

ELL Strategies for Paraprofessionals

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Paraprofessionals who work alongside ELLs may do so in a variety of settings with a variety of roles. You may be working alongside the ELL teacher in the ESL classroom or perhaps you aid a content-area teacher who has ELLs in his/her class. You may be multilingual yourself; familiar with the challenges of learning a second language or maybe this is your first encounter with students who speak languages other than English. Whatever the case may be, there are some tips that will help you to succeed in supporting ELLs.

First Steps

Get to know your students

It may sound simple, but getting to know your students is a great first step towards helping them to succeed in the classroom.

Your role: It begins with learning their names and how to pronounce them correctly. In my experience, many ELLs will not correct a teacher who mispronounces their name. Therefore, if you ask them, "Is that how you say it?" They will most likely tell you "yes" even if you mispronounce it. Instead, try asking them how their mother says their name. You might be surprised how differently it's pronounced. In addition:

- If you are working in a classroom where ELLs are integrated with non-ELLs, find out who the ELLs are.
- Find out language proficiency levels of the students.

You should be able to find out both pieces of information from the classroom or ELL teacher.

Help students feel comfortable

It is common for new students, particularly at the beginning level, to experience what experts call a silent period.

Your role: You can help to make students feel comfortable by asking them some basic get to know you questions:

- Find out where the student is from and what language they speak at home.
- Ask them to teach you a greeting in their language.
- Ask them what their favorite activities or hobbies are, and look for links to class activities or lessons.

If a student feels that you have taken a genuine interest in them, they will be more likely to request and/or accept your help.

Get to know the teacher in the classroom

Collaboration in the classroom is often ideal, but it is not always easy. Take the time to get to know the teacher with whom you are working and discuss your teaching styles and expectations.

Your Role: Set up a time to meet with the classroom teacher to discuss both of your expectations.

Ask specific questions:

- How and when are you expected to assist in the classroom? For example, will you be working one on one and/or off to the side with ELLs in the class or will you be walking around the classroom helping everyone?

- Chances are that you will be helping students while s/he is instructing. If so, what will that look like?
- Does the teacher prefer that you wait until there is a break in instruction to make clarifications or explanations to the students, or would s/he rather that you quietly clarify or explain to students in need at the moment?

The only way to find these things out is to talk about it!

What Does Help Look Like?

The help that ELLs will need from you will range from the academic content to the mechanics of the classroom, and everything in between. This includes:

Academic help

- Model an example for students when they do not understand the task at hand.
- Restate or simplify questions, directions, instruction, etc. When dealing with ELLs it's important to focus on the major theme or the big picture and focus less on the details.
- Check for comprehension frequently. Refrain from yes or no questions because when you ask an ELL if they understand, they usually answer "Yes." Instead, ask open-ended questions that encourage them to explain their answers with words, motions or pictures.
- If students are lacking the confidence to share answers with the entire class, act as their sounding board. If they are correct, encourage them to share. If they're incorrect, help them to find the correct answer.
- When students need to look up vocabulary words or definitions, help them to navigate through glossaries and picture/bilingual dictionaries.

Mechanics of the classroom

- Make sure that they are on the same page as the rest of the class, literally. For example, check that they're on the correct page in the textbook, correct worksheet, or the same number problem.
- Ensure that they have copied down assignments correctly. If they are written on the board, help them to locate them. If an assignment was given orally, students may need to see it in writing to fully understand.

Social/emotional needs

As with many students, the scope of assistance often goes way beyond the classroom when ELLs are involved. Try to pay attention to the following.

- **Hygiene:** Not everyone shares the same hygiene practices as we do in the U.S. One explanation for this is that before their arrival, not everyone had access to daily showers, baths, and laundry as we do. For that reason, pay attention to whether the students' clothes are clean each day. Do the students seem to be properly bathed? Did they brush their teeth? For older students, do they wear deodorant? If not, you, the teacher, the counselor or the school social worker may need to address issues of hygiene with the student.
- **Clothing:** Watch that students wear appropriate clothing for the weather. Are they wearing socks with their sneakers or shoes? During cold winters, do they wear boots, coats, hats, and gloves?
- **Nourishment:** Do the students look nourished? When you see them in the cafeteria, are they eating lunch? If they aren't, why not? Perhaps they didn't fill out the appropriate lunch application or they may not know where the cafeteria is! It's possible that they are afraid to eat because the food is unfamiliar and they think it may go against religious or dietary restrictions. Not all students will ask for help and not all adults in the school pay

attention to such details. You could bridge the gap by keeping an eye out for such things and asking questions.

- **Bullying:** Are the ELLs being teased, ostracized, or peer pressured? OR Are the ELLs bullying other students in an attempt to be accepted? ELLs, especially new students, often feel scared and alone. Take the initiative to introduce them to some friendly classmates who could help them feel more at ease in school.

Interpreting

If you are bilingual, you will probably interpret for students and families in a variety of settings. It goes without saying that speaking the same language, as your students will put them at ease. However, it is important to establish some guidelines before interpreting.

In the classroom

- **Discuss your role:** First, talk with the teacher to determine when the best time for clarifications and interpretation are. Discuss how the use of interpretation can be used most effectively in the classroom.
- **Get to know your students:** Become familiar with the English language proficiency levels of your students as soon as possible. This will help you to determine when interpretation is necessary and when students are perhaps taking advantage. Beginners will certainly require more attention than advanced. Remember that there is a delicate balance between giving students the aid that they need and encouraging them to become independent learners.
- **Think about seating:** Consider seating students who speak the same language closer together. That way you won't have to go back and forth across the classroom and repeat yourself.
- **Set limits:** Encourage students to call on you for interpretation for academic help, but discourage them from socializing with you during instruction. It's also common for students to request your help in areas unrelated to instruction such as problems at lunch, locker issues, bus pass, etc. Sometimes, they ask for help on behalf of their parents: green card questions, landlord problems, auto insurance, etc. If this is the case, set up a time to meet about the issue later. Set a good example for your students by engaging only in academic talk during instruction.

During tests

Interpreting during instruction should look different than interpreting during tests. During tests, interpretations should follow the same parameters set by your state. For example, in New York State, interpretations during state tests are to be oral only, no writing. They should be word for word interpretations that do not clarify or explain content. By mirroring the state parameters during classroom tests, it will prepare students for final exams.

To find out more about your states testing accommodations for ELLs, speak with your principal or testing coordinator. You should also be able to find such information on your state's education website.

Interpreting for parents

You may be asked to interpret and/or translate for parents in a variety of settings. In terms of face-to-face interpretation, you may need to interpret during events such as a Parent/Teacher Conference, Open House, or parent organization meeting. You may be needed to interpret over the phone as well. In addition, your school may want to send home letters and information in students' native languages and you could be called upon to do some written translations.

Note: If you will be interpreting, try to clarify what your interpreting/translation responsibilities and schedule will early on. Otherwise, administrators and staff may be pulling you in different directions at the last minute to help with translation as the need arises. If you are scheduled to be

"on call," that may be appropriate. If you are being pulled away from instructional time in the classroom to translate, however, it will be difficult to work effectively with your students.

Language Support

Even if you're not bilingual, there are a number of ways to offer language support to your students. First and foremost, you can help students master academic content and language in English. However, you can also help them strengthen their native language by providing books and other materials in that language. If you don't know where to find such materials, ask other aides, teachers, librarians, or parent liaisons for ideas. Research shows that students who have strong language and literacy skills in their first language are more successful in learning English — and learning *in* English!

Tips for Success: The Individual vs. the Group

Americans value self-sufficiency. We have an individualistic culture, which means that we value individual achievements and are more likely to take pride in being independent. Many of the cultures your students will come from, however, have a more collectivist approach. Collectivist cultures tend to focus on working together for the good of the group, rather than for the good of the individual. In the classroom, this collectivism often manifests itself in the following ways:

Working together

Students copy off of one another on homework, class work, or tests and see nothing wrong with doing so. This is a major problem because ELLs don't understand why they can't "help out" or "get help" from their classmate; however, in the U.S. cheating and plagiarism are major educational offenses.

Your Role: It's important to teach students to help their classmates in the same manner that you help. Explain that helping does not mean giving the answer. It could mean showing a classmate where to find an answer in the book. It could mean interpreting for them. Or students could help each other by clarifying the question so classmates can come up with the answer on their own.

Dependence and independence

ELLs, especially those at the beginning level, have a tendency to latch on to helpers and have difficulty working independently. While all students need some kind of support and assistance, there are those students who thrive on assistance and require continual attention from the teacher, aide, tutor, or classmates. Be careful not to get lured into a situation in which a student is relying heavily on your help. We want to provide students the support they need; in order for them to be truly successful in this culture, however, they will eventually need to learn how to do things on their own.

Your Role: Encourage students to try it on their own. One way to do this is to build them up to working independently. For example, offer them some guidance, but then walk away and tell them that you will be back to check on them in a 5 minutes (or after they have completed one task). When you return, praise their effort, offer additional assistance if needed and then tell them that you will be back in 10 minutes (or after they have completed three tasks). This process will take time, but over the course of the year you will begin to produce a more confident, self-sufficient student.