

10 TIPS for Working with English Language Learners



Teachers face the challenge of instructing the ever-growing number of students who speak a language other than English and who come from culturally diverse backgrounds.

In order to teach English Language Learners (ELLs), teachers need to understand the principles of teaching students from other cultures and also the strategies and methods to use to assure students' success. Here are 10 tips for working with English Language Learners.

- 1 Understand your own culture and cultural biases.** Unconsciously, educators often say things and act based on their own cultural perspectives, which are often attributed to their family upbringing, religion, or education. Teachers assume everyone understands their words and actions the way they want them to be interpreted. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Words and gestures have different meanings and interpretations in different cultures. Once teachers understand their own culture and biases, they can begin to understand others.
- 2 Get to know your students' cultures.** Through technology and the Internet, teachers now have the world literally at their fingertips. Read about the culture of the non-native English speakers and try to understand why they interact and behave the way they do.
- 3 Be aware of the levels of acculturation.** ELLs pass through levels of acculturation as they adjust to the American way of life. Culture shock is a common stage, and teachers must understand that students may pass through a silent period or show anger, fatigue, or lack of motivation. Being patient and supportive are keys to helping students overcome culture shock.
- 4 Involve the parents.** Provide an interpreter when possible. Keep the lines of communication open and invite parents to share their cultural heritage and participate in activities such as field trips and career days. Listen to parents' concerns regarding their children's education.
- 5 Prepare your classroom to be a multicultural community.** Include books, pictures, bulletin boards, and other resources from the ELLs' home cultures. Encourage cooperative group work with clear ground rules for acceptance of all students.
- 6 Provide opportunities for ELLs to learn basic interpersonal communication skills.** It takes at least two years for ELLs to learn English communication skills. Provide opportunities for students to work in flexible groups, work with partners, and socialize with peers. Encourage friendships between ELLs and English-speaking students.
- 7 Help ELLs acquire Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).** This is the language needed to understand and perform school tasks. CALP can take five or more years to develop. Teach vocabulary explicitly; use visual aids and realia; incorporate a variety of graphic organizers; use pre-, during, and post-reading strategies to aid with comprehension; and allow more time for ELLs to complete content area assignments and projects.
- 8 Incorporate the multiple intelligences that Howard Gardner describes.** ELLs have many talents and abilities. Incorporating music, movement, art, opportunities for linguistic and mathematical development, and opportunities for interpersonal interaction and intrapersonal reflection can unleash those talents and support their learning processes.
- 9 Use appropriate assessments.** Paper and pencil tests are not always appropriate assessments. Students often do not understand the words on the test or understand the format of taking such a test. Embed evaluations in instructional activities and scaffold assessments to provide support. Provide opportunities for authentic assessments such as portfolios, literature response journals, discussion groups, oral interviews, and role-playing or simulations. Provide rubrics so students are aware of the criteria for evaluation.
- 10 Have high but realistic expectations.** Students will achieve what educators expect of them. Keep in mind that like all learners, ELLs can and will learn and develop at their own pace. Avoid stereotypes, embrace diversity, and celebrate the learning and progress that occurs.

This issue is written by Sue A. Rieg, associate professor in the Department of Professional Studies in Education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in Indiana, Pennsylvania.



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