

Bridging the Gap

Teaching Language Arts Concepts to English Language Learners

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Abstract: The number of English Language Learners continues to grow steadily each year. It is important that Language Arts concepts and strategies be implemented in the classroom to help these students increase their language development skills. This article explores why the understanding of Language Arts concepts are so critical to English Language Learners success in the classroom and provides some examples of strategies that can be utilized to strengthen their Language Arts skills. Overall, English Language Learners that have a strong understanding of Language Arts concepts are more likely to have success in a variety of learning content areas such as: mathematics, science, and social studies.

Bridging the Gap: Teaching Language Art Concepts to English Language Learners

It is important to understand what the educational gap for English language learners in US schools is and why it is an important one.

There are 5 million English Language Learners (ELLs) in the public schools in the USA, many of them have no or limited access to quality educational programs. The lack of access to an optimal education, which includes quality English language teaching, is mirrored by the achievement gap between ELLs and native speakers of English. (Szecsi, 2017, p. 19)

As the number of ELLs entering the U.S. educational system continues to grow, educators are faced with considerable challenges to ensure that they do not fall behind their English-speaking peers. The limited English proficiency in an English-language school setting contributes to wide and persistent achievement gaps between the English learners and English-speaking peers (Park, 2014). Emerging early in life and persisting throughout the school years, these gaps have serious consequences for ELLs and for society. Educators should have plans and strategies in place to assist these students to help them be successful academically. Teachers need to be knowledgeable of language development to be wise in choosing appropriate classroom strategies. Provided with strategies and training, educators will give ELLs the tools they need to succeed throughout their education. A lack of quality educational programs is in most cases due to lack of teacher training and resources. Another issue is that “the rapid increase of immigrants has not been matched by sufficient growth of instructors’ understanding and preparedness in how best to plan and carry out good instruction” (Samson & Collins, 2012, p. 2).

“While the number of English learners has increased substantially in the United States, few teachers have articulated a sense of confidence in their ability to plan instruction for ELL students” (Islam, 2015, p. 43). Even though teachers need to

be able to provide resources to help their students be successful in the classroom, at times it may be difficult to gain access to this information through training and research-based data because what is known about language and literacy development among ELLs is so sparse (National Education Organization, 2015).

Why are Language Arts Concepts Critical to ELLs?

According to Olsen (2019) increasing English proficiency helps prevent an achievement gap, but research shows that ELLs need proficiency in both their home language and English at kindergarten entry for overall academic success in a second language. Ensuring development of the home language helps the development of English language skills. Language arts concepts consist of reading, writing, speaking, viewing, thinking, and listening. The understanding of these concepts is critical to the academic success of ELLs because without them students cannot begin to develop the skills they need to be successful in other content areas. Due to this fact, preschool-age ELLs may have special challenges in early language learning and development. They are faced with the task of translating from one language to another. As preschoolers, they are asked to develop language and literacy skills in English even as they are still developing those skills in their home language. For example, many teachers expect students to have prior knowledge of literary genres. However, because of culture differences educators need to teach these concepts to ELLs. Simply knowing the vocabulary will not solve the problem, ELLs may be able to read the words, but it does not mean they will understand the text. They are not aware of information that the author left unsaid; the information that “everyone knows.” It is vital that while educators build ELLs prior knowledge, they also encourage them to speak in their home language as well (Haynes, 2021). Language researchers consider second language acquisition to be an additive process, that is, a child need not lose his home language (L1) to learn a second language (L2). Rather, a child will add the second language to his or her repertoire. Research has shown that young children use the same skills to learn L1 as L2. (Huennekens, 2010). Providing effective strategies, teachers can help ELLs improve their language and literacy skills.

Strategies for Classroom Implementation

Islam (2015) states, “obstacles to comprehension for ELLs are decreased when teachers use purposeful tasks that use language productively and meaningfully and identify cultural links to texts” (p.40). Implementing strategies to assist ELLs can be a challenging task. To improve the language skills, literacy, and academic achievement of ELLs, many studies have examined effective instructional strategies. One helpful strategy when working with ELLs is to include words and phrases from their home language throughout the classroom. In my classroom, I have utilized the labeling of materials to help children develop literacy and language skills. When literature and learning resources were limited, I have created my own. As pictured in Figure 1, I have labeled a variety of materials and objects throughout my classroom in Somali using Google Translate. When using this multilingual translation service developed by Google, you can translate up to 109 different languages. By utilizing this resource, I can create labels that list the English word first and then the child’s

home language underneath in blue. I have also made books using Google Translate to create literature in my students' home language. My ELLs have been extremely interested in looking at the books I have created. While looking at a book together, one of my students recognized a few letters in a word that was written in his home language. Prior to looking at the book he had not identified any letters when prompted. When teachers create their own literature in their students' home language, they can adapt and change the materials to correspond with their lesson plans and teaching curriculum. Family members of ELLs also find these resources helpful when working with their children on homework or communicating with the teacher.

Figure 1

Labeled items in the classroom



Note. This is a sample of labeling for ELLs.

Emotional Scaffolding

Another effective strategy for early childhood teachers to use while working with ELLs is to create positive emotional experiences in the classroom. Park (2014) states that positive emotional experiences that enhance learning can be called "emotional scaffolding," a term that derived from Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding (as noted in Park, 2014, p. 21). Emotional scaffolding can be defined as "temporary but reliable teacher-initiated interactions that support students' positive emotional experiences to achieve a variety of classroom goals" (Park, 2014, p. 22). Teachers who engage in this type of scaffolding have clear academic goals. A list of goals is created and might include: Sustaining students' understanding of concepts, students' involvement and persistence, students' demonstration of their abilities and independence, and students' emotional or personal experiences (Park, 2014, p. 22). It is important to recognize that children express their emotions through a variety of ways. Although children can use language to express their emotions, they can also

use facial expressions, tones in vocal intonations, gestures, eye contact, and body language. Unfortunately, little information is available about emotional scaffolding with ELLs. Teachers can engage in emotional scaffolding by integrating culturally tailored activities that are more familiar to ELLs. For example, when discussing a word problem, the teacher can use vocabulary and materials that are tailored toward the students’ traditions and customs. Translating these lessons into the ELLs’ home language can also be helpful when using emotional scaffolding. By labeling items with the student’s home language as well as English, educators implement two-way translation in the classroom.

According to Rowe (2018) classroom activities should support students’ use of two-way translation as a strategy for making meaning. Students should be encouraged to use their translation skills as a resource as they read and discuss challenging texts. Teachers must provide students with authentic opportunities to use both of their languages in meaningful ways that relate to their lives and interests. This means connecting curriculum to students’ lives, providing engaging activities and opportunities for student choice, and creating activities with tangible outcomes. When students engage in authentic activities that involve talking with bilingual speakers or audiences in their heritage languages, they are likely to use their translanguaging skills as they normally would in their everyday lives. Because interactions between English speaking and non-English speaking peers can be difficult, it is important that teachers offer support to students during these interactions. Teachers also need to be trained on how to facilitate play and how to help ELLs interact with English speaking peers. The most successful interactions between ELLs and peers are those in which a teacher facilitated play. With support the ELLs displayed several social abilities that were not apparent when they were on their own. “When prompted by a teacher, they used nonverbal and verbal methods to initiate social interaction. These interactions included using peers’ names and tapping them on the shoulder” (Dominguez, 2018, p. 578).

Another way to ensure that educators are providing a developmentally appropriate environment for their English language learning students is to create a check list of the strategies that can be utilized in the classroom. By using this checklist weekly, teachers can ensure that they are implementing best practices regarding their ELLs. A sample checklist I created can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1
ELLs Language and Literacy Development Checklist

Strategies	Yes	No	Comments/Concerns
Explicit, systematic instruction in vocabulary provided			
Bilingual environmental print is present throughout classroom			
Picture schedules or other visuals present			
Adult support is provided during peer interactions			
Students’ home language is incorporated through songs, videos etc.			

Note. This chart is a sample teacher checklist for monitoring provided practices for ELLs.

This checklist can be used in the classroom to ensure that appropriate accommodations are being made for ELLs. I have provided a space to answer yes or no if the strategy is being used and a section for comments or concerns where educators can write their thoughts, ideas, or questions. The key strategies I have chosen for my checklist are explicit, systematic instruction in vocabulary, presence of environmental print, picture schedules or other visuals. For example, a social story could be an example of using environmental print in the classroom. In the social story you may discuss how the child can perform self-help skills. In our classroom, a social story about a child washing his hands and drying them is a visual cue that the child can utilize when communication through language is not effective. Picture schedules have also been successful in our classroom when helping ELLs transition between activities. Adult support is also being provided during peer interactions as well as having the students home language incorporated through songs, videos etc. The Language and Literacy Development Checklist can help educators ensure that their classrooms are utilizing the appropriate resources to provide a quality education for ELLs. Once teachers have begun the process of modifying their classroom and curriculum to better suit ELL's, educators should also become an advocate for their students by helping to raise awareness of the absence of quality education as well as other difficulties ELLs and their families may encounter.

Advocating for Awareness

Due to the increasing number of ELLs entering educators' classrooms each year, it is imperative that teachers advocate for awareness of the challenges in providing quality developmentally appropriate education for ELLs. Educators can also support students and families by helping them to voice their thoughts, needs and opinions.

According to the National Education Association (2015) the five steps to ELL advocacy are as follows:

1. Isolate the issue.
2. Identify your allies.
3. Be clear on the rights of ELL students.
4. Organize and educate others.
5. Identify your outlets for change.

One helpful advocating strategy is to make connections by collaborating and engaging with fellow educators to share information. Another helpful strategy is to share information you may know about your student's cultural background with co-workers or others who are working with that student. Also, express the need to hire and train teachers and educate support professionals to help provide quality education for ELLs (National Education Organization, 2015, p. 20). To ensure that ELLs have access to developmentally appropriate education teachers should ask themselves the following questions:

- What can I do in my classroom?
- What can I do in my school?
- What can I do in my district?
- What can I do in my community?
- How can I collaborate with other non-school-based communities? (NEA, 2015, p. 15)

Educators also need to keep in mind that federal law requires student access to the curriculum and criteria for ELL programs. A good resource to utilize is The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) at the U.S. Department of Education. The website offers guidelines for ELL program evaluation and development. It also provides a list of laws that protect students against discrimination as well as how to file a complaint if discrimination is seen or experienced. Many of the documents are translated in multiple languages which can be used as a resource for ELLs families.

Conclusion

For educators to support ELLs in their classroom, they need to be well versed in the concepts of language development and instructional support. This can be accomplished through support and training provided by employers, as well as universities. “While the number of English learners has increased substantially in the United States, few teachers have articulated a sense of confidence in their ability to plan instruction for ELL students” (Islam, 2015, p. 43).

Teacher education programs in North America have yet to provide preservice teachers (PSTs) with necessary skills that are desperately needed for the academic advancement of ELLs who must tackle the language as well as social barriers of content area classes. Consequently, many PSTs feel inadequately prepared to attend to the needs of diverse learner. (Toronyi, 2020, p. 41)

Educators should have plans and strategies in place to assist these students to help them be successful academically. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about language development concepts so they can choose appropriate classroom strategies. According to Pappamihiel (2016) “in many ways, the simple fact that mainstream teachers now understand the need for any accommodations is a success story, but we must continue to strive to fine tune our implementation of such accommodations” (p. 11). Providing English Language Learners with accommodations in the classroom setting is critical. When provided with strategies and training, educators can give ELLs the tools they need to succeed throughout their education and ensure that they will be successful in the classroom as well as in their English-speaking communities.

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About the Author

Brittany Oswald graduated in 2017 with a B.Ed. in Early Childhood Education from the University of Toledo. In 2021, she earned her M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education from the same university. She currently is a Head Start preschool teacher and looks forward to helping her students reach their full potential.