



The ESL/ELL Teacher's SURVIVAL GUIDE



Ready-to-Use Strategies,
Tools, and Activities
for Teaching All Levels

LARRY FERLAZZO
KATIE HULL SYPNIESKI

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The ESL/ELL Teacher's Survival Guide

**Ready-to-Use Strategies, Tools,
and Activities for Teaching English
Language Learners of All Levels**

LARRY FERLAZZO AND KATIE HULL SYPNIESKI

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Introduction

There was a great forest fire—everything was burning and all the animals were scared and didn't know what they could do. A hummingbird, though, went to a lake and got a drop of water. It flew to the fire and dropped the water there, and it kept on going back again. The other animals kept on telling the hummingbird that it was wasting its time, telling it there was no way a little water was going to make a difference. The hummingbird replied, “I'm doing the best I can.”

—Japanese folktale¹

The hummingbird did its best in the face of many challenges and adversity, and nothing could stop it.

While it would have been ideal for the hummingbird to organize all the animals to join it in fighting the fire, always encouraging the use of that kind of strategy is not the main point of the story or this book. This book is primarily designed to help the secondary-level ESL teacher do the best she can in her classroom (though it does also include a chapter on how to help mainstream educators make their content more accessible to English language learners, too). In addition, the majority of approaches and strategies we discuss can be easily modified for younger ELLs.

This book is written by two committed and experienced educators who have a rich family life outside of school, plan on continuing to teach for years to come, and who are always interested in providing high-quality education to their students without requiring enormous extra work for the teacher.

It is not written by or for teachers who lack awareness of their own limitations and what is needed to stay in

education for the long haul.

This book is a careful distillation of selected instructional strategies that have been used successfully by us for years in the classroom.

It is not a laundry list of every ELL teaching method that's been discussed in the literature.

In addition to providing a selective review of ELL teaching methods, this book shares highly regarded research supporting just about everything we suggest.

It is not just speaking from our experience and what we think is good.

This book shares numerous specific suggestions about how ESL teachers can use technology to bring a value-added benefit to their language-learning students.

It is not a treatise on how educational technology is the “magic bullet” that is always (or even often) superior to nontech strategies.

This book recognizes that teachers need to deal with standards (we use a simple summary of California State ESL/ELD standards throughout the book that has been developed by the Sacramento City Unified School District—see Exhibit 3.1 in Chapter Three), textbooks, and standardized tests. This book also recognizes that not everything always goes according to plan, and includes a lengthy chapter on how to deal with potential problems. This book understands the realities of what work in the classroom world actually is like.

It does not offer a pie-in-the-sky view assuming we operate in an ideal classroom world all the time.

This book emphasizes the importance of learners being co-creators of their education.

It does not encourage the teacher being the “sage on stage.”

The point of this book is not to claim it is the be-all and end-all for ESL teacher professional development. We

strongly encourage teachers and their schools to develop ongoing mentor relationships with experienced educator organizations, and we recommend three of them in the Afterword.

This book does not promote the idea that any teacher is an island and only needs a few books and informal professional relationships to reach his full potential.

We hope that you can gain from this guide at least as much as we learned from writing it.



Bonus Web Content

Numerous Tech Tools supporting the lessons and instructional strategies that we discuss are highlighted throughout this book. In addition, we have a lengthy web page listing links to all the tools we cite, as well as to many others that we did not have space to include. All Exhibits in the book can also be downloaded. Readers can access these resources by going to www.josseybass.com/go/eslsurvivalguide. To post messages pertaining to this book or interact with the authors, join the Twitter conversation: #eslsg.

¹ “The Hummingbird and the Forest Fire” (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hr3i3LYGU4>.

Part One

Getting Started with English Language Learners

Chapter 1

ESL Instruction: The Big Picture

Long ago in the southwestern part of the United States an Indian tribe lived near a range of mountains. Climbing the highest of these mountains was considered an important accomplishment, and all the young boys of the village couldn't wait until they were old enough to make the climb on their own.

One night, the Chief gathered the boys together and said to them, "You have reached the age to take on the challenge. Tomorrow you may all go and climb that mountain with my blessings. Go as far as you can, and when you are tired, turn around and come home. Remember to bring back a twig from the place where you turned around."

The next morning, the boys began the long awaited climb. A few hours later, one of the boys returned with a piece of buckthorn. The Chief smiled and said, "I can see you made it to the first rockslide. Wonderful!" Later in the afternoon, another boy arrived with a cedar frond. "You made it halfway up! Well done!" remarked the Chief. An hour later another boy returned with a branch of pine, and the Chief said, "Good job. It looks like you made it three-quarters of the way. If you keep trying, next year you will surely reach the top!"

As the sun began to set, the Chief began to worry about the last boy, who still had not returned. Just

when the Chief was about to send out a search party, the boy finally returned. He ran to the Chief and held out his hand. His hand was empty, but his eyes sparkled with happiness as he said, “Chief, there were no trees where I turned around. I saw no twigs, no living things at the very top of the peak, and far away I could see the majestic sun shining off the sea.”

The Chief's eyes also sparkled with joy as he proclaimed, “I knew it! When I looked in your eyes I could see that you made it! You have been to the top! It shines in your eyes and sings in your voice! My son, you do not need twigs or branches as prizes of your victory. You have felt the prize in your spirit because you have seen the wonder of the mountain!”¹

This tale describes the satisfaction and joy felt by the boy who reached the mountain's peak and witnessed the compelling view from the top. He didn't return with any physical “prizes,” but instead carried the treasures of his journey within himself. The next time he climbs the mountain, he will be motivated from within, not because there are tokens or prizes to be collected.

As educators, we hope all of our students will “see the view from the peak” and will feel compelled to take on many more journeys as they learn and grow. In a recent paper, Stephen Krashen explains how “compelling input” relates to language learning:

Compelling means that the input is so interesting you forget that it is in another language. It means you are in a state of “flow.”² In flow, the concerns of everyday life and even the sense of self disappear—our sense of time is altered and nothing but the activity itself seems to matter.³

This idea will be reflected throughout this book as we identify and describe research-based instructional strategies and approaches that “compel” students to want to learn English. Compelling input can help students “reach the peak” of acquiring language without seeking external rewards. However, it is ultimately important for students to come to their own conclusions about the value of “reaching the peak.” Once students see the value of language learning and become intrinsically motivated to learn English, they will take the risk and climb that mountain over and over again. Sometimes they will need encouragement and support from us, especially when the peak is obscured by clouds along the way.

This book contains strategies and tools for the English as a second language (ESL) teacher to act as a guide on this trek up the mountain. We hope it will help you feel prepared and excited about this journey. We know that everyone's trail will be different, and we hope this survival guide will serve as a compass rather than a direct map.

In the following subsections we will lay out a big picture of ESL instruction, including statistics on the English language learner (ELL) population, research on language development, and several ESL instructional best practices. Later chapters will go into more detail on how to successfully use the research and practices presented in this big picture in your own classroom.

Some Facts About the ELL Population

It is hard to find a school or district in this country that doesn't have an English learner population. For teachers in states like California, Texas, Florida, and New York it is sometimes hard to find a classroom without any English

language learners. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education estimates that approximately 4.5 million English learners are enrolled in public schools across the country—roughly 10 percent of all students enrolled in K-12 schools in the United States.⁴ The number of English learners has increased by over 50 percent in the last decade, with some states, like South Carolina and Indiana, experiencing extremely rapid growth of English learner populations (400 to 800 percent increases).⁵ The ELL population continues to grow, with some demographers predicting that in twenty years the ratio of ELL students to English-only students could be one in four.⁶

While English learners in this country come from over four hundred different language backgrounds, the majority (80 percent) of the ELL population enrolled in our nation's schools are Spanish speakers.⁷ Vietnamese and Chinese are the next two most common first languages spoken among ELLs (accounting for 1.8 percent and 1.4 percent, respectively, of the ELL population).⁸

ELL, ESL, ELD, LEP, EFL: What Do All The Labels Mean?

ELL, or English language learner. ELL is the most current term used in the United States to describe students whose native language is not English, who are in various stages of acquiring English, and who require various levels of language support and development in order to become fully proficient in English.

ESL, or English as a second language. The term *ESL* was formerly used as a designation for ELL students, but is more commonly used now to refer to “a program of instruction designed to support ELL students” and is

often still used at the postsecondary level to refer to multilingual students.^{[9](#)}

ELD, or English language development. ELD is often used to describe instruction and programs for ELL students that focus on developing English language proficiency in the domains of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

LEP, or limited English proficiency. *LEP* is used by the U.S. Department of Education for ELLs who have not yet demonstrated proficiency in English, according to state standards and assessments.^{[10](#)}

EFL, or English as a foreign language. EFL refers to students who are “nonnative English speakers, but who are learning English in a country where English is not the primary language.”^{[11](#)}

Many educators and researchers, including the authors of this book, prefer the term *ELL* because it emphasizes that students are active *learners* of English, as opposed to being limited or deficient in some way.

Adolescent ELLs and Long-Term ELLs

Adolescent ELL students are a fast-growing population and come from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. ELLs in grades seven through twelve increased by approximately 70 percent between 1992 and 2002.^{[12](#)}

From 9 to 20 percent of students enrolled in middle and high schools are newcomer or refugee students. While some of these students come with high literacy skills and content knowledge, the majority of newcomers are students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) who have had two or

more years of interrupted schooling in their home country.¹³ These students enter U.S. schools with limited educational experiences and lower levels of literacy in their native languages.

Well over half of ELLs in middle and high schools were born in the United States, are second- or even third-generation immigrants, and have been enrolled in U.S. schools since kindergarten.¹⁴ Researchers have identified these students as long-term English language learners, or LT-ELLs. Typically, these students have high levels of oral English proficiency, but may lack the academic language and skills in reading and writing needed to master subject matter.¹⁵ Many long-term ELLs are stuck at the intermediate level due to their lack of proficiency in academic language and their challenges with reading and writing skills. Many of these students may not have received targeted language development, may have been placed with teachers lacking the professional development needed to meet specific language needs, and may have lived in particularly challenging socioeconomic conditions, including poverty.¹⁶

With such diversity among adolescent ELLs, it is important for teachers to learn as much as possible about their students and to have knowledge of strategies that directly address the needs of these students. Chapter Two contains ideas for getting to know students and for building relationships of trust with students and their families. It also outlines important resources for working with adolescent ELLs and gives ideas for establishing classroom routines that promote a positive learning environment. Chapters Three and Four present instructional strategies designed for newcomer and beginning students, and Chapters Five and Six offer numerous strategies designed for intermediate-level learners, including long-term ELLs.

While adolescent learners enter our classrooms with diverse needs and challenges, it is important to remember that adolescents also bring creative minds capable of processing higher-order thinking and learning. The general public may often have the impression that language learning is easiest for young children and becomes harder and harder with age. However, recent research has shown that some elements of language acquisition may actually be easier for adolescents than for young children. One study found that young adults who were taught a specific language rule were better than younger children at “recognizing the rule, applying it quickly, and using it in new situations.”^{[17](#)}

A Primer on ESL Research

The following subsections present basic descriptions of research and concepts that are foundational components of ESL instruction. While this is not a comprehensive summary of all the research on language development, it is an introduction to several key concepts that are highly important for teachers of ELLs and can serve as launching points for further study.

L1 and L2

Researchers and educators commonly use the term *L1* to refer to a student's native language (also called primary language, home language, or heritage language) and *L2* to refer to the language a student is acquiring in addition to their native language, which in the United States is English. The next subsection, on ESL best practices, will discuss the important link between L1 and L2 in language learning.

BICS and CALP

Jim Cummins, a professor at the University of Toronto, first introduced the distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills, or BICS, and cognitive academic language proficiency, or CALP,¹⁸ and his research has had a major impact on both policy and practices in second language education.

Basically, BICS, also called *communicative competence*, refer to the listening and speaking skills that students tend to acquire quickly in a new language (within the first couple of years) in order to communicate in social situations. For example, BICS enable one to talk with friends on the soccer field or to ask someone for directions.

CALP refers to the academic language and more cognitively demanding skills that are required for academic success. CALP takes longer for students to develop, often between five to seven years, but can take longer for students with less proficiency in their native language.¹⁹ CALP is required in academic situations such as lectures, class discussions, and research projects, and includes skills such as summarizing, analyzing, extracting and interpreting meaning, evaluating evidence, composing, and editing.²⁰

More recent research has extended CALP to include the following three dimensions of academic English: linguistic (knowledge of word forms, functions, grammatical elements, and discourse patterns used in academic settings), cognitive (higher-order thinking involved in academic settings), and sociocultural-psychological (knowledge of social practices involved in academic settings).²¹ ESL instruction based on CALP is still widely accepted as best practice,²² as many researchers agree upon the need to focus on academic language proficiency in order for English learners to succeed in school.

Acquisition Versus Learning

Most researchers acknowledge a distinction between language acquisition and language learning. A simple, rudimentary explanation of the difference is that acquisition involves being able to easily use the language to communicate, while language learning might place more emphasis on filling out grammar worksheets correctly. This does not mean, however, that the two are mutually exclusive.

This distinction has led to much debate over the place of explicit grammar study in language development. Some linguists have argued for a more communicative approach, where the focus is on the message versus the form and fosters language acquisition, while others believe students need direct instruction in grammatical forms of the target language.²³

Recent research has proposed a more balanced approach—that second language instruction can provide a combination of both *explicit* teaching focused on features of the second language such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and *implicit* learning stemming from meaningful communication in the second language.²⁴ We agree that the best language instruction uses meaningful input and contexts to help students develop their English skills, but we also feel that teaching language features in context is also necessary for students to develop proficiency. Specific strategies for how to employ this kind of balanced approach in the classroom will be described in later chapters.

Stages of Language Development

While it is important to note that ELL students come with different cultural and educational experiences that can affect their language development, researchers, beginning with Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell,²⁵ have identified the following *general* stages of second language acquisition that students go through:

Preproduction. Also called the “silent period,” when the student is taking in the target language, but not speaking it.

Early production. The student begins to try speaking using short phrases, but the focus is still on listening and absorbing the new language. Many errors occur in this stage.

Speech emergent. Words and sentences are longer, but the student still relies heavily on context clues and familiar topics. Vocabulary increases and errors decrease, especially in common or repeated interactions.

Beginning fluency. In social situations, speech is fairly fluent with minimal errors. New contexts and academic language are challenging due to gaps in vocabulary.

Intermediate fluency. Communicating in the second language is fluent, especially in social language situations. In new situations or in academic areas, speech is approaching fluency, but some gaps in vocabulary knowledge still exist. There are very few errors, and the student is able to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills (such as opinions and analysis) in the second language.

Advanced fluency. Student communicates fluently in all contexts and can maneuver successfully in new contexts and when exposed to new academic information. The student may still have an accent and use idiomatic expressions incorrectly at times, but is

essentially fluent and comfortable communicating in the second language.[26](#)

It is important to remember that not all students' experiences fall neatly into these categories, and that prior educational experiences and literacy in their L1 can have a great impact on students' language acquisition processes. Most researchers believe it takes from five to seven years to reach advanced fluency if a student has strong first language and literacy skills, and that it can take between seven to ten years for students with less language proficiency in their first language.[27](#)

Knowing students' proficiency levels can help teachers differentiate their instruction and address the language needs of each student. For example, when working with students in preproduction and early production stages, it can be helpful to ask yes-or-no questions. Students at the speech emergent level could be asked questions that require a fairly short, literal answer, and students at the beginning fluency stage could be asked if they agree or disagree with a statement and why.

Proficiency Levels

As described earlier, research has found that ELLs progress through several stages of language acquisition. Most states use a model that divides this process into five levels of English proficiency: beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced, and advanced.

Researchers have also found that students generally progress much more quickly from beginning to intermediate level (often taking two to three years) than from intermediate to advanced (often taking four or more years). This is likely because the lower levels of proficiency require simpler vocabulary and sentence patterns and involve language situations that are highly contextualized (familiar,

recurrent, and supported by nonlinguistic clues such as gestures and intonation). Full proficiency, on the other hand, means students must have command of more complex sentence structures and vocabulary. They must have the academic English to function well in less contextualized situations (for example, a classroom discussion or a prompted essay), where they must clearly communicate their ideas on higher-level, more abstract concepts.

This research directly contradicts the argument that students who are immersed in all-English instruction will quickly become fluent, and it challenges the policies proposed and implemented in some states requiring students to move into mainstream classes after just one year of school.[28](#)

A Quick Tour of ESL Best Practices

Throughout this book we will describe many effective instructional strategies and activities to use with ELL students. The following are a few basic best practices in ESL instruction that will guide the strategies and activities presented in the following chapters. We have found that consistently using these practices makes our lessons more efficient and effective. We also feel it is important to include a few “worst” practices we have witnessed over the years in the hopes that they will not be repeated! The best practices outlined below, as well as others, will be explained in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Modeling

Do. Model for students what they are expected to do or produce, especially for new skills or activities, by