

Instructor Guide to Supporting English Language Learners (ELL) in the Classroom



TWELVE WAYS TO SUPPORT ELLS IN THE MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM

From the [Cult of Pedagogy](#).

They're doing twice the work as everybody else in the class, even though the result looks like half as much.

–Jennifer Gonzalez

On average, 9% of students in US classrooms are ELLs (14% in cities). In K-12, most students streamline into regular classrooms within one year. Not surprisingly, there are a number of [myths concerning monolingualism](#) that continue to perpetuate the view that multilingualism is a deficit, rather than an asset. Unfortunately, these misconceptions follow students to college, where [support is often less evident and more difficult to obtain](#). How many [myths about ELLs](#) are you familiar with? How can you work to dismantle these beliefs, so that you can better support ELLs (and all students) in your classroom? The following list provides concrete examples of ways you can support multilingual learners in the classroom. Ideas in this list are explored further in the information that follows.



CENTRAL OREGON
community college



This guide was created by Dr. Jane Denison-Furness in collaboration with Amy Stancliff, M.Ed., Central Oregon Community College, Bend, Oregon.

The Writing Center
Free tutoring online
Jennifer Forbess
jforbess@cocc.edu
See [web page](#) for details.

Humanities/Writing Department
Jane Denison-Furness
writingplacement@cocc.edu
See [web page](#) for details.

Adult Basic Skills
See [web page](#) for details.

Office of Diversity & Inclusion
Christy Walker
cwalker2@cocc.edu
See [web page](#) for details.

Disabilities Services
541-383-7583
disabilityservices@cocc.edu
See [web page](#) for details on accommodations.



The list was curated from an episode of the podcast “12 Ways to Support English Learners in the Mainstream Classroom,” from [The Cult of Pedagogy](#). [but we assert that these suggestions are just best practice for all students]:

1. Make it visual.
 - a. Even basic directions should be written on “the board.”
 - b. Challenging concepts should be reinforced using diagrams.
 - c. Physically model the steps you want students to use.
 - d. Show a finished product (a model or sample assignment/paper). Often, this is all that is needed.
2. Build in more group work.
 - a. Less teacher-led whole class discussion.
 - b. More lower risk activities/ungraded work.
 - c. Avoid ELL only groups.
3. Communicate with the [Latinx Program Coordinator](#), the [Native American Program Coordinator](#), or the [Afro Centric Program Coordinator](#).
 - a. Talk with them about what is going on in your classroom. Ask for advice.
 - b. Invite them to visit.



6. Look out for culturally unique vocabulary.
 - a. Most lack background knowledge.
 - b. Directly teach certain vocabulary words. Use visuals to do this.
 - c. Consider the whole list of terms needed for a unit; if an ELL learner might be overwhelmed, cut some terms for them.
7. Use sentence frames to give students practice with academic language.
 - a. All students need practice with academic language/ conversation.
 - b. Use appropriate frames from [They Say/I Say](#).
 - c. Post these on the Learning Management System (LMS) to help students while they are writing.
 - d. This needs to become a regular part of class to normalize it.

4. Honor the silent period.
 - a. Many new ELLs go through a “silent period.” This is normal.
 - b. Don’t force them to talk if they do not want to. Many are very self-conscious of their English and don’t want to speak until they feel it is perfect. Honor that.
5. Allow some scaffolding with the native language.
 - a. Some feel students should only speak English, but the practice of allowing them to use second language as support is important. This helps them relax and feel part of the class. This also demonstrates you honor multi-lingualism as an asset, rather than viewing it as a deficit. Unless proficient, most students will not participate.
 - b. Even if you can’t read what they write. Use native language with brainstorming, especially.





8. Pre-teach whenever possible.
 - a. Give ELL students access to readings early, before materials are presented in class.
9. Learn about the cultural background of your students.
 - a. Find out exactly where they come from, not “somewhere in Africa or South America.”
 - b. Don’t conflate cultures. Students from El Salvador are not ‘Mexican.’
 - c. Learn about religious and cultural practices.
 - i. Keep this in mind when sharing food.
 - ii. Learn about what is acceptable/not acceptable in their culture (e.g., not looking an authority figure in the eye).
10. Don’t make students speak for their entire cultures.
11. Show them how to take themselves less seriously.
 - a. Model this.
 - b. Humor and ridicule are not the same thing. Know the difference.
 - c. Risk-taking is necessary, so laugh at yourself.

12. Take your students seriously.
 - a. Do not see student efforts as “cute.”
 - b. Don’t get distracted by the delivery and miss the message.
 - c. It’s easy to assume the concepts are missing when students lack the language to communicate information in English.



Unlocking English Learners' Potential

by Diane Staehr Fenner and Sydney Snyder, [2017](#)

With the increasing number of ELs in today’s classrooms, it is essential that all teachers understand and use strategies that effectively support ELs and can also model how to implement those strategies. – Fenner and Snyder

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Culture impacts students’ and teachers’ beliefs about education and learning. It can impact ELs’ ways of communicating, their classroom participation and behavior, and their expectations for the role of the teacher -Fenner and Snyder

Monitoring and improving professional skills while incorporating research-based strategies into lesson plans and teaching are hallmarks of an effective instructor. An important part of professional development should include filling our toolbox with [effective, research-based strategies](#) for supporting multilingual learners. Like incorporating the principles of Universal Design, adopting these strategies makes learning more accessible, usable, and inclusive for all learners.

The number of ELLs in college classrooms has grown and will continue to increase, so it is imperative that instructors are ready to meet the challenges inherent in a multilinguistic classroom. Because so few educators have received training in working with ELLs, it is important to learn and incorporate “ready-to-go, research-based strategies to reach [...] learners” (Fenner & Snyder 2017, p. 1). The following list has been distilled from Chapter 2 of the Fenner and Snyder text (2017). Many concepts overlap, so you will see some suggestions listed under more than one area.

[1] Some examples of ways to learn about students’ cultural background include using a questionnaire, using questions/answers as a basis for topical discussions, and using assignments involving stories about family, etc.

Culturally Responsive Teaching



1. Use a culturally responsive framework to meet the needs of ELLs.
 - a. Understand that culture is complex and dynamic.
 - b. No one cultural group is better than another.
 - c. There is great variability of cultures within social groups.
 - d. There are three distinct levels of culture:
 - 1) Surface: concrete elements of culture than can be seen, such as food, clothing
 - 2) Shallow: rules for everyday communication and behavior, such as beliefs about time, concepts of personal space
 - 3) Deep culture: unspoken knowledge and unconscious understanding of how we relate to others and the world, such as ideas about cooperation and notions of justice
2. Culturally responsive teaching is assets based. This means it “values students’ home languages and cultures and sees them as foundations for future learning” (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p. 41).
3. Culturally responsive teaching is also student-centered. This means “students in the classroom shape the content, instructional activities, materials, assessment, and/or pace of the learning” (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p. 45). This requires skill because the lesson you prepare may not be the lesson students need, which means you need to be able to adapt in the moment to meet students where they are.
4. Culturally responsive teaching also values students’ languages, cultures, and backgrounds. This may mean incorporating instruction that “builds on ELLs’ home language” to “support them in developing literacy in English” (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p. 49). Consider using the library for help finding “home language texts to support the content you are working on (e.g., a translated copy of a graphic novel)” (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p .49).
5. Finally, culturally responsive teaching simultaneously challenges and supports students. It is important to have high expectations for all students, including ELLs. It is also important to provide the support necessary to help them succeed. Include diverse groups in readings and topics by recognizing and being responsive to “explicit instruction about structures that reinforce power, privilege, and discriminatory practices in society” (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p. 50).

Check out these online charts for more information and help evaluating your views on culture: [Reflecting on my cultural beliefs and expectations part I](#), [Reflecting on my cultural beliefs and expectations part II](#), and [What I know about my EL](#).

Scaffolding Instruction for ELLs

by Diane Staehr Fenner and Sydney Snyder, [2017](#)

A scaffold “is a temporary support a teacher provides to a student that enables the student to perform a task he or she would not be able to perform alone” (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p. 60). This is similar to Vygotsky’s (1978) [Zone of Proximal Development](#), which is “the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” ([WestEd](#)). Although this is used in learning theory for children, it is also a core principle in [Adult Learning Theory](#) or andragogy.

Scaffolds can be grouped into three main categories: materials and resources, instruction, and student grouping.

1. Materials and Resources “are the instructional tools that you can provide to ELs to support them in accessing content and sharing their understanding of content orally or in writing” (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p. 61).
 - a. [Graphic organizers](#)
 - b. [English and/or bilingual glossaries](#) and dictionaries
 - c. [Home language materials](#)
 - d. [Sentence stems, sentence frames, and paragraph frames](#)
 - e. [Visuals](#)
 - f. [Word banks](#)





2. Instruction is the “process through which a teacher adds supports for students in order to enhance learning and aid in the mastery of tasks” (Vanderbilt Peabody College).
 - a. Pre-identification and pre-teaching of content-specific academic language and vocabulary.
 - b. Concise instruction of background knowledge.
 - c. Use of language with a reduced linguistic and cognitive load, repetition of key ideas and instructions, paraphrasing key concepts, and modeling.
 3. Student Grouping is used to divide the class into smaller groups for learning and problem-solving. Groups “will need sufficient structure and guidance in engaging in the pair or group task” and will often require other scaffolds (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p. 68).
 - a. Pair work
 - b. Small-group work
- See here for information on developing scaffolded lesson plans.

Fostering Oral Language Development

Foundational Literacy: What Research Tells Us About Speaking and Listening by McGraw Hill discusses how “speaking and listening support development of all other literacy skills, such as text comprehension and writing.” When discussing literacy, we often think of reading and writing, only. However, listening and speaking are the other important components of four language skills that comprise literacy.

On the webpage “Literacy in Language Learning” from The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), “Critical literacy strategies include the means to access and analyze information, use technology, evaluate messages from a wide variety of media, apply creativity to express and analyze messages, and use critical thinking.” Additionally, “second language learners use all means possible to make meaning; gaining awareness of the strategies used to make and express meaning in a second language strengthens learners’ first language strategies. The key question around literacy is to analyze what the author, speaker, or producer of the media wants the reader, listener, or viewer to understand or do. By interpreting and actively comparing linguistic and cultural systems and the interconnections among them, students develop valuable literacy skills.”



Commonly Asked Questions About Fostering Oral Language Development

from Dr. Lindsey Moses Cuccione on the website [Colorin, Colorado](#)

Q1: How do I provide instruction and support for ELs without holding back the students who are fluent in English?

Differentiation is the key to effective instruction for all students. Students of varying proficiency levels can learn the same content when the teacher provides a wide range of learning opportunities with different academic and linguistic needs. Three key strategies for this approach include differentiating or modifying the texts, creating grouping structures, and targeting the amount and nature of support based on students' needs (Opitz & Ford, 2008).

- a. Modifying the text: Teachers can differentiate the text by selecting various levels of text difficulty on similar content, or they can divide the text up into smaller portions appropriate for certain groups/individuals for a [jigsaw activity](#). Another idea is to summarize a text that might be too difficult and provide ways to make the text more accessible (such as vocabulary support, visual support, connecting to background knowledge, etc.).
- b. Creating grouping structures that set students up for success: While some grouping structures can be established according to language or literacy skill levels and needs, it is also important to think about providing students exposure to interact with peers who demonstrate a wide range of different language and literacy skills. Additionally, teachers can improve engagement and motivation by creating choice/interest groups where students gather, read, discuss and work together on topics of common interest.
- c. Targeting the amount and nature of student support: It is important to think about scaffolding the experience and using comprehensible input to make it accessible for all students. Comprehensible input means that students should be able to understand the gist of what is being said or presented. There are many ways to do this, such as selecting key vocabulary, using context or visual cues, building background knowledge, building on experiences the students have had, using consistent language, and providing images or visual representations to support vocabulary and content. Teachers can support their students by embedding comprehensible input into their whole-group instruction, but this also becomes particularly effective when used in the different grouping structures. Teachers can also modify the amount of support and interaction between teachers and students depending on their individual and group needs.

Q2: This student knows English...They just don't want to try in class.

- a. I have heard many teachers discussing variations of this same idea. However, I would caution teachers...about jumping to this conclusion. [Academic language](#) (or the language specifically related to school and/or academic content) can be complicated to acquire. Students often first develop social language and demonstrate near proficiency or proficiency in English in social settings. A student may be demonstrating sophisticated use of social language, but they may have difficulty using language in more formal settings such as school.
- b. One idea for reducing anxiety and encouraging students to experiment with language might include allowing students to read, practice, and discuss their responses in partners and small groups before sharing out to the entire group. This allows students an opportunity to hear language modeled by peers, practice what they want to say, and possibly revise their original thought and/or language before sharing it in a public way. As students find more success with their language production and classroom participation, they will be more likely to share and take risks, and in turn continue building their confidence.



Commonly Asked Questions About Fostering Oral Language Development (cont.)

Q3: What kinds of activities should I be doing to help students develop their oral language and oral reading?

McCauley and McCauley (1992) report four factors as necessary for acquiring a second language: a low-anxiety environment, repeated practice, comprehensible input, and drama. These are all important components of setting children up for success and language development.

- a. A low-anxiety environment includes a setting where students feel nurtured and supported by their teacher and peers, and in turn, they feel safe to take risks without the fear of being laughed at or made fun of.
- b. Repeated practice is just like what it sounds! Students need repeated practice hearing and using a new language. They need multiple opportunities to comprehend and express their ideas in a new language. Like with anything new that we learn, practice helps us get better.
- c. Comprehensible input, as explained above, means finding different ways to make what is being said comprehensible and easier to understand. Things to consider with comprehensible input might include using speech that is appropriate for students' language proficiency, providing a clear, step-by-step explanation of tasks, and using a variety of techniques to support their understanding.
- d. Drama, or a sense of excitement and engagement, can be found in activities like [Reader's Theatre](#), dramatic play, including recordings of expressive readings of a text, etc. All these activities also have the other three factors embedded within them. These activities assist in the development of oral language in addition to introducing students to oral reading and rich literacy experiences and responses in a classroom setting.

Teaching Academic Language



by Diane Staehr Fenner and Sydney Snyder, [2017](#)

It is critical for ELs to have a command of the forms and functions of academic language to gain access to challenging academic content and to express their knowledge of subject matter.

-Fenner and Snyder

[Alison Bailey](#) (2007) defines academic language as “language that stands in contrast to the everyday informal speech that students use outside the classroom environment” (p. 12). In other words, the “language used to ‘access and engage with the school curriculum’ is different from the ‘unique interaction between language and the personal linguistic experience’ of each student” ([Bailey & Heritage](#), 2008, pp. 12-13). We can call this second type “social language.”

Distinctions between social language and academic language (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p. 115):

	Social Language	Academic Language
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyday use for interactions inside and outside school • Social interaction • Less specialized language • Less cognitive demand • Used in social contexts • Acquisition requires understanding of cultural and social norms, including nonverbal cues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic setting—used in areas such as classroom discourse texts, assessments, content standards, and classroom materials • Mainly used in the classroom for reading and writing • Acquisition requires specialized knowledge • More cognitive demand due to complex vocabulary and grammatical structures
Acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency can develop in three to five years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency can develop in a minimum of four to seven years
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to a coach review the soccer practice schedule • Having an informal, face-to-face conversation about weekend plans • Reading a lunch menu • Writing a post on Facebook • Texting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describing a classic work of art • Defining a scientific term • Explaining how to solve a complex math problem • Comparing and contrasting two opposing parties in a historical dispute • Summarizing information in a research paper

Academic language is different from English in other settings in three ways: word level, sentence level, and discourse or text level (Fenner & Snyder, 2017, p. 116).

1. The word level is made up of “tiers” of vocabulary: that which is familiar, that which students can acquire on their own, and that which is necessary but challenging for students.
2. The sentence level includes grammar and syntax students need to acquire to access, discuss, and write about complex concepts and texts. This is also necessary for students to be able to discuss these concepts with peers/teachers.
3. The discourse level addresses the “organization, structure, and purpose of text” and includes things like clarity, tone, coherence, and rhetorical situation.



Eight Strategies for Building Students' Academic Language

from Todd Finley, 2014, on [Edutopia](#)

1. Encourage students to read diverse texts: Reading and then thinking and talking about different genres is a robust sequence for learning academic language.
2. Introduce summary frames: Summarizing is a simple and fail-safe approach to academic language activities. Students read a section of text to themselves before verbally summarizing the passage to a partner. Alternatively, learners can complete sentence frames, or guides for summarization.
Some examples:
*If the main idea of the paragraph is problem/solution, use the frame: “ ___ wanted ___, but ____, so _____.”
*If the main idea of the paragraph is cause/effect, use the frame: “ _____ happens because _____.”
3. Help students translate from academic to social language (and back): Model how to say something in a more academic way or how to paraphrase academic texts into more conversational language. Provide students with a difficult expository passage, like [the inventor's paradox](#), and have teams reinterpret the text using everyday language.
4. Have students complete scripts of academic routines: Some discourse routines seem obvious to adults, but are more complex than NASA for ELLs unless you provide scaffolding, like these speech examples:
“The topic of my presentation is _____.”
“In the first part, I give a few basic definitions. In the next section, I will explain _____. In part three, I am going to show _____.”
5. Dynamically introduce academic vocabulary: Repeated encounters with a word in various authentic contexts can help students internalize the definition. They also benefit when teachers make their first encounters with vocabulary sticky. Use the word in a funny or personal story.
6. Help students diagram similarities and differences: When students generate a list of similarities and differences between words and complete a Venn diagram (like [this one](#)) comparing and contrasting belief and superstition (for example), they are working with one of [Robert Marzano's high-yield instructional strategies](#).
7. Have students write with a transition handout: Formal academic writing challenges students of all ages. Before students write, give them a [handout of transitions](#). Model where transitions fit and describe how they help the reader.
8. Teach key words for understanding standardized test prompts: Vocabulary.com shares examples of the [language of standardized tests](#), which helps students understand prompts and ace standardized tests.
[Note: although the linked website is for middle school, the strategies here are transferable to college classrooms.] Utah State University provides [a handout](#) on test-taking tips for successfully preparing for and taking a variety of different types of tests typical in college.



Teaching Background Knowledge

Students learn more effectively when they have familiarity with the content they are about to learn. When teachers link what students already know (prior knowledge) with the new concepts to be introduced, they stimulate student interest, motivation, and curiosity, and give learners a sense of purpose for learning.
- Colorín, Colorado

From [Eschevarria, Vogt, & Short](#) (2004): “Taking a few minutes to ‘jump-start- students’ schema, finding out what they know or have experienced about a topic, and linking their knowledge directly to a lesson’s objective will result in greater understanding for ELLs.

The following steps and information were taken from Fenner and Snyder (2017):

Step 1: Discover your students’ prior knowledge of a particular topic or text.

- Opinionnaires: a series of statements you ask students to determine what they know about a topic.
- Graphic organizers
- Reflection journals
- Discussion
- Guided discovery: a teaching and learning experience where students actively participate in creating knowledge. See [here](#) for examples.



Step 2: Decide how much background knowledge to provide. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do non-ELLs have background knowledge on the topic?
- Does the background provide information in place of what the author is going to provide in the text?
- Is the background knowledge about big issues that will help ELLs make sense of the text?
- Is the background knowledge you’d like to provide to ELLs concise?

Step 3: Activate prior knowledge:

- [Carousel brainstorming](#): Using sheets of paper, white boards, or online forums, students post responses to statements/information around a real or virtual room. They then rotate around until they have responded to all “stations.” When this is done, groups present the information on the sheet at their stopping point.²
- [Sentence starters](#): For activating prior knowledge, focus on starters like “One thing I know about _____ is _____.”
- [Categorized sticky notes](#): Provide a sticky note on a topic with a question for each student. Students respond on the sticky note and then post to a real or virtual board. This space could have categories, such as “positive/negative” or “agree/disagree.” They can return to these responses at the end of class to confirm, revise, or add to their statements.

Step 4: Concisely Teach Background Knowledge:

- Use guiding and supplementary questions. Limit the number and focus on open-ended questions.
- Share a Web link (in English or home language).
- Include video clips or visuals.
- Add text-based instruction.
- Home language support (e.g., text, Web link, or video).

[2] One caveat: ELL students are often anxious about sharing responses with the whole class. This can be alleviated by sharing prompts ahead of time with students (e.g., provide questions the class before using a carousel brainstorming activity). This allows students to write out and review response before sharing with others, which can reduce the stress of this activity.

Formative Assessment

From the [Center for Applied Linguistics Trainer Guide](#)

1. Principles of effective assessment:
 - a. Clearly identify the purpose of an assessment and what will be assessed.
 - b. Select an appropriate assessment tool given the task and design the assessment so it engages students.
 - c. Use multiple measures to provide a more holistic picture of what is being assessed.
 - d. Ensure adequate materials are available to conduct the assessment.
 - e. Identify the limitations of the assessment.
 - f. Be transparent about the results of the assessment with students, teachers, and administration. The goal is not the assessment itself, but what is learned from the assessment.

For ELLs: “Learners acquire language as they use it in social interactions to accomplish purposeful tasks (e.g., finding information or applying for a job)” (cal.org).

2. Recommended strategies for formative assessment, from lincs.gov:
 - a. [Quick write](#)
 - b. [Graphic organizers](#)
 - c. [Cloze writing](#)
 - d. [Think-pair-share or write-pair-share](#)
 - e. [Entry/exit cards](#)
 - f. [Student reflection](#)



When considering assessment of student writing...

from the Writing Program of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington

This [website](#) offers some practical strategies for dealing with language error in student writing that will allow you to keep the focus of the course on your primary learning goals, save time grading papers, and help ELL students feel supported in your class.

For more on working with ELLs and Multilingualism, see the [COCC Developmental Education Digital Library](#) for a list of sources, information, and relevant research.

