Effective Instruction Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners

University of New England

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Karen Yik

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According to the statistics cited in Allison and Rehm (2011), it is predicted that, by 2030, 50% of all students in the United States will be English language learners (ELLs). ELLs are mainly children from immigrant families, or children with at least one foreign-born parent. Tissington and LaCour (2010) note that ELLs are one of the largest groups to struggle with literacy. There is an achievement gap between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers (Schulz, 2009). Teachers need to make an effort on many levels to educate this diverse group of learners in the English language so that they can achieve success just as their native English-speaking peers (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). This literature review will explore the effective instruction strategies for teaching ELLs so that teachers can be better prepared to meet the needs and improve the learning of ELLs in their classrooms. These effective strategies are discussed through the studies conducted in the following articles.

Schulz (2009) provides information on the differences among English Language Learners (ELLs) and the effective instructional writing strategies and assessments for them in the first article, *Effective Writing Assessment and Instruction for Young English Language Learners*. More and more ELLs are present in our school system. Many teachers feel unprepared to meet the unique needs of these diverse learners. Literacy assessments are mostly in English format only, and potentially are not useful to assess ELLs who do not have sufficient knowledge of English to understand the test items (Schulz, 2009). This article notes the guiding principles that teachers should keep in mind while they use state writing standards to guide and plan their writing instruction and assessments. Assessment should be based on ELLs’ prior schooling and background at home so teachers can differentiate their writing assessments and instruction according to each ELL’s level and needs. The writer also recommends using explicit writing instruction which fosters social interaction among the teachers and the students, and can help
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students better understand the language in real-life context. There are four different approaches to help ELLs build a writing process: 1) language experience where teachers demonstrate the writing process in front of students; 2) shared writing where teachers act as a scribe and demonstrate the writing process in front of students; 3) interactive writing where students and teachers collaborate in the writing process; and 4) independent writing when students work alone and use their own understanding of the writing process to compose texts (Schulz, 2009).

Teachers can gain insights about their students’ writing development and progress by conducting multiple, authentic writing assessments over a period time. Assessments such as self-assessment checklists, writing conferences, and writing portfolios can reveal what students know about the writing process and help teachers learn how to modify instruction so their ELLs can reach the early learning content standards and curricular goals set by the state and their school district (Schulz, 2009). Effective assessments and effective teaching are interconnected, “The knowledge gleaned from individual student assessments will help teachers tailor writing instruction to help all English Language Learners achieve academic success” (Schulz, p. 62). ELLs will have improved chances for writing progress when appropriate assessment and individualized instruction are present in the classroom (Schulz, 2009).

In the second article, English Language Learners: Effective Teaching Strategies, Practices for FCS Teachers (2011), Allison and Rehm highlight the effective teaching strategies that are identified by research and scholarly literature to prepare family and consumer sciences teachers to better meet the needs of the English language learners (ELLs) and enhance their learning. The article notes that there is a dramatic growth of ELLs in America. Although 40% of ELLs are from Mexico, and the predominant native language is Spanish, there are 350 other languages used by ELLs in the United States. ELLs are likely from families with low-income
and they are likely to have less academic achievement (Allison & Rehm, 2011). As stipulated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, teachers face the challenge of teaching ELLs the content areas and including them in the mainstream classroom as soon as possible. The article identifies five evidence-based instructional strategies and classroom practices for FCS teachers to implement. The first one is to create a supportive and welcoming learning environment by understanding the challenges of ELLs, such as their adjustments and difficulties in mastering a new language and academic content. ELLs should be allowed to speak in their first language because proficiency in home language assists in learning a second language. Teachers can pair ELLs with a partner to provide a sense of security and should also include them in all classroom activities, allowing ELLs to share their culture, customs and traditions (Allison & Rehm, 2011). Secondly, teachers can provide a student-centered interactive classroom which facilitates cooperative learning and hands-on learning (Allison & Rehm, 2011). Thirdly, teachers can incorporate a variety of assessments based on the learning styles of students and their level of development. Assessment should be on-going and geared to reduce linguistic burden faced by ELLs. Performance assessments are best for ELLs as they can show their understanding of academic content in other non-verbal ways (Allison & Rehm, 2011). Fourthly, teachers can provide challenging lessons that reflect high expectations in order to motivate ELLs to experience self-efficacy. Instead of creating separate lessons for ELLs, teachers can modify existing lessons and present content in ways that require less language, so ELLs can become capable learners (Allison & Rehm, 2011). Lastly, teachers should communicate with parents and engage them in their children’s education through home visits, experiences and information sharing on their culture with the class. ELLs are increasing in U.S. school-age populations. Their unique educational needs and learning style will require teachers to apply effective
practices and pedagogies. Teachers are ethically and legally compelled to accommodate and help all students, including ELLs, learn (Allison & Rehm, 2011).

The study discussed in the third article, looked at classroom strategies and content areas that teachers of English language learners (ELLs) should employ. In the article, Strategies and content areas for teaching English Language Learners (2010), Tissington and LaCour note that ELLs, being one of the biggest groups to struggle with literacy, should receive instruction according to their ability, so that they can comprehend the lesson content. The article proposes the use of drama and movement, teaching of math, music, science, and social studies in order to help ELLs with decoding, fluency and vocabulary. Through incorporating the physical experiences, teachers can employ teaching aides such as Movement Machines, Falling Rain Dance and the Gadget Band for drama and movement; Counting 1 to 20, Everything Has a Shape, and Shapes All Around Us for math; and Musical Follow the Leader, word play, chants, songs and instrument playing for music (Tissington & LaCour, 2010). When teaching science to ELLs, teachers need to determine the appropriate skills and concepts, and the specific activities according to their background. Teachers also need to ensure that appropriate assessment is used for student learning. Nature walks and science experiments will promote shared learning experiences and increase vocabulary (Tissington & LaCour, 2010). In social studies, teacher can utilize role pay, the Four Corners game, and peer collaboration to include ELLs in reading, talking, listening or writing about social studies content (Tissington & LaCour, 2010). The article also states that storybook reading is also an effective strategy to build vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension. Lastly, in regard to creating assessments, Pary and Monhardt (as cited in Tissington & LaCour, 2010) state that teachers should include accommodations for language ability. Assignments and assessments should include language reduced proficiency.
The article concludes that strategies used to aide all students were proven to be effective for ELLs too. When ELLs are presented with these strategies, they will improve in their proficiency (Tissington & LaCour, 2010).

The next article addresses the strategies that teachers can use to overcome the barriers they face when teaching literacy to English language learners (ELLs). Helfrich and Bosh (2011) state the statistics that show the rapid increase in number of ELLs in today’s classrooms, in their article *Teaching English Language Learners: Strategies for Overcoming Barriers.* The role of teacher in language acquisition for ELLs is an important one. ELLs require differentiated methods of instruction and assessment. Helfrich and Bosh note that the concept of language learning should be looked at from a whole-child perspective. ELLs should be allowed to learn the English language while respecting and preserving their native language and attitude toward literacy (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). This article discusses four perceived barriers faced by ELL teachers: the lack of understanding of the role of literacy in different cultures, the teacher’s inability to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners, in particular the ELLs; the devaluation of peer interactions and collaborations in learning a language, and a lack of confidence and knowledge about using assessments measures with ELLs (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). Through the review of research and personal experiences in teaching, the authors highlight the key factors and differences in these barriers, and provide valuable and relevant strategies for teachers to overcome them (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). By valuing cultural differences, respecting diversity, and investigating into different cultures, teachers can bring students of different cultures together, and avoid misinterpreting students’ aptitudes, meaning or abilities. Through celebrations, incorporating historical events or geographic factors, and the selections of trade books in classroom library, teachers can convey their respect and
acknowledgement of the diverse cultures in their classroom. By knowing the backgrounds and interests of ELLs, teachers can create a connection between the background knowledge they possess and the academic requirements of the classroom, and can then adjust their instruction accordingly (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). Research noted that ELLs gained majority of their understanding from the use of oral language. Therefore, teachers should model good language (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). The article also points out that the role of peers is very important in the inclusion and education of ELLs. Report had shown that ELLs showed growth in language achievement when they had the opportunity to interact with English-speaking peers. Through group activities, such as morning circle, ELLs can learn about their peers and about different cultures (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). While teachers should be cautious when choosing assessments for ELLs, they should not hesitate to use valid and reliable assessment and progress-monitoring tools with ELLs. Kornhaber (as cited in Helfrich and Bosh, 2011) stated that assessment can be used as a tool to increase all students’ knowledge, skills, and understanding so that they can perform at their very best. Assessment should be used to differentiate instruction based on individual needs and should be done frequently so that students can receive the necessary interventions (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). Teachers’ self-developed assessments allow ELLs to supply missing words, and verbalize answers to comprehension questions, and are effective in helping teachers assess their language proficiency and fluency. Language Experience Approach (LEA) can also scaffold the learning of ELLs by creating materials that they can read and are of interest to them. LEA allows students to build their vocabulary by using spoken English to present their personal experience, while the teacher provides them with the written English words (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). The article concludes that when teachers identify and acknowledge individual student differences, they can identify, discuss, and
overcome the barriers so that teachers can deliver appropriate and effective instruction. (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011).

All four articles reviewed (Allison and Rehm, 2011; Helfrich and Bosh, 2011; Schulz, 2009; and Tissington and LaCour, 2010) point to one phenomenon: that today’s teachers are going to have more and more ELLs in their classrooms, and they have to prepare themselves to teach this diverse group effectively. All four articles provide teaching ELLs with effective instruction strategies in different ways, but some common threads can be pulled. The similarities include 1) the importance of teachers’ understanding and respect of ELLs’ literacy, cultural and linguistic diversity; 2) appropriate assessments; 3) instruction strategies; and 4) peer interactions. However, there are also some differences among these four articles. Only one article mentions the importance to communicate and engage parents in ELLs’ education, and only a couple of the articles note the importance of teachers’ expectations.

Tissington and LaCour (2010) state teachers’ understanding of children’s previous experience is important. The first experience with school, whether it was good or bad, has a lasting effect on a child. ELLs need teachers who understand their experience and their needs, who are sensitive to their anxiety and frustration, and who can create a supportive and welcoming learning environment for them (Allison and Rehm, 2011). Schulz (2009) notes that, because there can be a wide range between ELLs’ academic abilities, it is important for teachers to be knowledgeable about the different literacy backgrounds of their ELLs, in order to “be more equipped to select developmentally appropriate writing assessments and instruction based on student’s individual writing needs” (Schulz, 2009, p. 59). Helfrich and Bosh (2011) state that, by knowing the background and interests of ELLs, teachers can create an important connection between the background knowledge of their ELLs and the academic requirements of the
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classroom. Is it enough just to know the backgrounds of ELLs? There is apparently a need for teachers to understand the challenge of learning a second language, the function of language and literacy in the native culture of their ELLs so that they can teach them effectively. While teachers incorporate as much English as possible to help ELLs succeed in school, teachers should also preserve ELLs’ native language and cultural values so that ELLs’ cultural background is respected (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011).

Schulz (2009) notes that assessment for ELLs should be based on their backgrounds and focused on what each ELL is capable of doing. Effective writing assessments give teachers the opportunity to observe, assess, and instruct students at the same time. Helfrich and Bosh (2011) add that assessment should be done frequently so that students can receive the necessary interventions as needed. The primary function of an assessment is to evaluate if the student has met the desired learning objectives (Tissington and LaCour, 2010). But not all teachers are confident in using assessment tools with ELLs, and this lack of knowledge about using assessment measures with ELLs has become a perceived barrier for beginning and veteran teachers today. Because literacy assessments used in school are in English format only (Schulz, 2009), and some of them may not be valid or reliable measures to be used with ELLs (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011), it is important that teachers seek help from specialists in their schools, who may be more knowledgeable in specific assessment measures, to help them with their selections (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011). Some appropriate assessment tools are presented in these articles, for example, teachers’ self-developed tools, such as cloze procedures and curriculum-based measures to assess ELLs in the classroom (Helfrich and Bosh, 2011); self-assessment checklists, writing conferences, and writing portfolios suggested by Schulz (2009); and performance assessments recommended by Allison and Rehm (2011). All of these assessment tools are
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sensitive to the linguistic proficiency of the ELLs and allow them to show their understanding of
in alternative ways.

Research has indicated that explicit, systematic instruction has been proven to be
effective for ELLs (Tissington and LaCour, 2010). The writer particularly likes the Language
Experience Approach (LEA) included in the Hellfrich and Bosh (2011) article. It scaffolds the
learning of ELLs by creating materials that they can read and are of high interest to them.
Instead of teaching traditional grammar or skill and drills in writing that do not make meaning to
ELLs, Schulz (2009) suggests the use of explicit writing instruction which fosters social
interaction among teachers and students, and can help students better understand the language in
real-life context. This instruction strategy is supported by Helfrich and Bosh (2011) who state
that by engaging ELLs in classroom instructional activities, teachers should use explicit
instruction, modified patterns of speech, modeling, and real reading to express meaning and to
increase ELLs’ understanding. Interactive teaching strategies, such as cooperative learning, are
also highly effective with ELLs. Johnson & Johnson (1990), as cited in Allison and Rehm
(2011), noted that in cooperative learning, ELLs are given opportunities to put into practice the
English they know, and be able to improve their communication skills while building friendships
with their peers. When teachers look at the concept of learning language, they should look at it
from a whole-child perspective. Good teaching pedagogy should cover more than reading
instruction. As Helfrich and Bosh (2011) introduce the importance of movement strategies,
which allow ELLs to learn kinesthetically in drama, math, music, science and social studies,
ELLs are motivated and stimulated to learn through hands-on learning experiences, and
consequently, their vocabulary and language skills are promoted.
The importance of peer interaction has been mentioned in three out of the four reviewed articles. As noted in Allison and Rehm (2011), through cooperative learning, ELLs share materials with their peers, socialize with them, and get support from them. As a result, their feeling of isolation and loneliness are reduced. Teachers, therefore, should value the role of peers in the inclusion and education of ELLs. Helfrich and Bosh (2011) highlight the fact that ELLs learn from their peers as much as they learn from their teachers. Teachers can use partner-share, group activities, and peer tutoring to include peer involvement. Tissington and LaCour (2010) use peer collaboration in social studies classrooms, ELLs are included in small group discussion, and to create and present projects together.

It is surprising to note that the importance of communicating with parents and engaging them in their children’s education is only mentioned in the article by Allison and Rehm (2011). Although involving parents is challenging, parents of ELLs can often make a positive difference in the classroom. Home visits, invitation to share experiences and information of their culture, foods, and other traditions are all useful ways to work with and interact with the families of ELLs (Allison and Rehm, 2011). Therefore, it is essential for teachers to build a strong relationship with the parents of ELLs in order to enhance the learning of these diverse learners.

According to Bandera’s motivation theory, children experience self-efficacy from teachers who believe that they can succeed. This same motivation applies to ELLs as well. If teachers have high expectations on them, they will live up to teachers’ expectations. However, Allison and Rehm (2011) note that many ELLs do not get challenging lessons that are appropriate to their grade-level knowledge and content because their teachers do not trust in their capability due to their English language skills. Teacher’s expectations need to be realistic, and should focus on what students are capable of doing and build from there (Schulz, 2009).
In conclusion, the writer finds that the instruction strategies identified through the articles are very useful. It is crucial for teachers to know how best to effectively support the home language so that early literacy can be fostered at home and at school. In Toronto where the writer’s school locates, ELLs come from different parts of the world. Therefore, further research to link multiculturalism with teaching strategies and learning activities is needed so that schools in Toronto can meet the particular linguistic, cultural and learning needs of all ELLs.

The needs of every student are unique and the level varies. Teachers must differentiate instruction to enhance the learning of their students according to their needs and levels. This is particularly true when working with ELLs, “When teachers provide careful, individualized scaffolding, students’ writing will be enhanced” (Schulz, 2009, p. 60). Through using different effective instruction strategies, from respecting cultural diversity, integrating different aspects of students’ culture into their daily instruction, employing appropriate assessments that are less language intensive, to peer collaboration, careful planning of challenging lessons, and encouraging parental involvement, teachers can make available opportunities to assist ELLs become successful, capable learners.
References


