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# Developing Academic Literacy in Adolescent English Language

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**WE HAVE A GROWING NUMBER** of adolescent English language learners in the United States who need specialized support to learn academic English and to be successful in high school. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 1.5 million adolescents who were in grades 6–12 were not proficient in English. Fifty-seven percent of these students were second- and third-generation immigrants. Although their lack of academic English proficiency is a product of multiple factors (including poverty and mobility), many students who have been through U.S. elementary schools have not developed the skills necessary for school success. Further, the 43% of adolescent ELLs who were foreign-born are more challenged than younger learners because of fewer resources at the secondary level and less time to learn English and master academic content areas (Capps et al., 2005).

## ELLs Face Double the Work

Our adolescent English language learners are faced with doing *double the work* in order to succeed in high school. They must learn both academic English *and* all the core content topics of a standards-based curriculum. We know that English language learners need 4–7 years of targeted English language development in order to reach average performance levels on state or national exams (Thomas & Collier, 2002) but many schools do not provide programs for that length of time. However, if these learners are provided with consistent, effective programs and appropriate materials, they can be successful in school. Former ELLs who were in sustained programs of specialized instruction have, upon exit, performed better than the state or district average for all students (New York City Department of Education, 2004; State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2006).

## How Can ELLs Catch Up?

One finding from *Double the Work* (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007) is that teachers need to use research-based instructional strategies in their lessons, whether the students are in an ESL, sheltered, SEI, or bilingual program. Teachers need to incorporate both language and content objectives into their lessons to promote academic literacy and use instructional interventions that can reduce the achievement gap between English language learners and native English-speaking students. Research-based strategies that have shown positive student outcomes include:

1. Integrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in all lessons for all proficiencies
2. Teaching the components and processes of reading and writing
3. Focusing on vocabulary development
4. Building and activating prior knowledge
5. Teaching language through content and themes
6. Using native language strategically
7. Pairing technology with instruction
8. Motivating adolescent ELLs through choice

With each of these strategies, instruction must fit the cognitive and development levels of teens. Materials and activities intended for primary grades are not suitable. Let's take a closer look at each strategy.

### 1. Integrate Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking Skills

ELLs benefit from the integration of all four language skills in all lessons across the curriculum, regardless of student proficiency level (Genesee et al., 2006). Reading and writing are mutually reinforcing skills, and oral language development facilitates English literacy growth (August & Shanahan, 2006; Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). Explicit

instruction in these skills is critical, especially as they are used in academic settings.

For instance, students need to participate in classroom conversations with more than simple phrases and one-word responses. They need to articulate their opinions, share their observations, make comparisons, and so forth, through speaking and writing. They need to listen to classmates to make informed comments or to take action, and they need to read about the topics they are studying. Therefore, teachers should incorporate all four language skills in their lessons, and oral language practice should not be sacrificed for more time on reading and writing.

The lessons in *Edge* are carefully designed for language development and integration of instruction, along with practice and application, for all four language skills. Here is how a typical literature cluster integrates reading, writing, listening, and speaking:

- **Build Background and Language** Students view a selection-related visual and learn the language associated with an important function of language, using the Language and Grammar Lab.

- **Make a Connection** Students discuss or write about the upcoming selection-related topic.

- **Learn Key Vocabulary** Students participate in listening to, discussing, and writing key vocabulary in advance of reading the selection.

- **Read and Respond to the Selection** After previewing the selection and building additional background about the author, topic, or other context of the selection, students read and/or listen to a professional recording of the selection. Then they write responses that connect the reading to the theme and essential question of the unit.

- **Integrate the Language Arts** Explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction after reading—built into the student books and augmented with full teaching tools in the Language and Grammar Lab—facilitate appropriate usage of the four language skills.

## 2. Teach the Components and Processes of Reading and Writing

Adolescent ELLs who do not read or write in any language must be taught the components of reading, beginning with phonemic awareness and phonics (the sounds of a language and how the sounds together form words) and adding vocabulary, text comprehension, and fluency (August & Shanahan, 2006). If students can read in their native language, knowledge and usage of many of these components will transfer to English. But, it is useful to discuss areas of transfer explicitly and also target differences between that language and English, such as some of the English sounds that do not exist in other languages (e.g., Spanish has no phoneme *sh*). Students must also learn vocabulary and syntax, of course, to make sense of text. Plus, they need explicit instruction about reading comprehension strategies (Bernhardt, 2005; Garcia & Godina, 2004). The comprehension strategies for second language learners are the same as those for native English speakers.

After adolescent ELLs acquire basic literacy skills, they need to actively use reading and writing processes, such as previewing, paraphrasing, inferring, brainstorming, drafting, and editing. Researchers have found that adolescent ELL literacy is enhanced when teens are taught using a process-based approach (Garcia & Godina, 2004; Valdés, 1999) and engaged in academic and "real-life" reading and writing. The process creates awareness about the functions of language, and the reflection inherent in the process helps students practice highly abstract thinking that is essential for success in high school and beyond.

*Edge* has been built to teach reading and writing to English language learners strategically. The **Fundamentals Level** allows non-readers to develop initial literacy, with its prime focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, basic vocabulary, and simpler writing tasks. Each unit of the next three volumes, **Levels A–C**, features one key reading strategy (e.g., determine importance; make connections) that is taught explicitly and practiced with multiple genres and several techniques. The *Edge Interactive* reading practice book lets students have hands-on experience with the text by, for example, highlighting key passages, jotting notes in margins, brainstorming ideas for a written response to literature, and more.

Across each level, six major writing projects are presented that address a variety of academic genres and each of the traits of good writing.

### 3. Focus on Vocabulary Development

Research has shown how important a robust vocabulary is. Adequate reading comprehension depends on knowing 90–95% of the words in a text (Nagy & Scott, 2000), and students with better vocabularies tend to be more successful on tests and other measures of achievement. Among native speakers of English, it has been shown that eighth graders, on average, have a reading vocabulary of 25,000 word families; twelfth graders, a reading vocabulary of 50,000 word families (Graves, 2006). A word family is a basic word and all of its other forms and meanings. So the word family for *run* includes *run*, *ran*, *running*, *runner*, *run into*, *run on*, *run over*, and the like.

We know that teaching vocabulary can improve reading comprehension for both native English speakers (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982) and English language learners (Carlo et al., 2004). However, for ELLs, especially those who begin the study of English in secondary school, there is a lot more vocabulary to learn than teachers can reasonably teach. Therefore, we need to instruct students in word learning and word awareness strategies and in cognate recognition and use. We have to help them develop knowledge of words, word parts, and word relationships so they understand topics in a content area and develop strong reading comprehension and test-taking skills (Graves, 2006).

Students can learn new words through a variety of methods. Visuals, graphic organizers, demonstrations, and other instructional aids help students better understand and remember words and their meanings. Also helpful are word attack techniques, such as identifying words in English that are similar and related to those in the student's native language and inferring the meaning of a word based on context clues and structural analysis (August, 2003; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Teachers must teach multiple meanings of words and help students incorporate words into their expressive vocabularies. Some researchers have found that students need 12 practice sessions with a word in order to comprehend it in text. For ELLs, teachers may also need to distinguish between content-specific words (e.g., *hypotenuse*, *equilateral*), process words (e.g., *scan*, *draft*, *clarify*), and words related to English structure (e.g., prefix, *dis-*; suffix, *-ly*) (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Graves, 2006).

*Edge* acknowledges the critical importance of vocabulary development and incorporates a wide variety of instructional techniques and daily routines to ensure students have rigorous practice with key words, academic vocabulary, and word-learning strategies. Some of the techniques include use of visual supports, graphic organizers such as semantic maps and concept charts, analysis of word structure, vocabulary games and activities, presentation of cognates, and more. Weekly oral and written reviews of the words provide the repeated practice and connect the vocabulary to the Essential Question.

### 4. Build and Activate Background Knowledge

Reading research has shown the benefit of having teachers activate students' background schema before reading a text to aid comprehension (e.g., Bernhardt, 2005). This is useful in some cases for ELLs, but not always sufficient. Many adolescent ELLs lack background knowledge of the topics taught in middle and high school content classes or have gaps in information learned. Students who have been in U.S. schools since the early grades generally have some of the background knowledge expected by teachers, textbooks, and curricula in the secondary grades, but students who are new to the United States may not. Although these students often have a great deal of background knowledge, not all of it applies to the schooling context. In these cases, teachers must explicitly build background schema.

Connecting instruction to what the learners know and then explicitly discussing how that knowledge applies to the topic at hand is a strategy all teachers should use with ELLs (Gonzalez, et al., 1993; Moje, et al., 2004). For example, immigrant students may not have studied the U.S. Civil War,

> **"Linking language instruction to real-life experiences is beneficial for ELLs."**

but they may have lived through a military conflict at home and that experience could give them special insight into U.S. history.

*Edge* has been designed to both build and activate background knowledge for the learners.

- To gain an understanding of the types of texts being read and their purposes, for example, the **How to Read feature** precedes the literature in each unit.

- At the beginning of every cluster of literature, teachers can use the **Language Function transparency** from the Language and Grammar Lab to both build background and language functions before reading.

- **Make a Connection** presents anticipatory tasks to make connections between what the students will read and what they know.

- **Learn Key Vocabulary**, with the Make Words Your Own routine, helps teachers develop deep word knowledge.

- With the **Look into the Text feature** in Before Reading, not only do the ELLs learn about features of genres (e.g., use of captions and illustrations in nonfiction articles, the role of character and setting in short stories), but they become familiar with a portion of the text as they do so.

- Additional background building occurs by sharing information about the selection's author or the historical context of the text.

## 5. Teach Language Through Content and Themes

A thematic approach helps students integrate language and content learning by, for example, reinforcing vocabulary through repeated use and deepening knowledge of content topics over time. Linking language instruction to real-life experiences, including the content or themes being taught in other classes, is also beneficial for ELLs (Garcia & Godina, 2004). With teacher facilitation, students can access their content knowledge to bolster their academic language development and similarly use their language skills to gain more content knowledge. Providing content- or theme-based instruction gives ELLs an important framework for assimilating new information and applying language

skills learned across the curriculum (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Garcia & Godina, 2004).

The Essential Question is the driver for each unit in *Edge*. It sets a theme for the readings and engages the students in higher-order thinking. Without a right or wrong answer, students can linger over their response, discuss possibilities, write down their ideas, change or strengthen their opinions as they gain new information and insights from the readings which touch the topic from various angles. The pairing of a main selection with a related adjunct also bolsters the students' language development, as a theme is woven across texts and vocabulary is utilized in different contexts.

## 6. Use the Native Language Strategically

One useful strategy for helping students understand difficult academic terms and content concepts is to explain the ideas in students' native language. In this way, students can develop a deeper understanding of the concepts while they are still learning the English words and expressions that define or exemplify them. If students share the same language background, they may also be able to explain concepts and terms to each other (Gumperz, Cook-Gumperz, & Szymanski, 1999).

*Edge* lessons make strategic use of the native language. Particular attention is paid to helping students recognize cognates (and false cognates), for example. Key Vocabulary glossaries and selection summaries (to build schema for reading the literature) are available on www.hbedge.net in seven languages.

Teachers are also encouraged to link students' out-of-school literacy practices, which may be conducted in the native language, to instruction, such as during genre study (e.g., How is this poem like a popular Spanish song?), or a writing activity (e.g., how an email to a friend to persuade her to do something could be similar to a letter to a newspaper editor).

## 7. Pair Technology with Instruction

Many adolescents enjoy using technology for leisure literacy activities, writing text messages and emails, listening to songs, surfing the Web, and so forth. By incorporating technology with second language literacy practices, we can motivate the students and foster more language development (Kim & Kamil, 2004). Warschauer and colleagues

(2004) found that technology paired with other interventions, such as project-based instruction and interdisciplinary teacher teaming, related positively to adolescent ELL literacy development. Projects requiring students to partake in field work and present a product to a real audience by means of technology led to improved standardized test scores. Projects also provide opportunities for background reading, editing, and vocabulary development. The use of audio books can also support students' literacy development, as students follow along with a written text; the recordings provide students with models for pronunciation and oral fluency and can aid in vocabulary comprehension. In general, computer-based literacy instruction can promote reading and writing development for adolescent ELLs but that instruction should be scaffolded by teachers.

Technology is an integral part of *Edge*. Students have full access to its specialized Web site, the **Learning Edge**, which offers ideas and tools for the unit projects, background on the fiction selection authors, context for the nonfiction selections, research options, and many other resources. Each literature selection has been read by professional talent and is available on **audio CDs** for listening practice. The *Edge* **Online Coach**™ is an important software tool to promote fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and text comprehension.

### 8. Motivate Adolescent ELLs Through Choice

Motivation can be a key factor in helping adolescent struggling readers be more successful in school. We have found that adolescents prefer to have opportunities to exercise choice in their learning. One option is choice of text. Students should have a wide range of diverse selections to choose from. High-interest, low-difficulty texts play a significant role in a successful adolescent ELL literacy program. Classroom libraries should include different topics, genres, and reading levels, so all students find something of interest suited to their ability. Choice of task is another way for students to become engaged. Not everyone needs to do the same assignment for every text read or skill practiced. By providing alternative tasks, teachers let students take some ownership of what they will do. Choice of partner is a third way to let adolescents get involved in their learning. From time to time, letting students pick their own partners can motivate them to do

their best on a project or activity.

*Edge* has been designed with the adolescent learner in mind. The *Edge* Library offers a diversity of texts, genres, and reading levels. Unit projects contain built-in choice of end product and grouping. Further, the Teacher Editions offer suggestions for student groupings and differentiation, based on both need and student choice.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we know from research and practice that we can help our adolescent ELLs learn academic English—and challenging core content through English—if we use research-based instructional strategies and materials in a consistent and sustained manner. The students need a program of studies that offers sequenced ESL instruction and develops academic skills that are applicable across the curriculum. They need to be exposed to a variety of text genres with targeted vocabulary development and they need to be treated like young adults who can take some responsibility for their own learning. Appropriate resources like *Edge* will help these learners and their teachers be successful in school. ❖

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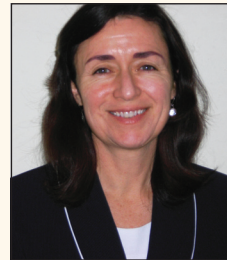
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