

# **Understanding the Unique Instructional Needs of English Language Learners**

Elizabeth Brooke, Ph.D., CCC-SLP  
Chief Education Officer, Lexia Learning and Rosetta Stone

## **What do we know about English Language Learners?**

English Language Learners (ELLs) are one of the fastest-growing sub-groups among the school-aged population in the United States. The ELL population is diverse due to differences in students' exposure to English as well as individual competence in their first language. These differences, along with other social and environmental factors, influence each child's ability to successfully learn to read and speak English. To best support ELLs, educators must have a clear understanding of their students' backgrounds, and must focus on providing personalized reading instruction, with varying levels of support.

## **What are the instructional needs of English Language Learners?**

An extensive review and summary of research\* on instruction and academic interventions for ELL students identified the following six evidence-based, instructional strategies that can be effective in helping ELLs develop basic reading and comprehension skills:

1. Develop decoding skills with early, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonological awareness and phonics
2. Provide increased opportunities for ELLs to develop sophisticated vocabulary knowledge including strong academic language
3. Use challenging narrative and expository texts to teach comprehension strategies
4. Promote reading fluency with a focus on vocabulary and increased exposure to print
5. Ensure that independent reading is structured and purposeful with a good reader-text match
6. Provide opportunities in the classrooms to engage in structured, academic talk

While these strategies should be considered essential for all learners, they are particularly important given the specific needs of English Language Learners.

## **How does rigorous curriculum support the development of literacy skills for ELL students?**

Rigorous ELL instruction must address the development of oral language, reading, spelling, and writing skills in learners of all ability levels. Both the instructional design and the content design should utilize the above six strategies to support the development of literacy skills in English Language Learners.

### **1. Develop decoding skills with early, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonological awareness and phonics**

At the earliest skill levels, instruction should integrate basic foundational reading skills in phonological awareness and phonics with oral language skills. Since ELL students are typically unfamiliar with the phonological structure of English, this kind of systematic, intensive work in the areas of phonological awareness teaches students the sound structure of English and allows them to build on this knowledge in the acquisition of phonic word attack strategies for reading. This awareness of sound structure also enhances the ability to recognize spoken words and allows ELL students to experience greater benefit from vocabulary instruction. The development of vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to academic success for all students and poses a particular challenge for English Language Learners. Robust instruction that goes beyond word definitions and teaches word-learning strategies is critical for ELLs to be able to access content and develop academic language necessary for following directions and understanding explanations.

### **2. Provide increased opportunities for ELLs to develop sophisticated vocabulary knowledge including strong academic language**

Instructional lessons designed to enhance vocabulary knowledge are often supported by pictures, which are particularly helpful for ELL students in acquiring concrete words and concepts as well as more abstract academic vocabulary. Students can strengthen their vocabulary knowledge through activities that focus on words with multiple meanings, analogies and shades of meaning as well as idiomatic expressions. Such activities are particularly valuable for ELL students who may not have been exposed to this kind of figurative language. Exposure to Latin and Greek affix and root meanings develops an understanding of more sophisticated content specific words (e.g., inspection,

photosynthesis). Work with the meaning of signal words (e.g., although, therefore) enhances knowledge of sentence structure to aid in both comprehension as well as writing skills.

### **3. Use challenging narrative and expository texts to teach comprehension strategies**

Along with a strong focus on vocabulary development, rigorous ELL instruction often incorporates key comprehension strategies for listening and reading with both narrative and expository text. The systematic strategy of instruction requires active engagement with language and fosters the application of critical thinking skills. Instructional activities often incorporate the development of skills such as imaging and sequencing in both oral and written language and move to higher order thinking skills such as determining the main idea, drawing inferences, predicting outcomes and summarizing. This focus on the comprehension process is particularly important for ELLs to help them identify and repair breakdowns in comprehension as they read. A focus on monitoring of meaning across content areas enhances the student's ability to generalize these strategies to new and unfamiliar settings and contexts.

### **4. Promote reading fluency with a focus on vocabulary and increased exposure to print**

Many ELLs struggle with reading fluency which might appear, at first, to be due to struggles with word recognition (phonological awareness and phonics). However, in many cases these struggles are often due to weaknesses in vocabulary, knowledge of sentence structure and phrasing, and insufficient exposure to print. English Language Learners in print-rich environments benefit from early exposure to reading and print concepts such as familiarity with letters and sounds, as well as exposure to the conventions of printed words (e.g., reading left to right on a page and front to back in a book). Additionally, a focus on fluency instruction should be incorporated in classroom activities that focus on word identification, vocabulary knowledge and sentence structure related to phrasal chunking and prosody. Paragraph level fluency activities can also help to increase speed of processing while maintaining a focus on meaning.

### **5. Ensure that independent reading is structured and purposeful with a good reader-text match**

As students encounter unfamiliar words in text, their speed and accuracy of reading will decrease and comprehension will suffer. To combat this, ELLs require good reader-text matching with

opportunities for structured and purposeful, independent reading. Independent text should be easy for students to understand and requires little or no support from the teacher. When there is good reader-text match, students avoid struggling with concepts that they have not yet mastered and are able to successfully practice newly acquired reading skills. Since there are distinctly different types of texts for reading instruction, not only must teachers take into account the text's complexity and difficulty, they must also consider the instructional purpose of the selected text.

## **6. Provide opportunities in the classrooms to engage in structured, academic talk**

While engagement in deep reading activities is critical for ELL students, it is equally important for them to have the opportunity to participate in structured, academic talk. Using appropriate academic language through teacher-led instruction and dialogue as well as structured peer discussions helps ELLs build speaking and listening skills. These skills help ELLs further develop reasoning skills and deepen their understanding of content. ELLs benefit from modeling to hear language in authentic and varied contexts and structured, academic talk provides the opportunities to practice grammar and vocabulary to strengthen oral communication. Conclusion

### **Conclusion**

Using these instructional best practices, students will engage with the rich language used in their classroom instruction, and will develop the foundation and building blocks critical for academic success by strengthening and integrating their oral and written language skills.

### **References**

\*Francis, D. J., Rivera, M., Lesaux, N., Kieffer, M., and Rivera, H. (2006). Practical guidelines for the education of English language learners: Research-based recommendations for instruction and academic interventions. Center on Instruction.