

# Imagine Learning's Strategies for Supporting ELLs' Success

English language learners (ELLs) constitute the most rapidly growing segment of the total pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade public school enrollment. ELLs have the additional task of learning a new language at the same time as they learn new content, it is not surprising that they lag behind their peers in most school subjects. The students are being tasked with the challenge of learning when they don't even speak the same language as their teacher. This is recognizably a stress on both the student and the teacher.

Because of this change, educators are working to find the best solutions to help this growing population be successful. Based on extensive research, here is a list of our strategies for teaching ELLs:

## ***Strategy #1: Assess and monitor L2 literacy***

The IES Practice Guide (Gersten, et al., 2007) recommends that districts should collect “progress monitoring data,” or conduct assessments more than three times a year for ELLs who are at risk for reading difficulties. Progress should be monitored more frequently for students with severe reading difficulties, but the guide acknowledges that testing frequency would depend on district resources.

When assessing ELLs, teachers should

- present two or three practice items before the actual test administration;
- model the task for the child; and
- provide corrective feedback, giving ELLs the opportunity to understand what the task requires of them.

Ideally, these instructions should be given in the student's first language.

## ***Strategy #2: Provide explicit instruction***

Explicit instruction refers to “task-specific, teacher-led instruction that overtly demonstrates how to complete a task” (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007). The task might be a basic, discrete skill or it might be a higher-order reading skill—it doesn't matter; both can and should be taught explicitly.

For ELLs, explicit teaching provides clear, specific, and easy-to-follow procedures which facilitate learning a new skill or strategy. It has a very important additional benefit: when skills are taught explicitly, ELLs also learn the language associated with them (Calderon, Hertz-Lazarowitz & Slavin, 1996; Edelsky et al., 1993; Hernandez, 1991; Muniz-Swicegood, 1994; Saunders et al., 1996).

## ***Strategy #3: Differentiate instruction***

When teachers differentiate instruction, they tailor it to fit the learners' needs: they react responsively to individuals. Teachers recognize students' varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, and interests and respond accordingly (Hall, 2002).

The purpose of differentiation is to take the students where they are and move them forward in the learning process. It is a powerful tool, but one that teachers struggle to use as they face a classroom full of learners—typically spanning five years in reading ability (as mentioned above).

## ***Strategy #4: Develop the same five basic reading abilities (as identified by the National Reading Panel to be valuable for native speakers)***

**1. Phonemic awareness** is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read during their first two years of school (Learning First Alliance, 2000; National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000; National

Research Council [NRC], 1998). If students have phonemic awareness in their first language, they can transfer that knowledge to a second language quite readily (Gersten & Geva, 2003). However, if the new language they are learning has new phonemes—phonemes that may not exist in their home language—then they will need explicit instruction in producing these sounds (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007).

**2. Phonics instruction** refers to teaching the structure of English beginning with letter/sound correspondences through the reading of connected text. It gives students a framework for making sense of English orthography (Blevins, 1998).

**3. Vocabulary** development is perhaps the most needed element of literacy instruction for ELLs. Without an understanding of key story vocabulary, it is impossible to comprehend the story (Francis, et al., 2006).

**4. Reading fluency** is more than speed and accuracy; it also includes phrasing, prosody, and inflection. Each of these is considered an indicator of comprehension, as readers must understand the meaning of a sentence in order to give it the right expression (Francis, et al., 2006).

**5. Comprehension** is particularly important with ELLs. There is considerable research showing the foundational skills in reading are acquired by ELLs, but there is often a breakdown with reading comprehension (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007). One likely cause of this difficulty is ELLs often encounter more unfamiliar English words and fewer familiar topics while reading than their monolingual English peers (Garcia, 1991; Jimenez, et al., 1996).

#### ***Strategy #5: Add important modifications (to developing the five reading components) for ELLs***

Clearly focusing on the five elements of reading is very important, but insufficient. ELLs need help in building their background knowledge. They need scaffolding for discussing and reading in the content areas. They need safe opportunities to engage in structured, academic talk. All agree that academic language is important for student achievement and that limitations in academic language development are the root of most ELLs' academic difficulties. There is a pressing need to attend to the role of academic language and to support its development (Gersten, et al., 2007).

#### ***Strategy #6: Provide opportunities to practice***

All students, but particularly ELLs, need many and varied opportunities to practice their language and literacy skills, including feedback and assistance from the teacher (or computer) as well as independently (Graves, Gersten & Haager, 2004; Haager, Gersten & Graves, 2003; August & Hakuta, 1997; Jensen, 2005; Francis, et al., 2006; Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007). “Many” and “varied” are key features of valuable practice and are often identified by brain researchers, who assert that practice should be interesting, not just repetitive. They also add it should be “active” (students must respond frequently) and include “feedback” (Jensen, 2005).

ELLs benefit from repeated exposure and use of content words scaffolded with support and feedback. One way to achieve this is through reading aloud, which provides an opportunity for practicing effective language use. When ELLs are paired with a fluent model (could be a narrator on the computer), they have an opportunity to practice appropriate expression with support. Structured experiences with academic language are typically only given “minimal focus” (Francis, et al., 2006).

#### ***Conclusion***

Certainly schools seek to provide as many of these practice opportunities as possible, but they are limited in terms of time, materials, and number of trained ESL teachers.

What is the solution? In answer, many schools are turning to technology. While computers will never replace teachers, they can certainly share their instructional load. Computer-delivered instruction that follows the recommendations for helping ELLs develop literacy (as listed above) can significantly reduce

the burdens placed on teachers and give ELLs the opportunity to succeed academically, which they both need and deserve.

One program is Imagine Learning, an English language and literacy software designed to help struggling students close the achievement gap. Imagine Learning is designed for all of the research strategies mentioned previously. Here are just a few ways Imagine Learning helps support ELLs:

- **Adaptive Assessment.** The placement test is administered when students start the program to identify the correct array of learning experiences best tailored to meet an individual students' needs. This test is adaptive—questions are determined by individual student performance, thus avoiding lengthy tests.
- **Adaptive Instruction.** Activities are selected based on students' performance on the placement test and on short predictive assessments as well as students' performance in the activities. These continuous adaptive adjustments ensure students' time is invested on the specific array of skills they need. Also, it enables the program to adjust according to instruction that may happen in other parts of the school day.
- **Instruction Based on Scientific Research.** Exemplary and effective methods for strengthening English language development are incorporated throughout the program.
- **One-on-One Instruction.** Imagine Learning assumes the role of an expert tutor, delivering one-on-one instruction and incorporating the best English language development practices, all for a fraction of the cost of tutors and available before, during, and after school. Additionally, reports like the Action Areas Tool and resources such as offline reteaching lesson plans enable teachers to conduct face-to-face interventions to target specific skills in other formats or time slots through the school day.
- **Reports.** Reports showing students' progress can be accessed at any time. As noted above, these reports provide visibility for teachers as they plan language and literacy activities across the school day. The data provided also provides tools for communicating with parents, paraprofessionals, co-teachers or specialists, and administrators.
- **Student Recordings.** Teachers can listen to recordings of students' speech production at any time in the administrator view.

For more detailed information, please visit Imagine Learning's website at [www.imaginelearning.com](http://www.imaginelearning.com).

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