School Librarians & English Language Learners

By Larry Ferlazzo

It was a day when 40 intermediate English Language Learners (ELLs) from two classes could choose among several options when they entered the library media center. Some chose to read the bilingual books in Hmong, Spanish, and Russian the librarian had set out for them, while others went to a graphic novel cart that had been rolled out. Several went to work creating a public display highlighting the arrival of the Hmong New Year. Others picked up their headphones/microphones and went to the computers to easily create and post online animated movies they had written, or they practiced their reading, listening, and speaking skills at some of the other 9,000 free and accessible websites linked to the school's web page.

Well over 10 percent of all students in K-12 schools in the United States are English Language Learners today, and, according to the Educational Testing Service, that number is expected to grow to 25 percent by 2025. Much of that growth is happening in communities (and in schools) that do not have a history of large immigrant populations. Given these demographics, let's consider different strategies school librarians can use to effectively assist ELLs and their teachers.

BUILDING YOUR LIBRARY OF ELL RESOURCES

Having age-appropriate bilingual and graphic novel books available for students is important in this goal to assist ELLs. As more and more immigrant families come to the United States from different countries (Somalia and Bhutan are two of the more recent countries of origin for many ELLs), librarians might also find that another way to have bilingual books available is by working with students to create their own. Also, displaying books and materials—including those created by students—that share information about students' native countries can help develop a welcoming atmosphere to ease student anxiety, which can be a major barrier to language acquisition. Those resources can also help introduce new cultures to the broader school population.

The Internet is not a "magic bullet" but, if used strategically, English Language Learners can use it as another tool to assist language development.

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Becoming familiar with the most suitable sites and introducing them to teachers and their students can be a key role for librarians. The Internet resources I use with my ELL students have to meet very strict criteria. First, they must be available at no charge, Second, they must provide some kind of value-added benefit to students. In other words, some additional learning opportunity must be provided to students by using the computer over a lesson that doesn't use technology. I have to admit, however, on occasion doing something on the computer that could just as easily and effectively be done in the classroom can be a nice change of pace and result in increased student engagement. One value-added benefit can be creating online content for an "authentic audience"—someone other than the teacher. Computers can also be used to help students feel more comfortable about making mistakes and learning from them. Thousands of free online activities allow students to practice listening, speaking, writing, and reading with instant feedback—without anyone else seeing their mistakes. This obviously won't eliminate making errors around others—and, in an effective classroom, mistakes are celebrated for the risks they entail—but it can build greater student self-confidence. Third, I must be able to learn how to use the application within one minute. Fourth, it has to be possible for a non-tech-savvy student or English Language Learner to understand how to use it within a minute, too—with a little guidance. And, finally, it has to be allowed through most school content filters.

Here are some of my (and my students') favorite resources that meet those criteria.

SPEAKING

At English Central (www.englishcentral.com/en/videos) students can watch scenes from popular movies, see what is being spoken, then repeat what they hear. They are then graded instantaneously by the site on how well they pronounce the words, which also takes into consideration the students' particular accent. It's likely that every teacher of English Language Learners in the world who uses the Internet in their teaching would identify it as the best website that came online in 2009. To use the site you must have earphones and microphones for each student. You can purchase them at a local store or buy them from Schoolphones (www.schoolphones.com/products-frame.htm), which offers quality headphones to schools at a low cost. An additional piece of good news about English Central is that Google is one of its primary investors, so it's likely to be around for a long time to come.

Vocaroo (http://vocaroo.com) is a simple site where students can easily and quickly record their own voice and post it on a class blog or just email it to a teacher. No registration is required, and there are no ads on the site.

WRITING

BBC Bitesize KS 2 for Writing (www.bbc.co.uk/schools/ks2bitesize/english/writing) and BBC Bitesize KS 3 for Writing (www.bbc.co.uk/

schools/ks3bitesize/english/writing) are excellent sites that provide numerous interactive games and activities for students to practice multiple writing skills.

Edublogs (http://edublogs.org) is a great place to create a class blog where teachers can easily post assignments and students can share their completed work. In addition, students can comment on the work of their peers. You can see our class blog at http://sacschoolblogs.org/burbankeld. It's free, but if you want a blog free of advertisements, and the ability for students to leave audio comments (plus many other additional features), the cost is $40 per year.

LISTENING

Henny Jellama's TPR site (www.digischool.nl/oefenen/hennyjellema/engels/tpr/voorbladtpr.htm) is a brilliant online creation of a teaching strategy often used in the ELL classroom—Total Physical Response. On the site, many images of actions are shown, and the user has to choose the correct written and audio description of the activity.

English Listening Online (www.elllo.org) has thousands of engaging listening activities and games.

READING

Into The Book (http://reading.ecb.org/student/index.html) is designed to help students learn reading strategies such as visualize, predict, and summarize. Users are led through the process of learning each reading strategy with interactive exercises.

Reading Skills Stories 1 (www.marshalladulteducation.org/reading-skills-for-todays-adult/group-1) and Reading Skills Stories 2 (www.marshalladulteducation.org/reading-skills-for-todays-adult/group-2) provides a large selection of engaging and accessible stories for older English Language Learners.

Literactive (www.literactive.com/Home/index.asp) and Starfall (www.starfall.com) are unparalleled sites for younger ELLs.

ALL IN ONE

Mingoville (www.mingoville.com/en.html) is an exceptional site from Denmark designed to teach younger beginning English Language

Learners. There are many interactive exercises and games, it's very colorful, and there are both listening and speaking activities, including a voice recording feature. You can experiment with it as a guest for a few minutes, but then you have to register. It's completely free, and registration takes about 20 seconds.

USA Learns (http://usalearns.org/index) is an incredible website to help users learn English. Even though it's primarily designed for older learners, it's very accessible to all but the very youngest ELLs. It's free to use.

My own website (http://larryferlazzo.com/english.html) is designed for student self-access, and has 9,000 categorized links that are accessible to English Language Learners in every content area.

TEACHING IDEAS

English Raven (www.englishraven.com/main.html) is designed by an experienced teacher of English Language Learners, and has thousands of teaching ideas and downloadable activities. Much of it is available for free. If you access certain resources on the site, you are asked to pay whatever you can—there is no set fee.

EFL Classroom 2.0 (http://eflclassroom.ning.com) is an online community of thousands of English teachers from around the world. Thousands of resources are available, as well as free advice.

For more ideas on how librarians can assist English Language Learners, visit Colorin Colorado's "10 Ways To Support ELLs In The Library" (www.colorincolorado.org/article/33008).

REDWOODS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Computer resources, when used appropriately, can be a great asset to English Language Learners and their teachers. One caution, however, is to

not get seduced by its ease of use and its apparent effectiveness. Here in Northern California, you can find many redwood trees. The ones that grow on their own can get very tall. It's the trees found in groves, though, which are the ones that can reach extraordinary heights. Their underground trunks interlock and provide needed support. Students relating to the computer screen can take advantage of exceptional language learning opportunities. However, the best language learning occurs when students use the knowledge gained in the computer lab to help develop and deepen face-to-face interaction with their peers and teachers in and out of the classroom.

Librarians and teachers together can make a dynamic combination to respond to the needs of this rapidly growing high-risk student population. By focusing on the assets of the vast majority of ELL students (their appetite to learn, their rich cultural histories) instead of their perceived deficits, everybody can win. ▚

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