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Challenges for ELLs in Content Area Learning

by Judie Haynes

Do you want to help classroom teachers in your school with their English language learners? Begin by understanding the challenges ELLs face in their content area learning.

Here some of the challenges ELLs face in content areas. These come from participants in various workshops that I have conducted around the U.S.

Challenges for ELLs in Reading

English language learners face many obstacles when reading literature in English. Most literature is culture bound. We expect students to have prior knowledge of literary genres such as fairy tales, myths, legends, and tall tales. If the teacher has not activated prior knowledge or built background information, knowing the vocabulary will not solve the problem. ELLs may be able to read the words but it doesn't mean they will understand the text. They are not aware of information that the author left unsaid; the information that "everyone knows."

Here are some specific challenges that ELLs face when learning to read material in English:

- an abundance of idioms and figurative language in English texts
- density of unfamiliar vocabulary
- use of homonyms and synonyms
- grammar usage especially the "exceptions to the rules"

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- word order, sentence structure and syntax
- difficult text structure with a topic sentence, supporting details and conclusion
- unfamiliarity with the connotative and denotative meanings of words
- ELLs may not have practice in expressing an opinion about text.
- use of regional U.S. dialects
- fear of participation and interaction with mainstream students
- story themes and endings can be inexplicable
- literary terms for story development are not understood
- unfamiliarity with drawing conclusions, analyzing characters and predicting outcomes
- imagery and symbolism in text are difficult.

Challenges for ELLs in Mathematics

Mathematics is not just arithmetic. There are considerable challenges for English language learners in math. There are challenges for teachers of mathematics, too. We may find that our ELLs use a different processes to arrive at answers. Many teachers do not validate other systems and prior mathematical knowledge. Problem solving is not just language but a thought process. Students from other cultures may be more concerned with getting the correct response than with the process. They may not be able to justify their answers.

Difficulties that ELLs face when learning mathematics:

- formation of numbers varies from culture to culture
- use of decimal point and comma vary from culture to culture

- Math is not spirally taught in many cultures. So students may not know a lot about geometry, for example.
- Many students have never seen or worked with manipulatives. They may not take a lesson using manipulatives seriously.
- Students learn math by rote memory.
- Math curricula in their countries may be primarily calculation.
- Word problems may not be introduced until much later.
- Estimating, rounding, and geometry are not often taught as early in other cultures.
- Mathematical terms do not always translate well.
- Mental math may be the norm. Students may not show work in addition, subtraction, multiplication and division or they may show work in a different way,

Specific Challenges for ELLs in Science

ELLs may lack of background knowledge in science. Our "hands-on" approach is different from what they are used to. Drawing conclusions on their own may be difficult for ELLs. In their own culture students may not have been trained to make guesses.

Challenges that ELLs face when studying science:

- The vocabulary of science presents a huge difficulty. There are a special set of terms for the student to learn. Even simple words that the student may know, could have another meaning in science.
- Material is covered very fast

- Directions are often multistep and difficult.
- There are too many concepts explained on each page of a science text.
- Cooperative learning may not fit in with students experiences in learning.
- Visuals may be confusing and difficult to understand.
- Sentence structure is complex and the passive voice is used in textbooks.
- What was taught in class does not always match the assessment.
- ELLs are not used to science labs or equipment
- Students lack background in scientific method
- There is no standard form of delivery of information

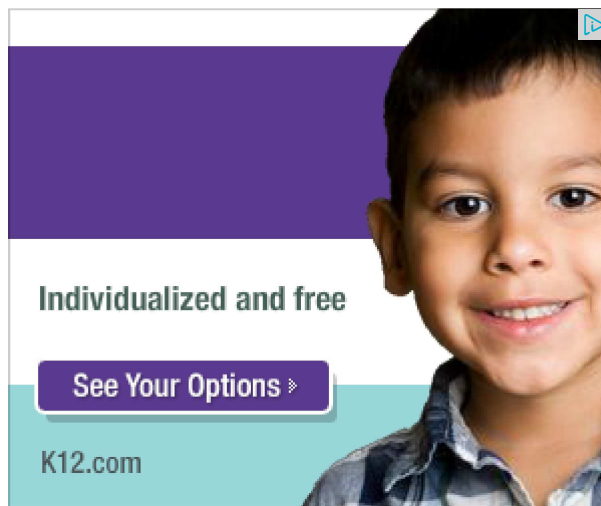
Challenges for ELLs in Social Studies

Social studies and U.S. history provide the biggest challenge to ELLs in their content classes. They have very limited background knowledge to activate. ELLs lack prior knowledge of U.S. and U.S. history, geography, and current events needed. Many students will memorize information for a test, but it has no relevance for them so the information is quickly forgotten.

ELLs' difficulties when studying social studies.

- Use of higher level thinking skills for reading and writing.
- Lack of familiarity with historical terms, government processes, and vocabulary.
- Social Studies text contains complex sentences, passive voice, and extensive use of pronouns.
- ELLs may not be used to expressing their personal opinions.

- Nationalistic and cultural focus of maps.
- Concepts which do not exist in all cultures are difficult. This includes privacy, democratic processes, rights of citizens, free will.
- No concept of movement within the structure of a society.
- ELLs are seldom asked to contribute an alternate view that reflects conditions in other countries.
- Use in our schools of "timeline" teaching vs. learning history by "dynasty" or "period."
- Difficulty with understanding what is said by the teacher and being able to take notes.
- Amount of text covered and the ELLs' inability to tell what is important in the text and what is not important.



Related Links

[Organizing and Assessing in the Content Area Class](#)

How do you help mainstream teachers accurately monitor for student comprehension, organize the content class, and design realistic assessments? These

questions will be addressed in this article, which is the second part of "Meeting the Challenge of Content Instruction."

[Meeting the Challenge of Content Instruction](#)

Discover how the standards movement currently sweeping the US will have a positive impact on the education of ESL students, while also presenting instructional challenges to ESL and mainstream professionals.

[SIOP: Making Content Comprehensible for ELLs](#)

The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) was developed to make content material comprehensible to English Language Learners. This model is the result of the work of Jana Echevarria, MaryEllen Vogt and Deborah J. Short.

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