

Educational Strategies to Guide English Language Learners  
in Reading and Mathematics

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## Abstract

This Senior Honors Thesis covers effective strategies that educators can use with English Language Learners (ELLs) in the subjects of reading and mathematics. Reading strategies contained within the thesis include comprehension strategies as well as analytic and reflective reading strategies. Mathematics strategies will focus on building a foundation of basic skills at an early age and developing those foundational skills and concepts throughout the grades. These reading and mathematics strategies will be for students at various levels of English proficiency and at various levels of reading/math abilities in grades K-8. The thesis also addresses heterogeneous whole-group and homogeneous ELL-specific group strategies in order to show the effectiveness, usability, and efficiency of both broad types of approaches. Additionally, the thesis describes the differences between strategies in elementary and middle school in both reading and math. Overall, the thesis provides a guide to effective strategies for educators of ELL students at various levels of education.

Educational Strategies to Guide English Language Learners  
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The task of teaching students who are learning English is a daunting one. English Language Learners (ELLs) make up a significant and growing portion of American students, yet schools often do not meet their academic needs (López, Scanlan, & Gorman, 2015). Teachers need to learn effective, researched-based instructional strategies that can guide ELL students toward learning. They also need innovative strategies that take into account the needs of current ELL students. Because the field of education is constantly changing, reliable, recent research on the topic is essential. The author has therefore used research only from peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and the present.

Reading and math, universally recognized as two of the most crucial subjects in school, are important for success later in life. According to Schoffner and Oliveira (2017), “for ELL students, literacy is a crucial component in solidifying their place in the world around them—teachers without the understanding or ability to teach ELLs deny these students that place” (p. 44). Reading, an essential component of literacy, is thus crucial to ELLs growing up in this society. Mathematics, too, is an important part of fitting in to the world, but ELL students are struggling with this subject, even as the standards for mathematics achievement become more difficult to reach (Doabler et al., 2016). Therefore, in teaching these subjects especially, teachers should seek to help their ELL students grow in the most efficient way possible. The most important thing to remember when teaching ELL students is that these students, like all others, are

individuals. Teachers need to instruct them in the way that will most benefit them. The wise teacher will review these strategies and models to determine which ones are best for their individual students.

### **Strategies for Reading Instruction**

Reading instruction varies greatly between the elementary and middle grades. In elementary, teachers focus more on phonetic principles, fluency, and comprehension. In middle school, however, the focus shifts to a deeper understanding, including reflection upon and application of texts to the lives of students. Teachers of ELL students in the elementary grades should especially consider strategies related to growth in reading ability, and teachers of ELLs in the middle grades should especially look for strategies that integrate understanding and application with a growing reading ability.

#### **Grades K-5 Strategies**

Researchers have developed several strategies and models to help teachers better instruct ELL students in reading. These include heterogeneous whole-group strategies, like vocabulary instruction, language modeling, and instructional conversations, to stimulate learning, and homogeneous ELL-specific group strategies, such as using translation to aid comprehension and using poetry to encourage growth in reading. A discussion of whole-class and ELL-specific strategies, which are both valid instructional approaches, and the benefits of each follows below.

**Whole-group strategies.** Whole-group instructional strategies are strategies that teachers can use in classrooms where ELLs make up a portion of a heterogeneous class. A heterogeneous group is one that includes both ELL and non-ELL students. Whole-

group strategies, as opposed to ELL-specific strategies, are usually easier to implement in a classroom since they do not involve specific separate instruction for ELL students. These strategies involve teaching to all the students, but in such a way that the ELL students specifically benefit and grow from the instructional approach. They may, however, be less effective in reaching ELL students because of the whole class format and the resulting decline of individualization that occurs. Teachers need to balance the various formats of instruction to make sure that they differentiate their teaching to reach all students.

Martínez, Harris, and McClain (2014) have identified a focus on academic English as a key instructional practice for teachers of ELLs in a heterogeneous whole group setting. Academic English is the language used in subjects at school. It differs from everyday English in its vocabulary and reading strategies. In instruction with academic language, teachers should emphasize “explicitly teaching vocabulary, emphasizing cross-linguistic transfer strategies, and supporting ongoing oral language development” (Martínez et al., 2014, p. 133). This will help ELL students grow from using only everyday English to using the more challenging academic English.

***Vocabulary instruction.*** Vocabulary instruction is one way for teachers to model academic language for ELL students. According to Sylvester, Kragler, and Lontas (2014), there are several important steps that teachers can follow in vocabulary instruction. First, teachers should carefully select several words to teach. These words should come from a book the class will read, so that ELL students will have the opportunity to experience the words in their proper contexts.

Next, teachers should filter the selected vocabulary words by using a check for understanding. A simple conversation with students about whether they have heard the words before and in what contexts they have heard them can help teachers decide the words on which they should especially focus. If students show a very complete understanding of a word, then teachers may choose to focus on other words. If, on the other hand, students have no context from which to view a word, it may be difficult for them to fully understand the meaning of the word throughout the lesson. It is important for teachers to teach words with which students are somewhat, but not fully, familiar. This ensures that instruction is efficient and effective for students (Sylvester et al., 2014).

Following a check for understanding, teachers should introduce and expand upon the selected words. The use of text talk, or talk that includes both everyday and academic English, is well suited to the direct instruction of vocabulary (Sylvester et al., 2014). In teaching vocabulary through text talk, the teacher instructs on the specific words, but students also converse about the words in ways that will deepen their understanding of the words. The first step in directly teaching the words is contextualization, using the book in which the words appear. Next, the students say the word with the teacher, “to create a phonological representation” (Sylvester et al., 2014, p. 439). They repeat the word several times, and then the teacher gives a definition of the word at the students’ level of understanding. This definition uses words and ideas with which students are familiar to create a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The teacher also provides additional contexts for the word, to prevent the students from only recognizing

one use of the word (Sylvester et al., 2014). The final step for teachers in the direct instruction portion is to repeat the word again with the students.

After the direct instruction, teachers can extend ELL students' understanding by leading a discussion around the vocabulary words. This conversation allows for further "explanation, discrimination, or analysis" and "promotes opportunities for students to think more deeply about target words" (Sylvester et al., 2014, p. 440). When students can differentiate between the words and explain similarities and differences between them, they show their understanding of the meaning and use of the vocabulary words presented. The discussion ends by relating the vocabulary words together in different contexts, which brings the conversation to a complete conclusion.

*Language modeling.* One approach teachers can use to guide ELL students in learning academic English is language modeling. Language modeling includes modeling vocabulary, incorporating rich language in instruction, asking questions, and using discussion on a topic (López et al., 2015).

Modeling vocabulary and incorporating rich language in instruction both involve using and teaching difficult words to students. Modeling vocabulary means that teachers use words in their proper context while they speak. When teachers place words in correct context, it is easier for ELL students to learn and use the words too. This results in a decrease in confusion surrounding difficult vocabulary words. Teachers should carefully choose vocabulary words in instruction that will bring about the most understanding for ELL students (i.e., rich language). This rich language means that students are getting the greatest benefit possible from the chosen vocabulary words.



Questions and discussion in language modeling both lead to an increase in oral conversation. Open-ended questions especially allow students to answer in using their own thoughts and ideas. For ELL students, this means that they may not have to both think of a specific answer and think of how to say that answer in an unfamiliar language. Discussions allows ELL students to communicate their original ideas while also learning communication skills from the teacher and other students.

In a study on the relationship of language modeling to reading ability, “students gained almost 2 points on average for each unit increase in the language modeling measure across classrooms” (López et al., 2015, p. 17). This figure included ELL students and shows that language modeling is an effective approach to instruction for ELLs.

***Instructional Conversations.*** Another instructional strategy that involves discussion is Instructional Conversations. Instructional Conversations (ICs) are “a regularly scheduled teacher-led event involving three to seven students, lasting about 20 minutes, with a clear instructional goal” (Portes, Canché, Boada, & Whatley, 2018, p. 491). In contrast to teacher-led class discussions, ICs are student led, with the teacher providing the topic and input when necessary. Teachers can use ICs in several content areas, including reading, to facilitate a deeper understanding of material through conversations that involve the cultural and life experiences of students. In reading specifically, ICs can introduce students to greater comprehension of passages, and they can also give ELL students a way to express relationships between the texts they read and their own personal thoughts and experiences.

For ELL students, ICs provide a low-structured time to use conversational English without pressure to perform. Teachers can and should model correct academic English during these conversations, but the focus for students should be on the topic at hand, not on conventions (Portes et al., 2018). During ICs, ELL students receive both the explicit benefits of learning more about the topic at hand and the implicit knowledge of English grammar and mechanics. Portes et al. (2018) found that ELL students taught by teachers using ICs in the classroom performed better than their controlled-classroom peers on content exams in not only English Language Arts (i.e., English acquisition), but also in content areas (e.g., reading). ICs give ELL students the opportunity to learn more English in a low-pressure situation and therefore improve their opportunities to succeed in reading as well.

***Peer pairings.*** Teachers of heterogeneous classes can also use peer pairings so that students can help each other through difficult passages or reading strategies. Pairing strategies supported by research include dyad reading, in which a (usually non-ELL) reader with stronger reading skills reads in unison with an ELL reader who has weaker reading skills, and paired reading, in which a reader with stronger reading skills reads a passage first and then an ELL reader with weaker reading skills rereads the same passage immediately following (Martínez et al., 2014). These pairing strategies, while making ELL students feel comfortable in the classroom, also greatly improve their reading fluency, comprehension, and accuracy.

**ELL-specific strategies.** ELL-specific strategies are strategies used with small homogeneous student groups composed solely of ELL students. Teachers can use these

strategies to more easily focus on individual students' needs because of the small group setting. Although small group settings can be harder to implement in the classroom because of time, setup, or other issues, teachers should attempt to incorporate some kind of small-group instruction when teaching ELL students to read, as it can provide more intense and significant growth in reading ability among those students. All strategies in this section involve teaching either individual ELL students or homogeneous small groups; that is, groups composed only of ELLs.

***Shared-book reading.*** Shared-book reading is one ELL-specific strategy that teachers can use in the early elementary grades to increase comprehension. In their study on kindergarten students in homogeneous classes of ELLs, Gámez, González, and Urbin (2016) found that shared-book reading positively influenced ELL students in their understanding of story structure, their story comprehension, and their ability to retell a story. Teacher activities throughout the shared-book reading process brought about various results in the language skills of the students. For example, in classes where teachers used more gestures to communicate throughout the shared-book reading experience, students showed gains in comprehension. When teachers both read the story and talked to students about the story during the shared-book reading time, students improved in their understanding of story structure. ELL students also showed gains in their ability to retell stories using a larger vocabulary after the shared-book reading. Both gestures and extratextual talk produced specific but rather unexpected results in students. These results could indicate that specific actions indirectly influence many features of language, not just the ones that seem directly related (Gámez et al., 2016). These

findings should motivate teachers to be deliberate in their actions, choosing carefully how they speak and act so that students can best learn.

Because shared-book reading involves reading, extratextual speech, gestures, and more opportunities for language growth, it provides an environment in which students can not only learn to read better but also learn to speak English more fluently. Teachers, especially of younger grades such as kindergarten, should add shared-book reading to their repertoire of reading instructional strategies because it provides many benefits to the reading skills of ELL students and to the general language and speech skills of students.

*Translating texts.* While shared reading is a beneficial strategy for ELL students in lower grades, Goodwin and Jiménez (2015) suggest a different strategy for older elementary students who are at a higher level of English proficiency. This strategy is based upon students translating texts in order to get the most meaning possible from the texts. Goodwin and Jiménez (2015) give three components that should be present in this type of lesson: “modified guided reading, collaborative translation, and metacognitive reflection” (p. 622).

The first part of a typical lesson using the translate strategy is modified guided reading. During this portion of the lesson, the teacher introduces the text to a group of ELL students using known background information. Students then silently read a portion of text in English to themselves. They determine any important points or main themes and write these down to share with the group. Next, the students, with the teacher’s assistance, choose a small passage (one or two sentences) to translate into their primary language. As they translate, the students discuss amongst themselves the best words and

phrases to convey the meaning of the passage. This builds comprehension since it not only reviews the material of the passage but also forces students to think about what the passage is actually saying and how it is saying it. Teachers can guide students in this process by instructing them in the use of translation devices, including negation, explanation, paraphrase, and simplification. These devices foster skills that also build reading comprehension, such as inferencing and paraphrasing (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2015). The lesson ends with students reflecting on their translations and on the translation's significance to the whole text. Students critique one another's word choice or order and think about the strategies they used to translate the smaller portion of text. They also think beyond the passage to their experiences in the activity and the benefits of using translation to aid comprehension. This reflection helps students to gain metalinguistic awareness; that is, it helps them understand both English and their primary language better as a whole. This strategy builds understanding by keeping the students engaged and interested and by allowing them to use their strengths (i.e. their first language) to guide their reading.

The translation strategy works both for bilingual teachers and for monolingual teachers who may not understand the translations of students. Bilingual teachers are able to recognize mistakes in students' translations, and while monolingual teachers may not be able to do this, they do gain the added benefits of students' explanations. When the language barrier between students and teachers requires students to explain their translations, they use more comprehension pathways and gain a greater awareness of the similarities and differences between their primary language and English (Goodwin &

Jiménez, 2015). Other “instructional moves” that monolingual teachers can make in requesting student translations include selecting challenging text to translate, teaching students strategies to use during translation, encouraging and instructing in collaboration, explicitly teaching on English textual clues and vocabulary, and connecting figurative language to student background knowledge. In analyzing translations, monolingual teachers can compare student translations, ask students to explain problem words, phrases, or ideas in translation, and summarize or revoice student insights (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2015).

*Poetry.* One ELL-specific instructional strategy is unique in its content and purpose. The use of poetry to aid ELLs in learning to read is unconventional, but it produced significantly positive results in fluency and word recognition for a group of ELL students. Many basal systems focused on comprehension strategies (like the methods mentioned above) but did not emphasize word recognition or fluency, which are both integral skills for the beginning reader. The implementation of a poetry program, called The Poetry Academy, made the emphasis on word recognition and fluency possible without sacrificing the comprehension strategies (Wilfong, 2015).

The Poetry Academy, a strategy for teachers of ELLs in small, homogeneous groups, aligned with six tenets of learning a second language and was a good fit for helping ELL students learn to read. These six tenets are as follows: (a) language acquisition is a conscious and subconscious process; (b) English grammatical structures are usually learned in a particular order; (c) ELLs monitor their speech in their second language (English); (d) teachers should focus on language for communication rather than

for grammatical structure; (e) ELLs' filter, or monitor, can be affected by their degree of motivation and confidence in a situation; (f) students are successful in reading when they can read assigned or chosen texts with ease (Wilfong, 2015). The Poetry Academy meets these tenets in several ways. First, it offers an informal setting in which students read passages that lack some grammar regularity. It also removes the necessity of having to sound perfect all the time, and it provides specific poems to match student progress and interests. This means that the Poetry Academy program meets students at their specific level of ability. Finally, it encourages stimulating conversations that increase the use of English without forcing students to use a filter or monitor.

The Poetry Academy method involved several steps. First, the researcher pre-assessed students to determine their levels of fluency and word recognition. Specifically, the researcher used the Names Test and the 3-Minute Reading Assessment to determine the students' levels of reading ability (Wilfong, 2015). Over the next several weeks, the tutoring sessions followed a set pattern. Students first followed this pattern in homogeneous groups composed of ELLs and then in individual student sessions with the instructor. First, the instructor read a poem to the students to model correct reading. Then, the students read the poem with the instructor to build confidence in their ability. Next, the students read the poem by themselves to the instructor. Following the session, the students went home and read the poem to as many people as possible, gaining signatures as proof that they read to several individuals. Finally, the students performed the poem the following week. The tutor and students repeated this process over several weeks of sessions (Wilfong, 2015). The program was set up in such a way that the

instructor could choose poems according to individual student interests and grammatical learning needs. At the end of a 12-week period, the instructor assessed students again. The ELL students showed improvement on both tests, with several students moving from a frustration level to an instructional level of fluency in word recognition (Wilfong, 2015). In addition to improving their word recognition and fluency, students also reported that poetry made their reading more fun and that they felt more comfortable when reading using The Poetry Academy method. Their classroom teacher reported a surge in the students' confidence in reading following the completion of the program. The English tutor, who actually administered the program, commented that it was difficult to choose specific poems for the individual students' abilities and interests, but it was worth it. The students became more engaged and excited about reading as they got to read about subjects that interested them. In addition, the tutor said that the routine of The Poetry Academy helped the students stay focused and know what to expect (Wilfong, 2015). Overall, the Poetry Academy not only helped students grow in reading ability, but also in confidence and classroom participation. As such, it is one of the more effective methods to use with ELL students.

### **Grades 6-8 Strategies**

Middle school students face a unique struggle in reading. In late elementary and into middle school, the focus in reading changes from basic comprehension and fluency to analysis and reflection. As seen from curriculum and standards for the age group, educators expect that students not only know what they are reading, but also that they know how to think critically about the texts. Students must evaluate the ideas in the texts



and decide upon the validity of them. For ELL students, who may be at various levels of reading fluency by the middle school grades, these additional language demands require teachers to use specific strategies that will guide the ELL students in both fluency and the higher-level thinking demands.

**Whole-group strategies.** Whole-group teachers in the middle school face several unique challenges. First, the makeup of whole groups in middle school is different from that of elementary classrooms in that the groups are not always consistent throughout the day; that is, students may not be with the same group of students in all of their classes. Also, teachers in the middle school teach several different groups daily, so differentiation of instruction must often take various forms throughout the day. Finally, content areas besides language arts (such as social studies and science) require reading in middle school. These unique challenges require unique instructional strategies in response.

***Linguistically responsive teaching.*** Shoffner and de Oliveira (2017) recommend that teachers of ELL students include several key elements in their classroom. These elements are part of linguistically responsive teaching, or, teaching that connects the elements of language to culture and society. Of those elements, three specifically apply to instruction. These three elements are that teachers should (a) identify language demands, seeking to alleviate some of the burdens of learning English; (b) apply principles of second language learning, which include emphasizing the differences between academic and conversational English; and (c) scaffold instruction to promote ELLs learning, utilizing various instructional materials and methods to give ELL students the best chance to succeed (Shoffner & de Oliveira, 2017). Teachers who actively decide

to make these elements a part of their classroom can greatly benefit their ELL students and the mainstream students in the class.

As an example of linguistically responsive teaching, Shoffner and de Oliveira (2017) demonstrate the use of a text that could be relatable to the cultural and linguistic situations of ELLs. They ask questions that require students to reflect on the meaning and language use of the text while encouraging students to bring their own experiences into the discussion. When teachers use texts that are relatable to students and ask questions about both surface-level and deeper meanings of the texts, ELL students can grow in reading fluency and in reflective, higher level thinking.

***Content area reading.*** Content area reading is an additional concern in the middle grades. According to Barber et al. (2015), “ELLs, especially in the upper grades, confront the double challenge of having to learn and perform on grade-level curricula in a language while simultaneously learning that language” (p. 33). The United States History for Engaged Reading (USHER) curriculum encourages middle school students to become involved with the content area texts that they are reading. Instruction in the curriculum revolves around three key student strategies: activating background knowledge, generating text-based questions, and organizing information graphically (Barber et al., 2015).

When students activate background knowledge, they use text features to connect the text to any prior understandings or experiences they have had. This means that students look at the texts and find any information or extratextual evidence that connects to something in their lives. Generating text-based questions involves asking about

specific aspects of the text that seem unclear to the student. Students have the opportunity to ask about things that confuse them through the use of this strategy.

Organizing information graphically means using a physical model to pull information from the text and structuring it in the model in a logical fashion. This structure can give students a good visual understanding of the information and how it connects to other important concepts. Some examples of graphic organization include Venn diagrams for comparing and contrasting, and timelines to relate events to one another (Barber et al., 2015).

Teachers can instruct on these strategies by modeling the strategies (e.g., for activating background knowledge, looking at a text feature and explaining a prior experience that may help them better understand the passage) and then gradually moving from a teacher-centered example to independent student practice (i.e., from a structured student example in the whole class setting to guided practice in smaller groups to independent practice with individual students) (Barber et al., 2015). A typical USHER lesson includes instruction on one of the reading strategies and then application of that strategy to a content area text. USHER lessons also include strategy, content, and vocabulary scaffolds. Scaffolding means that the teacher gives the students stepping stones to understanding. In USHER lessons, these stepping stones include references to goals, leading questions about connections to previous materials, and discussions on word meanings, if necessary (Barber et al., 2015).

The implementation of the USHER curriculum brought about positive changes in students' (both ELLs and non-ELLs) history comprehension. The strategies taught to the

students allowed them to build comprehension of the texts, because they had several new ways that they could think about the texts. The structure of the instruction, from teacher-centered to student-focused, encouraged self-efficacy in ELL students, a predictor of comprehension ability in ELLs (Barber et al., 2015). The use of the USHER curriculum shows a beneficial example of history scaffolded reading instruction that can and should be emulated in the classrooms of other content area teachers as well.

**ELL-specific strategies.** Many teachers in the middle grades encounter barriers against helping ELL students succeed in reading. One barrier, identified by Sedeghi and Izadpanah (2018), was the limited amount of time spent focused on reading in the classroom. Because classes in middle school are often separate and students are learning subjects independently of one another, the amount of time that teachers spend solely on reading decreases. Sedeghi and Izadpanah (2018) suggested that teachers spend a designated amount of time outside of the classroom teaching ELLs reading, or that teachers divide their classes into groups based on reading ability so that the teachers can best meet the students' needs. This kind of homogeneous grouping can give ELL students the specific, intense instruction that will help them to succeed.

**ELL classroom.** Smith and Salgado (2018) documented a case study in a sixth-grade ELL reading and language arts classroom. These authors observed the homogeneous ELL classroom of Mrs. Martinez (a pseudonym) and focused on her teaching practices as they related to her students. They found that Mrs. Martinez concentrated on English language differentiation, visualization and reading comprehension, and crossing boundaries with *cuentos*, or stories.

*English language differentiation.* To Mrs. Martinez, English language differentiation involved finding the words in English and Spanish (her students' primary language) that would bring the greatest amount of understanding of a particular passage. This could include finding cognates (i.e., words that look or sound similar in both English and Spanish and which have similar meanings) and giving instructions in the language with which students feel most comfortable. She also challenged students to think about language structure and about the meaning of the passages they read (Smith & Salgado, 2018).

*Visualization.* By having students visualize the text as they read it, Mrs. Martinez increased the possibility for comprehension. When students see what they are reading, it is easier for them to understand what is happening in a story. To teach students to visualize a text, Mrs. Martinez told them to make a picture or a movie of a scene in a story in their heads. She showed them her own example by drawing it on the board. Then, she asked students to verbalize what they saw. In this way, "students were able to imagine characters, setting, and events" (Smith & Salgado, 2018, p. 23). Visualization helps ELL students to come to a greater understanding of story elements.

*Storytelling.* Mrs. Martinez also used *cuentos*, or stories, to engage students and to raise their motivation levels. In class, the students read young adult literature books to which they could relate. Mrs. Martinez specifically chose stories that contained familiar elements to the lives of her students. She also used stories from her own life to help students make connections from the stories to experiences of their own (Smith & Salgado, 2018). In using *cuentos*, Mrs. Martinez modeled storytelling and connecting

good literature to her own life, and also encouraged storytelling in the conversations of students. Storytelling is one way for students to move beyond comprehension to connection, reflection, and analysis of literature in the middle grades.

Reading instruction for ELLs involves many moving parts. Word recognition, fluency, and basic comprehension are all important in the elementary grades. Teachers of ELL students in these classrooms, as well as in small groups, can use instructional strategies such as vocabulary building, instructional conversations, peer pairings, shared book reading, translation, and the Poetry Academy. Middle school teachers of ELL students face other challenges, including struggles in content area comprehension and in learning to connect, reflect upon, and analyze reading material. These teachers can ask questions about texts, model content-area reading strategies, teach visualization, and tell stories to instruct students in reading. These elementary and middle school strategies, while representing a small part of the range of ELL instructional strategies, have recently shown significantly positive results in common areas of difficulties for ELLs. Therefore, teachers should seek to apply these strategies to the instruction of their ELL students, so that their students can succeed in reading.

### **Strategies for Mathematics Instruction**

Like reading, the subject of mathematics has a clear division in content between the elementary and middle school. In the elementary years, the focus in content is generally on building up basic methods to solve math problems. In middle school, this focus shifts to an emphasis on real-world application of these methods. This shift

provides a clear distinction between the types of strategies that should be used in the elementary and middle school grades.

### **Grades K-5 Strategies**

Like the reading strategies, the two broad types of mathematics teaching strategies in the elementary grades, are whole-group and ELL-specific strategies. Miller and Warren (2014) suggest that teachers should focus on three key elements when working with both the whole group and with small groups in the mathematics classroom: representations, oral language, and engagement in mathematics. When teachers focus on these three elements, ESL students see great gains in mathematics achievement and even greater gains than those of their mainstream peers (Miller & Warren, 2014).

**Representations.** Representations are the varied types of images or depictions that the brain uses to comprehend mathematics. These can include both internal representations and external representations. Internal representations are inside of the learner and include mental models, visual images, and kinesthetic concepts. External representations are outside of the learner and can include graphs, number lines, geometric figures, and other standard illustrations (Miller & Warren, 2014). Teachers who use many different representations give students the opportunity to see a concept in more than one way. Doabler et al. (2016) advise supporting students in their understanding by offering many visual models and by explicitly explaining the relationships between the models and the key concepts they represent. The visual models provide a tangible way for students to understand the material, but if students do not understand the connection between the model and material, teachers lose the significant benefits of using models.

Thus, teachers should use models extensively but also must explain the model and the connection explicitly and thoroughly so that students fully comprehend the lesson material.

**Oral language.** The language of mathematics is often a barrier to student understanding. New and unfamiliar terms present difficulties to many students. Familiar vocabulary used in unfamiliar contexts can also be a barrier to learning (Miller & Warren, 2014). ELL students especially encounter these difficulties since the everyday English they learn is often very different from the language used in the mathematics classroom. Miller and Warren (2014), however, see mathematical language as a resource that supports “thinking, doing, learning, and teaching mathematics” (p. 794). When teachers learn and use the language of mathematics correctly, they present information that makes sense to students and thus help students learn.

**Engagement.** Shared experiences and background information are both important tools that teachers can use to promote engagement in mathematics. Engagement in mathematics is central to learning mathematics because it provides a motivation to learn mathematical concepts. Teachers can engage their students in the learning process by using relatable language and experiences, including students in the instructional process, and showing students how their knowledge is applicable to their lives (Miller & Warren, 2014). Teachers should always bear in mind the three important ideas of representations, oral language, and engagement in mathematics so that they can help their ESL students succeed, whether in a whole class or small group setting.



**Whole-group strategies.** Whole-group strategies in the math classroom are strategies that teacher can use with a heterogeneous group of students. It is crucial that teachers, and especially teachers of ELL students, use instructional practices that will best introduce and solidify new ideas for students. Merritt, Palacios, Banse, Rimm-Kaufman, and Leis (2017) found six instructional practices common to two grade 5 classrooms with a high percentage of ELL students and a high level of mathematical growth. These practices are as follows: multiple representations of mathematics concepts, mathematical discourse practices, vocabulary building, checks for understanding, error analysis, and explicit teaching of learning strategies.

**Multiple representations.** Using multiple representations of mathematics concepts involves using various forms of a concept to further understanding (Doabler et al., 2016; Merritt et al., 2017; Miller & Warren, 2014). For example, in a lesson about fractions, a teacher may use fractions strips, fraction circles, and the decimal representation of a fraction to illustrate the concept in multiple ways. By utilizing multiple representations, teachers are more likely to reach all their students. Since students all have different ways of understanding, using the different representations creates a greater likelihood for student understanding throughout the classroom. Doabler et al. (2016) suggest that explicit mathematical instruction, which focuses on overt models and demonstrations, is helpful to ELL students, especially those in kindergarten.

**Mathematical discourse.** Mathematical discourse practices in both successful classrooms involved questioning, which the teachers used to review concepts and create connections between prior knowledge and new knowledge (Merritt et al., 2017).

Questioning allowed students to reflect upon their understanding of the concept, even if not all students answer a specific question aloud. For ELL students, questioning involved another opportunity to hear and understand the mathematical language used throughout the lesson. A teacher who “connects new content with students’ background knowledge” and “scaffolds instruction” employs additional beneficial mathematical discourse practices (Doabler et al., 2016, p. 346).

***Vocabulary building.*** Building vocabulary is another important way to help ELL students understand mathematical language. By using explicit instruction involving vocabulary, the successful teachers in the study by Merritt et al. (2017) provided a pathway to understanding potentially difficult words found only in the subject of mathematics. These teachers used definitions, pictures, and hand motions to teach vocabulary, and they also supported students’ vocabulary understanding by explaining non-mathematical words found in story problems (Merritt et al., 2017).

***Checks for understanding.*** Checks for understanding allow teachers to know how much their students comprehend about a concept. They are important because teachers can use this information to structure their next lessons and to guide students toward a full understanding of concepts. The teachers in the study by Merritt et al. (2017) used checks for understanding to focus on both the mathematical and the language understanding of their students to make sure they understood all that a question asked.

***Error analysis.*** Teachers can use error analysis to help students know where they went wrong in solving a problem and how they can do a problem correctly in the future. When used correctly, error analysis should not discourage students but should help them

to realize that their mistakes help them to grow in their mathematical knowledge. With ELL students, it is important for teachers to recognize errors in language and mathematical concepts, not just one or the other. Teachers should not assume that students do not understand a mathematical concept but should strive to find the root of a misunderstanding, whether it involves language or mathematics usage. A common way to use error analysis is to identify an error and then use guiding questions to bring full understanding about the error and its solution to the student (Merritt et al., 2017).

***Learning strategies.*** Learning strategies can include organizational, procedural, and problem-solving strategies. Organizational and procedural strategies help students to follow an approach in order to solve a problem, while problem-solving strategies help students to identify a way to solve a problem and use that way to find an answer. Both types of strategies can benefit ELL students by giving them tools that they can use to solve mathematics problems, and the successful teachers in the study by Merritt et al. (2017) used and explicitly taught both types to their students. Learning strategies, along with the other five previously mentioned teaching practices, can help teachers to better reach their ELL students.

***Whole-class discussion.*** Another way that students can connect with one another and with mathematical content is through whole-class discussion. In whole-class discussion, the teacher facilitates a conversation, leading the students to make their own correct conclusions about a topic or concept. In this way, students are more invested in what they learn: “When students communicate during mathematics lessons, they offer their understanding to the scrutiny of their teachers and peers so that their ideas can be

corrected, confirmed, or adapted” (Banse, Palacios, Merritt, & Rimm-Kaufmann, 2017, p. 200). Discussion provides a particularly beneficial environment in which students may share their understanding in order to further grow in their mathematical knowledge. It also provides additional opportunities for mathematical vocabulary building and for students to “verbalize their mathematical thinking” (Doabler et al., 2016, p. 346). When teachers use discussion in the classroom, students not only internally understand mathematical reasoning but externally communicate that reasoning during discussion.

However, challenges surface for students who do not share the same primary language as the teacher or the majority of the class. Several obstacles, such as content-specific vocabulary and conversational proficiency, arise when ELLs attempt to enter into whole-class discussion (Banse et al., 2017). Teachers can learn to scaffold students in several ways so that the students may come to an understanding of the content necessary to continue in mathematical development. Banse et al. (2017) suggest using questioning, revoicing, and clear teacher speech to guide all students, especially ELLs, toward understanding.

*Questioning.* Questioning, as mentioned above, is an important part of a whole-class discussion. It typically involves two types of inquiries: referential and display. Teachers more commonly use display questions, which elicit a single, procedure-based response. Referential questions, on the other hand, are more beneficial to discussion because they seek answers that are open-ended, with students providing answers based on their own reasoning and not a previously provided formula or process (Banse et al.,

2017). Once students have answered either type of question, teachers can use revoicing to clarify and expand upon the answers.

*Revoicing.* Revoicing gives students another opportunity to hear and understand what other students are saying. It also gives teachers the opportunity to clarify or correct any misunderstandings that may have occurred in the original student's response. For ELL students, revoicing allows the mathematical understanding that the students show to come through, despite any language troubles the student may have had. Three key components of revoicing include reformulation (using correct academic terms to describe a student's answer), elaboration (extending or expanding upon a student's response), and repetition (saying what the student previously said again); (Banse et al., 2017).

*Teacher speech.* Teacher speech is the third suggested tool that teachers can use to scaffold students' understanding. The main two beneficial types of teacher speech are think-alouds and self-talk. Think-alouds occur when teachers model how to solve a problem by stating their thinking process aloud with the class. Self-talk involves repeating steps or ideas in ways that will help more students understand what the teacher is doing throughout the process of the problem. Both of these types of teacher speech help ELL students by using clear language to solidify and expand understanding of the concept. They give more opportunities for students to comprehend what is going on and why mathematical processes and concepts work the way that they do (Banse et al., 2017).

*Small groups.* Although not an instructional strategy, putting students into small groups is an important approach that teachers can use with ELL students in a heterogeneous whole-group setting. The general benefits of group work include content

understanding, relational understanding, and the benefit of peers working together to fill gaps in understanding. Individual students may not have a complete understanding of a topic or concept, but groups as a whole are more likely to have a greater knowledge, so individual group members can explain various parts of the topic to other group members to bring each member to full comprehension (Takeuchi, 2016). Small groups also give students more individual attention from the teacher, provide more time to practice a skill than whole-group instruction provides, and, for ELL students, offer a structured opportunity for conversation with other students and the teacher. In mathematics, small groups can especially help students in working through problem solving and concept learning (Garrett & Hong, 2015).

*Homogeneous versus heterogeneous ability grouping.* There are essentially two ways that a teacher can use grouping in the classroom: homogeneous ability grouping and heterogeneous ability grouping. Homogeneous ability grouping means that the teacher groups students of similar abilities together (Garrett & Hong, 2015). With this type of grouping, the teacher can address the needs of students who are struggling or challenge those whose achievement is above average depending on the ability level of the group. In heterogeneous ability grouping, teachers group students of various abilities together (Garrett & Hong, 2015). This kind of grouping allows for more conversation among students, with higher-achieving students able to help lower-achieving students by giving them additional information about potential gaps in understanding.

In their study in which they analyzed grouping in kindergarten classrooms, Garrett and Hong (2015) found that there was a significant negative impact for ELL

students in classrooms using only homogeneous grouping compared to no grouping, heterogeneous grouping, and a combination of heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping. In the specific case of Hispanic ELL students, Garrett and Hong (2015) found that no grouping was also likely unhelpful. A possible reason for the negative impacts of homogeneous grouping on ELL students could be teacher perception of a student's ability level. Teachers who misjudge students' abilities may give them instruction in a homogeneous group that does not cater to the students' needs (Garrett and Hong, 2015). Heterogeneous grouping usually involves a more balanced approach to instruction, so students may receive the benefits of group work better in this type of grouping.

*Student-chosen groups.* Another grouping strategy that teachers can use is grouping ELL students with their friends rather than in teacher-assigned groups. This idea is based on a "sociocultural theory of learning," which says that education is a social exercise, and thus social groupings (i.e., friend groups) are the most beneficial place in which to learn (Takeuchi, 2016, p. 412). Friends who discuss with one another the concepts or processes learned can, according to this theory, come more easily and completely to an understanding of those concepts or processes. The basis of friendship allows for ease in conversation and thus a quicker path to talking about the ideas presented by the teacher.

ELL students in teacher-assigned groups often assume the role of the novice and do not contribute to group discussion. However, when allowed to choose their groups and work with their friends, ELL students do not automatically become novices and are more able to participate in the dynamics of their groups (Takeuchi, 2016). Although the

consensus on working on group work with friends in the general classroom has been murky, it has clear benefits for ELLs.

Takeuchi's (2016) study of student interactions within groups that included ELLs showed that groups consisting of friends devoted significantly more time to collaborative activities than their teacher-assigned counterpart groups did. Friends groups also gave more opportunities for ELL students to become "experts" in the group, helping or teaching the other members of the group rather than being taught by them (Takeuchi, 2016, p. 422).

*Grouping with other ELL students.* Students may also see additional benefits if they choose partners or groups that include other ELL students (even if the other ELL students do not speak the same primary language). In Takeuchi's case study, a student receiving ELL instruction chose to work with another student who did not receive ELL instruction due to program requirements, but whose primary language was not English nor the primary language of the first student. In this student-selected partnership, the learners communicated their understandings and misunderstandings with more confidence and helped each other work through difficulties that arose rather than simply telling each other what to write or do to solve the problem (Takeuchi, 2016). This showed another benefit of student-selected groups: the ability to connect with each other, which led to giving and receiving help more graciously.

**ELL-specific strategies.** ELL-specific strategies give ELL students specialized attention designed to meet their set of needs. For example, Driver and Powell (2016) investigated the effectiveness of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching on the



mathematics achievement of nine ELL students at risk for mathematics difficulty.

Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching in mathematics seeks to use prior knowledge and experiences of students to provide a relevant context in which students may complete problems. Driver and Powell (2016) define students with mathematics difficulty as those below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile in mathematics performance. Researchers chose students who were both ELL students and who displayed mathematics difficulty for this study.

In their study, the researchers used several tutoring sessions that incorporated information from the students' lives into the word problems given to the students. Tutors also encouraged students to use their native languages during tutoring sessions. Tutors gave the students a pretest and a posttest to gauge their understanding of word problems, and the results of these tests showed growth in the students' ability to comprehend and complete word problems correctly (Driver & Powell, 2016). Researchers also found that students previously in the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> percentiles of one specific type of word problem at the beginning of the study progressed to the 33<sup>rd</sup> to 59<sup>th</sup> percentile range by the end of the study, a range that is above the previously mentioned metric of the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile that researchers used to choose participants in the study (Driver & Powell, 2016).

Though the sample size of this study was small, the results provide important insight for educators looking to provide specialized instruction for ELL students in mathematics. The results indicate that teachers who focus on prior knowledge and who encourage use of ELL students' primary language(s) can help students grow in their understanding of word problems. An emphasis on the culture and language unique to the

ELL students in the classroom can give the ELL students more motivation to complete the problems teachers give them.

***Primary language instruction.*** In the small group setting, teachers may want to not only allow and encourage ELL students to speak their primary language(s) but, if possible, may want to speak that language during instruction themselves. Orosco (2014) examined the effects of using students' primary language during tutoring sessions for Spanish-speaking ELL students at risk for math disabilities. He found that teaching in the students' primary language combined with teaching concepts in three phases brought about positive changes in students' mathematical development. These three phases are preteaching content, teaching strategies, and cooperative learning in a group or pairing. It is important to note that many teachers speak only English, and therefore it is not possible for them to teach in the students' primary language(s). These teachers can, first of all, still focus on the three phases of instruction in English. Additionally, these teachers can seek out tutors who speak the primary language(s) of students and train them in the three phases of instruction. Although these teachers may not be able to directly communicate these concepts with their students, they can still attempt to implement them in these ways.

The first phase of instruction with small groups of ELLs was preteaching content. When the instructors pretaught content, they explicitly defined vocabulary and applied new words in the correct mathematical concept (Orosco, 2014). All instruction in the small group of ELL students was in their primary language of Spanish. The second phase, teaching strategies, involved five steps that the students could use to solve a word problem. During this phase, the teacher modeled the steps with the students to lead them

through a problem. The five steps used were (in English): know it (brainstorm and predict how to solve the problem), find it (look for key terms and information), set it up (use relevant information to create a way to solve the problem), solve it (complete the problem), and check it (use traditional algorithms to check the problem); (Orosco, 2014). After working through a problem with the instructor, the students took on the instructor's role. To show that they understood how to use the strategy, the students explained each part of the strategy to the instructor. They worked through a problem from the perspective of a teacher, presenting the information in a way similar to how a teacher would do so. This not only gave the students an additional opportunity to express comprehension of the strategy but also gave the teacher an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings that may be present in the students' knowledge of the strategy and how to use it.

### **Grades 6-8 Strategies**

Mathematics requires an understanding of not only mathematical notation and processes but also the language specific to the discipline. Many mathematics curriculums demonstrate a shift in language usage around the middle school grades, from more everyday language to the discipline-specific vocabulary necessary to understand higher-level mathematics concepts (Adoniou & Qing, 2014). This shift is difficult for most students to grasp but can be especially challenging for ELL students. Additionally, a change has come about in recent mathematics regarding the beliefs about the way that teachers teach concepts. Standards and curricula encourage teaching concepts and processes in the context of real-world application. While the additional information and

practicality inherent in this context may help native English speakers better understand mathematical ideas, for ELL students, the language usage demands can prevent them from reaching a proficient level of understanding (Adoniou & Qing, 2014).

ELL students may find difficulty with three levels of mathematics language: text, sentence, and word. Text context can bring about confusion through the additional information given in a word problem. ELL students may struggle to understand information that is ultimately unnecessary in the working out of the mathematical problem (Adoniou & Qing, 2014). Sentence context confusions include order, inflection, and tense use, all of which include facets that are original to English and difficult to perceive from a different language perspective. Word context problems arise when a word has different meanings in an everyday language usage context and a subject-specific (e.g., mathematical) context. For example, words such as *find* and *table* have different definitions in mathematics than in regular usage and so may present extra difficulties to students who are ELLs (Adoniou & Qing, 2014). In light of these difficulties, middle school mathematics teachers should attempt to understand the difficulties that may arise from the language of mathematics and then seek ways to guide ELL students toward comprehension of and success with the new mathematical language. Through scaffolding, discussion, the use of manipulatives, and a focus on vocabulary, teachers can overcome these obstacles and lead students to learning.

**Whole-group strategies.** Teachers can use various strategies to mitigate the effects of the difficulties that ELLs experience with language in the mathematics classroom. Scaffolding is an important part of learning in any context. In the learning of

mathematical concepts, this can include defining potentially unfamiliar words and situations. It can also mean clarifying the uses of words in correct contexts and explicitly connecting various words that mean the same thing. Discussion is as important in the middle school classroom as it is in the elementary one, especially when guided by the teacher. Manipulatives and pictures can be non-language-based concrete representations of a concept or process besides the word problems often used to communicate ideas (Adoniou & Qing, 2014). All of these strategies help teachers to communicate with ELL students using the language of mathematics.

*Dual-language classroom.* Another way that teachers can assist students in using the language of mathematics is through a dual-language (DL) classroom. This biliterate environment gives students the opportunity to express themselves and their ideas in the language that is easiest for them while still encouraging growth in the language they do not know as well (Rubinstein-Ávila, Sox, Kaplan, & McGraw, 2014). The use of the primary language takes away the barrier of another language and gives students immediate access to content knowledge. Although this type of classroom is not always feasible in the middle school environment, teachers can try to implement some of the components of dual-lingualism, including learning common, helpful words and phrases in the students' primary language(s).

*Mainstream classrooms.* The success seen in dual-language classrooms should encourage teachers in mainstream schools to permit use of students' primary language(s): "mathematics teachers, even those who are English monolingual, should not fear the use of multi-lingualism in the mathematics classrooms" (Rubinstein-Ávila et al., 2014, p.

922). Teachers who allow students to draw upon the resources of both of their languages open the door for greater understanding across the board. Students who use the language with which they are more comfortable to express their reasoning build “habits of mind”, pathways to mathematical problem solving that they can ultimately use in either language (Rubinstein-Ávila et al., 2014, p. 923).

Besides the benefit of creating these pathways, students communicating in their primary language see another benefit: easier discussion and defense of mathematical ideas and problem-solving processes. Students who can defend their own processes in solving a problem show that they understand the problem and how to solve it. However, this defense can be difficult for students in a classroom where the main language spoken is not their primary language. When students have the advantage of explaining their process in their own language, they are able to clearly communicate how they completed the problem and why they believe they completed it correctly (Rubinstein-Ávila et al., 2014). They are able to discuss with other students the many possible ways to solve a problem and thus continuously grow in understanding.

**ELL-specific strategies.** ELL-specific strategies in the middle school mathematics classroom should focus on the individual students’ interests and needs. Teachers can use the strengths and weaknesses of ELL students to guide their decisions regarding instruction toward these students just as they would any other student. For example, Young, Hunt, and Lewis (2018) describe an ELL student with an interest in sports and an affinity for working in groups with other students. The teacher in this situation structured a word problem around the interest in sports and used cooperative

learning to help the student understand the process of solving the problem. This differentiation helped ELL students to receive the information they needed to learn in a way that motivated them and was understandable to them.

***Vocab Grid.*** One area in which ELL students often struggle is vocabulary. As mentioned above, the shifting language of mathematics in the middle grades makes ELL students especially vulnerable to misunderstandings, which, in turn, lead to gaps in comprehension. The use of similar words in conversational English also leads to confusion. A Vocab Grid is a way that teachers can combat these gaps in understanding by introducing and using new vocabulary correctly in a mathematical context (Marin, 2018). This strategy utilizes a grid designed to highlight important terms and incorporate the important contexts of the terms through discussion of the words' definitions, their synonyms, example uses of the words, and sample problems involving the words. Terms chosen can include both new vocabulary and review words, of which students may have heard but may not yet understand fully. Students begin by rating each word on a scale of one to three, with one meaning they know how to use the word completely, and three meaning they have never heard the word before. The student ratings guide the emphasis that the teacher needs to place on each word throughout the learning period (usually a week for 5-10 words). A discussion follows, with students giving their input regarding how they would fill out the rest of the chart. Throughout the discussion, the teacher corrects any misconceptions and expands upon student understanding. After the students fill out the chart, they may study it, look back upon it, and use it to expand their vocabulary in mathematical discussions. The weekly grids that students create form a

“math dictionary” that students can use to remember the definitions of previous words. Students can also use the math dictionary to compare and contrast previous words with new ones (Marin, 2018, p. 398). When teachers explicitly introduce new terms through Vocab Grids, they give ELL students the chance to encounter those words in their proper mathematical context.

### **Conclusion**

Both whole-group and ELL-specific strategies are useful when teaching ELL students reading and mathematics. Whole-group strategies provide teachers with methods that benefit all students in a heterogeneous group but that specifically aid ELLs, while ELL-specific strategies give focused instruction to homogeneous groups of ELL students and meets their unique needs. Teachers should tailor their instruction according to the grades that they are teaching, and they should bear in mind the curricular changes that mark the transition between the elementary and middle grades as they choose instructional strategies. In the elementary grades, vocabulary building, language modeling, instructional conversations, and peer pairings provide benefits in reading to ELL students in a whole class setting, while shared-book reading, translating, and using poetry in small groups give comprehension help, specific word recognition skills, and fluency to elementary students where they need them. Linguistically responsive teaching, content area reading, English language differentiation, visualization, and storytelling are all effective reading instructional strategies in the middle grades for ELLs. In the elementary mathematics classroom, teachers should focus on multiple representations, vocabulary building, mathematical discourse, checks for understanding,



error analysis, learning strategies, and discussion to build ELL students' understanding in mathematics. They can also utilize small groups, especially student-chosen groups, and primary language instruction to facilitate learning for ELL students. In the middle grades, teachers can use principles of a dual-language classroom to guide their instruction, even if they are not able to fully implement the model in their classroom. They can also use Vocab Grids to help students learn new and challenging words. Teachers who utilize these strategies give English language learners the opportunity to grow. These teachers are well-equipped to instruct ELL students and therefore are prepared to bring these students to their full potential. By thoughtfully using these strategies to instruct ELLs in reading and mathematics, teachers help English language learners to not only succeed in the classroom but in life.

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