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Six Strategies for Classroom Success: Enhancing Teaching and Learning for English Learners in Diverse Content Areas

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Cover Page Footnote

This article is dedicated to educator Scott T. Brower, whose compassion and inspiration lives on in the many students, colleagues, friends, and family members whose lives he touched.

Introduction

As a result of the pandemic, teaching and learning has changed drastically over the past few years (Dascalu et al., 2021). Planning for classroom success for English Language Learners (ELLs) now includes infusing educational technology along with strategies for keeping students motivated with “well-planned topics, thought-provoking discussions, and respectful yet probing questioning techniques” (Freiberger, 2020, para. 2). In addition to enhancing academic language, educators may also consider various contemporary technologies to revamp vocabulary knowledge, uplift language development, and polish academic performance. Here are six strategies for enhancing teaching and learning for ELLs in diverse content areas.

1. Teaching Techniques for Multiple Content Area Classrooms

There are several time-tested teaching techniques to support ELLs across multiple content area classrooms, such as understanding students’ home environments and conducting ongoing progress monitoring to assess progress and survey students’ proficiency levels. Incorporating a vital vocabulary and infusing interactive activities also supports student collaboration. Careful consideration of establishing working pairs and small groups based on language support, unique personality traits, and proficiency levels is also useful in promoting interaction and ongoing scaffolding. Other areas to consider may include myriad methods for motivation, tenable topics for teamwork, and augmenting applied science prowess as synergism and high tech know-how are smart skills sought both in academia and in the workplace.

The use of equity sticks may also elicit participation from more reticent students, and realia as well as visual imagery may enrich learning in multiple content areas such as language arts, literacy, robotics, and science. It is also pertinent to ensure student accountability and help

students take ownership for their own learning. Instilling responsibility is not only valuable to help ELLs succeed in the K-12 classroom, but also in college and later in their careers.

2. Model for Mastery

Research (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Khajavy, 2021) indicates that some forms of modeling may aid ELLs in their ability to self-correct errors in grammar and syntax. Modeling may include behaviors, reading and writing strategies, vocabulary, and word pronunciation. Carefully consider topics to teach in context and frontload pertinent phrases, salient sentences, and weighty words relevant to the text. Modeling meaning may start with smart actions and a Smartboard; this may help ELLs better grasp new material, especially if powerful phrases, particular teaching points, and terrific takeaways are translated into students' home languages.

The use of sentence starters may also help hold students accountable; “accountable talk” refers to the academic language that begins classroom conversations. Sentence starters help spark classroom conversations and enable ELLs even with limited English proficiency to call for clarification, elicit evidence and respectable reasons, and politely agree or disagree with peers.

Another idea that works wonderfully well in K-12 settings is to pair non-native speakers with little knowledge of the English language with a learning partner to translate, transcribe, and explain. This supports new students in learning, using correct words and phrases and holds them accountable for fathoming novel facts. Activating prior knowledge (*schema*) helps scholars connect current material to their lives and better master main ideas, and it may also help ELLs to infer and concoct connected conclusions.

3. Infuse Educational Technology

With the “new normal” now becoming noticeably normal, educational technology has become imperative to enhance teaching and learning for ELLs. Several studies (Bull & Wasson,

2016; Wu et al., 2011) investigated how infusing computers and technology may affect student learning. For instance, Bull and Wasson (2016) investigated how instructors could employ new technologies to inform language learning instruction from a competency-focused rather than a merely activity-based perspective. The authors highlighted the use of Facebook, Second Life, and mobile-assisted devices “because of their likely increasing importance as 21st-century technologies for language learning” (Bull & Wasson, 2016, p. 161). The researchers reported “as instructors extend or change tools and activities in their teaching (for example, to embrace newer technologies and state-of-the-art approaches in language learning), these can be straightforwardly incorporated as new activities, and linked to the relevant competences” (Bull & Wasson, 2016, p. 161).

Lambert and Gong (2010) investigated prevailing paradigms in teacher preparation programs, which included the use of educational technology. Their study found that a redesigned course for pre-service teachers to focus on “21st-century skills” rather than technical skills development alone led to enhanced “technical skills and knowledge of how to apply these skills in the classroom” (Lambert & Gong, 2010, p. 54). “It could be argued that pre-service teachers’ attitudes and self-efficacy changed as a result of the 21st[-]century focus in the course” (Lambert & Gong, 2010, p. 66).

This “focus” on 21st-century skills was defined as using technology to promote students’ higher-level cognitive thinking and conceiving of technology as a tool for students to practice these skills (Lambert & Gong, 2010), which have been identified as infusing innovation, collaboration, and problem-based approaches (Thomas & Ge, 2011). The authors concluded, “While it is imperative that we integrally connect technology to pedagogy and content through

subject-specific applications, we must make explicit in our training the 21st[-] century reasons for using technology for teaching and learning” (Lambert & Gong, 2010, p. 66).

New technologies are also being incorporated for use in language learning classrooms today. Some notable newer technologies include the use of blogs and wikis, mobile technologies, and online social networks and virtual worlds where “today’s technologies [can be turned] into a pedagogically useful formative assessment and feedback tool” (Bull & Wasson, 2016, p. 147).

The use of academic applications and popular educational programs such as Flipgrid, Padlet, Screencastify, Nearpod, Peardeck, Kahoot!, Quizziz, and Lumio have also proven effective in motivating ELLs in K-12 classrooms to collaborate, share ideas (and/or myriad file types), and prove prowess. Augmented reality applications such as Aurasma stimulate students to selectively add visual layers to posters or other visual displays. Educators can also use Google Suite tools to upskill or mentimeter.com to poll students for a quick gauge of classroom conundrums versus material mastery.

4. Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) challenges students to seek solutions to pertinent (or even prescient) problems. This interactive learning approach could be effective across multiple content area classrooms as it sparks creativity, inspires collaboration, and is often a welcome respite from lethargic lectures or tiresome textbooks. What educators find enticing about the PBL approach is offering students opportunities to tap into talents, lead their own learning, and delve into discourse in an attempt to clear up real-world conundrums.

Problem-based learning has also been demonstrated to help ELLs better develop the skills they need to succeed to conduct research, consider possible solutions, and then select the most appropriate learning path. According to one research-based article, “Teachers need to be able to

design and implement problem-based learning (PBL) experiences to help students master the content and the processes [of challenging coursework]” (Rillero et al., 2017, para. 1). A consummate PBL checklist may include considering content and selecting skills to sharpen, appraising resources, pondering problem statements, actively looking at apposite activities, considering a focus question, and selecting an evaluation strategy (Smith, 2010).

5. Strategies for STEM Classrooms

Strategies for vocabulary-rich content area classrooms, such as English Language Arts (ELA) and social studies, may also be considered effective for use in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) classes. This includes promoting prompts and the use of manipulatives and sentence starters. ELLs tend to grasp mathematical language and science vernacular more effectively with a visual experience. Educators may thus want to consider particular learning pairs, trying student triads, and infusing vivid visuals along with leveled questions for students’ diverse proficiency levels.

Accelerating the rate of progress for ELLs across all content areas, and especially in math and science, may include infusing PBL activities as this approach is particularly pertinent for students to meet challenging new mathematics and science education standards (Rillero et al., 2017). In addition, educators may want to consider various other supports, such as the use of mind maps, think-pair-share activities, and the use of a KWL chart. What works well for ELLs in one class may not necessarily work for language-minority students in another. Frontloading relevant images may help ELLs to better fathom higher-level meanings. Thus, consider providing visual representations of each content-specific vocabulary word prior to asking students to define each word in both English and in their home language.

6. Considerations for the Hybrid Learning Environment

To account for new learning realities, some schools have switched to hybrid learning environments. Blended learning approaches may have benefits for students who desire more autonomy for their learning or who choose to delve deeper into various digital engagement tools.

In a case study evaluating asynchronous and synchronous communication in e-language learning environments at the University of Pakistan, Praveen (2016) delineated: “Online learning environments can be divided into a triad of synchronous, asynchronous[,] and hybrid learning environments. Synchronous learning environments provide real[-]time interaction, which can be collaborative in nature” (p. 21). This type of learning environment requires time-bound, student-to-student or student-to-teacher interaction in real-time, where questions posed and responses offered must be immediate” (Praveen, 2016, p. 21). Examples of synchronous communication are traditional, face-to face classroom formats, video conferencing, and live online chats as well as chat room and telephone conversations.

Hybrid learning environments combine both synchronous and asynchronous communication and may include a mix of both online and off-line (in-class) academic activities. The findings revealed that asynchronous e-language learning was quite beneficial for second language (L2) learners, but with some limitations which could be scaffolded by synchronous sessions. Based on the findings, the researcher suggested a blend of both synchronous and asynchronous paradigms to create an ideal environment for e-language learning in Pakistan. (Praveen, 2016, p. 21)

Since the author used a large sample of over 1,000 participants, it is possible for results to be generalized to other e-learning environments where students, especially ELLs learning English as a second or foreign language, may benefit from blended learning approaches.

Think Out Loud

In sum, help ELLs to realize that overcoming roadblocks is a natural part of the learning journey. Consider monitoring student progress via low-stakes formative assessments, either online or in-person, to provide immediate feedback and guide progress. Offer opportunities for ELLs to think out loud (i.e., metacognitive modeling). The use of KWL charts may also be advantageous for lower-level readers who have difficulty comprehending via written materials alone. Finally, consider infusing the PBL approach in curricula to sharpen standpoints and meliorate mindsets, and keep kindness in mind at all times to improve the learning environment for everyone.

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