

## Checklist for Effective Practices With English Learners

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If teachers can answer yes to the eight questions in the Checklist for Effective Practice below, they are probably taking into consideration key factors that will improve the chance of school success for all their students.

**Is curriculum organized around "big" questions?** Collier (1995) points out that school success depends on students' developing cognitive, academic, and language proficiency. These three areas are interrelated. Cognitive development results from solving problems in or out of school. Academic development involves problem solving in school-related areas. Students need enough language proficiency and the appropriate skills to engage in these problem-solving activities and achieve academically. When teachers organize curriculum around significant questions, they involve students in solving meaningful problems. For example, students might investigate questions such as "How are we alike, and how are we different?" or "How does where we live influence how we live?" As students explore these relevant questions, they develop higher levels of cognitive, academic, and language proficiency.

**Are students involved in authentic reading and writing experiences?** As students explore important questions, they naturally turn to fiction and nonfiction texts as sources for information. For language learners, predictable whole stories, novels, plays, and poems as well as complete pieces of nonfiction are more comprehensible than simplified texts or excerpts because the context is richer. Once students have researched their question, they write to present their understandings to classmates or to a wider audience. Engagement with authentic literacy activities of these kinds promotes literacy as well as cognitive, academic, and language development.

**Is there an attempt to draw on students' background knowledge and interests? Are students given choices?** Smith (1983) has explained that people do not learn if they are confused or bored. When school topics do not relate to students' lives, they may find themselves either confused or bored. Further, when students cannot understand the language of instruction, they may become frustrated.

On the other hand, when students receive comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) and when they can link school subjects with their life experiences, they learn. The best way to make input comprehensible is through use of the first language (L1): providing a preview in the native language, teaching the lesson in English, and then allowing students to summarize or ask questions in their L1.

Another way to make sure students are learning is to provide them with choices in the questions they investigate, increasing the possibility that students will connect their life experiences outside school with their studies in school. This approach allows all students to build on the knowledge and experiences they bring to the classroom.

**Is the content meaningful? Does it serve a purpose for the learners?** Too often, instruction for English learners is organized around a set of decontextualized skills. The goal of these exercises is to have students learn rules and practice language until it is automatic. However, these activities do not involve learners in real problem solving, nor are they pleasurable. Skill building does not foster literacy or promote cognitive, academic, or language development. Such instruction is not meaningful to language learners, nor does it serve their immediate purposes.

In contrast, when students engage with significant questions that they have helped to pose, they realize that knowledge from different curricular areas -- language arts, social studies, science, math, and the arts -- is essential for solving their problems. At that point, academic content is meaningful because it serves a purpose for students.

**Do students have opportunities to work collaboratively?** Holt (1993) has shown clearly that collaboration benefits language minority students cognitively and affectively. Students develop language in authentic social contexts as they help each other make sense of content and concepts. In the process of collaborating while reading and discussing authentic literature, writing responses, authoring their own books, investigating interesting questions, and reporting their findings, students develop the academic language they need to expand their knowledge of academic content areas.

**Do students read and write as well as speak and listen during their learning experiences?** Language learners acquire language through all four modes. They should be encouraged to read and write as well as speak and listen from the beginning of their experiences with English. Research has shown that many second language (L2) learners read or write before they speak and that listening comprehension is often enriched by literacy experiences (Freeman and Freeman, 1994; Hudelson, 1984; Rigg and Hudelson, 1986). Development of literacy is crucial for academic success, and teachers should not delay reading and writing.

**Are students' primary languages and cultures valued, supported, and developed?** Students who fully develop their primary language acquire an L2 more quickly. Cummins (1981) has shown that a common proficiency underlies languages. Knowledge developed in the primary language transfers to an L2. Further, bilingualism enriches the individual and the community. Even when teachers are not able to provide instruction in all their students' primary languages, they can find ways to support those languages and can also involve students in activities to explore the cultures of all the students in the classroom (Freeman and Freeman, 1994, 1998).

**Are students involved in activities that build their self-esteem and provide them with opportunities to succeed?** When teachers have faith in their students and the students themselves believe they can learn, these high expectations lead to academic success (Collier, 1995; Freeman and Freeman, 1998). The questions we present here in the checklist are intended as a guide for assessing classroom practice. We believe that when teachers can answer yes to most of these questions as they reflect on lessons or units, they are providing effective instruction for all their students.

## References

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