

Thirteen Instructional Strategies for Supporting ELL Newcomers

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**Teaching students who
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year of enrollment in a
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privilege...**

Michelle Shory and Irina McGrath
Education Week

The new question-of-the-week is:

What are effective teaching strategies for newcomers?

Newcomers to the United States often have low-proficiency in English but, depending upon their age, might have had considerable education in their home language.

What are the most effective teaching strategies educators can use with this population, which is certain to grow under President Biden’s immigration policies?

1. Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM)

In the PWIM, students and teachers first label an image with words, then categorize them, followed by using the words to write sentences about the picture. They next categorize the sentences, turn them into paragraphs, and finally, write a title.

You can learn more about the PWIM [here](#) and [here](#).



2. Games

You can't go wrong with games. In the classroom, [zillions of different ones](#) can be played with mini-whiteboards, and they can be modified for online use by using a tool like [Whiteboard.fi](#). [Quizizz](#) is also great for online use, and it has countless games already premade for just about any topic you want to teach!



There is no question in my mind, however, that one of the most English games for newcomers, and one of the most fun, is the old standby Messenger-and-Scribe. Basically, students work in partners to write down sentences that are either taped to the wall or, in virtual classes, screen shared. You can read the details for [both versions here](#).



3. Dialogues

Providing students with funny dramatic dialogues, [which they perform and also record](#), is an excellent strategy to build reading and speaking fluency—and confidence. They work well as a differentiation strategy, as well, since students can also modify them.



4. Freire's Learning Sequence

The Peace Corps adapted this strategy from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. You can read more about it [here](#). Basically, students are shown an image illustrating a problem and are first asked to describe the picture. Then, they are asked to say what the problem is, if they or someone they know have ever experienced that problem, and discuss potential solutions.

5. Language Experience Approach (LEA)

The LEA describes a lesson in which the entire class does a common activity (playing a game, watching a video, anything), and then the teacher leads students in a process of writing about it. Those sentences can then be used for a myriad of other follow-up activities. You can learn more about the LEA [here](#).



You can see a very simple description of how I use several of these activities in a series of lessons [here](#).



You might also be interested in [The Best Resources To Help Educators Teach ELL Newcomers](#).





Promoting Interaction

Michelle Shory and Irina McGrath are Google Certified trainers and co-creators of ELL 2.0, a website that offers tools and resources for teachers of English-learners.



Irina V. McGrath, Ph.D., works for the Kentucky education department as an education recovery specialist. She is also a co-director of the Louisville Writing Project (LWP) and the University of Louisville and Indiana University Southeast adjunct who teaches ESL/ENL instruction as well as assessment, literature, and cultural- and linguistic-diversity courses.

Michelle Shory, Ed.S., is a district ESL instructional coach in the Jefferson County public schools, Louisville, Ky. She is passionate about literacy and helped establish Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Louisville.

Teaching students who are newcomers (students in their first year of enrollment in a U.S school) is a privilege—it changes an educator's outlook, practice, and heart forever; however, working with newcomers requires a lot of cognitive, physical, and emotional energy. But we challenge you to find a more rewarding experience in all of education. Where else do you get to see such incredible growth and change? And you will probably keep relationships with these students long after they leave your classroom.

Research

In order to support newcomers in the most effective way, teachers should do their homework on students—research their cultures, history, language, and education systems. You can find resources [here](#) and [here](#).



Learning about newcomers will help you connect with your students and their families, give you ideas on how to make your curriculum culturally relevant, and help you address your own assumptions and misconceptions.

Relationships, Self-Advocacy, and Routines



Before starting with the first “real” lesson, begin with relationships, self-advocacy, and routines.

When focusing on relationships, start with names.

Teachers should know how to pronounce student names—and students should know how to pronounce each other’s names. Also, students need to be fully seen.

Educators must take time to learn about their students’ interests, families, and topics they love to study. Teachers should also share about themselves—share hobbies, family pictures, etc. Classrooms (especially newcomer classrooms) need to feel safe because we are encouraging students to be vulnerable each day when they are using a new language.

Dr. Stephen Krashen instructs educators to “lower the affective filter” as a way to increase comprehension. Lowering the affective filter includes helping kids feel comfortable by speaking more slowly, using gestures, and including high-interest materials. All of this is most effective when classrooms are warm and comfortable.

Educators will want to begin by teaching independence on day one. Show students how to use technology like Microsoft’s Immersive Reader, Google Translate, or Socratic from Google. Demonstrate planning and organization skills (like using a digital calendar or Google Keep). It is also a good idea to make sure that students know how to ask for help from a teacher when they don’t know the answer to a question.

Instructional Supports and Considerations

One last addition is to set up strategies to support interaction. WIDA researchers found that ELs spend on average less than 10 minutes per day speaking in class. This is unacceptable from a social-emotional and academic lens—ELs need to engage frequently in classroom conversations. When thinking about structures, consider Kagan structures or QSSSA from Seidlitz.

When facilitating lessons, always remember to include visuals, gestures, and repetition. ESL consultant and teacher Carol Salva's students report these strategies as the most helpful.

It is also important to consider teaching themes. Krashen's research demonstrates the power of "deep reading" on a topic and how it supports ELs in acquiring language. Themes boost engagement and confidence because students are continually building their expertise about a topic. Additional research (highlighted in Natalie Wexler's work) has proven that reading comprehension is largely based on background knowledge. So, whenever teachers build students' knowledge of the world, they are also supporting comprehension.

Finally, when teaching newcomers, educators should not discount the expertise in the room. Be sure to tap into students' "funds of knowledge," a term coined by Dr. Luis Moll that represents cultural resources and knowledge that students bring to the classroom. Always include at least one entry point for newcomers to bring in their cultural and linguistic expertise. One example might be a unit on religions, holidays, or education systems around the globe.

In conclusion, teachers play an important role in ensuring social, emotional, and academic success of newcomer students. The more effort teachers put into getting to know their students, teaching them self-advocacy skills, and building on their funds of knowledge, the greater chance their students will have of reaching their highest potential and succeeding personally and professionally.

ELLs 'Need to Feel Safe'

Luisa Palacio is an ESL and Spanish teacher from Colombia with 19 years of teaching experience. Luisa holds a bachelor's degree in modern languages: English and French, and an M.A. in TESOL from Greensboro College. Currently, she teaches K-12 at Northampton County schools in North Carolina and Spanish with South Carolina Virtual Education:

We always consider content relevancy, the use of visuals, vocalization, facial expression, among others. However, what ELs need at first is to feel safe, comfortable, and confident in their new environment.

The school system works in a completely different way in every country. I believe one of the first things we need to do with newcomers is to show them how school works, classroom routines, how to sign in and out of school, how to move around campus, how to get their meals, how to login on their technological devices, explain schedules, share possible extracurricular activities in which newcomers could participate, etc. Newcomers need modeling, not only for the language but also for the culture. Newcomers need to be shown what to do and how to do it, what to say and how to say it. As teachers, we need to be aware of the cultural shock newcomers go through so that we can help the process to run a bit smoother.

Every newcomer should have a mentor to shadow him/her during the first days of school, someone who can introduce them to their teachers, who makes teachers aware that this EL is in their class and will need some extra attention. In my opinion,

cultural awareness should be the first teaching strategy. Newcomers are facing a new culture, and they also need to feel their own culture is valued. Thus, it is important to generate activities that allow students to share their culture, so they make comparisons and connections by sharing about a subject they master and a subject that is relevant.

‘Language-Learning Goals’

Sean McWherter, Ed.D., is the director of restart programs for the Guilford County schools in North Carolina. He is the author of A Road Map to PLC Success published by Routledge Eye on Education, 2017, and Unpacking your Learning Targets: Aligning Student Learning to Standards, published by Routledge Eye on Education, 2020:



With the rapidly increasing population of English-language-learners in many schools across the U.S., it is becoming ever more important for regular education teachers and administrators to know how to support these students and their families.

I feel that oftentimes educators mistakenly believe that ELLs have trouble learning or that they learn differently from native English speakers and that their education is best left to the English as a second language or ELL teacher. This could not be

further from the truth; the educational barriers ELL students face are accentuated by language and cultural barriers, not an inability to learn.

Utilize Language-Learning Goals

Many educators are aware that the use of learning targets in the classroom is an instructional best practice and that students learn better when teachers utilize clear daily learning goals (Marzano, 2009; Reeves, 2010; Kareva & Echevarria, 2013). For ELL students, it is especially important to include both lesson and language-learning goals.

The lesson objectives should be focused on the grade-level content while the language objective should align to one of the four domains of English-language development (ELD), which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A teacher's experience with creating and using language objectives in their instruction is important to ensure that ELLs have equal access to the curriculum (Hudson, Miller, & Butler, 2006; Short, Echevarría, & Richards-Tutor, 2011; Marcos and Himmel 2016). When planning a lesson, everything should intentionally lead students to mastery of the learning targets while providing students with a variety of meaningful activities and high-quality instruction.

Increase Student Engagement and Interactions

To support student engagement, as well as the lesson and language objectives, liberally employ the use of visuals to reinforce both spoken and written words. Capitalize on the use of gestures, often exaggerated, for added emphasis, speak slower and be sure to enunciate your words, repeat important words or phrases, and be sure to use fewer idioms. Many ELL students have not attended schools in their new county and may be unfamiliar with cultural references. Take the time to thoroughly review texts to identify potentially confusing language and concepts so that you can build the background knowledge of your ELL students prior to exposing them to potentially confusing material (Kareva & Echevarria, 2013).

Incorporate high-frequency vocabulary words throughout all content areas and be sure to provide instructions and other important information in multiple formats. Don't just tell the students what you want them to do, write it, provide an example/exemplar, and act it out or model the activity if possible.

Provide multiple opportunities for ELL students to interact with their peers in small groups where they can practice speaking and listening in low-risk settings that will produce language-learning outcomes (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010).

Build Positive Relationships and Cultural Connections

Building relationships with your students is the foundational component of successful teaching and learning, and there is a multitude of research that supports this idea. According to a review of 46 research studies, students that feel valued and appreciated are more likely to demonstrate both short- and long-term improvements in academic engagement, attendance, grades, and behavior, while also having a reduced dropout rate (Sparks, 2019).

Begin forming relationships with your ELL students by learning about their individual culture, traditions, religion, hobbies, family dynamic, and background. Stay respectful of their personal boundaries and understand that they may need time to settle into their new environment before opening up. (National Clearing House for English Language Acquisition, n.d.). Having a positive relationship with a student's family can also help support their education.

Remember some of the families may only have very little or even no formal schooling experience in this country, so taking the time to show them what school is like and how they can get involved are critical first steps to forming a parent partnership. (Short & Boyson, 2012)

See References [here](#).



Stations

Ciera Walker is a sixth-year systemwide ELL teacher in east Tennessee:

Newcomers that might have the same level of English do not necessarily grow and learn at the same rate. This is due to many factors, such as previous schooling experience and the background of the student and their family. I use stations as a strategy to meet the needs of all of my newcomers.

What? Stations provide students with an opportunity to work with a partner on specific skills to boost their language learning and language acquisition.

When? We do stations most Thursdays and every Friday.




How? Students eventually work their way up to a goal of 12-15 minutes per station. The teacher starts a timer, and students rotate through the stations with their partner.

Who? I generally group my students by ability in English (homogeneous groups), but occasionally, if they have a great ,I will let them choose their partners (in more heterogeneous groups).

Why? The purpose of stations is to provide students with practice in skills they are learning in the ESL classroom and the general education classroom. Students have opportunities to practice skills during stations while the teacher provides individualized mini-lessons to help with the language-learning process. Stations are

practical and provide teachers with opportunities to use best practices in teaching students a new language. It is extremely important to be purposeful, organized, and use a system to make stations go smoothly! It takes a lot of planning to teach students the stations so they can work independently. I take a lot of time to “front-load” the expectations and provide students time to practice. Students generally start stations independently after fall break.

Each year, I change up my stations depending on my students’ needs or new ideas I find. Below are some of my favorites that are easy to maintain and enjoyed by the students. I recommend teachers keep stations simple and choose one activity per station, especially in the beginning. As students become more familiar, you can add on to the complexity of each station.

- *Teacher:* Students meet with the teacher and work on individualized needs (letter work, word work, reading stories, fluency, comprehension, etc.). I like to use Reading A-Z or ReadWorks to help structure this station. 
- *Listening:* Students work on EPIC books, Unite for Literacy, or listen to books on tape/cd. You can get a headphone splitter from Amazon for pretty cheap if you have limited devices so students can listen together.
- *Library:* Students read a book and complete a simple graphic organizer about what they read. 
- *Computer Station:* Choose a safe website for students to play on. I like starfall.com for my primary students and I am hoping to implement typing websites for my older students next year.
- *Speaking:* I use Vocaroo or Flipgrid. For Vocaroo, I usually have picture cards with vocabulary words students might need; students retell the story. For Flipgrid, I usually have a video for students to watch or I ask them a question and they must respond. 
- *Writing:* This station is the one that evolves the most throughout the year. Using picture prompts, sentence stems/frames, and word banks is crucial for the writing station.

- *Word Work Games*: This station has many games that work on foundational reading skills. Eventually, students have different boxes/baggies they pull from (depending on their level).



1. **Bang**: Have different sets of 10-12 words (letters, sight words, vocabulary words, etc.). Label 1-2 cards “Bang.” Students pour cards out of baggies into a box. They reach in the box and grab a word, say the meaning or read the word. If they pull “bang,” then all their cards must go back in the box.
2. **Roll, read, write**: Create a 7x6 table. Type in the target words that correspond with a number on a die. Put the sheet in a pocket protector and have students write the word with an Expo marker when they roll the die.
3. **Oodlu.org**: Create vocabulary sets. Students answer questions and get to play premade video games. Easy to use and create—a class favorite!



Stations are a versatile and practical way to provide students with practice on new skills they are learning and to differentiate instruction for newcomers with varying levels of language acquisition.



Thanks to Michelle, Irina, Luisa, Sean, and Ciera 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 lferlazzo@epe.org. 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](https://twitter.com/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 (The RSS feed for this blog, and for all Ed Week articles, has been changed by the new redesign—new ones won't be available until February). And if you missed any of the highlights from the first nine years of this blog, you can see a categorized list below.

- This Year's Most Popular Q&A Posts
- Race & Racism in Schools
- School Closures & the Coronavirus Crisis
- Classroom-Management Advice
- Best Ways to Begin the School Year
- Best Ways to End the School Year
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- Implementing the Common Core
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I am also creating a Twitter list including all contributors to this column.















