

Making the Reading/Language Arts Curriculum More Accessible to English Language Learners

Outcome: In this segment we will discuss five basic ideas for making the Reading/Language Arts curriculum more accessible to English Language Learners.

Respect student diversity:

The recently released *Standards for the English Language Arts* (published by the International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English in 1996) is among the few national content standards documents that explicitly focus on the needs of ELLs. Two of the twelve standards are directly related: one focusing on the importance of native language development, and the other promoting an understanding of, and respect for, diversity in language use.

The authors state that the capacity to hear and respect different perspectives, and to communicate with people whose lives and cultures are different from our own, is a vital element of American society. Celebrating our shared beliefs and traditions is not enough; we also need to honor beliefs and traditions which are distinctive in the many groups that make up our nation.

Select Appropriate Texts:

Research shows students use past experiences and background knowledge to make sense out of unfamiliar texts. This is particularly important to understand when working with ELL students.

Literature that is relevant to the life experiences and cultures of ELL students, including folktales or myths from their first culture, can facilitate cognitive and language development. Short stories written by minority authors, such as William Saroyan, Sandra Cisneros and Amy Tan frequently contain themes and characters with which ESOL students may find familiar.

Make Literature More Comprehensible:

Teachers are encouraged to use strategies that will help make literary material more comprehensible to ELL students. Tools such as semantic maps, storyboards, webs, and

Venn diagrams, and other graphic organizers can help students visualize and organize content, characters and plot developments. Journal writing and oral discussions provide additional support for involving students in responding critically to the text.

Encourage Students to Maintain their Native Language:

ELL students benefit academically from being able to use their native language in a predominantly English setting. Teachers can support these students by allowing them to communicate using their native language in reading logs or journals, answering questions in their native tongue, asking questions to peers who speak the same languages, and pairing the ELL students up with other ELL students who are more proficient in the English. Additional materials such as books, magazines, films, or other materials supporting the theme of a lesson can support native language development.

Provide a Balanced Writing Program:

Teachers should emphasize the importance of writing as a process and as a means of authentic communication. If students can write with correct form, but the meaning is not clear and they aren't able to convey their message, the student still lacks necessary writing skills.

English language learners need a balanced approach to writing which includes meaningful assignments that encourage students to work together to organize their own writing, and support one another's writing development. For example, peer collaboration throughout the writing process allows students to rehearse their ideas before they write.

Characteristics of Sound Assessment for ELLs:

To raise the quality of mainstream instruction for ELLs, authentic and meaningful instruction should be combined with authentic and meaningful assessment. Teachers need to be aware of both content knowledge and language proficiency. Whenever possible and appropriate, schools should make efforts to assess students' content knowledge and abilities in the native language as well as in English. Native language assessment is particularly important when students have learned certain content concepts and skills in their native language. Without such assessment, teachers are likely to underestimate students' academic achievement. Understanding of a student's

background, including their educational experiences and parents' literacy, contribute to a more complete assessment picture.

Teachers can make the Reading/Language Arts curriculum more accessible to English Language Learners by remembering the five main ideas presented in this segment.

- Selecting texts with content reflecting the culture and background of students allows them to make more connections and increases interest and comprehension
- Making literature more comprehensible through the use of graphic organizers and discussions
- Encouraging students to use their native language as needed to support their academic knowledge
- Providing a balanced writing program focused on the writing process and peer collaboration
- Assessing students with authentic and meaningful tasks

Reflection: Which of the ideas presented in this segment could you integrate into your classroom?