



TIPS | for Educators of ELLs in Grades 4-12: What To Do First

Before you begin to work with your English Language Learners (ELLs), look at these preparation strategies to make your reading instruction more productive and effective.

- **Find out about your newcomers' literacy backgrounds in their primary language if possible.**

If students have literacy skills in their primary language, you can build on these skills in developing English literacy. Use the literacy assessment tools your school or district provides to evaluate reading and writing skills, but keep in mind that literacy assessments in a student's second language (English) may not provide accurate results. If an assessment is not available in the student's primary language, discuss an alternate plan with your principal and/or school district.

- **Determine the relationship between home language and English.**

Does your student's home language share cognates with English? Does it share roots with English? Does the home language use a different alphabet? Are there speakers/resources of your student's home language available in your school or community?

- **Give authentic assessments of students' literacy skills.**

This is different from a formal diagnostic assessment that determines broad literacy skills. Appropriate authentic assessments should focus on specific literacy skills in English and include decoding and comprehension as well as written skills.

Authentic assessments can be completed by listening to students read (running records, etc.), asking open-ended questions, asking for text retellings and having students complete writing prompts.

- **Create a safe, non-threatening classroom environment.**

Create some ground rules for classroom interaction and brief your students beforehand about new incoming students. Create a "welcoming committee" and ask your current students what would make them feel comfortable if they were going to a new environment, etc. Students are much more willing to take a chance in an environment in which they feel welcome and where it's OK to make a mistake.

- **Create a language-rich environment.**

Provide plenty of supplemental texts and create "word walls" by categories (academic words, words specific to content, words to facilitate writing, "help" words, words used often in your classroom, new words students have learned and like to use). Be sure to have plenty of dictionaries in English and your students' home language on hand and encourage students to create personal dictionaries. In addition, provide plenty of opportunities for students to speak, read and write all of these words.

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- **Build on background knowledge.**

Discover what students already know on the subject so they can further develop their language and content acquisition. Also remember that even if the students know the concept, they may not know the English label.

- **Always remember the reading level.**

Target texts that students can read with at least 90 percent accuracy. If a student misses more than 10 out of every 100 words, his or her fluency and comprehension will suffer. Note that newcomer students without prior formal education will need an introduction to the structure and organization of the text; introduce different parts of the text such as the table of contents and the glossary. Show students how to use clues for text organization such as bold print, chapter headings and chapter summaries.

- **Use texts with strong graphic support to build content vocabulary.**

Richly illustrated information books can help ELLs learn the vocabulary they need in science, social studies and other content-area classes. Newcomers will need even more support and more concrete definitions and visual aids. (ELLs who have been in the country for some time will be more familiar with certain concepts, holidays, idiomatic expressions, etc., than students who have just arrived.)

- **Find reading material in your newcomers' primary language.**

Continuing to develop reading skills in their first language will help students develop those same skills in English. Include first-language books, magazines and other level-appropriate reading materials in your classroom library.

- **Recognize that newcomers may experience a "silent period."**

Initially, newcomers may listen much more than they talk. This is a natural phase in which they are building their early understanding about how English works. In the meantime, however, do not let this "silent period" go unchecked. Focus on providing rich language through talk or read-alouds, modeling and gestures. Provide sentence structures (showing how most sentences are constructed in English) for students to practice beginning English skills.

- **Provide frequent opportunities for peer-assisted learning.**

Pairing newcomers with other students who are more proficient in English supports vocabulary development, comprehension and social interaction.

- **Collaborate with colleagues.**

Develop collaborative relationships between ELL teachers, reading specialists, classroom teachers, bilingual educators and other school personnel to ensure that newcomers receive the best possible instruction.