

Hey, Speak Up!

White Paper on Equipping EL Students with Academic English



Language Teachers...To the Core

Teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs or EL students) are facing greater challenges for their practice. The EL population in the United States has yet to level off: in 2011, 22% of school-aged children—some 15 million minors—spoke a language other than English at home, while only 1% of teachers were equipped to teach them, creating a national ratio of 150 EL students to one teacher.¹ EL status is highly associated with low socio-economic status (an established factor in school achievement predictions) and school drop-out rates, so the pressure to meet the needs of our students is great.³ Still, many EL students plateau at the intermediate level, without the linguistic or complexity academic vocabulary expected for their grade level, and with permanent errors in their speech.⁴

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The Common Core State Standards have made explicit three aspects of English Language Arts (ELA) growth areas for EL students: They must develop the traditional four skills of language learning (reading, writing, listening, speaking); they must acquire school, making their the language of grade-level content; and they must develop explicit knowledge *about* language, including grammar and conventions, register awareness, and academic vocabulary.⁵ While such demands may seem unattainable, we know that EL students who transition and are reclassified perform better in school,⁶ making their growth in English a primary goal of our work. The task remains to find tools that will make

the challenge attainable, and thankfully, developments in the fields of education and linguistics are aimed at partnering with teachers in rising to the occasion.

Who's Doing All the Talking

Every language teacher is aware of the comprehensible input⁷ to their students' growth. However, expecting students to silently and passively receive instruction, like banks to be filled⁸, is no longer acceptable in an educational climate that demands activity and demonstrated comprehension. Current language teaching practices tend to take up the goal of communicative competence, emphasizing the role of interaction, which has proven itself worthwhile for both comprehension and productive language skills.⁹ During interaction, learners notice new language forms, and can add them to their productive repertoire.¹⁰ Indeed, Swain, a proponent of 'pushed output' in language learning, encourages meaningful production practice as a means

Current language instruction approaches emphasize the importance of interaction to student learning, and collaborative activities are among the most promising practices for building communication competence

for students to develop a variety of metalinguistic skills: By actively producing language, they automatize new language forms, become aware of gaps in their own knowledge, experiment with novel language while reaping the benefits of monitoring (from self, peers, and teachers) and can problem-solve while talking about language with peers.¹¹ Putting thoughts into words simply makes sense: Listening to someone else talk though a new idea is not the same as doing it for oneself, and when one person explains new information to another, there are greater learning benefits for the explainer.¹² Still, even the most skilled teacher struggles with questions of practicality: how do



*Supporting content curriculum
with pretask activities can improve
both fluency and comprehension,
moving your students toward
academic success*

you ensure that students are engaged in meaningful, academic conversation during class time? And how do you manage a classroom of buzzing students without it spiraling into chaos?

It is becoming increasingly clear that collaborative, problem-solving tasks are an absolute requirement for successful language learning, because so many mental processes originate in interactions and social behaviors that are later internalized.¹³ This means that students must have the opportunity to practice using tools of language in order to gain ownership of them as advanced, English-proficient learners, before they are expected to recall them for use on high-stake tasks. This has proven worthwhile even among a group of emergent language students, or students that don't speak the same native language: The drive for cooperative success motivates them to fill in the gaps of their understanding and restate what their partners say, resulting in group and individual-level success.¹⁴

Of course, planning such well-designed, collaborative activities is just another to-do on a teacher's list of myriad responsibilities. That is why Lingual Learning as your partner in EL education, has developed a program that focuses on the linguistic and communicative needs of your students.

*Lingual Learning has developed a
program with the goal of providing
students the practice they need to
develop academic language.*

You be the Rhino, We'll be the Little Bird

Like rhinoceroses and oxpecker birds, Lingual Learning wants a symbiotic partnership with you. You are on the front lines of EL education, so we want to support you with curriculum that you might design yourself. It's a challenge to find the balance between activities that improve both fluency and understanding without overwhelming students, so Lingual Learning has designed ELD Links™ with the intent of meeting all the points of an optimal language learning environment. Language students benefit from materials that promote noticing of language forms and encourage metalinguistic awareness, so combining such instruction with practices of Communicative Language Teaching would offer an environment in which students develop linguistic and communicative skills simultaneously.¹⁵

ELD Links™ can be considered a pre-task program for content instruction because it aims to both help students assimilate new academic language before they are expected to use it in content area classes, and to reduce the cognitive demands of the activity, thus keeping the tasks within their Zone of Proximal Development.¹⁶ Since the primary focus in ELD Links™ is spoken language, students work with peers to practice new linguistic forms. As the teacher, you are given the opportunity to provide instruction at a time when your students are receptive to feedback, and, in the words of Swain,¹⁷ your students are motivated because "the social activity they are engaged in offers them an incentive [to succeed], and the means to do so." Lingual Learning believes that, when explicit linguistic practice is built into their routine, students will begin to use increasingly complex language and experience academic success, as they move toward reclassification as fluent English-proficient students.

Your primary task is to equip students with the single most important tool of success— language. That's why ELD Links™ was designed by teachers, for teachers, with the goal of providing students the practice they need to use academic language. Let us be the bird on your back, because we're already behind you, all the way.

Notes

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- ² National Council of Teachers of English. (2008). *English Language Learners: A Policy Research Brief*. James R. Squire Policy Office of Policy Research. Urbana, IL. Retrieved on March 14, 2014 from <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/PolicyResearch/ELLResearchBrief.pdf>.
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¹⁶ Vygotsky, 1978.

¹⁷ Swain, 2000, p. 100, emphasis supplied.

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