Engaging Your Beginners

Jane Hill

Six do's and don'ts help teachers engage students at all levels of speaking English—including the first levels.

Most teachers would agree that one of the best parts of the job is seeing the spark—the moment when something you’ve said or a strategy you’ve tried lights a spark of interest in a student’s eyes. But when you’re working with English language learners (ELLs), especially those just beginning to comprehend English, figuring out how to light that spark and maintain engagement can feel like making a series of missteps.

Because beginning-level ELLs often can't communicate what they already know or what they're taking in about a topic, it's hard to know whether you are reaching them at the right level. Even more important is the reality that teachers often lack training in how to effectively handle situations in which language issues complicate communication and motivation. Most teachers aren't taught how to meet the long-term needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students. They find themselves continually questioning their choices, searching for strategies they can count on.

Here are a few key do's and don'ts that will help classroom teachers engage and challenge beginning-level ELLs.

1. **Do consider each language learner's stage of language acquisition.**

The first do is to be aware of and understand the five stages of second-language acquisition, identified by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell in 1983: Preproduction, Early Production, Speech Emergence, Intermediate Fluency, and Advanced Fluency.

The Preproduction stage, which can last up to six months, is also known as "the silent period" because you may not hear students speak any English at all during this stage. The next level, Early Production, is characterized by students using single words or two-word phrases in English, as well as yes-or-no responses, names, and repetitive language patterns (“Have a good weekend!”). At the Speech Emergence stage, students are able to speak in short sentences (“I walked to the movie”). Students can express sentences of increasing length and complexity at the Intermediate Fluency stage; finally, they demonstrate a near-native level of fluency at the Advanced Fluency stage.

Students at different stages, of course, have different instructional needs. When teachers and principals are aware of these stages and where learners fall, they can set realistic expectations for what each language learner should be able to do, in terms of using language, as that learner interacts with content and attempts assignments. Although ELLs need to be held to the same standards as native English speakers on what they know and understand, how they get there and how they demonstrate that knowledge will look different, depending on their level of English skill.

This do comes with a corresponding don't: Many educators who aren't aware of the different stages often group all English language learners together or divide them into simply "higher level" and "lower level" groups. Teachers may even pair a high-level ELL with a low-level one who speaks the same native language, expecting one to teach the other. This does a disservice to both students, especially if the student who speaks English better doesn't have full understanding of the concept he or she is expected to teach.
2. Do use tiered questions.

Once a teacher knows a student's language-acquisition stage, that teacher can pose questions about content that match the way a student in that stage is capable of answering. As the student progresses to the end of his or her current stage, prompts or formats should be matched to the next higher level—a strategy called "tiered questioning." Figure 1 shows the five stages of acquisition, the characteristics of student verbalization at each stage and corresponding examples of tiered question prompts.

Figure 1. Stages of Second Language Acquisition and Tiered Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Characteristics of Student Verbalization: The student …</th>
<th>Tiered Questions (Prompts)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preproduction</td>
<td>Has minimal comprehension without support May not verbalize Nods &quot;yes&quot; and &quot;no&quot; Draws and points</td>
<td>Show me … Circle the … Where is …? Who has …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Production</td>
<td>Has limited comprehension without scaffolds Produces one- or two-word responses Participates using key words and familiar phrases Uses -ing verbs</td>
<td>Yes-or-no questions Either-or questions Who, what, and how many questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Emergence</td>
<td>Has good comprehension Can produce simple sentences Makes grammatical and pronunciation errors Frequently misunderstands jokes</td>
<td>Why …? How …? Explain … Questions requiring short-sentence answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Fluency</td>
<td>Has excellent comprehension Makes few grammatical errors</td>
<td>What would happen if …? Why do you think …? Questions requiring more than a one-sentence response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Fluency</td>
<td>Has a near-native level of speech</td>
<td>Decide if … Retell …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From Using Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners (2nd ed.) (p. 12) by J. D. Hill and K. B. Miller, 2013, Alexandria, VA: ASCD © 2013 by McREL. Adapted with permission.

For example, a teacher can ask a student in the Preproduction phase to show what she knows by pointing at a picture or selecting the correct answer phrased in simple English. When the learner advances to the end of that stage, the teacher should begin posing yes-or-no or either-or questions (Early Production prompts), and so on.
When teachers ask questions at the student’s stage of acquisition, they increase students' access to and comprehension of the content and provide English learners with opportunities to practice their new language. Asking questions from the next stage of acquisition is a transitional device that keeps students moving through the continuum of learning the language. With the aid of tiered questions, Preproduction and Early Production students can be included in all classroom instruction, rather than working on a nonrelated activity.

The experience of a teacher in Newport News, Virginia, shows the benefits of tiered questioning. Ms. Case implemented tiered questions with a 3rd grade Latino student who’d previously said very little during class. Once she identified that the student, Leonardo, fell between the Early Production and Speech Emergence stages, Ms. Case began asking him content questions at the Speech Emergence level while making the text and illustrations available.

For example, she asked Leonardo, "What do you know about frogs?" while slowly paging through a book they were going to read about the amphibian. After they read the book together, she asked, "What did you learn about frogs?" as Leonardo scanned the book. He immediately began responding with "Frogs can hop" and "Frogs lay eggs in the pond." Leonardo was soon speaking much more frequently.

3. **Don't expect the same product from all students.**

In-class assignments and homework can—and should—be tiered, just as you tier questions. In a social studies unit on water conservation, for example, native English speakers might be asked to write an essay describing water waste. Students at the Preproduction stage could instead be asked to take photographs that illustrate water waste (such as someone brushing teeth with water running or watering their lawn during the hottest time of day).

Of course, all students should understand the purpose of their homework (Hill & Miller, 2013). So it's important to ensure that beginning ELLs understand the goals and purpose behind each assignment, as well as to accommodate their language stage. We give homework so students can practice or elaborate on what they've already learned or prepare for upcoming instruction. When every student receives the same homework assignment, ELLs may struggle because they haven't learned the skills they're supposed to practice through that task. They may even practice incorrectly (Hill & Miller, 2013).

4. **Do engage Preproduction students at the same level of thinking as other students.**

An important *don't* also accompanies this *do*: Don't water down the curriculum for ELLs at early levels of English acquisition. When applying tiered questions with students who are in the process of acquiring English, it's important to distinguish between low-level questions, which lead to low levels of thinking, and high-level questions, which promote higher-order thinking.

The five stages of second language acquisition must *not* be equated with the six levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956), which categorizes thinking activity, from lowest to highest, into Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. The critical-thinking ability of Preproduction students, for example, does *not* automatically correspond to Knowledge, the lowest level of Bloom's taxonomy. How well a student can speak a second language has nothing to do with her or his ability to think abstractly.

If we expect Preproduction-stage students to work only at the Knowledge level, we will be holding them accountable for only the lowest levels of thinking—and learning. Rather, we should design learning tasks for ELLs at the Preproduction and Early Production stages that require the same levels of critical thinking we expect of other students.
So how does a teacher engage students in all levels of critical thinking? Consider a secondary science teacher who wants her Preproduction students to practice, review, and apply what they've been learning about parts of plants and their functions and what types of plants grow in different biomes. Figure 2 illustrates examples of tasks Preproduction students might do at all levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

Teachers must teach higher-order thinking skills while using language that is appropriate to their students' levels of English acquisition. The newer a student is to English, the more comprehensible input he or she will need. Teachers can provide such input by slowing down their rate of speech, limiting sentence complexity, and adding as many gestures, pictures, objects, and actions as possible to accompany the words.

For instance, for the Evaluation-level task in Figure 2, "Assess correctness of a moveable biome model," the teacher might start by placing a picture of a cactus into the desert biome and saying, "The cactus belongs in the desert" while giving a thumbs-up sign. Next, he would add a picture of an oak tree to the desert biome and say, "The oak tree belongs in the desert" while giving a thumbs-down. After using the same sentence frame with one more thumbs-down picture (such as a pine tree) and one more thumbs-up picture (a palm tree), the teacher would show another picture, use the same sentence frame, and then gesture for the student to decide whether that plant belongs and to give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

**Figure 2. Sample Tasks at All Levels of Bloom's Taxonomy for Preproduction-Stage ELLs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Assess correctness of a moveable biome model. Show understanding by rearranging parts as necessary.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>Plan and construct dioramas or collages to show seasons in a forest biome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Categorize types of plants found in desert and alpine tundra biomes using pictures and labels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>Graph how tall plants get under specific conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>Match parts of the plant to their function.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From *Using Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners* (2nd ed.) (p. 18) by J. D. Hill and K. B. Miller, 2013, Alexandria, VA: ASCD © 2013 by McREL. Adapted with permission.

As another example, in math, if native English speakers working at the Analysis level are required to write real-world problems involving adding and subtracting fractions, Preproduction students can also work at this level by using newspaper ads to create real-world problems with pictures and numbers.

And in a secondary language arts class where students are focusing on narrative text and working at the Application level, if native English speakers are writing about how the theme and conflict of a novel the class is reading applies to another novel or to their own life, Preproduction students could draw a scene from another book—or from their own life—that relates to the theme or conflict of the class novel. Because Early Production students can verbalize more than Preproduction students, they could use a sentence starter, like "The theme (or conflict) reminds me of [another book or life event]," to accompany such an illustration.
Asking the right questions is also important (Hill & Flynn, 2008). During a categorization task matching animals and environments, for example, a teacher could engage Preproduction students at the Evaluation level of Bloom's taxonomy by having students indicate the accuracy of information through pointing. First, she would show students pictures of four environments: an ocean, soil, a forest, and a desert. Then she would place a picture of raccoons into the ocean picture, ask whether raccoons live in the ocean, and demonstrate a correct response by pointing to a frowning face. Then she might put a picture of squirrels in the forest, ask "Do squirrels live in the forest?" and model pointing to a smiling face. After a few examples, students will be ready to respond on their own. Early Production students could evaluate and provide one-word responses judging correct or incorrect environments. They wouldn't, however, be able to recommend a different environment for an animal to raise its young and defend the choice, as students with more English could.

5. **Don't assess language when you want to assess content knowledge.**

Assessment tasks can also reflect all levels of Bloom's taxonomy. It's important, however, for teachers to separate language ability from content knowledge. If, for example, as part of a secondary science lesson on how the eyeball allows us to see, students are asked to write a comparison of the conditions *nearsightedness* and *farsightedness*, the task would test a Preproduction student's language proficiency, not his or her content understanding. Here's a more appropriate way to measure understanding: After an experiment using lenses to simulate eyesight, have Preproduction students use the results to construct models of eyeball shapes that would result in nearsightedness or farsightedness.

6. **Do be aware of your own language use.**

In the classroom, there will be many times when you transmit content information. Remember that *words alone* don't convey meaning for English language learners. To help ELLs follow the presentation of information, slow your rate of speech, speak in complete sentences, and use one or more of the following:

- Manipulatives and miniature objects.
- Visuals (photos, pictures, and drawings).
- Gestures, body movement, and pantomime.
- Facial expressions.

Be careful not to overuse idioms or pronouns; instead, use nouns, which convey more meaning to someone still learning the language. You might record yourself and listen for idiomatic expressions—as well as how often you use pronouns—and adjust your presentation accordingly.

Being aware of the stages of second-language acquisition and following these *do's* and *don'ts* can help any classroom teacher be more sure-footed in their instruction. Teachers can set rigorous, yet realistic, expectations that ELLs of all levels can meet—one spark at a time.

*Author's note:* All names in this article are pseudonyms.

**References**

