

An Educator's Guide: Gifted and Talented English Language Learners

Language Acquisition

A second language is most successfully acquired when...

- The focus of instruction is meaning rather than on form.
- The language input is comprehensible – at or just above the proficiency of the learner.
- There is sufficient opportunity to engage in meaningful use of the target language in a relatively anxiety-free environment.

There are compelling reasons why educators should integrate language and content instruction.

- When language development is integrated with content instruction, it is more efficient than teaching the language in isolation.
- The academic content for the school curriculum provides meaningful basis for acquiring new language structures and patterns, given that the content is of interest or value to the learners.
- Integrated language and content instruction offers a means by which English language learners can continue their academic development while they are also acquiring language proficiency.

As a result, the goal should be to develop language in the context of academic learning as it provides a meaningful and authentic environment for students to acquire cognitive language proficiency. The decision elevates the level of challenge, which will facilitate the talent development of potentially gifted students who are English Language Learners.

Where should teachers target their instruction for English Language Learners?

Context Embedded	Easy with Contextual Support	Easy without Contextual Support	Context Reduced
	Challenging with Contextual Support	Challenging without Contextual Support	
Cognitively Demanding			

Sometimes well-intentioned educators mistakenly believe a student's language proficiency suggests a lack of readiness to learn new academic content. As a result, academic instruction may not be rigorous or challenging for English Language Learners but instead needlessly watered-down.

This attempt at differentiation does not assist students in developing content area knowledge needed for school success, nor does it sufficiently challenge bright students who are capable of making great intellectual leaps.

When teachers are evaluating a student's readiness, they need to focus on their intellectual ability to learn academic content. They can then provide the appropriate range of materials to support student learning at their current level of language proficiency. Language proficiency should not limit a student's access to challenging academic content.

Characteristics of Gifted English Language Learners

Student Profile

Marco is an intermediate EL student in the second grade; he entered the United States in the middle of first grade speaking little English. In his home country, he was reading above grade level. In the short time Marco has been in the United States, he has rapidly acquired English and is now reading slightly above grade level. In the classroom and during critical thinking lessons, he understands abstract concepts, readily makes connections within and across disciplines, and demonstrates abstract reasoning skills. During math instruction, Marco utilizes clever problem-solving strategies and approaches a task from multiple perspectives. Marco often displays an intense focus when pursuing self-selected topics.

Marco has recently been serving as an interpreter for a newly arrived Spanish-speaking student, and his teacher notices how adept he is at balancing communication between both languages. He translates and explains complex concepts related to academic content to other students. Additionally, Marco appreciates humor and easily converses with peers and adults both in the school environment and the community. He often assumes a leadership role, even with older peers.

Often gifted language learners are overlooked because they lack the advanced language skills needed to communicate their knowledge, understandings, and/or skills. Teachers should nurture and develop students' areas of strength.

In addition to the characteristics in the Supplemental Behavior Scale, many gifted English language learners may also exhibit some of the following:

- Curiosity about new words and phrases.
- Express an understanding of abstract concepts and ideas.
- Use English and or their native language in a creative way; for example, create puns, poems, jokes or original stories.
- Function at language proficiency levels above that of their non-gifted ELL peers with comparable educational backgrounds and exposure to English.
- Become absorbed with self-selected problems, topics and issues and may become easily bored with routine tasks and drills.
- Use visual cues and clues from the environment.

- Demonstrate awareness of own degree of language proficiency and hesitate to ask others for help, may respond more freely in one-to-one situations with adults or in small peer groups.
- Prefer to work independently or with other students whose level of English proficiency is higher than his or hers.
- Demonstrate resilience, persistence, independence and social maturity.

Additional Instructional Strategies for Gifted English Language Learners

Effective instruction benefits all students regardless of their individual needs. Sound instruction involves differentiation using various instructional strategies. These strategies will help gifted language learners gain access to an accelerated curriculum. Teachers should be flexible in their use of instructional strategies and tailor their instruction to the diverse needs of each student.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a form of differentiation in which the teacher assists a student to know, understand, and or do something that would not be possible for the learner to accomplish independently (Gibbons, 2002). The cognitive needs of gifted English language learners are similar to their gifted monolingual English-speaking peers. The major difference is that linguistically diverse students often require differentiated opportunities that will appropriately challenge and scaffold their learning. Scaffolding is a powerful differentiation tool that provides students access to challenging academic content.

Advice for Scaffold Builders

- Teach conceptually.
- Integrate multicultural perspectives throughout the curriculum.
- Link academic content to students' prior knowledge and experiences.
- Use varying levels of reading materials to allow access to content.
- Structure opportunities for students to use their primary language as an instructional tool.
- Use visual and concrete materials to teach academic content.
- Focus on hands-on, observation-based assessment of actual student progress.

Communicating with Parents of Gifted English Language Learners

Advocacy for all students is critical to their success. Communicating with parents in a timely and consistently focused manner is important to the success of each learner. Giving parents plenty of opportunities to engage with educators and to give input in regards to their child's academic goals and progress strengthens the ties between school and community and support students in a positive and progressive relationship.

Professional Resources to Support Work with ELL Students

Baldwin, Alexinia. (Editor). (2004). *Culturally Diverse and Underserved Populations of Gifted Students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Castellano, Jamie, (2002). *Reaching New Horizons: Gifted and Talented Education for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Castellano, Jamie, (2003). *Special Populations in Gifted Education: Working with Diverse Gifted Learners*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Fay, Kathleen and Suzanne Whaley. (2004). *Becoming One Community: Reading and Writing with English Language Learners*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers

Tomlinson, Carol. (2003). *Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom: Strategies and Tools for Responsive Teaching*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.