

Teaching English Language Learners: Some Helpful Tips

A Tipsheet by Tracey McConnery

1. Get to know your students

Take the time to learn your students' names, and pronounce them correctly. Also, invite their cultures into the classroom by asking them to share a story during a class discussion, or to say a word or two in their own language. The classroom can be a busy place, and you have many students to attend to; however, taking the time to learn a little about your students' names and backgrounds will help them feel more comfortable and welcome in the class.

2. Honour the "silent period"

Many English Language Learners (ELLs) go through a "silent period," during which they speak very little. During this stage, they will try to be precise when they speak, and will worry about sharing their opinions if their speech isn't perfect. Encourage them to participate, but don't force them.

3. Simplify your language without "dumbing it down"

Speak clearly and naturally, without going too quickly or slowly, and encourage students to raise their hands if they don't understand a word or expression. ELLs often have a difficult time understanding idiomatic and colloquial speech. (And native English speakers often don't realize when they are using colloquial or idiomatic language!) When possible, try to limit your use of this language. For example, saying "run that by me again," or "that answer is in the ballpark," will often be confusing for ELLs.

4. Increase wait times

After you ask a question, wait a few seconds before calling on students to respond. This will give ELLs a much-needed period to formulate a response. Allowing sufficient response times when interacting orally is important as ELLs will often first think in their native language, and then compose a response in English.

5. Provide students with frequent opportunities to work together

Cooperative learning activities, both in pairs and in small groups, are important ways to promote peer interaction. By working in smaller groups, and practicing their language in lower-risk settings, ELLs are given a chance to express themselves with increasing confidence. Teacher-assigned groups work better for shyer students, who often worry about being left out of groups chosen by peers.

6. Use non-linguistic cues

ELLs often have a difficult time processing spoken language, so use visuals, sketches, gestures, intonation, and other non-verbal cues that will make the language and classroom content more accessible and comprehensible.

7. Pre-teach whenever possible

Any chances that you can give ELLs to preview material will increase the likelihood that they will understand it when it is presented to the class as a whole. For example, you could encourage students to read ahead, or preview videos that you plan to show in class. ELLs typically do not have the same background knowledge as their peers, especially when it comes to Canadian cultural or historical references. Identifying key concepts, and giving students time and practice with the new material, will greatly increase their chances of success.

8. Modeling

Modeling promotes learning and motivation, as well as increases student self-confidence. As much as possible, model for ELLs what they are expected to produce by showing teacher and student exemplary work samples. They will have a stronger belief that they can accomplish the learning task if they have clear models to follow. As well, make sure that the instructions and requirements are clearly articulated, review any language that is highly specialized or colloquial, and share any rubrics or grading criteria for the assignments.

9. When possible, allow chances for feedback and revisions

Like all students, ELLs learn from repetition and second chances. When possible, provide your ELLs with opportunities to revise their assignments based on peer or teacher feedback. If time permits, schedule meetings during various points in the term to discuss their ideas, organization, and planning to make sure they're on the right track with assignments.

10. Check for understanding

Regular checks for understanding are essential. However, don't simply ask, "Are there any questions?" as ELLs will often just shake their heads to be polite. Rather, you could have students write questions on a sticky note that they place on their desks, or you could have them use hand signals to demonstrate their level of comprehension. For example, you could ask them to use a thumbs up, to the side, or down motion, to indicate their level of comprehension of a particular concept.

References

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