The classroom is abuzz with the productive noise that emanates from students working together. Groups of 4 are huddled around chart paper on which they are writing a character analysis. The teacher circulates and points to the posters with adjectives and adverbs, providing a resource for their writing. The English learners who are working in the groups are supported through scaffolding, including interaction with other students and the teacher.

In a class across the hall, the teacher is reading a story with the class as they follow along. Some students have their heads down on their desks, a couple have their sweatshirt hoods pulled over their heads. A few students in the back are acting up. When the teacher gives instructions for the follow up task, the English learners seem lost, unsure what they are supposed to do. The teacher notices and repeats the explanation of how to complete the worksheet.

Teaching literacy skills to an increasingly diverse school population is a challenge in part because many students become disengaged from learning at an early age. They attend schools that have practices and expectations that they may not fully understand and that may not reflect the values of their home. English learners (ELs) are learning a new language at the same time they are learning literacy skills, how to express their ideas, understanding the ways of school, and so forth. Young students enter kindergarten without many of the pre-literacy skills and experiences schools expect them to have. Older English learners have often been passed along from grade to grade without achieving basic literacy skills or they are recent immigrants who do not speak the language of instruction. For older adolescents, there is a “literacy crisis” (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2006).

However, even with these realities, we have observed many classes where English learners are thriving. Some are urban classes with high numbers of ELs and others are in suburban schools with only a handful of ELs but the commonality is that these students are active participants in learning and are set up for success. Because of their limited English proficiency (and sometimes interrupted schooling) ELs require “scaffolds” or support to be able to comprehend, learn, and complete academic tasks.

For English learners it is critical that teachers provide interesting, relevant lessons that are presented in a way that allows students to participate fully in lessons and will ensure that they will be successful in school. In this article we will describe the type of instruction that makes a difference, the kind of instruction that gives English learners the best chance of achieving academically while developing English proficiency.

Since 1995, we have been researching and refining the SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) Model for English learners (see Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008, or Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010a or 2010b for more information). The SIOP Model is an instructional framework for organizing classroom instruction in meaningful and effective ways. While it is now effectively implemented in bilingual, ESL, and two-way immersion classrooms throughout the
country, it is primarily intended as a model of sheltered instruction for all content classrooms (pre-K-12) where the language of instruction is English. Through our work and that of others, we have found that when teachers implement the SIOP teaching techniques to a high degree, the academic achievement of English learners (and other students) is increased (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Echevarria, Richards, Chan & Ratteff, 2009; Honigsfeld & Cohan, 2008; McIntyre, Kyle & Moore, 2006; Short, Lougit, & Fidelman, 2009).

There are eight components in the SIOP Model that include thirty features of effective instruction for English learners. The components are Lesson Preparation, Building Background, Comprehensible Input, Strategies, Interaction, Practice & Application, Lesson Delivery, and Review & Assessment (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; 2010a; 2010b). Among the thirty features of the SIOP Model is one that focuses specifically on student engagement, which we define as: “Students pay attention and are on task, follow the lesson, respond to teacher direction, and perform the activities as expected” (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008, p. 155). For English learners to make academic progress, the expectation is that they must be highly engaged 90-100% of the time during each lesson. Adhering to the following principles of instruction will lead to higher levels of student engagement and, in turn, in higher academic achievement for English learners.

**Six principles of instruction that foster engagement for English learners**

*Provide many opportunities for English learners to develop oral language competency through interaction with others.*

English learners need oral language practice to help them develop and deepen their content knowledge and to support their second language reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills (Saunders & Goldenberg, in press). Oral language proficiency impacts all aspects of educational achievement, including grades, achievement test results, and acquisition of skilled reading (August & Shanahan; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Lesaux & Geva, 2008). As a child’s teacher, you are the main role model for appropriate English usage, word choice, intonation, fluency, and so forth, but do not discount the value of student-student interaction. In small groups, pairs, and triads, English learners can practice new language structures and vocabulary that they have been taught, as well as important language functions, such as clarifying, confirming or disconfirming predictions, elaborating on one’s own or another’s ideas, and evaluating opinions.

Further, structured interactions between ELs and native-English speakers result in English proficiency gains when the interactions focus on negotiating meaning and eliciting understanding, such as in instructional conversations (August & Shanahan, 2008; Saunders & Goldenberg, in press). To be beneficial for English learners, interactive activities need to be carefully designed to maximize student engagement and more proficient English-speaking students should be taught how to interact with youngsters who are developing English as a second or additional language.

Opportunities for authentic discussion and expression of ideas is important for language development, and sentence frames are also effective for providing language models for both English learners and native-English speakers. These frames serve as a scaffold for using complete sentences. For example, when you plan for your students to engage in a structured discussion, the following sentence frames will help English learners practice subject-verb agreement, while enabling them to participate more fully (Vogt & Echevarria, 2008, pp. 104, 116):

- “______________ was important to this story because it __________.”
- “______________ were important to this story because they __________.”

Another example of a sentence frame for older students that models appropriate agreement and disagreement with someone’s ideas is:

- “I respectfully disagree with __________ because I think that __________.”
- “I agree with __________ because I think that __________.”

Additional nouns and/or verbs could be added to the sentence frames for students with lower levels of English proficiency. The goals is to model the varied sentence constructions with the sentence frames, and then remove them as soon as students are able to formulate similar English sentences on their own.

There are times when it is important to provide clarification in a student’s first language, if possible. This can be provided by the teacher, instructional assistant, or another student who speaks the same language. Also, activities that foster classroom interaction and engagement assist students in developing friendships and support, so that English learners can learn and practice classroom routines in a comfortable, risk-free environment.

Effective teachers consistently write, post, and orally share with their students both language objectives and content objectives for every lesson they teach. This provides English learners with a road-map of what they are to learn and be able to do in both content...
and language by the end of the respective lesson. Content and language objectives also guide teachers by reminding them that English learners must be able to learn both content and language simultaneously if they are to make gains (Goldenberg, 2008; Lyster, 2007). (For more information about writing content and language objectives see Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2008; 2010a; 2010b).

**Explicitly link English learners’ background knowledge and experiences to lesson content and past learning.**

One of most important things you can do to assist English learners in meeting content standards is help them connect new concepts to their personal experiences and past learning. For many English learners who have not attended U.S. schools or who are unfamiliar with American culture, explicit background building can fill gaps students might have about content topics. This can be done with photographs, illustrations, video, explanations, or comparisons to a student’s own background or culture. Frequently, it’s also necessary to activate students’ prior knowledge in order to learn what they already know about a topic, or to identify gaps or misinformation. Don’t assume that students “lack prior knowledge.” Instead, consider that they may have a mismatch between what they have experienced and learned, and the topic you are teaching. Also, remember to tap your English learners’ funds of knowledge as resources, perhaps in lessons related to short story characters or plots, poetry, native-language nursery rhymes, songs they have learned previously, universal themes in literature, and so forth. Check your anthologies, novels, and other texts for cultural biases or idiomatic speech, so potential problems can be anticipated, and confusing concepts can be pre-taught. Let students read about topics with which they are familiar and give ample exposure to unfamiliar topics before they are asked to read about them (Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1996; Vogt, 2005).

**Provide explicit and contextualized vocabulary instruction to English learners.**

Studies of vocabulary instruction show that English learners learn more words through explicit instruction than by incidental exposures. They also benefit from learning words that are embedded in meaningful contexts, rather than in isolation. ELs need to have many opportunities for repetition and practice with new vocabulary while reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and it is beneficial to post and review words frequently, while providing exposure to the words in multiple texts and contexts (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, Dressler, Lippman, Lively, & White, 2004). Further, research studies suggest that English learners benefit most from intensive vocabulary instruction that engages students in meaningful practice with ‘student-friendly’ definitions, and that provides regular review (Gersten, Baker, Shanahan, Linan-Thompson, & Collins, 2007).

Academic vocabulary provides particular challenges for English learners, and teachers need to include not only content words in the language arts and other disciplines, but also explicit instruction that includes process and function words (Vogt, Echevarria, & Short, 2010). These are words and phrases that have to do with functional language use, such as requesting information, justifying opinions, writing conclusions, “stating in your own words,” identifying multiple perspectives, persuading, interpreting, and so forth. Tasks that students are asked to complete during a lesson also fit into this category, and include such things as, *list, explain, describe, paraphrase, identify, create,* and *share with a partner.*

When teaching academic vocabulary, including content words, provide as much context as possible. For example, your word walls should provide more than just the word. Include a photo or illustration, a simple definition, and a sentence. This activity, called Four Corners Vocabulary (Vogt & Echevarria, 2008, p. 40), is effective for explicitly teaching word meanings. When 4-corner charts, with a word, illustration, definition, and sentence are posted while teaching a particular topic, students can refer to them as needed. Also, English learners’ vocabulary growth may be accelerated when instruction is linked to the home language, such as by offering an equivalent or synonym, or shared cognate (August, Beck, Calderón, Francis, Lesaux, & Shanahan, 2008). When designing your vocabulary lessons for English learners, we urge one caution: More is not necessarily better. Too many words on a Word Wall, or too many posters or charts on the wall are potentially confusing and quite distracting. Be purposeful when selecting words to teach, and keep the number manageable for both you and your students.

**Each lesson you teach to English learners must be meaningful, comprehensible, and accessible.**

English learners will not be able to understand what is being taught if explanations are spoken too rapidly, or if the readability of a text is far too difficult. This may seem like common sense, but the reality is that accommodations must be made to ensure that ELs (and other students) can understand. You can modify your instruction for English learners with SIOP techniques such as the following (Echevarria & Vogt, in press):

- Adjust your speech to your students’ proficiency levels, not too fast and not too slow;
- Regularly model or demonstrate tasks, processes, and routines;
- Use gestures, pantomime, and movement to make concepts more clear;
Stimulate English learners' thinking and provide meaningful activities for students to demonstrate their learning.

One of our favorite adages is, "Just because a student doesn't speak English proficiently, doesn't mean he (or she) can't THINK." Therefore, as you plan lessons for English learners, just as with all students, it is of critical importance that you consistently plan for a range of questions and tasks that promote strategic, critical thinking (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008). It is far easier to ask simple, factual questions—and too often, this constitutes "regular" instruction for English learners. Although ELs may be limited in the way they can express their thinking, they can still be asked higher order questions. For example, "In comparing the North's and the South's conflicting positions on slavery, why do you think the South refused to change?" The answer may be expressed in few words but the higher level thinking required to answer can still come through. It is important to provide instruction in how to use a variety of learning strategies to aid students in thinking critically (Echevarria & Graves, 2010; Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000). Also, create assignments that require your students to think more critically and apply their language skills in a more extended way.

Not surprisingly, this means that teachers must incorporate scaffolding techniques throughout each lesson for English learners (and struggling readers). As you reviewed the techniques recommended in the previous section for providing comprehensibility and accessibility to content, you may have noticed that many involve scaffolds, such as, modeling, using illustrations or photos, adapting your speech, and using graphic organizers. Without these and other scaffolds, and multiple opportunities to practice, apply, and transfer new learning through meaningful activities (Jensen, 2005; Goldenberg, 2008; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001; Vogt & Shearer, in press), it will be difficult, if not impossible, for English learners (and struggling readers) to tackle challenging questions and tasks (August, Beck, Calderón, Francis, Lesaux, & Shanahan, 2008). These activities for ELs should combine both direct and indirect instruction that includes a give-and-take between teacher and students that encourages higher levels of thinking, speaking, and reading (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006).

Assess English learners frequently, before, during, and after lessons, and plan purposefully, based on the assessment data.

Assessment and instruction are inextricably linked and are reciprocal processes. Data are used for making instructional decisions during lesson planning in order to meet students' assessed needs. Assessments are then used to determine how well students have learned what has been taught, and the cycle then continues. Assessment includes both formal and informal formative and summative measures, such as those included in basal reading programs, and other curriculum-based measurement (CBM) that are integral to determining which students may require re-teaching or intervention for under-developed skills. For English learners, it is of critical importance to include an assessment of English proficiency, and if possible, primary language and literacy assessments that provide invaluable information. Certainly, your state's standardized annual testing provides needed information about students' academic growth over time. Your own teacher-created assessments are certainly important to include, and these may involve teacher observation, note-taking, end-of-theme or unit tests, student writing samples, reading fluency measures, and any other informal assessments you find helpful.

While all students benefit from well-designed, appropriately paced instruction, English learners must have this type of teaching. They need much richer and more extensive teaching procedures than those that are generally recommended in core curriculum programs (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006). This includes frequent and specific academic and/or behavioral feedback so ELs can understand what they are doing well and what may need some correction (August & Shannon, 2006; Gersten, et al., 2007). For example, a familiar comment that many teachers use...
while students are working is, “Good job!” While this may make a student feel good, it communicates little about why the teacher gave praise in the first place. For English learners (and struggling readers), a more helpful feedback statement would be, “I noticed that when you were writing, you weren’t sure how to spell a word, and you asked your partner for help. Then you both looked in the story, you found the word, and you corrected your spelling. Good job!” Remember, teacher observation is a valuable form of assessment, so use it to formulate specific feedback for your students. In sum, we know that students benefit from specific feedback on correct and incorrect responses, periodic review, frequent assessments to gauge progress, and reteaching when needed (August & Shanahan, 2008; Goldenberg, 2008).

**What leads students to lose interest in learning?**

When students disengage from academics, the obvious question is, why? An equally obvious and accurate answer is that the kinds of instructional practices described above are not used systematically and effectively with English learners. They simply do not understand the material being presented, the lessons aren’t meaningful to them and they tire of consistently performing poorly on assignments. However, there are also a number of other influences that teachers do not necessarily consider, ones that may have a profound impact on students’ motivation and well being in school (Jensen, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008).

- **Lack of positive relationships.** Many English learners experience loneliness and isolation at school. They may not easily form close relationships with peers or teachers, the kinds of relationships that positively impact academic achievement. Classroom settings that encourage interaction, use “teams” for instructional purposes, and provide ample opportunities to engage with peers around interesting topics will increase English learners’ chance of connecting with others and forming positive relationships. Teachers benefit in that they get to know their students at a deeper level through students’ active participation, discussion, and sharing of ideas. On the other hand, sitting passively in a teacher dominated class, being called upon in front of peers, and having little opportunity to collaborate with others contribute to feelings of isolation. It is difficult for teachers to develop strong relationships with students they know little about.

- **Awareness of disrespect toward one’s culture or ethnicity.** Disrespect is detected by students even when teachers’ attitudes and actions are subtle such as indifference or low expectations for culturally diverse students. We sometimes think of showing respect for one’s culture by having cultural events or classroom decorations, but it is more about, for example, acknowledging students’ home experiences as valuable and linking them to discussions. Ask students how their families spend weekends, what kinds of things they do with their siblings, and other kinds of non-invasive questions that convey interest and recognize the students’ home experiences as valuable. Establishing positive relationships with students is a critical factor for raising achievement. Seemingly simple acts that show a teacher has respect for students, identified by students themselves (Pane, 2008), include talking to students respectfully, answering students’ questions, helping students when they need it and calling students by their name. Further, being conscious of the sociocultural influences on students’ lives enhances communication and builds positive relationships (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Living in poverty, having household responsibilities, being separated from loved ones left behind in the home country, and the disconnect between the values and expectations of their home and those of the school are only some of the myriad sociocultural realities that English learners deal with every day.

- **Perception of threats.** School climate impacts student achievement. In their study of immigrant students, Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova (2008) found that students’ perceptions about violence were highly related to their academic achievement. In highly volatile environments where students feel at-risk, threatened, or detached from a chaotic school climate, they are less likely to connect with peers, teachers, and staff, leading to the kind of isolation discussed previously. The threat of harm may be real or imagined and may be on the commute to school, in the hallways and restrooms, or in the classroom. Supportive learning environments reduce the perception of threat and if the threat is real (i.e., in a high crime area), a strong relationship with teachers can provide refuge for students.

- **Perception that class assignments or tasks are irrelevant.** Many students disengage from learning because what they are being asked to do seems irrelevant. Teaching practices that contribute to this perception include an overreliance on paper and pencil tasks, assignments that are difficult to understand, both in content and teacher expectation, and instruction that doesn’t make connection
to what students know. However, when you provide lessons that are based on rich, interesting materials, involve related hands-on tasks, provide opportunities for students to grapple with ideas, have authentic discussions with their peers, and explicitly connect to students’ lives and experiences, learning is fun, engaging, and meaningful. In these kinds of classrooms, even the most reluctant learners thrive.

When students struggle: The promise of RTI

When English learners lag behind academically, they don’t make adequate progress in English language development, and they disengage and appear apathetic about school, teachers often wonder if these students have some sort of problem. There has been a long history of disproportionate numbers of ELs being referred to special education, with many either over- or under-identified as having learning disabilities (Artiles & Trent, 1994). While it is a challenge to disentangle possible learning disabilities from limited language proficiency, the first consideration must be the quality of instruction in the student’s classroom. In the past, too much focus has been on the learner rather than the teaching environment as the source of learning difficulties. Currently, a promising approach for meeting the needs of English learners — and all students — is Response to Intervention (RTI).

RTI is a multi-tiered instructional delivery model that is designed to identify at-risk learners early and make adjustments to instruction so that students can learn critical literacy skills. We believe it holds promise for English learners in particular because it provides a structure for monitoring their progress, adjusting instruction accordingly, and providing interventions as needed. Rather than focusing on what is wrong with the student, the emphasis is on searching for solutions within the classroom. Is instruction scaffolded so that the student experiences success? Does the teacher make connections to what the student knows? Are there adequate English language development opportunities? Can the student demonstrate knowledge of skills and concepts in the home language but not in English? Are other ELs in the class succeeding or are most struggling?

At the foundation of a successful RTI model is general education instruction that reflects best practice for meeting the academic and language needs of ELs (Tier 1). Figure 1 shows that in Tier 1, teachers use practices such as those delineated in the SIOP Model. Most students will achieve benchmarks when the teacher uses engaging, effective instruction that is differentiated for their needs. However, some students will require additional, more intensive instruction to learn some literacy skills (Tier 2).

Tier 2 interventions are for students who have difficulty with key skills that impact success in reading and writing, not for students who have difficulty in meeting specific standards such as identifying the main character in a story or distinguishing fact from opinion. To help those students, modifications are made as part of a teacher’s repertoire for individualizing instruction as needed. These are the kinds of things “good” teachers do because they know these modifications will facilitate their students’ learning. Some general practices for improving students’ performance might include conferencing with a parent or guardian, moving a student to another seat or to a carrel to reduce distractions, adjusting the level of difficulty of an assignment, providing sentence frames, outlines of a text or lecture, or other scaffolds, and providing native language support. Tier 2 interventions, on the other hand, are specific research-validated practices that develop specific skills needed for overall literacy development.

For the small number of students who don’t respond to Tier 2 intervention, they would move on to Tier 3, a more intensive level of support. In some models, this would include special education services. One thing to remember about English learners and disability: one cannot have a language or learning disability in English but not in one’s home language. Therefore, some overarching questions to ask about English learners include (Echevarria & Vogt, in press):

- Does the student differ significantly from others with similar background?
- Does the student’s family notice a problem?
• What about first language development? Was it normal?
• Does the difficulty the student is experiencing result primarily from cultural, environmental, or economic disadvantage?
• Is the student making steady progress, regardless how slow?
• Has the student had an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and skills in his home language?
• Has the student had sufficient opportunities to learn by hearing engaging stories, reading interesting texts, using the home language for literacy development and background information?

The answers to these questions are essential for identifying the source of a student’s difficulty in the classroom. While the same percentage of English learners would, theoretically, experience learning disabilities as the English-speaking school population, we need to first examine the quality of instruction being provided before an attribution of “learning problem” is assigned to English learners – or any student. Typically, opportunity to learn is a more significant factor that contributes to academic performance than issues inherent in the child. However, if extensive data (interviews, observations, assessment results) in both the student’s home language and English indicate that the student is not responding to intervention, then the student may be eligible for special education services.

Note that the RTI process is a reciprocal process (Figure 1), with students receiving the services they need for a period of time and may go in and out of the tiers as needed. They are still part of the general education class.

Conclusion

Students disengage from school for myriad reasons, some of which we discussed in this article. Because of the variation that we have observed in levels of student engagement and academic performance by students with similar profiles, we believe that a powerful contributor to the academic achievement of English learners is the type of instruction that takes place in classrooms every day. We hope that the principles of instruction presented here will be helpful to teachers as they work with the ever growing number of English learners in schools.

References


