

Five Strategies to Help Beginning ELLs Meet the Common Core



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Introduction

The unique characteristics of beginning-level English language learners (ELLs) present a major challenge for classroom teachers trying to meet the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. Beginning ELLs require strategic supports to learn and to participate in class. However, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) focus on results and do not define how ELLs will meet their academic expectations. Teachers and school administrators are left to figure out how to help ELLs meet the Common Core. This white paper defines the unique characteristics of beginning ELLs and five instructional strategies designed to help these students develop greater language proficiency to meet the Listening and Speaking Standards of the CCSS (Boyd-Batstone, 2013).

Five Strategies to Help Beginning ELLs Meet the Common Core

Language Behaviors of Beginning ELLs

Recognizing the language behaviors of ELLs at each level will help you determine which instructional strategies will meet their needs. Beginning-level ELLs are in a silent period that is characterized by their quiet, active listening and their immediate need to acquire basic oral language for essential communication. Their silence can be perplexing to classroom teachers who want to immediately engage students with multiple questions, expecting to hear responses, but who just receive timid stares in return. But this is the beginning of the ELL's journey from silence to utterances to literacy to proficiency. It takes time to become proficient in another language. Like any long journey, it begins with those first tentative steps. Students at this stage predictably exhibit behaviors such as silence, offering yes/no responses or one- to two-word responses, the ability to name a few objects, and the ability to follow directions. The following strategies will help these students improve their speaking and listening skills.

Five Strategies for Beginning ELLs

The five strategies that follow are appropriate for beginning ELLs across grade levels; however, they may look different within specific grade ranges. As we will see below, they may be combined to address specific Common Core standards related to Listening and Speaking.

Employ simple “caretaker” speech. It takes a degree of self-discipline to govern one’s speech in order to enhance communication with beginning ELLs. There are several components to speech that come into play: pacing and emphasis, volume, and word choice. Pacing and emphasis refer to teachers needing to slow down conversational language and to place emphasis on key words in order to increase the ELL’s comprehension. At times in the hectic pace of the classroom, teachers succumb to the temptation to talk fast in order to “cover the material.” Rapid speech without emphasis on key vocabulary will be heard as meaningless noise and will therefore be lost, misunderstood chatter. In addition, volume control is essential to tune into a student’s comfort level. Many teachers, without realizing it, use extremely loud “teacher voices” to project to an entire classroom of students. Volume is culturally determined and to a beginning ELL, it can be quite distressing to feel like the teacher is yelling for some unknown reason. In many cases, a calming, low-volume voice will have a positive effect and increase the ability of the ELL to pay attention. Finally, using simple sentences and emphasizing and repeating key vocabulary will increase comprehension. When planning a lesson, identify the key vocabulary to teach and use in speech with students. As you speak with students, use simple sentences such as “Look at this ball. The ball is round. The ball is round like something. What is round like a ball?” (note key words: ball and round).

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Use realia and visuals. The value of using realia (real objects) and visuals (such as pictures, diagrams, and models) cannot be over emphasized with all ELLs, but particularly with beginning ELLs. Show something first, then follow by labeling it with words. Words, by themselves, are abstract representations of objects and images. As literate adults, we see words as very meaningful. However, to a beginning ELL, a word card displayed without an object or picture to give meaning and context can be as incomprehensible to them as Chinese characters are to an English-only speaker. Whenever possible, use concrete objects to express meaning. Display items related to

Five Strategies to Help Beginning ELLs Meet the Common Core

instruction and discussion topics. Providing realia has the added benefit of tapping into multiple senses such as touch, sight, smell, sound, and even taste. When the senses are tapped, comprehension and memory are increased. At times, showing a picture, a diagram, or a model is more appropriate or logistically easier. For example, when teaching about anatomy (such as the features of the nervous system), it is logistically much more feasible to display visuals, diagrams, and models. Allow students the opportunity to illustrate their thinking with their own sketches and drawings. They do not need to be pristine or highly artistic drawings; they just need to communicate their ideas. Give the student the opportunity to recognize the realia or visual first in his or her own language; then label the item or picture in English. It is a more efficient use of instructional time when meaningful items and pictures give context to the learning. Just remember to show first; label second.

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Show meaning with gestures and Total Physical Response. Because beginning ELLs are silent and do not produce much in the way of oral speech in English, instruction, in large part, will be direct and explicit. James Asher (1969) developed a highly effective strategy in the form of following explicit directions called Total Physical Response (TPR). To understand TPR, think of the game “Simon Says...” without the element of trickery involved. The teacher models actions of meaningful words or phrases and says them in command form. In response, students act out the directions. They can repeat the commands orally if they are able. For example, picture a teacher stepping forward with students at his side and on the count of three he says, “lunge forward,” and he, with the students, strike a pose of lunging forward. The participants show their comprehension by acting out the forward lunge; again, they may or may not have said the command aloud with the teacher. Using realia for props can enhance this strategy. Picture using a scarf with the following commands: “Hold the scarf up high. Drop the scarf and watch it float downward. Toss the scarf in the air. Tie the scarf into a knot.” Four complete sentences were just made comprehensible to a beginning ELL when a command was spoken and an object was used. The strategy is enhanced even further when the commands are numbered on a sheet of poster paper and displayed for all to read. As ELLs become more fluent in the written commands, they can pair up with a partner to practice the language, trading off who will say the commands and who will follow the directions.

Avoid forced speech. Novice teachers sometimes feel uncomfortable in a linguistically diverse classroom when ELLs talk to each other in their native languages. They may demand that all students “Speak English!” thinking erroneously that if they can’t understand what an ELL is saying in his or her native language, it must be suspicious. Consider the flaws in this kind of thinking. First of all, for a teacher to demand that the ELL “Speak English!” is as silly as demanding that an English-only speaker “Speak Japanese!” If only they could speak the target language on demand, this command would make sense. But they can’t at this stage of language development. This is particularly disconcerting for the beginning ELL who is in a silent period in English. Furthermore, and just as importantly, allowing an ELL to speak in his or her native language fosters better learning and thinking. Consider planning a space in your lesson when students explain the instruction to each other in their own language. If they have that opportunity, they can discuss the learning at a deeper level than they are

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Five Strategies to Help Beginning ELLs Meet the Common Core

able to at this time in English. Over time, this becomes less and less of an issue; but particularly at the beginning stages of language development the native language is a resource for acquiring English.

Select attractive books and read with students. Reading books and well-illustrated materials with beginning ELLs is helpful on multiple levels. On a visual level, the students see what is being read through quality illustrations. On an auditory level, the students hear the teacher model how to read and pronounce the key words in the text. The more comprehensible the selected text, the higher the degree of student understanding and learning will take place. Conversely, providing beginning ELLs with texts that are dense with words and have few illustrations will cause difficulties. With such texts, students' participation is reduced and the learning diminishes. This refers back to the above strategy of using realia and visuals. Address meaning first when selecting texts to use for instruction.

Addressing Specific Listening and Speaking CCSS

The five strategies above meet the Common Core's listening and speaking standards. Listening and speaking standards are an appropriate starting place for beginning ELLs because their initial language development is predominantly oral. The goal is to develop oral comprehension and a working vocabulary to participate in classroom discussions and projects.

Let's take a closer look at how to implement the strategies to meet specific grade-level standards. Note that the following standards exhibit a progression in complexity that is solely based on grade level. Unfortunately, language level is not tied to grade level. A beginning ELL can be a kindergartener or a twelfth grader. As stated in the Key Design Considerations of the CCSS, "it is possible to meet the standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening without displaying native-like control of conventions and vocabulary" (CCSS, 2010, p. 6). Therefore, specific adaptations need to be provided using specific or combined strategies listed above.

Grades K-2 Listening and Speaking Standard #2b

- **Kindergarten:** Understand and follow one- and two-step oral directions.
- **Grade 1:** Give, restate, and follow simple two-step oral directions.
- **Grade 2:** Give and follow three- and four-step oral directions.

Applicable strategies: Use "caretaker" speech to provide clear and comprehensible directions. Also use Total Physical Response to model and participate in putting commands into action. As students become more fluent, they are able to give and restate directions and TPR commands to partners and groups of peers.

Grades 3-5 Listening and Speaking Standard #1c

- **Grade 3:** Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., gaining the floor in respectful ways, listening to others with care, speaking one at a time about the topics and texts under discussion).
- **Grades 4-5:** Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles.

Applicable strategy: Discuss selected illustrated texts so that beginning ELLs can point to pictures that give image to their ideas. Allow students to sketch their thoughts so that they can share their ideas and others can give words to their thinking.

Grades 6-8 Listening and Speaking Standard #2b

- **Grade 6:** Follow rules for collegial discussions, set specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.
- **Grade 7:** Follow rules for collegial discussions, track progress toward specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.

Five Strategies to Help Beginning ELLs Meet the Common Core

- **Grade 8:** Follow rules for collegial discussions and decision-making, track progress toward specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.

Applicable strategies: Establish roles in small groups for discussion such as recorder to take notes, governor to ensure discussions are collegial, and illustrator to draw a picture of what the group discussed. Using visuals in this way actively involves the beginning ELL in giving an illustrative voice to the discussion.

Grades 9–12 Listening and Speaking Standard #2b

- **Grades 9–10:** Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.
- **Grades 11–12:** Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

Applicable strategies: Don't force speech in English. Allow students the opportunity to discuss complex topics in their own language first; then set goals and deadlines to provide a representation of the conclusions in an illustrated format. In addition, have small groups come up with civil and collegial ways to foster clearer communication among all language levels including beginning ELLs. For example, suggest rules such as every new idea presented to the group must be accompanied by an illustration that successfully communicates the idea. In this way, English-only speakers will be compelled to make their ideas comprehensible to all students in the group, not just to the fluent English speakers.

Conclusion

These five strategies help beginning ELLs meet the Common Core. They were selected because they can be applied across grade levels with minor accommodations. They foster a start in the progression from silence to developing proficiency in English.

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