Challenges for English Language Learners (ELLs) in Content Area Learning

by Judie Haynes

❖ 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"
- 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 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
- Students have no experience with our measurement system; it is an abstract to them.
- 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 no 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.

Tips for Working with ESL Students

- Discuss the student's goals with him/her before getting started.
- Speak clearly, naturally and avoid using lots of slang.
- Ask students to repeat what you have just said to show understanding.
- If a student has trouble understanding you, write down what you are saying. If you have trouble understanding the student, ask him or her to write down what he/she is saying.
- Use lots of repetition.
- Put everything you study into context.
- Encourage each student to take an active part of the tutoring session; there should be "equal time" for the student to talk or ask questions and it is sometimes easy to forget to stop and wait for questions to be formulated. Sometimes you need to wait in silence before a question gets asked. In some cultures, a student does not ask questions.
- Thank the student for questions. Some students are deathly afraid to ask a question, so praising a question is a good way to encourage more.
- Encourage students to make friends outside of class because this will improve their English.
- Don't treat students like children. English language proficiency does not indicate intelligence or ability level.
- Don't try to change your students' language patterns by teaching them Standard English. Respect their oral speech habits and encourage them to add Standard English to their everyday language patterns. ESL students may ask you to correct their speech when they feel comfortable, but don't assume this is the case unless asked.
- Use plenty of examples.
- Don't act as if you understand the student if you don't.
- Don't speak too slowly; it might tend to raise your voice volume and/or to make your speech unnatural. Although it might be hard to understand your normal speech pattern, with practice the student will become familiar with it and in the long run, it will help him/her understand other native English speakers. You can lengthen your speech and insert more pauses; this might help a student understand more easily.
- Don't be afraid to correct the student.

Techniques for Questioning ESL Students

Within the tutoring session, frequently check students' comprehension to make sure they really understand concepts. ESL students may nod their heads as though they understand when they

really don't. Encourage participation and check comprehension in non-threatening ways, and provide cooperative experiences by using the following techniques.

Most Difficult: WH - questions (Who, What, Where, When, Why, Which & How) "Why is a more difficult?"

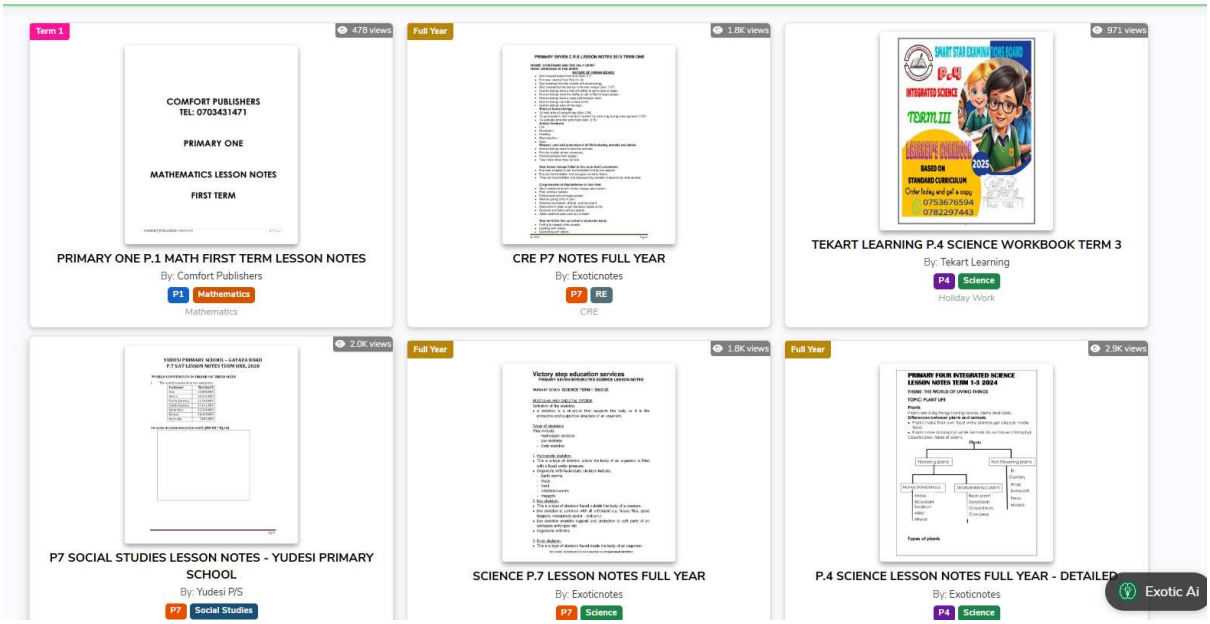
Easier: OR questions. "Which is more difficult, A or B?"

Easiest: YES / NO questions check comprehension, but do not rely on this strategy too much. "Is this difficult for you?"

- Begin with the most difficult question type. If these cannot be answered by the student, try a less difficult level to help them understand what you're asking; then work toward the more difficult levels.
- Ask the students to give examples when explaining concepts.
- Ask students to become the tutor and explain the concept to you.
- Search for answers to questions with the students.
- Use restatement to clarify students' responses; "I think you said . . ."
- Admit it if there is a communication problem; "I don't understand."
- Write down words the student does not know.

Compiled by Tracy Henniger-Chiang (1997), Director of Global Language Institute; UW-River Falls.

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