



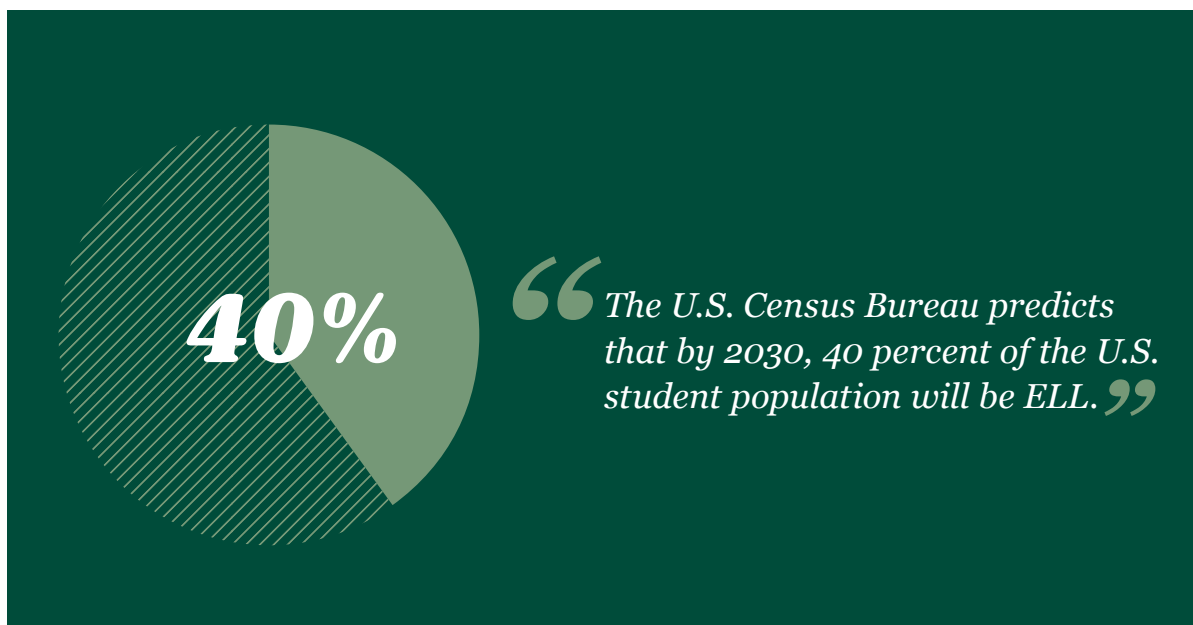
RESEARCH IN FOCUS:

Increasing Academic Performance for

English Language Learners (ELLs)

INTRODUCTION

Meeting a wide variety of students' needs has always posed a challenge for teachers, but effectively teaching English-language learners (ELLs) has recently risen to the forefront of classroom issues. ELLs can be (and hopefully are) enrolled in their schools' ELL programs, such as English as a Second Language, High Intensity Language Training, or Bilingual Education; but all teachers—not just those involved in these programs—need to be trained in how to teach their ELL students in order to help them reach full potentials. According to a National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) 2015 report, the number of ELL students had increased by approximately 300,000 in 8 years, totaling an estimated 4.4 million students in 2012-2013. In fact, a recent study found that the ELL student population has doubled in 23 states from 1995 to 2005 (Payán & Nettles, 2008). However, many teachers report that they have not received adequate training to work effectively with ELL students (Reeves, 2006).



CHALLENGES FACING ELLs

According to Bos and colleagues (2012), ELL students experience greater difficulty in completing high school because of their teachers' limited understanding of how second languages are learned, teaching practices that are designed for students with full English proficiency, and negative attitudes toward ELL students. Additionally, ELL students—particularly immigrants—generally lack access to college information and college preparatory coursework (Rodriguez & Cruz 2009).

BRIEF SUMMARY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Language acquisition is no exact science. Individual progress is specific to each student, and the language acquisition process frequently involves non-linear, fluid movement from phase to phase. Berg, Patron, and Greyback (2012) break classroom language acquisition down into the five stages below, modeling the ideal quality of teacher-student interaction for each stage.

Silent/Receptive/Pre-productive: In this stage, ELLs are taking in language input, constructing oral comprehension skills and the ability to infer meaning from context clues. Attempts to communicate are likely to be nonverbal or limited to one-word responses such as “yes” or “no.” Students at this stage should not be pressured to speak until they are capable of doing so on their own.

Early Production: Students in this stage are working on using short phrases to communicate verbally, and students are developing the ability to attach meaning from words directed at them. At this stage, any student utterances (e.g., “I go school”) produced should be reinforced and celebrated, rather than corrected.

Speech Emergence: : At this level, students begin communicating in simple sentences. That is, they ask simple conversational questions that may or may not be grammatically correct and participate in short conversations. Students' attempts to communicate should be received warmly and encouraged. It is very important that neither teacher nor student make fun of or discourage attempts at speech. Corrections should be done by recasting phrases in response, rather than direct correction. For example, if the ELL student says “I go to school yesterday,” the teacher could respond with, “I went to school yesterday, too.”

Intermediate Fluency: In this stage, ELLs are using more complex sentences in both their speech and writing. They are beginning to think in English, rather than translating from their native language, and can express opinion and share original thoughts. They have the ability to ask clarifying questions, especially regarding academic tasks, but keep in mind that at this stage, the student's writing skills may be more limited than their oral language skills. Teachers should be careful with students in this stage, as it is common for teachers to assume ELLs are fluent in English because of their ability to carry on a conversation, but this is not yet true.

Advanced Fluency: Students in this stage of language acquisition tend to shift focus to reading, writing, and building academic language. The students begin to engage in spontaneous conversation and are able to produce oral and written narratives. At this stage, students are near-native in their second-language ability, although there still may be some discrepancies, especially with idiomatic uses of the language.

INTERVENTION

While ELL students may be well below their grade level in English proficiency, their cognitive abilities in their native language is likely high—especially in secondary-level classrooms. What this means for educators is that they must not make the mistake of equating English proficiency with cognitive ability; doing so will set lower expectations for ELL students and stunt their academic growth. Devising ways to engage ELL students in higher-order thinking despite the language barrier is the best method for preventing this tendency, and to do so, Berg and colleagues (2012) recommend these eight strategies:

Understand Student's Academic Background

Previous schooling in the student's native language can greatly influence the way they learn in their second language, and by understanding this, teachers can more effectively adapt current schooling for ELLs.

Make Instruction Meaningful

Making real-life connections can allow ELL students to make cultural and linguistic connections they may not otherwise be able to make, due to their language barriers. Using non-fiction texts about familiar topics is helpful with the challenge of learning new vocabulary, especially words whose meanings change slightly depending on context.

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Make Instruction Culturally Responsive

Making written materials reflect the culture of the ELLs as much as possible allows instruction to be meaningful and relevant while also reflecting their cultural values. Educators need to be aware of the unspoken cultural norms of the American classroom and how they may differ from their ELL students' backgrounds (e.g., copying from text or teacher's notes may be encouraged in some cultures).

Foster Peer Interaction

Educators should foster peer interactions in ways that will avoid ELLs' embarrassment or withdrawal. Cooperative grouping is one potential way to do this, as it allows everyone to participate without singling out any one individual. Pairing ELL students with those who also speak their native language, bilingual students, or monolingual English students can all be used advantageously in their own ways to increase peer interactions.

Teacher's Language Use

Teacher's language use is another important factor in working with ELLs. Given ELL students' less-developed language skills, teachers may need to adapt how they speak, perhaps by slowing down or pausing longer at natural breaks. Teachers should also strive to supplement oral language with written language, limiting the use of idioms, and by using cognates (words that sound and appear similar and have similar meanings in more than one language) as references.

Make Written Materials Comprehensible

Oftentimes, grade-level textbooks can be difficult for ELL students to navigate, so going over the textbooks in addition to providing appropriate supplementary materials can be very useful to the student. Another strategy is to first provide readings in the student's native language, allowing them to preview the unit and giving them a foundation from which to learn the material.

Classroom Assessment

When assessing ELL students, educators should be wary of using essays unless the ELL is at an advanced English proficiency level or the essay question can be completed with visuals or graphics. Other potentially beneficial modifications to assessments are using clear language and multiple choices, reducing the number of choices in multiple-choice assessments, and including completion statements. Sometimes, adapting test rules, such as making shorter tests or allowing a bilingual dictionary, may be in order.

Focus On Content Not Form

Constantly correcting all grammatical errors on ELLs' written assignments can be overwhelming for both student and teacher, and it is nearly impossible for a student to remember all of the corrections. A major part of an ELL students' grade should be based on the student's understanding of the lesson's content objective, rather than proper grammar or spelling. This is not to say that grammar and spelling should be ignored, but rather that they could be better addressed by other means, such as mini-lessons.

CASE STUDIES

The following are two case studies focusing on two different courses of action that can aid ELL student achievement. The first case study focuses on directly increasing student performance through instruction, while the second focuses on increased family involvement as a means to increase academic achievement.

A) The geographic information system (GIS) method is emerging as a particularly powerful means of instruction, incorporating multiple intelligences by utilizing reading (linguistic intelligence), mapping (spatial intelligence), and analysis (logic-mathematical intelligence). For an ELL, tapping into visual intelligence may be particularly beneficial. This may be due to the multidimensional nature of visual learning, as visual references may activate a schematic that allows an association between linguistics and imagery (Goldstein & Alibrandi, 2013).

A study undertaken by Goldstein and Alibrandi (2013) to determine the benefits of GIS observed a science course and a social studies course throughout the course of one semester. The study included an intervention group that offered GIS instruction (256 students) and a control group, which did not receive GIS instruction (1169 students). The study demonstrated that the intervention group's students had higher academic performance than the control group, but of particular importance was the overwhelming presence of this trend in ELL students in particular (Goldstein & Alibrandi, 2013). Results showed that ELL students in the GIS group had significantly higher reading scores on the state reading exam than those ELL students in the control group. Overall, their results demonstrate the potential benefit of GIS incorporation, especially regarding ELL academic performance, as the study found that ELLs showed a significant increase in academic performance when using this method. Ultimately, the study highlights a potential vehicle to increase ELLs' academic performance.

B) Another viable way to increase the academic performance of ELL students lies in family inclusion. Research has demonstrated a positive association between parental involvement and students' academic success (Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, & Aretakis, 2014). The following case study by Chen, Kyle, and McIntyre (2008) highlights a program based on the Sheltered Instruction and Family Involvement (SIFI) project. SIFI focuses on aiding teachers to learn and provide strategies designed to help students learn content while simultaneously developing their English proficiency, which is also defined as sheltered instruction (Chen et al., 2008).

Participants in the study included two cohorts in an 18-month professional development initiative where they learned about and implemented ELL-focused instructional strategies based on Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004). This initiative included implementation of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model, which is aimed at making grade-level academic content accessible to English learners while also promoting their language and literacy development. The model includes

eight components: preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice/application, lesson delivery, and review/assessment (Chen et al., 2008).

The project incorporated a model of professional development that focuses on sociocultural principles of learning. This included learning about effective strategies, planning appropriate lessons for ELLs, and engaging in reflective communication about how to best meet the needs of target students (Chen et al., 2008). The project also included a family involvement component that aimed to demonstrate how teachers can respectfully reach out to and learn from families of other cultures.

CONCLUSION

Though ELL students and their teachers have significant barriers to overcome in collectively meeting educational goals, success is very possible with minor adjustments and some creativity. The rapidly changing demographics of the United States makes expanded teacher understanding of ELL instruction all the more urgent. Employing the strategies listed above could be the difference that helps a foreign-language student acclimate successfully and engage in quality education.

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