

A Beginner's Guide to Teaching English Learners

MONTANA OFFICE OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION



Examining Your Perspectives

Be patient and supportive.

Respect the "silent period" where students may be listening and absorbing without speaking, and avoid forcing them to participate before they are comfortable. Be empathetic and understanding, especially if students are experiencing culture shock or other social-emotional challenges.

Communicate with parents/caregivers.

Seek to learn about the student's academic journey. Did they attend school? What grade are they in? What grade did they complete? How did they do? What are their strengths and interests? What are areas of weakness? How well do they speak, read, and write in their home language?

Consider mental health.

Moving to a new country or a new school can be very challenging for students, especially English learners. While adjusting to cultural and language differences, the students and their families may also face mental health challenges with homesickness and depression after leaving their families, friends, pets, and school. Adults may be feeling stressed finding housing and employment. Families may also be fleeing dangerous situations. The article [Addressing Student Trauma, Anxiety, and Depression](#) provides guidance to teachers to support students with trauma, anxiety, and depression. The OPI website also has [videos](#) discussing mental health regarding newcomers and cultural awareness.

English Language Proficiency Checklist: Setting Your Students Up for Success

1. Create a welcoming environment.

- ☐ Provide students and parents/caregivers opportunities to meet the teacher(s).
- ☐ Tour the school and give a translated explanation about specific procedures.
 - ☐ Examples might include walking in the hallway, asking permission to line up, getting supplies, using the bathroom, eating lunch, etc.
 - ☐ Ensure parents know procedures for calling school, meeting with the teacher, reporting absences, explaining parent-teacher conferences, and report cards.

Resources

- [Videos on the OPI Website](#)
- Reading Rockets [Creating a Welcoming Classroom Environment for ELLs](#) – provides the Stages of Cultural Accommodation
- Colorin Colorado [How to Create a Welcoming Classroom Environment for ELLs](#) – bringing students' language and culture into the classroom
- Edutopia [Advice for New ELL Teachers](#)



2. Build relationships with your students.

- ☐ Learn students' names and how to pronounce them correctly.
- ☐ Make use of translation apps in order to communicate with students learning English. Federal funds may be used to purchase tablets and subscriptions to translating apps.

Resources

- Colorín Colorado [10 Strategies for Building Relationships with ELLs](#)
- Lessons for My Name, My Identity
 - [Getting to Know Our Names Week](#)
 - [Back to School Campaign](#) – Includes lesson plans, picture books, and videos
 - [My Name, My Identity: Educator Toolkit](#)
- Translation apps for students
 - [ChatGPT](#) – can be used as a translator and to write messages to parents
 - [Google Translate](#) – helpful for longer passages, but may not accurately translate sentence-by-sentence
 - [Microsoft Translator](#) – allows you to take pictures of worksheets and overlay the image with a translation

3. Understand language acquisition, WIDA's Can Do Descriptors, and EL guides.

- ☐ Learn the stages of language acquisition and differentiate instruction: Recognize that students will progress through predictable stages, and adjust your teaching strategies to match their proficiency levels.
- ☐ Provide scaffolding, visual aids, and differentiated activities to ensure all students can access the curriculum.

Resources

- Colorín Colorado [Stages of Language Acquisition: An Overview](#) – details the 6 stages of language acquisition and instructional strategies for each level
- Colorín Colorado [Language Acquisition](#)
- [OPI website English Language Acquisition Guidance and Forms](#)
- U.S. Department of Education [English Learner Toolkit](#)
- U.S. Department of Education [English Learner Newcomer Toolkit](#)
- [WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework K-12 \(2020\)](#)
- [WIDA Can Do Descriptors](#) – highlight what language learners can do at various stages of language development

4. Differentiate instruction.

- ☐ Use multimedia/videos, visuals/pictures, and realia (real objects) in your instruction. ELs may not understand the words we are using, but they will understand better if they can **see** the idea or object you are talking about.

Resources

- [Differentiation ideas appropriate for English Learners/Multilingual Learners](#)
- Colorín Colorado [Differentiation & RTI for English Language Learners](#)
- [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\) Guidelines](#) – The UDL framework is intended to be used as a guide with suggestions that can be applied across content areas to ensure all learners can access and participate meaningfully. Helpful UDL videos can be found on YouTube.



5. Build English Learning supports into lesson plans.

- ☐ Collaborate with paraprofessionals.
- ☐ Build in scaffolding, or temporary supports provided to learners.
 - ☐ Consider what students need to know to understand the learning intention or concept.
 - ☐ Preteach necessary skills and vocabulary.
 - ☐ Determine whether students will need additional support or resources to fully engage in the lesson.
 - ☐ Model how to perform a task using think-alouds that to make your cognitive processes visible to students.
 - ☐ Use [sentence frames](#) and conversation starters.
 - ☐ Break down complex tasks into more manageable chunks.
 - ☐ Integrate multimedia, posters, visuals, and realia.
 - ☐ Provide students with [graphic organizers](#).
 - ☐ Build in collaborative learning opportunities.
- ☐ Identify and utilize cognates (words in two languages that share similar meaning, spelling, and pronunciation) to build students' English vocabularies. While English may share few cognates with a language like Chinese, 30-40% of all words in English have a related word in Spanish.

Resources

- [Canva](#) – offers free accounts to educators, includes AI tools, and can be used with [Canva Whiteboards](#) and to create [worksheets](#) and [slides](#)
- [MagicSchool AI](#) (and [Top 3 MagicSchool AI Tools for Teachers](#) tutorial)
- [Eduaide AI](#)
- Colorín Colorado [15 ELL Strategies for Paraprofessionals](#)
- Colorín Colorado [Vocabulary Instruction for English Language Learners](#)
- Colorín Colorado [Phonics Instruction for English Language Learners](#)
- [Language and Sounds Transfer Chart](#) – explains which sounds are available in other languages and common errors in language transfers
- Colorín Colorado [Spanish - English Cognates/Cognados](#)
- Colorín Colorado [ELL Classroom Strategies Library](#)
- Colorín Colorado [Using Cognates to Develop Comprehension in English](#)

6. Create opportunities for interaction and collaboration.

- ☐ Create opportunities for structured group work.
 - ☐ Mixed-ability groups: Pair ELLs with native English speakers to create diverse learning teams.
 - ☐ Defined roles: Assign specific roles within groups (e.g., note-taker, presenter) to ensure everyone participates and is accountable.
 - ☐ Clear tasks: Provide well-defined tasks that require collaboration and communication.
- ☐ Integrate varied collaborative learning strategies into instruction that provide English learners with the practice necessary to develop English, both relating to social and academic skills.
 - ☐ Choral reading – Practice pronunciation and build confidence in reading aloud. Engage all students in reading, even when reading instructions. Avoid popcorn reading.



- ☐ [Think-Pair-Shares](#)
- ☐ Reading buddies
- ☐ [Turn and Talk](#)
- ☐ Structured discussions with the use of [sentence frames](#)
- ☐ Group storytelling
- ☐ Team-based challenges
- ☐ Scavenger hunts
- ☐ [Give One, Get One](#)
- ☐ [Gallery Walks](#)

Resources

- Colorín Colorado [6 Strategies to Help ELLs Succeed in Peer Learning and Collaboration](#)
- Colorín Colorado [Developing Students' Discussion Skill](#)

7. Use purposeful assessments.

- ☐ Design useful formative assessments. These should be ongoing, low-stress, un-graded ways to monitor learning and progress that provide information to the teacher on whether students are understanding what you are teaching or if you need to adjust lessons.
- ☐ Use Exit Tickets – brief, “snapshot” formative assessment at the end of a class period to gauge student understanding and provide feedback to the teacher. These can also be used to foster self-reflection about student learning.
- ☐ Use rubrics to show students how they are graded. [MagicSchool AI](#) can be used to create a project/activity and provide strategies for formative assessments, exit tickets, and a rubric.
 - ☐ Review rubrics with students, and have them score sample/exemplar projects or tasks. Students can use rubrics to self-assess as a reflective activity and identify improvement goals. These can be written in a student’s home language if they are newer to English.
- ☐ Offer choice and voice where relevant in summative assessments.
- ☐ Provide constructive, specific, and timely feedback that focuses on improving one aspect of language skills or the learning objective. Avoid over-correcting every error to prevent discouragement.

Resources

- [Triangle, Square, Circle Reflection format](#)
- [UDL Framework](#) – offers many ideas on flexible summative assessments

8. Develop school and classroom libraries.

- ☐ Build libraries that reflect students’ cultures. A diverse library is crucial to English Language Learners’ overall development, academically, socially, and emotionally. English-only students also benefit from access to diverse books.
- ☐ Include books in other languages and bilingual books that allow parents to read to their children in their home language.



Resources

- Colorín Colorado [Finding Diverse Books Across Different Topics and Genres](#)
- Colorín Colorado [Choosing Diverse Books for Your ELLs: Tips for Educators](#)

9. Build strong partnerships with families.

- ☐ Communicate regularly with families, utilizing preferred communication methods and translators when necessary. Office staff should have a device to translate real-time, spoken conversations with family.
- ☐ Ensure translations are spoken/read aloud. Consider that students and families may not be literate in their home language. Speaking and listening comprehension may be more advanced than their reading comprehension. Additionally, students *must not* be interpreters for formal parent meetings, such as parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings.
- ☐ Learn about students' and families' strengths, experiences, and cultural perspectives to create a supportive network for the student.
- ☐ Ensure parents know procedures for calling school, meeting with the teacher, reporting absences, explaining parent-teacher conferences, and report cards.
- ☐ Consider home visits to build trust and gather valuable insights into the student's background.

Resources

- [Welcoming Families and Family Engagement videos](#) on the OPI website
- Colorín Colorado [How to Use Technology to Engage Multilingual Families](#)
- Translating apps for families
 - [Microsoft Translator](#) – offers a two-way conversation translation option
 - [MagicSchool AI](#) – translations for parent messages
 - [Eduaide](#) – translations for parent messages
 - [ChatGPT](#) – can be used as a translator and to write messages to parents
 - [Google Translate](#) – helpful for longer passages, but may not accurately translate sentence-by-sentence
- Interpreters
 - [Talking Points](#)
 - [Propio](#)
 - [Language Link](#)

10. Collaborate and join Professional Learning Communities.

- ☐ Collaborate with other teachers and ESL specialists. Share expertise, co-plan lessons, and work together to ensure a consistent and effective approach to supporting ELLs across all subjects and grade levels.
- ☐ Contact the [Title III Program Specialist](#) at the OPI for assistance with program planning and connecting you with other districts.

Resources

- [Montana English Learner Instructional Network](#) (MELIN)