

## School Improvement News

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### **Tools for Success with English Language Learners**

Because nearly all teachers now face the challenge of effectively instructing English language learners, every teacher should have a repertoire of powerful tools that focus on students who do not speak English as their first language. These tools can help ELL students grasp information, process learning more effectively, and ultimately achieve high levels of success. Not surprisingly, teachers who use these tools with their ELL students often find that native English speakers also benefit.

The following tools are simple yet powerful strategies that teachers can immediately implement in their classrooms. The information about these tools comes from the School Improvement Network's video program titled [\*Every Teacher - A Teacher of English Language Learners\*](#) (2008).

#### **Make Accommodations to Your Regular Lesson**

By making accommodations to their lessons, teachers can more effectively reach English language learners. Accommodations can include greater use of repetition, working with partners or small groups, using real world examples, and making directions extremely clear. The purpose of accommodations is to make the learning more meaningful and engaging to all students.

Sacha Gan, a language arts teacher at Mesa View Middle School in Huntington Beach, CA, makes accommodations when she begins an activity. To ensure students understand instructions, she uses choral response, repeats ideas several times, and has students repeat instructions in their own words. When presenting a new concept, she asks students to think of examples and non-examples of the idea, which helps make abstract concepts more concrete.

#### **Chunk and Chew**

Jo Gusman, an expert in teaching English language learners and the founder of New Horizons in Education, developed a strategy she calls Chunk and Chew. To use this strategy, teachers examine their written lesson plan and ask themselves how many steps of the lesson they can deliver in the first eleven to seventeen minute chunk. They continue to break the lesson in these brain-friendly chunks. When delivering the lesson, teachers give students one chunk at a time. In between each chunk, students are given "chew time," otherwise known as processing time, which allows them to digest the chunk of information they just received.

This method ensures that students have a grasp on the learning before more is given.

### **Help Students See the Big Picture**

ELL students do better if they can see the big picture first, or an overview of the whole concept, before learning the details. When the instruction is designed to go from whole to part and then back to whole, students will grasp the learning.

"We want to frontload the students with information," said Brenda Ward, ESL Program Director at Frankfort Community Schools in Frankfort, IN. "Show the movie first, take the field trip first, give them the whole picture. If we can give them a picture of what it is all about first, then break it into parts, and finally give them the big picture again, they get it."

### **Build Background Knowledge**

When beginning a new lesson or unit, it's important to build background knowledge and meaning. One way to build background knowledge is to have students write down or talk about what they already know about a topic. Michael Reynolds, a social studies teacher at Frankfort High School in Frankfort, IN, uses drawing to help establish prior knowledge. When teaching a lesson about the US Space Program, he asked his students to begin by drawing a space shuttle, which bridged the language gap and established understanding.

Another way to build background knowledge is to relate the here and now to the academic concept being taught. Relating new ideas to things that students are familiar with in their daily lives helps them build understanding. As teachers move through a lesson, they should continue to repeat and emphasize important concepts. Using repetition helps students establish connections between background knowledge and new learning.

### **Use Visual Tools**

English language learners may not understand all they hear, but their understanding will be enhanced if teachers use lots of visual tools. Visual tools include pictures, charts, graphs, graphic organizers, videos, symbolic representations, pictographs, modeling, body language, gestures, and role playing. Teachers need to be prepared to use visual tools when they notice that students are having difficulty understanding words alone. Visual tools can also help students demonstrate their learning; to check for understanding, teachers can ask students to quickly draw a concept on a white board.

With increasingly high standards for ELL students, it is more important than ever that all teachers know how to be

effective with English language learners. These five tools, along with other research-based strategies, can empower teachers in their work with non-native speakers and ensure success for every student.