Resources for Supporting the Writing Skills Development of English Learners

This resource is a supplement to the videos in this mini-module and includes guidelines and tips for:

- Allowing students to use their native language
- Allowing students to express their ideas
- Choosing when to correct written errors
- Teaching grammar in a meaningful way
- Teaching patterns of pronunciation

Allowing students to use their native language

Allowing students to use their native language goes against the commonly held belief that native languages should be allowed only as a last resort for students with very low English proficiency. Most research, however, does not support the belief that using only English accelerates ELLs' progress. There is a large body of research showing that the use of native language during certain parts of a lesson can benefit students at all English proficiency levels. Allowing students to use their native languages during specific learning activities:

- Validates the importance of the students' language
- Reduces anxiety (thus lowering the affective filter) because students are allowed to speak in whatever language they feel most comfortable
- Enables students with low English proficiency to participate
- Develops academic and cognitive skills that may be beyond students' English proficiency level
- Helps students with low English proficiency understand directions, assignments, and topics of discussion
- Creates greater access to prior knowledge to scaffold learning
- Helps students of all proficiency levels to collect and articulate their thoughts

While many teachers of ELLs will not know the native languages of their students, they can incorporate the students' native languages into the classroom by having them brainstorm in their native languages before some writing assignments, or by pairing students with the same native language but different levels of English proficiency. Use of the native language does not mean a lack of accountability. Students are still required to find a means of translating their writing into English.

Allowing students to express their ideas

It is crucial that students learning English be given time to practice using meaningful academic language introduced by the teacher within the context of the lesson. Furthermore, it is equally important that ELLs, especially adolescent ELLs, be given opportunities to share their ideas and thoughts about a given topic. In most classrooms, teachers dominate talk, giving students very limited opportunities to use language to express their understandings, ask questions, or discuss the content (Cazden, 2001). Current thinking about effective practices for working with English learners suggests that lessons should be structured so that students have more talk time to interact and discuss the content they are learning, their discoveries, their ideas, and their questions.

Giving students a chance to interact with their peers not only increases the amount of time for students to practice their developing English skills, but also provides opportunities for student-initiated talk around an academic topic, practice in expressing and understanding meaning, and extended conversations. Additionally, students often feel more secure speaking up in a small group rather than a whole-class situation and may be more inclined to participate (Brown, 2007).

Choosing when to correct written errors

It is important for teachers of ELLs not to correct every student error. Doing so can hurt a student's confidence and hinder learning. It can also interrupt the flow and focus of the lesson. Before correcting one of your student's errors, ask yourself the following questions:

- Given my student's current level of English proficiency, should the student know better than to make this kind of mistake?
- Is the mistake relevant to the lesson I am teaching?
- How easy would it be to correct this error?
- Will correcting the mistake interrupt the flow of the lesson?
- Will this mistake confuse other students or hinder this student's effective communication?
- How will the student react to a correction?
- What is the best way to correct this student?

Even if you decide not to correct your student, it is important to listen to and note the types of errors your students frequently make, and design your lessons accordingly. There are many effective ways to correct your students' errors, beyond the traditional method of explicitly pointing out errors to students.

Suggestions for error correction

Here are some **research-based** and **classroom-tested correction methods** that don't

rely on explicitly pointing out student errors:

- Signal to the student that you are not able to understand her. This requires her to rephrase her statement in order to make it more comprehensible.
- Rephrase or expand on the student's statement, correcting the mistake and emphasizing or isolating the word or phrase that you are correcting.
- Create a mini-lesson to provide students with further review on a specific area of trouble.
- To encourage self-correction, provide students with a checklist they can use to monitor the types of errors they frequently make.
- Provide students with a list of errors that frequently come up among speakers of their native language; suggest that they monitor their own speech for these errors.
- Develop an environmental resource that contains a system of signs or symbols representing errors that your students commonly make and that you feel are most important to correct. This way, when a student makes one of these errors during oral communication, you can point to the sign or symbol instead of interrupting the student's speech.
- Ask other students if they know the correct answer. This can be a good way of seeing how widespread student confusion is about this item. Peer feedback encourages students to develop their own listening awareness.
- In order to enable more self-correction, use audiotapes and videotapes and provide students with self-evaluation forms.
- For more self-conscious students, make a note of the error and address the correction during individual conferences. Or create an error checklist to help the student self-monitor in the future.

If you are **using peer feedback:**

- Provide explicit instructions about the types of errors for which students are supposed to be checking to ensure the corrections are focused and effective.
- Give students a checklist you have created or have students review a model piece of writing or speech. Work with your students to generate a list of qualities they should be focused on when they review a peer's piece.
- Group students with a peer of the same language background who has mastered a particular item. A peer with the same language background is more likely to notice the other student's error and help the student understand how the error relates to native language interference.
- Model for your students appropriate phrases to use when giving feedback.

When **responding to students' written work:**

- Consider limiting error correction to a small number of items you feel are most important to correct and most accessible to students—depending on the length

of the assignment and your knowledge.

- Use a color of ink that is not red; many students have bad associations with red ink.
- Correct students in such a way (underlining; saying what the problem is, e.g., spelling, verb tense, subject/verb agreement) that enables them to self-correct instead of merely copying your corrections.

Teaching grammar in a meaningful way

The teaching of grammar has long been debated among researchers and practitioners. While many language-teaching experts agree that communications should be emphasized over learning the form of a language, the majority of experts still see an important role for grammar in the classroom. Grammar instruction, however, can be much more than simply imparting a series of rules that students are expected to memorize. Instead, grammar can be taught in ways to promote students' communicative abilities. In fact, some research shows that students avoid using grammatical structures when they're unsure of the rules that govern them. As a result, without specific instruction on and practice in using different constructions, students' grammar and writing are unlikely to improve much. Repetitive, isolated grammar drills are a commonly found teaching practice. However, researchers generally agree that "the teaching of grammar in isolation does not lead to improvement in students' speaking and writing, and that, in fact, it hinders development of students' oral and written language" (NCTE, 1985). Rather than simply imparting a series of rules that students are expected to memorize in isolation, grammar can be taught in ways to promote students' communicative abilities.

It is important to note that the teaching of grammar is more appropriate in some contexts than others. For example, it is less appropriate to focus on grammar instruction with beginning level ELLs. At this level, the focus of instruction should emphasize comprehension and meaning-making.

Here are some tips for teaching grammar in a meaningful way:

- Make grammar instruction as relevant as possible to the writing process.
- Take advantage of writing assignments that require the use of certain grammatical constructions (e.g., assignments such as "what I would do if I won the lottery" naturally elicit use of the conditional tense).
- Teach students when to use the grammatical structures. While most students can learn grammatical aspects such as the formation of the present perfect and perfect tenses of verbs in English, it is often confusing to understand how to use them. Teachers need to give students meaningful assignments that will help them understand the differences between the two forms.
- Emphasize use of correct grammatical structures over memorization of rules and terms. While it is useful in many cases for teachers to explain the rules that govern the formation and usage of a particular grammatical structure, having students memorize these rules is time consuming and ineffective. They need the

chance to apply and practice what they are learning. Teachers should use objects, pictures, drawings, charts, and other visual aids to practice grammar points. Also, students should be exposed to a variety of formats in which to practice new grammatical structures such as expository and creative writing assignments, dialogues, interviews, and games.

- Use repetition and recycling when teaching grammar. It is important to reinforce the grammatical constructions that students have learned.
- Help students to see grammar not just as a way to correct their errors, but also as an important aspect of effective communication.
- Use as little grammar terminology as possible in order to avoid confusion, unless students already have a sophisticated knowledge of grammar.
- Introduce forms to students that they are ready to process. Researchers generally advocate beginning with simpler structures and moving to more complex ones.

If you want to learn more about teaching grammar in a meaningful way, see the following articles:

- Larsen-Freeman, D. (1991). Teaching grammar. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (2nd ed., pp. 279–296). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Frodesen, J. (1991). Grammar in writing. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (2nd ed., pp. 233–248). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Teaching patterns of pronunciation

Although English pronunciation is not emphasized in many ELL classrooms, it is a vital aspect of effective communication. Obtaining accent-free speech in English is not a realistic or necessary goal for most ELLs (especially older students); however, teachers should help all students speak clearly enough to be understood. Lessons in pronunciation can easily be included in many activities so that teachers do not have to do isolated lessons about the sound system. Successful pronunciation lessons generally should:

- Include meaningful context. Students are unlikely to remember the proper pronunciation of isolated sounds or individual words.
- Help students understand that the way they emphasize a particular word or pattern of words can change the meaning.
- Assist students in comparing and contrasting the sound system in their native language and in English. When teachers learn the most common difficulties that students of different language groups have with the English sound system, they can better anticipate and understand their students' pronunciation problems.
- Connect pronunciation lessons to other grammar or syntax lessons (e.g.,

students can be taught the different pronunciation of "ed" and "t" endings of verbs while they are learning about the past tense; they can be taught the intonation patterns of different questions when they are taught the formation of "wh" questions).

- Provide students with multiple opportunities to practice pronouncing English. Some effective pronunciation activities include debates, speeches, presentations, and games in which peers listen to each other and monitor the quality of pronunciation.

References

Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Cazden, C. B. (2001). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

National Council of Teachers of English. (1985). *Resolution on grammar exercises to teach speaking and writing.* Position statement delivered at NCTE Annual Business Meeting, Philadelphia, PA.