

12 Common Mistakes Made by Teachers of English-Language Learners



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Larry Ferlazzo

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What are some of the most common mistakes teachers make when working with ELLs, and what should they do, instead?

Part One featured responses from Marina Rodriguez, Altagracia (Grace) H. Delgado, Dr. Denita Harris, and Sarah Said. All Part One's contributors also were guests on my 10-minute BAM! Radio Show. You can also find a list of, and links to, previous shows here.

In Part Two, Silvina Jover, Cindy Garcia, Luisa Palacio, and Laura Landau shared their commentaries.

In Part Three, Dr. Sandra Calderon, Kevin Jepson, Carrie Cobb, Melissa Wilhemi, Ricardo Robles, Teresa Amodeo, and Donna DeTommaso-Kleinert, Ed.D., answered the question.

In Part Four, Lindsey Moses, Luiza Mureseanu, Melissa Jackson, and Douglas Reeves contributed their thoughts.

In Part Five, Joe Santiago-Silvestri, Michelle Shory, Irina McGrath, Glenda Cohen, Berta Rosa Berriz, Amanda Claudia Wager, Ph.D., and Vivian Maria Poey offered their reflections.

Today, this six-part series is "wrapped up" by Valentina Gonzalez, Joseph F. Johnson Jr., Ph.D., Maria L. González, Ed.D., and Consuelo Manriquez, Ed.D., and Karen Nemeth and Jane Hill. I'm also including comments from readers.

View "students from an assets-based perspective"

Valentina Gonzalez is a former classroom teacher with over 20 years in education serving also as a district facilitator for English-learners, a professional-development specialist for ELs, and as an educational consultant. Valentina delivers professional development and coaches teachers on sheltered

instruction strategies. She works with teachers of ELs to support language and literacy instruction. Her work can be found on [Seidlitz Education](#) and on [MiddleWeb](#). You can reach her through her [website](#) or on Twitter [@ValentinaESL](#):

When we know better, we do better.

- Maya Angelou

Many of us (myself included) had very little if any preservice training directly related to serving English-learners. Most of what I learned about teaching ELs or ELLs came from on the job trial and error. Even though I grew up learning English as a second language, teaching students who are English-learners is different. My personal experiences helped me, but what helped me more was combining experience with practice and research. Below are three common mistakes that I have been guilty of making with ELs. I share these with you because I know that many of us are in the same boat. We want what's best for our students. And we are doing the best we can.

Mistake #1. Sending them out to work with someone else.

Though at the time, it seemed like I was doing what was best for my students, in hindsight, I realized that it wasn't. Sending English-learners out of the physical classroom space to work with another teacher sends ELs many unintended messages. Some ELs feel that being sent out means that you don't want to work with them, that they are not capable of learning from you like all the other students, that this learning space is not for them, that they are unwelcome here.

Instead ... Begin by taking a deep breath and recognizing that ELs are capable, bright students and that YOU are capable of supporting them, too. Keep in mind that body language speaks volumes! Smile and keep a warm tone with ELs even if you think they don't understand what you are saying. Sit next to them when conferring and build a relationship that communicates that you care. Because ELs spend the majority of their day with general education teachers, it is critical that general education teachers know research-based teaching methods to teach ELs, so they don't feel like they need to send them out to work with someone else (Calderón, 2020). Begin equipping yourself with the tools to teach English-learners in your classroom. The strategies used to support ELs are effective for all students but critical for English-learners.

Mistake #2. Giving ELs menial tasks.

Handing a newcomer student basic work or busy work to do is often tempting when students are not speaking English yet and the teacher has a class filled with 20+ students to tend to. When a new student arrives and they seem to be unable to participate, putting them on the computer or an app, giving them a craft to cut and color may seem easier than engaging them with the class. But even newcomer ELs are cognitively capable of thinking critically, observing classmates, and engaging with peers. They may not be able to communicate what they are thinking in English yet, but it's important that they continue to develop critical-thinking skills. If we reduce the rigor and ask ELs to complete menial tasks that are developmentally below their ability, then we create academic gaps in their education.

Instead ... Accommodate lessons to support students rather than lowering expectations. Depending on the students' language proficiency, they CAN DO many tasks in our classrooms. For example, a newcomer student with little English proficiency may be able to listen to their peers, chorally read with the class, draw and label in their native language, write using their native language, and more. It's our job to provide multiple opportunities for students to engage in meaningful work with peers, listening, speaking, reading, and writing cross-curricularly. And research says that students' success is linked to our beliefs. This means that we set the ceiling for English-learners.

Mistake #3. Seeing English-learners through a deficit lens.

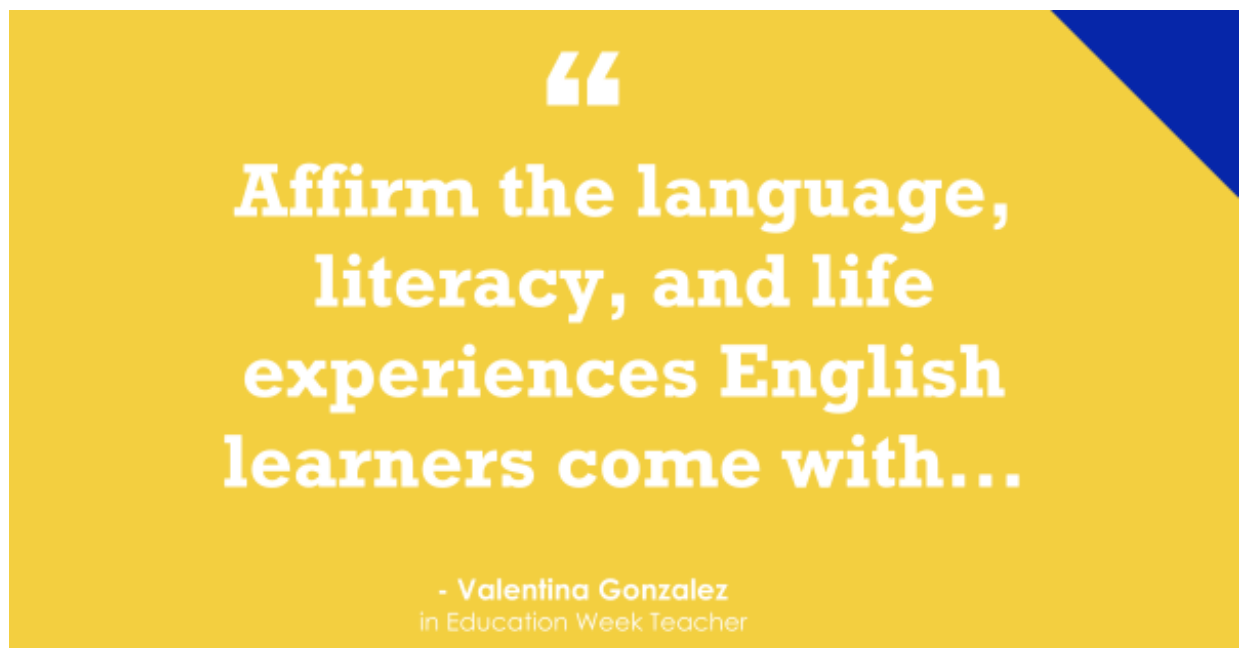
For decades, students who are learning English in our classrooms have been marginalized. They have been seen as "at risk" and lacking as opposed to their native-English-speaking peers. In some places, their curriculum has been watered down causing academic gaps. In other places, educators misunderstand and neglect the rich life and academic experiences ELs can bring into the classroom. The deficit lens can leave an English-learner with feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness.

Instead ... Affirm the language, literacy, and life experiences English-learners come with, viewing students from an assets-based perspective. A classroom that invites diversity and inclusion is one where all students can be who they are, share their culture, and embrace one another. Teachers who create classrooms

that highlight students' strengths see greater gains in student success because students feel valued and respected for who they are and what they come to the table knowing.

Swinging back to Maya Angelou's quote, "When we know better, we do better," no one is perfect. Perfection doesn't exist. But we can keep striving to be better educators than we were yesterday. All three of the mistakes I mentioned above can be fixed through empowering teachers with strong pedagogy that supports English-learners (Calderón, 2020).

Calderón Margarita. (2020). *Breaking down the wall: essential shifts for English learners success*. Thousand Oaks, California.: Corwin.



"It takes a team"

Joseph F. Johnson, Jr. is the executive director of the National Center for Urban School Transformation. Maria L. González is a retired program specialist from the San Diego County office of education, and Consuelo Manriquez is associate director of communications and operations at Darnall Charter School in San Diego. They are co-authors of Five Practices for Improving the Success of Latino Students: A Guide for Secondary School Leaders and "Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools: A Guide for School and Classroom Leaders:

Our center, the National Center for Urban School Transformation, (www.ncust.com) identifies and studies wonderful schools where every demographic group, including students with emerging English proficiency, achieves great results. We also spend time working with struggling schools to help them produce strong results for similar populations. From these efforts, we have learned well-intentioned educators tend to make five common mistakes related to the education of students who are learning English. Those mistakes are:

Mistake 1: Assuming parents of English-learners are not interested in or capable of helping their children succeed academically

In schools where EL students achieve great results, teachers have taken the time to get to know their students' parents. Even if it requires the aid of a translator, teachers have found it worthwhile to build a relationship with parents. Many teachers have told us how their investment of effort to talk with and listen to parents has paid huge dividends in learning gains for their students.

Mistake 2: Assuming students who are learning English know their teachers care sincerely about their academic success

In struggling schools, many students tell us their teachers don't care about them or their success. To the contrary, we believe almost all teachers care deeply about their students; however, the perception of care is critical. The awkwardness created by language barriers may make it easier for teachers to avoid trying to communicate with English-learners. This may lead some students to assume their teacher doesn't care about them. In the highest-performing schools, students describe many small things teachers do (e.g., greeting them by name, asking about life at home, demonstrating courtesy and respect, highlighting their learning gains, using a few words in their native language) as proof their teachers care deeply about their current and future success.

Mistake 3: Assuming students who are paying attention quietly are understanding what it is being taught

Some students are great at tracking the teacher's eyes, smiling when the teacher laughs, and looking like they are understanding, even when they don't have a clue about what the teacher wants them to learn. In the highest-performing

classrooms, teachers don't assume students understand until they have heard the student explain the concept, watched the student draw out the model, or observed the student teach the algorithm to another child. One teacher explained, "I call on my English-learners often. I don't wait for them to raise their hands. I need to know they are with me. Otherwise, I assume I haven't taught it and they haven't learned it."

Mistake 4: Assuming students who are learning English are not ready to meet challenging academic standards

Teachers who achieve great results for English-learners assume their students can meet even the toughest academic standards if they do a great job of breaking down complex ideas and helping students see the relevance of concepts to their lives. Teachers recognize that students will need to become fluent speakers of the vocabulary central to any academic standard they endeavor to teach. As well, they recognize that students won't become fluent unless the teacher prompts students to use the vocabulary frequently and properly. In high-performing schools, teachers are "warm demanders." In kind, supportive ways, they demand high levels of performance from each student. They know their students are not likely to succeed in life if they do not have opportunities to learn rigorous academic curricula.

Mistake 5: Assuming that colleagues who have produced poor results for English-learners are uncaring or incompetent

Teachers in the highest-performing schools tell us, "It takes a team." They spend considerable amounts of time helping each other, sharing best practices, and learning from each other. Regular, focused, high-quality professional development is essential because many educators never learned how to meet the needs of English-learners. Also, a spirit of collaboration is essential, because educators who support each other are more likely to refine their everyday practices. True collaboration, however, requires trust. In great schools, educators build and nurture trust in ways that promote adult learning that leads to excellent student learning.

By avoiding these mistakes, educators can strengthen schools so every English-learner can achieve their potential and excel.

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**In schools where EL students
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parents.**

-Joseph F. Johnson, Jr, Ph.D., María L. González, Ed.D. & Consuelo Manriquez, Ed.D.
in Education Week Teacher

Teaching younger ELLs

Karen Nemeth, Ed.M., is an author, consultant, and advocate focusing on early-childhood education for ELLs/DLLs. She has leadership roles in NAEYC, NABE, and TESOL. She hosts a resource website, [Language Castle](#):

Teachers of young children sometimes make the mistake of thinking quicker is better when it comes to teaching English. They may be pushed by school administrators who want to be able to show less need for English-development services. However, research very clearly shows that support for learning in the home language during the early years helps children develop a strong foundation of content knowledge and language acquisition that leads to greater school success. This approach is written into major national reports such as the NASEM Promising Futures report, and in federal and state policy statements and regulations. Despite all the evidence, teachers and their supervisors may emphasize quick, superficial learning rather than deep, lasting learning with support of home language. They may not realize that young children can be taught to memorize alphabet letters and sight words to sound like they are reading in English when they actually have no idea what the words mean.

Part of the problem is that kindergarten-entry exams are available almost exclusively in English. This requirement puts so much pressure on preschool teachers to get ready for that one, arguably inappropriate, assessment that they don't have time to engage children in deeper learning. It reflects the age-old

question of breadth vs. depth in a new way. This can be compounded by funding concerns or the lack of available, qualified teachers who speak the needed languages.

We know that appropriate home-language supports can help children comprehend content and vocabulary with greater depth that helps them build those needed brain connections as foundations for future learning. Effective practices include:

- * explaining the meaning of familiar words in the home language and making explicit connections to words in the new language,
- * giving children lots of opportunities to process and use new vocabulary in oral-language activities and conversations with peers and adults,
- * allowing more time to explore how words and concepts can be used in projects and extended lessons,
- * translating and adapting the curriculum to provide purposeful learning in home language as well as English.

If teachers are not comfortable teaching in a non-English language, make sure children have ample time to converse in their home languages with each other, with family members, and with volunteers. Offer workshops for each audience to ensure high-quality learning interactions. Depend on stronger home/school connections and prepare families to support high-quality learning activities and conversations outside of school in the home language.

Make time to learn open-ended questions in each language to encourage deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem solving.

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-Karen Nemeth
in Education Week Teacher

Supporting the home language

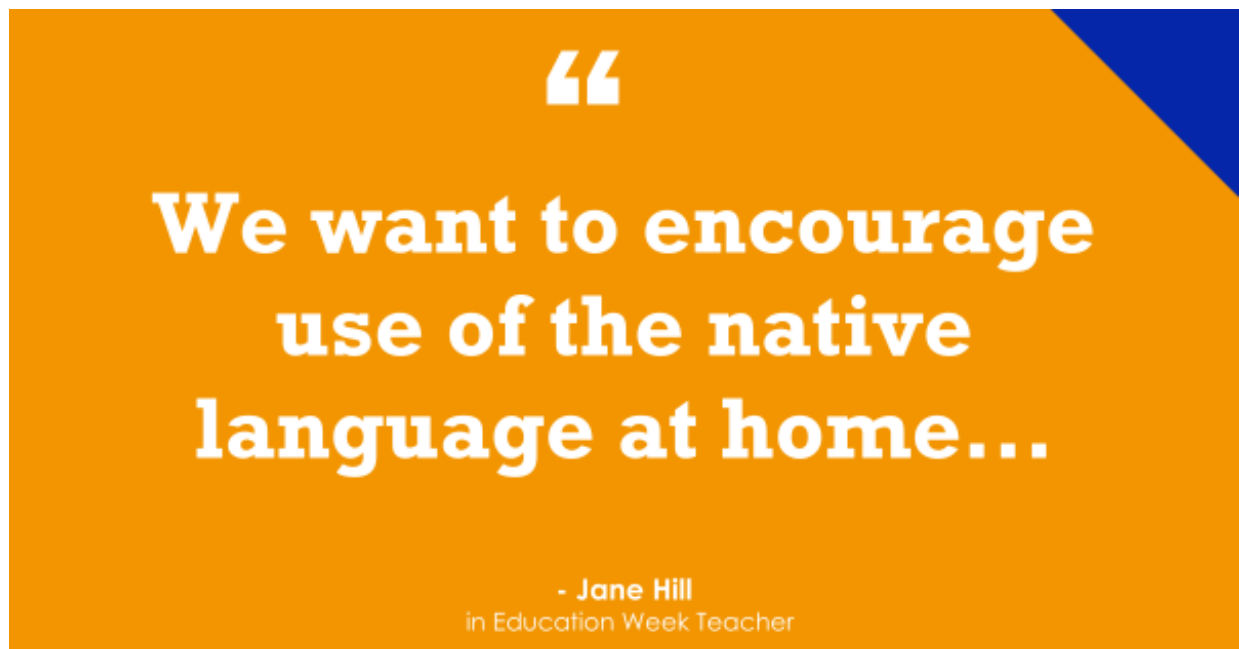
Jane Hill has worked in second-language acquisition and special education for 40 years. As a managing consultant at McREL International, she trains and coaches classroom teachers and ELL specialists on best practices for helping students gain fluency in English. She is the co-author of Classroom Instruction That Works With ELLs (2006) and has published related articles in Language, The Journal of Staff Development, The School Administrator, Leadership Information, Phi Delta Kappan, Principal Leadership, and Educational Leadership:

A common mistake made by teachers is asking parents to speak as much English as they can with their children at home. Teachers should remind parents to use their native language at home. We want parents to use their most proficient language when talking with their children. For example, if a child says they were learning about plate tectonics, parents might not be able to discuss the specifics of the concept but can explain what happened to the child's relatives in the aftermath of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. We want to encourage use of the native language at home so children can continue to communicate with extended-family members.

Teachers can also make the mistake of thinking all ELs are the same because they need to learn English. Teachers can turn that mistake around by learning

where each student lands on the continuum of language learning. Some may be further ahead than others because they've been in an English-speaking environment longer and their reading and writing may be more advanced. And others, who have recently arrived, may still be in a nontalking stage because they are listening and becoming familiar with the sounds of English and how words are strung together. Teachers can find out how the student performed on their English-language screening or English-language-proficiency assessment.

Another common mistake is forgetting that words by themselves are not necessarily understandable. But words with real objects, pictures, gestures, and facial expressions will convey meaning. In other words, lecturing is a mistake in need of correcting with more visuals to accompany what is being said. And speaking at a slightly slower rate can be helpful if the teacher is prone to speaking rapidly. In addition to a slower rate, the teacher can also use clear, concise sentences, body movement, and pantomime, and use of personalized language that favors nouns over pronouns.



Comments From Readers

As an educator myself, I've seen ELLs forced to speak up in the class. Like all learning, this needs to be scaffolded. Create a safe space for the ELL to practice. Build up confidence and then, only when they are ready, start practicing conversation in small supportive groups.

— BeED (@beedtheworld) [October 20, 2020](#)

Unfortunately, the most common mistake is also most harmful: far too common for teachers to dismiss ELL as inherently unintelligent simply because they struggle to communicate their thinking in English. We must value our ELL learners, take time to help them rediscover their voice

— Peter Cartledge (@mrpcartledge) [October 7, 2020](#)

From a technical standpoint, many educators can't grade their own language to make themselves more accessible linguistically. Also, I have crossed many who themselves can't speak another language and so can't relate to the learner's challenges.

— Aron (@Pop_that_Rona) [October 7, 2020](#)

Thanks to Valentina, Joseph, Maria, Consuelo, Karen, and Jane, and to readers, for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment with your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at . When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at [@Larryferlazzo](#).

Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled [Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching](#).

Just a reminder; you can subscribe and receive updates from this blog via [email](#) or [RSS Reader](#). And if you missed any of the highlights from the first eight years of this blog, you can see a categorized list below. The list doesn't

include ones from this current year, but you can find those by clicking on the "answers" category found in the sidebar.

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I am also creating a Twitter list including all contributors to this column

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