

Teacher Talk for Secondary Level Teachers

Ideas For Working With Students Who Speak English As A Second Language

Students who speak English as a second language represent a growing proportion of the student-age population in the United States. Teachers who work successfully with these students use a number of strategies which can assist them in gaining content knowledge as well as increase their English language skills, both keys to later success in school.

Students in immersion programs are placed in classes where instruction is all in English while they are still learning English. Not only must they acquire grade-level language skills, they are also expected to learn the academic content and keep up with their English speaking peers. To help students make the transition to content area coursework, teachers need to be aware of ways in which they can help their students.

For example, when students are first learning English, they often cannot hear some of the sounds. In such cases, students tend to make approximations of sounds that are closest to ones in their own language. The result is that the words the student hears and writes may be different from what the teacher actually says. To illustrate, one student wrote "anabit" and "inanabit" during a lecture on animate and inanimate images in literature. Mistakes such as this make learning from lecture notes difficult, since words such as these cannot be looked up in the dictionary after class.

Some strategies that can help students learn and successfully make the transition include:

1. Provide a key word outline and use terms such as "first", "second," and "finally" to indicate introduction of topics and transitions to new ones.
2. Use the overhead or blackboard extensively to help students take accurate notes and write words correctly.
3. Have students highlight words in the text they don't know, and develop word banks for units and chapters.
4. With beginning learners of English, identify separate objectives. For example, the student might learn five new words and two or three key concepts during the lecture.
5. Use directed small group activities. Give students specific tasks that will encourage them to use the new vocabulary.
6. The U.S. curriculum is linear in organization. It is assumed that students enter school in kindergarten and build on their school experiences every year. Students in other countries may not have had any prior coursework in some content areas. Don't assume the students know. Ask them. When they don't know, provide resources students can use outside of class to build expected prior knowledge.
7. Use visuals and graphic organizers as much as possible. Find out what the library or media center has, and provide students with a list of materials they could use individually to supplement their coursework.
8. Provide students with good examples of the kind of work you expect them to do. Samples of essay examination answers, tests illustrating kinds of questions you ask, research papers, lab reports, and journal entries are all excellent learning tools for students learning English as a second language.