

# Top 10 Tips for Working with English Language Learner Students

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English language learners (ELLs) in the classroom are faced with a difficult task—absorbing content instruction while their English skills are still being developed. How can you help your ELL students participate more fully in the classroom so they can achieve to the best of their ability? Try these 10 tips for supporting English learners in improving their language skills and subject knowledge in tandem:

### **1. Be self-aware**

Know your audience and take time to reflect on the nature of the language you use. Do you use many terms that could be considered jargon? Do prepositional phrases pop up often in your speech? Do you speak fast? Do you emphasize important concepts?

### **2. Balance content and language complexity**

Keep language simple to help learners grasp complex content, and use more complex language when content is simple. This approach helps learners grasp difficult material more easily, reserving challenging language structures for times when English comprehension is a surer thing. Imagine how it might be to study calculus as a Mandarin language learner versus learning to count to ten.

### **3. Check for understanding**

After you give the class an assignment, provide opportunities for students to tell you or their peers how they plan to approach it. Including this step can help students stay on the right track by confirming that they understand what is expected.

#### **4. Have them practice speaking English**

The more your ELL students get to practice their spoken English, the better. Provide opportunities for authentic practice (e.g., “tell a neighbor what you did at recess”) and practice through play or performance (e.g., “let’s pretend we’re the characters in this book”).

#### **5. Make language natural**

Provide opportunities for children to express their thoughts and feelings aloud by using open-ended questions that challenge students’ reasoning. To promote discussion, offer a natural, open-ended topic that’s relevant to your learners, such as, “Adam sure was sneaky in this book, always hiding toys from his sister. I wonder what all of you think about hiding toys from your siblings or friends...?” To encourage debate, ask students to choose between one of two opinions. For example, “In *The Little Yellow Chicken*, do you think the chicken should have invited his friends even though they didn’t want to help? Why or why not?”

#### **6. Create opportunities for contextual word learning**

Whenever possible, let the text deliver the meaning of words on its own. Look for texts with strong supporting visuals or with a rich and meaningful story—or both. Avoid pre-teaching vocabulary when possible. Providing definitions doesn’t yield the same sticking power as letting the word “teach itself” to the student.

#### **7. Provide a model when students get stuck**

If students struggle to formulate English sentences, provide a cloze sentence, (e.g., “You can say... ‘I thought the characters in this book were...’”). Write it on the board for extra support.

## **8. Recast with higher-level grammatical structure**

When a student makes a simple statement, reformulate it using more complex grammar, e.g., Student: “I like John. He is funny.” Teacher: “Oh, you enjoyed the main character because you thought he was funny.”

## **9. Make figurative language explicit**

Don't assume that ELL students know the implied meanings of figurative language. When you use a figure of speech, follow it up with the same idea stated in plain language. For example, “It was a piece of cake; it was easy.”

## **10. Have students practice reading aloud**

All children need to practice reading out loud repeatedly. Reading aloud is a great way for ELL students to exercise their speech mechanism and reinforce the sound of English without the added cognitive burden of formulating words and sentences. One option for more read-aloud practice is to use Reading Assistant, an online reading tool that uses speech recognition to correct and support ELL students as they read aloud, helping to build fluency and confidence with the help of a supportive listener. It's a great “twofer”—learners can get in more speech practice and build reading skills like phonemic awareness, decoding and fluency at the same time.

What's great about most of the above strategies is that they benefit non-ELL students as well—especially other struggling learners.