene painted nearly five hundred years ago. Awe - complete awe. You catch yourself holding your breath at the mere beauty surrounding you. Could you even gather the words to describe the emotions and feelings you have? How would you express the intense wonder before your eyes? Those who have experienced this say that mere words cannot capture their feelings and they are left speechless. Imagine having these intense emotions, feelings that you cannot describe, an experience you desperately want to share, yet no words to draw upon to explain and express them. This is the experience of the English Language Learner . . . every day.

So many products, programs, models of teaching, etc., have the ELL stamp these days, guaranteeing positive results for working with English Language Learners. An educator could spend hundreds of dollars on the latest and greatest out there to help advance the educational experience of the ELL. Some even claim to have packaged the research-based, best of the best for working with ELLs. Despite what products and models you have at your fingertips, there are numerous actions a teacher can take, as well as strategies and techniques to include that work effectively with ELLs, and none of them cost a dime.

### Actions a Teacher Can Take

**Invest** in learning about the English language learning level of each ELL in your classroom. Educators need to meet students where the students are. According to Cummins (1981), contrary to what we might assume, students who express themselves easily in conversation do not necessarily possess the same facility in academic contexts. Don't be fooled by language used on the surface. Currently in California we have access to CELDT scores for ELLs. A new resource from the Sacramento County Office of Education, the "Helping English Learners Progress" (hELp) website (<http://www.scoecurriculum.net/help>) is designed to support educators working with English Learners (ELs) in two ways. Educators can create customized, comprehensive CELDT Student Profiles for individual students, and from there they can find grade level resources and ideas to help implement differentiated instructional practices with English learners at all ELD levels. This resource also includes some examples of the kinds of expectations and ELD Practices reflected in the 2012 ELD Standards.

**Incorporate** the culture(s) of your students into your classroom. Invite your students and their families to share about their culture. Weave this teaching in with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for reading, writing, and speaking and listening. Include different cultures in the options you give students for projects, research, and independent study.

Read literature that highlights the cultures of your students and allow them to select informational texts that teach about their cultural background. In doing this, you are honoring the culture of your students and their families and encouraging them to learn about their own history. According to Nieto and Bode, “The culture and language children bring to school are often disregarded and displaced, and this situation can have dire consequences. In the words of Geneva Gay, ‘Decontextualizing teaching and learning from the ethnicities and cultures of students minimizes the changes (chances?) that their achievement potential will ever be fully realized.’ A teacher’s best intentions may be ineffective if students’ cultural differences are neglected in curriculum and instruction . . .” (Smutny, 2012).

**Honor** and insist upon the continued development of a student’s primary language. Encourage the use of the primary language in certain and appropriate contexts. Try never to suppress the use of the student’s primary language except when the goal is to learn English. Delpit (2002) asserts, “Since language is one of the most intimate expressions of identity, indeed, ‘the skin that we speak,’ then to reject a person’s language can only feel as if we are rejecting him.” The California ELA/ELD Framework states that this message—conscious or unconscious—is unacceptable and contrary to California’s goals for its children and youth.

**Familiarize** yourself with the families of your students. Luis Moll (2005) refers to the families of students as “funds of knowledge.” Families of ELL students can provide a wealth of information that can be useful as you strive to educate the child. While parents may not have mastery, or even knowledge of the English language, they can still provide alternative learning experiences for a classroom of students. In *Discovering and Developing Talents in Spanish-Speaking Students* (2012), the authors outline numerous helpful reasons why it is important to gather this knowledge and provide suggestions for what to do with this knowledge. For example, “If we know that children do not have books at home, provide some or have them go to their local library to borrow them.” And, “If parents cannot attend meetings during the day, plan for them in the evening.”

**Utilize** your students’ primary language knowledge. The level and depth of education in the primary language can have profound effects on an ELLs experience learning a second language. According to Stephen Krashen, “Your children will learn English more effectively if they continue to develop their first language at the same time.” We want our students to maintain their cultural identity and practice and use of their primary language is one of the keys to sustaining this connection.

**Model** and include Think-Alouds whenever possible. Oftentimes students just need to observe a strong model or hear a strong reader think aloud. When the teacher opens up his or her academic thoughts and makes them accessible to the students, they learn how to think and process.

**Create** an open learning environment in the classroom and on the larger school campus. Students need to feel comfortable; they need to feel at ease moving about their classrooms; they need to see and feel a connection to their surrounding educational environment. There needs to be an inviting structure for students to engage in routines for moving about in order to converse with classmates and for students to sit in cooperative, fluid, and flexible group arrangements. An open learning environment will lead to motivated students who want to learn and be engaged in school.

**Invite** your ELLs' parents to take an active role in their child's education. This requires more than just extending an invitation though. When the ELLs' parents are not actively involved in learning English as a second language themselves, this task is even more complicated. Educators need to take the responsibility of showing the parents of ELLs just how they can be involved. Many educators presume that these parents don't want to be involved, when on the contrary, they do, they just don't know how. Create and provide opportunities for the parents of ELLs to actively take on roles in the classroom or outside of the classroom in which they are still providing support. Consistently provide communication in the parents' primary language. Respect the fact that they may not know English or have any means for learning the language. Reach out to your district's and/or county office's community liaisons and/or translators for assistance with this.

### **Strategies and Techniques to Include**

According to the ELA/ELD Framework, educators must learn about and embrace **culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy**. For example, educators should "create a welcoming classroom environment that exudes respect for cultural and linguistic diversity." The ELA/ELD Framework also highlights 8 values for working with English Language Learners. Figure 1.2 of the Introduction outlines these key steps for working with ELLs in the classroom. They range from providing appropriate scaffolding to evaluating progress appropriately.

According to the Common Core State Standards, "It is also beyond the scope of the Standards to define the full range of supports appropriate for English language learners and for students with special needs. It is pertinent that educators maintain **high expectations** for ALL students. All students must have the opportunity to learn and meet the same high standards if they are to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary in their post-high school lives." This is a lofty goal, especially knowing how many students enter California public schools with a language other than English as their primary language.

Educators would be wise to include **graphic representations**, i.e., maps, drawings, pictures, charts, flash cards, etc., in their teaching practice whenever possible. Categorizing requires higher level thinking skills; by providing the graphics as the scaffolding technique, ELLs can gain access to this challenging skill. Each of these graphic representations can bring more meaning to the learning for ELLs, even of abstract concepts. The use of manipulatives and the inclusion of more hands-on experiences will further the learning as well. Providing personal dictionaries and classroom word walls will provide ELLs immediately with the terms they will need to use in order to communicate effectively.

Posting **sentence frames** for everyday language interactions and for academically rich conversations is a strong tool for helping ELLs communicate with others. Teachers would also be wise to use **cognates** in order to help ELLs whose primary language is Spanish. These are words that sound the same, or very similar, in both languages. Lists of Spanish-English cognates are readily available on the internet, along with false cognates to watch out for.

Begin each lesson by **sharing the objective** (what students will be able to learn and/or do) and the **purpose** (why students are learning this). When students are aware of where the learning will take them they are free to work toward achieving those goals. They do not need to wonder about why they are learning this or what they will do with this new knowledge. Possible confusion over goals will dissipate. The objective should be embedded in the CCSS for English Language Arts, Literacy for Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects, and/or in the CCSS for English Language Development.

Teach students how to **self-assess**. The learning experience becomes that much deeper and more meaningful when the learner assesses his own learning. Make it evident how you assess and score or grade assignments. Share rubrics with the students. Create rubrics together; the website Rubistar is a very user-friendly site that incorporates many types of assignments. Ask students what elements of assignments should carry more weight than others. Always refer back to the lesson objective and purpose. Involving students in self-assessment can be very powerful.

Offer alternative ways of proving mastery. **Choice**, in and of itself, often motivates students to perform. When alternative performance opportunities are offered, through music, art, poetry, photography, drama, etc., the emphasis on language mastery alone is lessened. This could be just what certain ELLs need - less emphasis on English mastery and a stronger emphasis on personal expression of mastery.

Provide **guided, productive, collaborative conversations**. According to Vanessa Gerard, "Only 4 percent of an English language learner's day is spent on oral engagement. Only 2 percent of that language is spent on engaging in 'academic' talk." If students are to learn to

speak, think, write, read, imagine and dream in a second language, they must practice using it. Engaging students in collaborative conversations, providing them with sentence frames and modeling the ways in which you want them to converse are all strong strategies for any classroom. Just begin by giving them time to talk.

**Grouping** for instructional purposes should be considered at length. Heterogeneous grouping should be maintained throughout most of the day, while preserving homogeneous grouping for English Language Development “Designated” time. ELLs need time to listen to their peers who use proficient English when they speak, yet they need a separate, designated time, to work with others like them in developing their English language skills.

### **Benefits for ALL Students**

While many of these tried and true actions and strategies are normally called out for working with English Language Learners specifically, they will work well for ALL students. Educators must maintain high expectations for ALL students. The educational frontier we face now with CCSS, the new testing systems, and the calling for more integrated technology and 21st Century Skills, requires ALL students to perform at a higher level, with stronger demand, and more intense rigor. Preparing students for college and careers is challenging and it’s unprecedented as a primary intentional goal. It just makes sense though. By taking particular actions in the classroom and by incorporating certain strategies, educators can bring English Language Learners to a level playing field with their classmates. Yes, it will take more work. Yes, it will require more intensity. Yes, it will mean more scaffolding. Yes, it is possible!

*Gina Estrada Danley is a Teacher on Special Assignment in the Santa Maria-Bonita School District. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Speech Communication and a Master of Arts in Reading and Literacy from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Gina works with the Gifted and Talented Program in her district and she provides professional development in the area of ELA/ELD and Literacy of the Common Core State Standards. She is one of four authors of Discovering and Developing Talents in Spanish-Speaking Students (2012). She is the Educator Representative for the California Association for the Gifted and co-president of the Tri-County GATE Council.*

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