

Modifications and English Language Learners

English Language Learners (ELLs) vary in the extent of language proficiency that they bring to the classroom. Some students come to school without English language skills or with some basic word knowledge in English but are not able to communicate well with teachers or peers. Many ELLs come to school with some knowledge of English and some proficiency in their primary language, but still need intensive language development in both languages. Other students come to school with academic language proficiency in their primary language, but have not acquired sufficient content vocabulary in English to enable them to complete their classroom assignments or participate in oral assignments. It is imperative that a careful diagnosis of language proficiency be done in English and, if possible, in the primary language. After the ELL's language characteristics have been determined, general education, bilingual education, and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers can identify the appropriate instructional methods, materials, and pacing necessary to ensure student success.

ELLs who are struggling to speak, read, and comprehend the English language may have few, if any, of the pre-skills necessary for academic success in English language arts. The reading requirements are often extensive and unrealistic, and these students' comprehension of the abstract concepts is minimal. Success in mastering language arts concepts is possible only to the extent that the ELLs have acquired the basic oral proficiency and reading skills, specialized abilities, and knowledge demanded in the content area.

Transfer is the process of connecting prior learning to present learning. Bilingual education as a mode for teaching is based upon the positive transfer process whereby original learning in the primary language boosts comprehension and retention of information given in the course of English instruction. Students understand complicated concepts by transferring known language competency to English. They must first develop conversational language abilities in order to progress to abstract academic levels of English proficiency.

A bilingual education program makes use of an ELL's native language as well as English. An ESL program uses the second language, English, as the medium of instruction along with adaptive methodologies such as Sheltered Instruction.

When they are acquiring English language skills and simultaneously receiving reading instruction in print as well as orally, ELLs should concentrate on developing these basic competencies:

- word recognition techniques to build reading vocabulary
- comprehension of phrases, sentences, and expressions peculiar to reading instruction, syntax and grammar, and speaking skills
- ability to organize and sequence information logically
- ability to follow specific oral and written directions

An ELL would have difficulty learning to speak, read and write a second language while simultaneously trying to comprehend complex reading passages. Therefore, a teacher specializing in language arts must consider two relevant and basic questions:

- How much prior skill and knowledge of the field does the student possess?
- How effectively is the student able to read the passages assigned?
- What is the academic level of the student in all of the content areas in the primary language?

General Principles of Modification: Language Arts

Both bilingual education and ESL teachers modify the instructional program by altering the language in which the content is conveyed; however, they would not alter the scope of the curriculum. In a bilingual education program, teachers provide the regular curriculum through dual language use to meet students' academic needs. ESL teachers use Sheltered Instruction strategies.

General education teachers should also modify their instructional strategies. By doing so, they foster English language acquisition and academic learning. Modifications may include the follows:

- help ELLs build card files on needed vocabulary
- show the same information through a variety of visual aids
- encourage ELLs to underline key words or important passages in written student assignments
- teach vocabulary helpful in grouping words, language arts concepts, and techniques into meaningful categories
- pair ELLs for team learning (with native English speakers and with other ELLs)
- teach English expressions and colloquialisms
- teach prefixes and suffixes peculiar to the English language
- develop and translate meanings through the language arts materials and context rather than providing mere translation in the vernacular which does not guarantee the same meaning in the native language and often creates confusion

All instructional personnel (teachers and teacher assistants) should be alert to language and concepts that may be unclear in materials used because of cultural difference.

Pacing and Instructional Modifications: Language Arts

Instruction must be paced according to language and academic abilities. Teachers should give consideration to the progression of language development; listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They may make modifications in the language of instruction in accordance with each student's language ability (e.g., Sheltered Instruction). The ELL's English proficiency is a factor that also should govern pacing of instruction.

In an ESL program, pacing modifications concentrate on vocabulary and concept development; in a bilingual program, dual language instruction concentrates on a process approach to the content area. Instructional personnel should help ELLs in their selection of reading materials to ensure that they are at the students' instructional levels. Modifications may include the following:

- explain special vocabulary terms in words known to the students
- write shorter and less complex sentences
- assign short homework tasks that require reading
- teach the words that signal sequence
- check understanding of written language that may convey complex concepts
- rewrite story problems in simpler English by using shorter sentences and pictures
- teach new vocabulary in each day's unit and to review terms already mastered
- tape short stories for independent listening assignments
- de-emphasize speed and emphasize accuracy of reading
- help students organize their materials, set realistic goals, and develop independent study habits

Modifications of Materials: Language Arts

All materials should be modified to meet the students' academic needs. General education teachers, bilingual education teachers, and ESL teachers should collaborate on lessons, modifications, etc. to foster and promote academic success for ELLs. Other instructional materials such as teacher-made and commercially-made products should be modified to adjust for the students' language and academic abilities. Modifications may include the following:

- provide numerous pictures to illustrate new words
- offer a variety of reference materials at the student's instructional level for independent use
- keep a variety of word games to be played by pairs of students or small groups
- use cartoons and leave the bubbles above the speakers blank to be filled in by the students
- have students prepare glossaries of reading terms
- use drawings to identify concepts and relationships
- maintain a library of supplementary reference books, workbooks, and other materials that are written in simple English and that offer additional reading samples that are well illustrated
- provide films, records, filmstrips, and other materials that may be used independently or in small groups
- help students improve writing skills by highlighting transitional devices used in writing samples
- use pictures and other visual aids to assist in comparison and contrasts for comprehension of concepts

General Principles of Modification: Mathematics

To meet the instructional needs of ELLs, teachers should modify mathematics programs to ensure that ELLs are (1) learning English and (2) mastering mathematical concepts. Emphasis on oral and visual stimuli aid students in comprehending concepts English-speaking students develop through written material. Modifications help in the following ways:

- emphasize and reinforce the concepts and ideas of mathematics as the students learn English
- emphasize acquisition of basic mathematics skills
- foster the thinking process
- stimulate continuous reorganization of previously learned ideas
- support multiple learning styles

Instructional Modifications: Mathematics

Instructional modifications may include the following:

- help students build card files and glossaries on mathematics vocabulary
- show the same information through a variety of difference graphs and visuals
- encourage students to underline key words or important facts in their written assignments
- encourage students to underline key words into meaningful groups to pair students for team learning
- teach English expressions for mathematical operations such as “square”, “add”, and “multiply”
- teach measurement terms through use of the actual instruments and devices whenever possible
- teach the names of currency, coins, and monetary units
- teach words that indicate quantitative relationships such as “more”, “less”, “larger”, and “twice as many”
- teach prefixes peculiar to the language of mathematics such as “bi”, “deci”, “centi”, and “kilo”

Pacing Modifications: Mathematics

Mathematics instruction for ELLs should be paced according to language and academic abilities and should employ teaching strategies that take these students’ unique needs into consideration. In an ESL program, pacing modifications concentrate on vocabulary and concept development. Secondary ELLs, whose academic needs require fulfillment of graduation credits, will need assistance in pacing course selection to accommodate their language and academic abilities. In addition, teachers may make the following modifications:

- explain special vocabulary terms in words known to the student
- write instructions and problems using shorter and less complex sentences
- prepare a sequence of ordinal numbers and identify the ordinal position of each one by writing the appropriate numerical symbol and word (i.e., “1st-first”)
- assign short homework tasks that require reading

- limit the number of problems that must be worked
- emphasize special mathematical meanings of words commonly used in English
- tape record problems for independent listening assignments
- de-emphasize speed and emphasize accuracy of work

Modification of Materials: Mathematics

All materials should be modified to meet the students' academic needs. General education teachers, bilingual education teachers, and ESL teachers should collaborate on lessons, modifications, etc. to foster and promote academic success for ELLs. Other instructional materials such as teacher-made and commercially-made products should be modified to adjust for the students' language and academic abilities. Modifications may include the following:

- provide numerous pictures to illustrate new words
- offer a variety of reference materials at the student's instructional level for independent use
- keep variety of number games to be played by pairs of students or small groups
- maintain a library of supplementary books and workbooks written in simple English which offer additional illustrations for problems
- keep listening tapes on mathematical problems for individual assignments
- help students prepare glossaries of mathematics terms
- encourage the use of diagrams and drawings as aids to identifying concepts and seeing relationships
- support reading in mathematics by having films, records, filmstrips, and other materials which may be used independently or in small groups

General Principles of Modification: Social Science

To meet the instructional needs of ELLs, teachers should modify social science programs to ensure that ELLs are (1) learning English and (2) mastering the concepts in social science. Emphasis on oral and visual stimuli aid students in comprehending concepts English-speaking students develop through written material. Modifications help in the following ways:

- foster the critical thinking process
- stimulate continuous reorganization of previously learned ideas
- encourage further investigation of the information presented

Instructional Modifications: Social Science

Instructional modifications may include the following:

- help students build individual card files on needed vocabulary for social science
- show the same information through a variety of different graphs and visuals
- build vocabulary needed to read maps and legends as these are discussed

- encourage students to underline key words or important facts in their written assignments
- teach necessary vocabulary for sorting categories of social science concepts into groups and to explain this vocabulary in words known to the student
- use student pairs for team learning (cooperative learning) especially for reports
- teach the vocabulary helpful in evaluating material for logic of written expression and for categorizing as opinion or fact
- write shorter and less complex sentences and paragraphs with fewer sentences for easier comprehension
- use language experience techniques in discussing concepts and ideas
- teach the words that signal sequence
- check understanding of written language that may convey complex concepts
- show students how to use a timeline to arrange and sequence important facts

Pacing Modifications: Social Science

Instruction in social science for ELLs should be paced according to language and academic abilities and should employ teaching strategies that take these students' unique needs into consideration. In an ESL program, pacing modifications concentrate on vocabulary and concept development. Secondary ELLs, whose academic needs require fulfillment of graduation credits, will need assistance in pacing course selection to accommodate their language and academic abilities. Informal reading inventories in the primary language and in English may be used to determine both instructional level and appropriate textbooks.

Modification of Materials: Social Science

All materials should be modified to meet the students' academic needs. General education teachers, bilingual education teachers, and ESL teachers should collaborate on lessons, modifications, etc. to foster and promote academic success for ELLs. Other instructional materials such as teacher-made and commercially-made products should be modified to adjust for the students' language and academic abilities. Additional suggestions for modifications include:

- provide a number of pictures to illustrate new words
- offer a variety of reference materials at the students' instructional levels for independent use
- use cartoons and leave the balloons above the speakers blank, to be filled in by the students
- collect many of the available comic books that portray historic and cultural events in simplified language
- provide biographies of significant men and women from different cultures
- prepare difficult passages from textbooks on tape for listening activities
- use outline maps for students to practice writing in the details and labels

- support reading instruction in the social studies by maintaining films, records, filmstrips, and other materials which may be used independently or in small groups
- present clear illustrations and concrete examples to assist the student in understanding complex concepts and skills
- highlight written materials for readability by enlarging the size of print, by organizing chapters meaningfully, and by writing headings that show introductions for transition from one idea to another
- use pictures, tables, maps, diagrams, globes, and other visual aids to assist in comparison and contrast for comprehension of concepts.

Instructional Modifications: Science

The interdisciplinary nature of science experiences provides students with opportunities to apply skills acquired in other content areas while in the process of acquiring science skills. Modifications may need to be made especially if the science activity requires reading or writing. Instructional strategies may include the following:

- practice cause and effect relationships in the environment, laboratory, and on field trips facilitated by providing language and visual cues
- teach the special vocabulary of the scientist, particularly verbs such as discover, classify, and hypothesize
- help students build notebooks of their hypotheses, materials, procedures, data, and conclusions or experiments and field experiences
- ask numerous questions which require higher level thinking responses
- limit the number of variables in laboratory experiments
- show the same information through a variety of different charts and visuals
- develop meanings through the science materials and activities rather than in terms of the equivalent words of the students' vernacular since direct translations often do not convey the exact meaning
- stress definitions of terms based on the students' observations
- read a variety of sources to highlight contributions of scientists, inventors, and researchers
- contrast interrogative, negative, and affirmative statements drawn from the science lesson
- encourage careful, thoughtful reading of short selections in which one main idea is presented
- encourage students to underline key words or important facts in written assignments
- teach interrogative words and expressions and show how they are used in science to answer such questions as who, how, when, and where and higher level questions
- encourage complete sentences, correct spelling, and accuracy of expression of science methods and language

Pacing Modifications: Science

Science instruction for ELLs should be paced according to language and academic abilities and should employ teaching strategies that take these students' unique needs into consideration. In an ESL program, pacing modifications concentrate on vocabulary and concept development. Secondary ELLs, whose academic needs require fulfillment of graduation credits, will need assistance in pacing course selection to accommodate their language and academic abilities. Informal reading inventories in the primary language and in English may be used to determine both instructional level and appropriate textbooks.

Modification of Materials: Science

All materials should be modified to meet the students' academic needs. General education teachers, bilingual education teachers, and ESL teachers should collaborate on lessons, modifications, etc. to foster and promote academic success for ELLs. Other instructional materials such as teacher-made and commercially-made products should be modified to adjust for the students' language and academic abilities. Additional suggestions for modifications are:

- provide a number of pictures to illustrate terms such as names of living things, weather patterns, and parts of the body
- develop interests and arouse curiosity through hands-on experiences, out-of-doors pictures, newspaper clippings, and periodicals
- use cartoons and leave the balloons above the speakers blank, to be filled in by the students
- have students prepare collections of science objects such as rocks and leaves
- prepare difficult passages from textbooks on tape for listening activities
- support reading instruction in science by having films, records, filmstrips, and other materials which may be used independently or in small groups
- present clear illustrations and concrete examples to assist the student in understanding complex concepts and skills
- highlight written materials for readability by enlarging the size of the print, by organizing chapters meaningfully, and by writing headings that show introductions for transition from one idea to another

In summary, these suggestions on modifications for teaching language arts, mathematics, social science, and science to English Language Learners (ELLs) are a beginning. If you would like to expand your knowledge on ELLs, bilingual education, and/or ESL, please contact the ESL/Bilingual Education Department at 373-7357.

Adapted from:

TEA. (2004). *Instructional strategies for English language learners*.