

Principles of Effective Instruction for English Learners

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) has developed a set of principles of effective instruction for English learners based on research on English learner instruction and on CAL's extensive experience working with these students and their teachers. These principles guide CAL's professional development services for educators who work with English learners.

Principle 1: Learn about, value, and build on the languages, experiences, knowledge, and interests of each student to affirm each student's identity and to bridge to new learning.

Students arrive at school with “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), which can be drawn on during instruction. Acknowledging students' languages and cultures and treating these as resources in the classroom can build bridges between what students already know and what they are learning in school (Trueba, 1989). This is a critical component of culturally responsive instruction (Au, 1993; Banks, 1994; Gay, 2000)—that is, taking students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into account in order to make instruction more appropriate and effective for them. Drawing on students' multiple languages, literacies, and cultures, and affirming their identities within the classroom can expand students' learning possibilities and help them to succeed academically (García, 2009; Gutierrez, 2008).

Principle 2: Use multiple tools and sources of information to continually learn about and observe student performance, using the knowledge gained to inform teaching.

Formative assessment of students during classroom instruction provides teachers with important information about how the students are doing. Formative assessments should be constructed to allow students to show what they understand about content concepts using oral, written, or other expressive modalities and to have sufficient supports (such as word banks or visual aids) so that students can demonstrate what they know even if their productive language skills are limited. Content understanding and language proficiency should both be considered when using formative assessment for forming student groups, reporting progress, or considering remediation. Caution should be taken when interpreting students' scores on standardized assessment measures, particularly when these measures have not been normed on English learners. These measures may not give an accurate picture of what students are able to do, whereas formative assessment and ongoing observation of students can provide a fuller picture of student progress (Gottlieb, 2006).

Principle 3: Involve every student in authentic, challenging, and engaging academic experiences, including tasks that prompt them to use critical thinking skills and that relate to their lived experiences.

English learners should not be held back from engaging with grade-level content; rather, the content should be prepared and presented in such a way that students of all language backgrounds can engage with it meaningfully while practicing and learning more language. Students learn language through active engagement with others in content study, as well as by answering questions and engaging in tasks that require the use of higher order thinking skills.

Student engagement is essential in all activities using any or all of the four language domains. For example, Guthrie and Alvermann's (1999) *engaged readers* are those who enjoy reading, are motivated to read and to succeed through reading, aim to understand what they read, and believe in their own reading abilities. Creating contexts to promote engagement in reading as well as in the other language domains involves choosing texts and topics that are interesting and relevant to students, making connections to students' lives, and providing goals for students to strive toward.

Because language learning is not just a technical process of learning a system of rules, but also an *affective* process that involves students' formation and reformation of their personal identities, language learning is intimately related to how students feel about interacting in the target language. Promoting positive interaction with the target language involves motivating students through elements of their environment, including their social relationships, so it is important to consider students' personal stories when working to motivate them. One way teachers can relate to students' backgrounds and promote student engagement is by choosing texts from a range of ethnic traditions, including texts that use students' first languages and different varieties of English and that are set in contexts that may be familiar to students.

Students will learn best through authentic experiences that challenge, motivate, and engage them in content. Through these experiences, they will also practice and gain proficiency in English, especially when activities are thoughtfully planned with student capabilities and interests in mind.

Principle 4: Plan for and develop all four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) through meaningful, task-based content instruction.

It is critical that students be given opportunities to participate in classroom activities through all four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), as development of proficiency in each of the domains is interdependent on the other three. For instance, a major finding of the National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan, 2006) was that oral language development is related to literacy development. Creating and posting language objectives along with content objectives helps communicate to students that language learning is an important classroom goal (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2013). These objectives can also serve as a planning tool for teachers to ensure that opportunities are provided for students to use all language domains.

Opportunities to engage in learning through all four domains should be provided through meaningful, task-based content instruction. Teachers should be able to identify the language that is embedded in the content, including how the key vocabulary, grammatical patterns, phrases, and other features of the language function to convey the content. They can then teach the embedded language to the students and help them learn to use these language forms in the types of meaningful contexts in which they tend to appear (Schleppegrell, 2004). It is most effective for students to learn language forms embedded in academic content, with teachers providing corrective feedback as appropriate and useful within the course of classroom activities (Ellis, 2008).

Principle 5: Involve every student in academic interaction with peers who represent a variety of proficiency levels and with proficient speakers and writers, including the teacher.

For students to gain proficiency in English—and academic English in particular—it is crucial for them to have opportunities to interact in English with a variety of interlocutors (Valdés, Capitelli, & Alvarez, 2011; Wong Fillmore, 1992). Producing language in addition to receiving language is critical in the language acquisition process, so students need opportunities to practice speaking and writing in addition to listening and reading. Their linguistic output can contribute to language acquisition in ways that may differ from and complement linguistic input (Swain, 1985).

Within interactional contexts in the classroom, feedback on students’ oral output can also help them develop proficiency, for example, by helping them to notice certain language forms in context, which can aid them in acquiring these forms (Mackey, 2006). Additionally, promoting the use of native languages and translanguaging—using bilingualism as a resource—in pairs or groups can facilitate understanding, encourage students to assist one another, and empower students to participate in more meaningful ways (García, Flores, & Woodley, 2012).

Principle 6: Scaffold instruction so that every student is able to participate in academically challenging, grade-level content instruction while developing academic language and literacy.

It is important to provide supports for making oral and written language more comprehensible and to aid students in production of language as well (Gibbons, 2002; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Scaffolds can come in many forms, including written, visual, and aural. Consider all of these modalities when planning scaffolds. Using a student’s first language is one effective way to scaffold information and provide a bridge to new language and content. For example, students could be allowed to first write or say something in their first language then perhaps translate it into English, or they could be offered resources such as bilingual dictionaries. Other scaffolds include verbal scaffolding, such as prompting students to extend their answers (e.g., “Tell me more” or “Why do you think that?”), and instructional scaffolding, such as providing word banks or sentence frames that could help English learners further develop their writing skills. Knowing when and how to remove scaffolds requires careful observation and formative assessment of students. Teachers need to know what assistance students may still need in order to communicate what they know in English, and they need to maintain a balance between challenging and supporting students (Mariani, 1997).

Principle 7: Engage and communicate with all stakeholders of student success, especially with students’ families and communities.

Student academic learning and success involve more than just what happens in the classroom. There are many valuable ways to engage families and communities in students’ learning (Barbour & Barbour, 2001). For example, teachers can communicate to parents and others the classroom learning goals, expectations of students, and home supports that can complement classroom activities. In addition, they can let parents know that developing their children’s native language literacy through home literacy activities will also help students’ development of

literacy in English, as well as help them become biliterate (Jimenez, 1997; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Teachers can also *learn from* students' families and communities in order to better understand their students and thus be able to more effectively engage these students in the learning process. Students' identities are complex and multifaceted and play a critical role in how they participate in classroom activities and, consequently, the degree to which they succeed academically (Bucholtz, 1999; Rymes & Pash, 2004; Wortham, 2006). Students' roles within their families and communities are an important part of their identities but teachers may not be aware of these roles. However, when teachers better understand their students in the contexts of these broader communities, they are better equipped to teach them effectively.

Factors beyond instruction that affect student success

The seven practices described above are critical features of effective instruction for English learners. However, there are many factors beyond instruction that affect students' success in the classroom and beyond. Classroom-level factors include teachers' backgrounds and the ways in which they relate to students and to English learners in particular. The role of other students is also important; for example, are they respectful of each other and of the diverse stories of students within the class? At the school level, program design is an important factor. Is the program effective in helping students learn both language and content? To what extent does it promote the types of practices listed above? School climate also plays a crucial role. For example, how is diversity viewed, not just on bulletin boards, but in the everyday interactions between administrators, teachers, and students? Do students feel their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are valued? Another crucial factor in students' success is the availability and accessibility of appropriate services and extracurricular activities. For example, to promote career and college readiness at the high school level, are counseling services available for students to learn about options for attending and paying for college and preparing for careers? Are there factors that may inhibit certain groups of students, such as English learners, from accessing these services or participating in extracurricular activities? Does the school strive to reduce these barriers as much as possible? Finally, parents and the community play a critical role in students' success. Empowering parents to participate in their students' education and promoting family literacy can be invaluable in promoting English learners' academic achievement and personal development.

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