



Instructional Strategies for English Learners

What to do: Use the chart below to make the most of your English learners' activity time.

Why it matters: Maximizing the effectiveness for any activity gives students the greatest chance for success. These strategies can be readily incorporated in whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one activities to benefit not only English learners but all students.

Instructional Strategy	Description	Actions to Take
Activate prior knowledge	Activating prior knowledge means discovering what learners already know about a topic. "Prior knowledge" can be accurate or inaccurate, and it can impact comprehension of new content as students connect new learning to prior knowledge. Identifying prior knowledge gives you a chance to clear up misconceptions. It also gives you a starting point for building students' knowledge.	You can activate English learners' prior knowledge by engaging in activities such as these: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss and reflect on what they know about a concept.• Draw a sketch or diagram to show their understanding.• Respond to an anticipation guide (a set of statements or questions that trigger students' thinking and curiosity about a topic).
Build background knowledge	Building English learners' background knowledge lays the foundation for learning new content. You need to activate students' prior knowledge to identify the background knowledge that you need to build. Knowing each student's background and culture can help you select strategies that will connect with their prior experiences and knowledge.	Here are some ways to build English learners' foundational (background) knowledge: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present images, videos, or audio clips.• Provide hands-on activities and experiences.• Have students interact with real objects, known as realia. Tip: Be mindful when using sayings or phrases that are part of American culture. For example, the meanings of "That's a piece of cake" and "That's how the cookie crumbles" have nothing to do with food. Sayings like "A penny saved is a penny earned," "We're not in Kansas anymore," and "the South" might be unfamiliar to newcomers. If you're sharing a book, video, or audio clip, introduce new words or saying in advance.



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Build academic language and vocabulary	<p>Academic language is used in schools, textbooks, and other academic settings. Helping English learners build academic language and vocabulary knowledge can take time. This language tends to be cognitively demanding because it's used to describe concepts and abstract ideas, has a specialized vocabulary, and has a more complex sentence structure than social language. Academic English includes words like <i>classify</i> and <i>evaluate</i>, as well as content-specific words like <i>denominator</i> and <i>adverb</i>.</p> <p>For comparison, social language is used in social settings and everyday life. It tends to be quick for English learners to pick up because its simple vocabulary and sentence structure make it cognitively undemanding and easy to understand. Social English includes phrases like "what's up" and "catch you later." You'll probably notice that English learners become proficient in social English more quickly than academic English.</p>	<p>Here are some strategies to try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use visuals to demonstrate what a vocabulary term does and doesn't mean. • Integrate graphic organizers, such as the Frayer Model, where students write the definition in their own words, write characteristics of the term, and draw/write examples and nonexamples. • For languages that are close to English, use cognates — words that are similar in spelling and meaning in both languages — to help students learn vocabulary or academic terms they may be familiar with in their first language. • Scaffold language by using sentence frames, sentence stems, and paragraph stems to help English learners form sentences with proper English sentence structure (word order) and communicate their thoughts. • Implement Marzano's six-step process for building academic vocabulary (see the 21st CCLC NTAC Effective Vocabulary Instruction Using Marzano's Six Steps tool). • Total physical response is an approach that uses props, gestures, facial expressions, pictures, and equipment to communicate the meaning of a vocabulary term as it's introduced. English learners mimic these movements as the instructor says the word. Doing this as a fun whole-group activity helps to minimize intimidation and gives English learners visual cues to aid understanding. A variation is to have students choose their own gestures, facial expressions, and visuals to physically communicate the meaning of a vocabulary word, and then present them as a group to the entire class. This creates a safe learning space as students present together.



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Model expectations and instructions	Acting out instructions for an activity and modeling expectations provides clues to help English learners understand verbal and written instructions.	<p>Here are some examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a Gallery Walk activity, where students can draw or write their ideas about a topic that's posted on chart paper. Start by physically showing them where each group will start. Then provide an example of a written response and a drawn response. Point to the clock and hold your hand up with how many minutes they have at each station. Then ring the timer and walk to the next station so they know what action you expect them to take when they hear the timer. It's also helpful to have these steps clearly outlined on a slide or chart, with visual cues for each step. • Use nonverbal cues, gestures, hand signals, facial expressions, and visuals such as pictures and video clips to support English learners who are at the beginner and intermediate proficiency levels of language acquisition. These types of support can help them start to feel comfortable participating in small- and large-group activities. It also helps with engagement because they won't feel "lost" or confused about what to do.
Use icebreakers that value culture	Icebreakers are opportunities for English learners to share about their culture and experiences.	<p>Here are some examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In My Culture: English learners stand in a circle. The facilitator pulls a topic from a hat. Students take turns standing in the center of the circle and sharing about that topic in their culture. (For example, if music is the selected topic, students might share a favorite song or type of song, like a mariachi song.) Depending on how comfortable group members feel, you could ask them to draw or write their responses before sharing with an elbow partner. Those partners then share with two other partners. This can reduce anxiety about sharing with the full group. • Our Sayings: English learners share popular sayings used in their first language.



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		<p>Encourage them to try to translate it into other languages represented in the group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One Hope, One Challenge: English learners share one hope they have (or had) as a newcomer to the U.S. and one challenge they face (or have faced). This can help build a sense of community for newcomers. It also gives them an opportunity to share their solutions for overcoming barriers.
Integrate technology	A variety of technology devices, software, and apps can accelerate language acquisition.	<p>Here are some ways you can use technology to support English learners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online collaboration tools: Students can collaborate in groups with mixed levels of language proficiency, which helps them practice their fluency skills. Google Classroom is one example. • Digital portfolios and collaboration platforms: Students can upload images, video, audio, and text to collaborate online. Some examples include Seesaw and Flipgrid. • Audio apps: Students can record themselves speaking, practice pronunciation, listen to their responses to the instructor's questions, and refine their responses as needed. This provides useful practice as some State language assessments include a speaking component that is scored and becomes part of each student's "level of language acquisition" score. An example app is ELSA. • Software and online licenses: Here are some examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Rosetta Stone helps English learners learn English for different situations. ○ IXL is an online application in which English learners can begin with their current level of understanding in a content area like math or science and progress to reach grade-level expectations or standards.



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Offer cooperative learning	Cooperative learning can accelerate English language acquisition by putting English learners in groups that include native English speakers and English learners at various levels of language development.	<p>Here are some ways to help English learners become comfortable in group learning settings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intentionally group students with mixed levels of language proficiency. This allows English learners to interact with others and develop language skills and concepts. Small teams help English learners build confidence, express themselves, and observe one another solving problems.• Consider rotating cooperative learning roles so students interact with one another in different ways (e.g., reporter, recorder, timekeeper, task manager, and materials manager).

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