English Language Learner Resource Guide
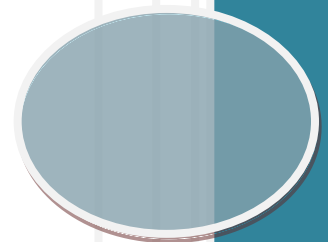
Top Ten Instructional Tips for Schools
With a Low Incidence of ELLs

prepared by

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INTRODUCTION

In 2004, in response to requests from the field for instructional strategies for teaching English Language Learners (ELLs), the Regional Education Laboratory Central (REL Central) at McREL produced the *English Language Learner Resource Guide: A Guide for Rural Districts with a Low Incidence of ELLs*. The guide proposed a three-pronged approach to meet the needs of a Wyoming district to build capacity for *leadership*, *instruction* (see Appendix A), and *parent* involvement. These three components comprised a systemic intervention to develop, improve, and enhance strategies both for teaching ELLs and integrating ELLs into the school community.

Since 2004, the number of schools and districts serving a low-incidence population of ELLs has increased in McREL's North Central Comprehensive Center (NCCC) five-state region (Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota). In 2011, REL Central conducted a study on what elementary general education teachers are expected to be able to know and do to teach ELL students. The study examined six topics that the research suggests are important for improving ELL outcomes, and found that although all Central Region states address at least two topics, none of the states addressed all six (Apthorp, Wang, Ryan, & Cicchinelli, 2012). Ensuring that classroom teachers are trained to effectively instruct ELLs is increasingly necessary in all schools, but is particularly important for schools with a low incidence of ELLs. In schools with larger ELL populations, there are generally more resources available to address the language needs of ELL students, often through dedicated ESL staff. In low-incidence schools, conversely, mainstream classroom teachers are more likely to be responsible for languge instruction.

In recent years, another group of students with language development needs has emerged in the NCCC region. Stakeholders in the region have described U.S.-born, English-speaking-only students who enter school without a firm foundation in academic language—the language of school. These students may come from lower socio-economic or other high-risk environments, where they have reduced peer/parent verbal interactions, which can result in sub-standard academic language development. These students are similar to ELLs in their need for academic language development in that they are conversationally proficient; however, conversational proficiency is not the only language competency needed for academic success.

Based on expanded research in the field of ELL instruction and an increased need for strategies that can be implemented immediately in a wide variety of settings, this report presents ten instructional strategies for schools and districts with a low incidence of ELLs, which can be used whether or not a school has dedicated ELL staff. Current research suggests that these strategies show promise for improving the quality of instruction for ELLs in low-incidence settings.

The following strategies are research-based and are intended to provide educators with tools and techniques that can be readily implemented in a general education classroom.

Tip #1: Understand and track how students acquire a second language.
It's a common misperception that learning a second language is similar to learning a first language. Native-born children acquire language through constant exposure, attempts at speaking, reinforcement for talking, and multiple opportunities to hear and use English in their daily lives. Although frequent exposure to the second language is important for ELLs, this alone will not lead to second language acquisition. ELLs need to be instructed on the function and structure of English (more about this in Tip #2). Harper and deJong (2004) discuss the need for older ELLs, in particular, to receive direct language instruction in order to understand the abstract concepts and complex language presented in secondary classrooms and texts. Conscious attention to grammar, vocabulary and classroom discourse will be needed to increase students' language acquisition.

In order to ensure progression toward language acquisition, teachers should identify each student's level of English language acquisition and track each student's progress in learning English. It's important for teachers to know the district policy for yearly growth in English language acquisition. To track students' second language acquisition, teachers should document when the student arrived in U.S., when the student first received English language instruction, and the results of annual language proficiency testing for each year to date. Next, teachers need to project the level of second language acquisition that the student should attain after the next English assessment and verify his/her progress along the way. The goal is to keep advancing each student to the next level of English language acquisition and avoid "long-term English language learners."

In addition, teachers need to determine students' linguistic and academic competence in the first language. Proficiencies in the first language will transfer to English and bolster second language acquisition (Herrara, Perez, & Escamilla, 2010). The more we know about what a student has achieved in their primary language, the better we can predict what he or she can accomplish in a new target language.

Tip #2: Teach language in addition to content. Since most ELLs are in mainstream classrooms for the entire school day, teachers should support language development in addition to content (Freeman & Freeman, 2009). How can teachers in rural or low-incidence settings help ELLs, and anyone in need of language development, develop language as well as subject matter knowledge and skills? By providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful interactions related to specific content, using not just conversational or everyday language but rich academic language. Here's one way to structure this:

> ***Step 1:*** Select a time when students are going to be engaged in student-to-student interaction.

Step 2: Identify the purpose for the student interaction. For example, are students talking in order to sequence, compare or summarize information? When you identify the reason for talking, you're detecting the *function* of language (Hill & Bjork, 2008).

Step 3: Now that students are conversing in small groups for a specific purpose, what supports or prompts will ELLs need in order to participate in the academic talk? Will they need sentence starters? Key vocabulary? A specific piece of grammar? These are known as language structures.

An example of a sentence starter for summarizing might be:
The most important person/place/thing/event is…

An example of using transitional vocabulary:
If students are making comparisons, after they express a similarity or difference, ask them to restate using signal words such as *although, however, but, even, though*.

An example of specific grammar:
ELLs may need assistance with expressing future tense when using language to predict; e.g., *is going to/will/could/*.

When it comes to grammar, English language learning for native-born students occurs formally in grades K through 12 during English language arts. In Des Moines Public Schools, for example, in grades K-6, Literacy Curriculum Guides indicate the language structures to teach at each grade. Pronouns and singular and possessive nouns, for instance, are taught in second grade. ELLs will need these same structures and additional speaking time for learning to use the structures orally. Native-born students have been using pronouns and possessive nouns since before they entered school and are learning to recognize them in print and use them in written language. ELLs, however, are encountering these English forms for the first time. Calling attention to grammatical structures outside of language arts instruction provides opportunities for repetition and reinforcement to help all students in need of language development.

Ways to encourage students to use academic language and "sound like a book" (Hill & Flynn, 2006) include:

- When conveying a partner's idea, instead of saying, "He/she said….," students report "_____ stated….." "_____ concluded."
- When predicting, instead of saying, "I think……," students state, "I predict….." or "I hypothesize that ……"

Tip #3: Plan for accountable student talk time. In order to plan for language growth in addition to content learning, students must be given time to talk with each other about the learning

taking place. As Jeff Wilhelm notes, "Neo-Vygotskians believe that learning floats on a sea of talk and that we must get students to talk through their content understandings and thinking processes"(Wilhelm, 2001, p. 116).To make this happen, teachers will have to purposefully plan for informal cooperative learning.

The following table suggests some informal cooperative learning activities.

Table 1. Table of Oral Activities to promote English academic language development

NAME OF ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION
NUMBERED HEADS TOGETHER (adapted from Kagan, 1992)	The teacher asks a question and students (each identified by a different number) in a group consult to make sure everyone knows the answer. One student number is called on to answer. 1. Number off the students in each group, up to four. If one group is smaller than the others, ask student no. 3 to answer for no. 4 as well. The teacher can assign numbers or students can assign numbers to themselves. 2. The teacher asks the students a question or proposes a problem to solve. Everyone in the group must be able to participate and answer the question. Ensure that enough wait time is given for the group to do the task. 3. The teacher calls out a number (two) and each two is asked to give the answer. This structure ensures that each student is prepared with a response.
THREE-STEP INTERVIEW (adapted from Kagan, 1992)	Seat students in groups of 4. Students interview each other in pairs. Students each share the information they learned in the interview with the group. 1. Students interview their partner by asking clarifying questions (What, How, When, Where, Why) about their understanding of a topic, skill or process. 2. During the second step, partners reverse the roles. 3. Students share their partner's response with team. This process activates prior knowledge, encourages peer tutoring and guarantees student talk time. It can also be used to review and reinforce previously learned material.
THREE-MINUTE REVIEW (adapted from Kagan, 1992)	Teacher stops any time during a lecture or discussion and give teams three minutes to review what has been said, ask clarifying questions, or answer questions. Good to use for student talk time to review during learning.
FOUR CORNERS (adapted from Himmele & Himmele, 2011)	1. Give students a prompt that necessitates their forming an opinion about the prompt. 2. Use Likert scale options such as Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. 3. Ask students to determine their level of agreement with the prompt and do a Quick Write expressing their opinion including reasons why they choose this point of view. 4. Post the response options in four corners of the room. 5. Students walk to the area where their Likert scale choice is posted. In their groups, students discuss their reasons for choosing the option they did. 6. Each group then reports out to the class. As a follow-up, you can ask students to go to another corner and argue the prompt from that point of view.

Discovering a variety of cooperative learning constructs will allow teachers to build a complete tool kit for engaging students in accountable talk. Lesson planning should include multiple opportunities to engage with students: consider allowing students to talk as much as, if not more, than the teacher. To make accountable talk time happen, it has to be an integral part of lesson plans.

Tip #4: Be informed of literacy instruction for ELLS and how it differs from the teaching of literacy to native English speakers.
Although literacy instruction for ELLs shares plenty of similarities to teaching literacy to native English speakers, there are significant differences that classroom teachers need to understand in order to better serve ELLs in their classrooms (Kauffman, 2007).

When adjusting instruction for ELLs, Kaufman (2007) recommends four principles to incorporate in lesson plans:

> **Principle 1.** Increase comprehension by including visuals, manipulatives, and other methods for bringing meaning to content.
>
> **Principle 2.** Increase student interaction by engaging students in use of academic language.
>
> **Principle 3.** Increase higher order thinking skills and use of strategies by being purposeful, intentional, and explicit when teaching cognitive skills and devices for learning.
>
> **Principle 4.** Make connections to students' background knowledge and what is familiar to them based on life experiences.

Tips 5 – 8 will connect each principle to classroom practices during literacy instructional time.

Tip #5: Increase Comprehension

If you think reading proficiency is best gauged by decoding ability, pick up any text written in Spanish. A native English-only speaker will be able to say every word since there is a one-to-one sound-symbol correspondence in Spanish, but will not be able to understand what it says. The same holds true for English: some students can pronounce every word but will not make sense of the words.

"Rather than a focus on learning to crack the code, literacy instruction for second language learners must focus on meaning" (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2010, page xiv). Many phonics programs teach the discrete skill of sound-symbol relationships in isolation (Freeman & Freeman, 2004). For example, students may be given a worksheet with 4 pictures (fan, man, can, pan) with directions to complete a word with an initial sound (_an) and match the word to the picture. ELLs will need to know what the pictures represent and be able to pronounce the

words to be successful. Rather than experiencing phonics in isolation, ELLs need to learn letters and sounds found in meaningful contexts. When an interactive reading process is used decoding is integrated with vocabulary and comprehension (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2010). To aid comprehension, encourage vocabulary learning, and teach phonics, teachers need to use real words in real contexts. Even during phonemic awareness and phonetics instruction, there should be a quest for meaning.

Tip #6: Increase student interaction. Who does most of the talking—the teacher or the students? If it's the teacher and there are ELLs and others in need of language development there will need to be a shift in classroom culture. Many teachers tell us they were trained to have quiet classrooms so a classroom with everyone talking breaks that paradigm. Noisy classrooms historically have not been the norm. If there are ELLs and others in need of language development, a classroom with regular student to student interaction is the exemplar.

Switching from one archetype to another takes planning. Teachers will need to set norms: e.g., voice levels, a signal for wrapping up discussions, and how to listen to others. Structures will need to be modeled and practiced. Observing other classrooms where students are talking to learn would be beneficial. Overcome perceived barriers by starting off small with think-pair-share and move into triads and small group talk. For good advice and "how-to's" see Fisher, Frey and Rothenberg's *Content Area Conversations: How to Plan Discussion-Based Lessons for Diverse Language Learners* (2008).

ELLs will be developing literacy alongside their non-ELL peers, particularly in rural and low-incidence settings. The regular education classroom teacher who knows and practices what is different about teaching literacy to ELLs will move students toward proficiency. Teachers who do not heed and pay attention to differences may see their ELLs plateau.

Tip #7: Pay attention to higher order thinking skills.

There is a common misperception that preproduction and early production ELLs work best at the Knowledge and Comprehension levels of Bloom's taxonomy because it takes more language proficiency to work at higher levels, such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This mistaken belief can mean that ELLs and others in need of language development are expected to work at the lowest levels of critical thinking instead of the highest levels. How can these classroom practices be mitigated? Plan for all levels of English language acquisition at all levels of critical thinking. For example, a secondary science teacher wants preproduction students to practice, review and apply what they've been learning about a plant unit:

Table 2. Bloom's Taxomony as applied to preproduction students and a unit on plants

Knowledge	Label and order the steps of the plant cycle. Respond to teacher's request to point to, gesture for, draw or match icons for steps of plant cycle.
Comprehension	Classify plant parts. First locate parts in a matching game. Then sort by features or colors.
Application	Demonstrate the process of photosynthesis using gestures.
Analysis	Categorize types of plants found in desert and alpine tundra biomes using pictures and labels.
Synthesis	Plan and construct dioramas or collages to show seasons in a forest biome.

Evaluation	Assess correctness of a moveable biome model. Show understanding by rearranging parts as necessary.

A *Tiered Thinking Across Stages of Second Language Acquisition* (Hill & Björk, 2008) matrix is included in Appendix B. This matrix was developed to remind educators that ELLs can work at all levels of higher-order thinking, regardless of their level of English language acquisition. ELLS in the preproduction stage of language acquisition all the way through to advanced fluency can work at each and every level of Bloom's Taxonomy. Do not mistake an ELL's limited verbal output at the preproduction stage of second language acquisition for an inability to think critically. If we direct and maintain ELLs' engagement at the lowest levels of *thinking,* we confine them to the lowest level of *learning.* Mainstream teachers can use this matrix daily as a reminder to keep all levels of language learners engaged at all levels of thinking.

Tip #8: Start with the familiar.
When summarizing, allow students to identify what is important from something familiar, like a TV show before moving into the academic realm. If students are expected to sequence, can they first order the steps in getting ready for school in the morning? Since paraphrasing is expected in note taking, can students first restate in their own words something they saw in a movie? Before finding similarities and differences between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, begin with verbalizing what's similar and dissimilar between two events in their daily lives.

Introducing a new academic concept or process by first linking it to what students already know is valuable both for ELLs and non-ELLs in need of language development. The purpose is to activate and access students' background knowledge so they can retrieve what they know and begin to use what they know before hearing and seeing something new. ELLs and others in need of language development may not have the same amount of prior knowledge as experience-rich native English speakers (Eschevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). One of the best ways to backfill that void is to teach vocabulary. Marzano (2004) has found that direct vocabulary instruction is beneficial for students whose home environments don't provide the necessary linguistic experiences that correlate with school achievement. See five steps for the direct teaching of vocabulary in Tip #9.

Tip #9: Preteach vocabulary before reading.
Stone and Urquhart (2008) indicate that instruction in new words prior to encountering them in context enhances the learning of vocabulary. Herrera, Perez and Escamilla (2010) link this research principle to ELLs and note that preteaching key vocabulary is "highly beneficial." Marzano (2004) promotes a direct instruction approach for teaching vocabulary, particularly for students who enter school with limited vocabulary knowledge. Here are five steps from Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock (2001):

1. Teacher provides students with a brief description or explanation (not dictionary definition) of the new vocabulary word in student-friendly language.
2. Teacher gives students a nonlinguistic representation to accompany the word in the form of a picture, graphic organizer, mental image, physical representation or kinesthetic representation.

3. Student creates their own description or explanation of the new word in their own words.
4. Student constructs a nonlinguistic representation to accompany the word.
5. Always provide time to review accuracy of descriptions and representations.

Preteaching vocabulary words before they are encountered in text is also advantageous for native English speakers in need of language development. There's plenty of research reminding us of the number of words lacking in English-speakers' repertoires (Hart & Ristley, 1995). In their *30 Million Word Gap* study, they found significant gaps between vocabularies of welfare and professional families in Kansas City by age three.

Tip #10: Embed professional development

If we focus only on English language proficiency, content knowledge will lag. Likewise, language learning cannot occur separately from content. When learning language is as critical as learning content, both language learning and development of knowledge and skills for content should occur throughout the school day.

In general, subject-area teachers have been trained to deliver curriculum, and ELL teachers' primary concentration has been on strategies for learning language, e.g., reciprocal teaching. It is time to merge these two pedagogical functions. There is no better place for this integration to occur than in low-incidence settings. The challenge becomes providing professional development on how to combine language learning in a subject-area focused classroom.

Embedded staff development should take place through a collaboration between an ELL coach and regular classroom teachers (assuming ELLs are clustered with one teacher per grade level). The ELL coach spends "bell-to-bell" time with the regular classroom teacher demonstrating ways to teach language in addition to content. Dove and Honigsfeld (2010) call this a co-teaching model whereby the classroom teacher focuses on content and the ELL teacher supports academic language development in same lesson. During the first quarter, the focus could be vocabulary. The ELL coach directs vocabulary learning by selecting Tier I, II and III words, and providing direct vocabulary instruction, activating use of vocabulary notebooks, helping with word walls, working with small groups, and more. The ELL coach promotes vocabulary growth and models/demonstrates these strategies for classroom teachers, who can then continue using these strategies during the ELL coach's absence, while he or she collaborates with the other grades. During the second quarter, the emphasis could be on student-to-student interaction. The ELL coach could look for opportunities for students to engage in accountable talk with each other, using strategies from Tip #3.

In the third quarter of the academic year, comprehension could be the focal point, where the ELL coach helps classroom teachers plan for and use comprehension strategies. What do ELLs need most to enhance comprehension? Making connections to what they already know?

Predicting? Visualizing? Summarizing? Asking questions? In addition to assisting in the identification of comprehension tactics, the ELL coach points out the language needed for application by ELLs and others in need of language development.

The last quarter might be devoted to higher-order thinking skills. ELL coaches can be of extraordinary assistance by collaborating with classroom teachers in planning for higher-order thinking skills, so that ELLs are not relegated to only Knowledge level critical thinking (see Tip #7.)

Table 3. Embedded Professional Development

Quarter	Focus	Embedded professional development
First	Vocabulary	Five-step direct vocabulary instruction (Tip #9)
Second	Student-Student Interaction	Kagan and Himmele structures (Tip #3)
Third	Comprehension	Comprehension strategies
Fourth	Higher-order thinking skills	Use Tiered Thinking Across Stages of Second Language Acquisition matrix (Tip #7)

Remember when we asked all teachers to be teachers of reading? Reading coaches began a similar collaborative model so all teachers would be teaching literacy alongside subject matter. Now, we're asking all teachers to be teachers of language development. The same coaching model may be effective for working towards building the capacity of the regular classroom teacher to incorporate oral academic language development with content in low-incidence settings. Other students in need of language development are likely to be present in *every* classroom—in that sense, there really are no low-incidence schools and districts. Regular classroom teachers teach language along with content when they focus on direct vocabulary instruction, increase student interactions, enhance comprehension development with strategies, and incorporate higher-order thinking skills.

How do you do this? First, think about who's available to provide the coaching or co-teaching. Who has developed a critical mass of teachers with common training around ELL issues to facilitate collaboration and instruction improvement efforts across schools? Nebraska, for example, has a cadre of twenty-three professional developers they have invested in through a training-of-trainers model (with yearly updates) who could potentially consult with other schools and districts to provide the collaboration described above. Look to intermediate service agencies (e.g., AEAs – Area Education Agencies and ESUs – Education Service Units) for professional development. Are there peers available to offer job-embedded guidance each

quarter? It'll take some "can-do" thinking to embed these instructional tips in the work lives of teachers and the routines of teaching.

Conclusion

Learning subject area knowledge and skills in English while still learning English can seem like a daunting task. Since the student is doing double duty by learning academic content in a new language, classroom teachers need to adapt their teaching to accommodate for that duality by supporting academic language instruction while providing content. This guide offers ten tips for classroom teachers' twofold role. Instead of attempting to master all of the strategies at once, consider becoming proficient at one per quarter and watch ELLs attain new levels of academic language to accompany content.

Finally, it's not just ELLs who will benefit from teachers incorporating oral academic language instruction into subject matter content. Teachers should be mindful of other native-born English speakers in need of academic language development. These students are similar to ELLs who have been in English speaking classrooms for two years or more because they are conversationally proficient but less able to discuss content as demonstrated by ineffectual vocabulary and reduced ability to use language to express opinions, hypothesize, predict, or speak metaphorically. In other words, it's not just low-incidence or high-prevalence schools that need to expand their current repertoire of language required for discussing content in language arts, math, science, social studies, and other curricular areas—it's *all* schools.

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Appendix A: Bulleted list of instructional recommendations.

(For complete guide, visit http://www.mcrel.org/topics/Diversity/products/203/.)

- Use the primary language when possible
- Be resourceful when human resources are limited
- Use bilingual paraprofessionals effectively to support monolingual teachers:
- Use content-based ESL instruction or sheltered instruction
- Know your students' history and culture
- Make connections between students' background experiences and content they are expected to learn
- Determine each student's level of English language acquisition
- Emphasize literacy across the curriculum
- Help students transfer existing native language skills to English language acquisition
- Provide explicit instruction within the context of literacy
- Teach reading and writing together
- Develop academic language
- Allow students to talk more than the teacher

Tiered Thinking Across Stages of Second Language Acquisition Linking: Thinking, Language Functions & Second Language Acquisition

Levels of Thinking --&-- Language Functions	Language Use Across Stages of Second Language Acquisition Language moves from simple to complex in grammatical tenses, forms, vocabulary, etc.				
Level of thinking & academic language required for any undertaking move from the concrete recall level to the more complex, abstract levels.	WORD--------►-----MODEL----------►----EXPAND------►---------------SOUND LIKE A BOOK-----►				
	Preproduction: **Nonverbal response**	Early Production: **One word response**	Speech Emergence: **Phrases or short sentences**	Intermediate Fluency: **Longer and more complex sentences**	Advanced Fluency: **Near native-like**
EVALUATION Appraise, argue, assess, attach, choose, compare, defend, estimate, judge, predict, rate, select, support, value, evaluate					
SYNTHESIS Arrange, assemble, collect, compose, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, manage, organize, plan, prepare, propose, set up					
ANALYSIS Analyze, appraise, calculate, categorize, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test					
APPLICATION Apply, choose, demonstrate, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, practice, schedule, sketch, solve, use					
COMPREHENSION Classify, discuss, explain, express, identify, indicate, locate, recognize, report, restate, review, select, translate					
KNOWLEDGE Arrange, define, describe, duplicate, label, list, name, order, recognize, relate, recall, repeat, reproduce, state					

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