

An Action Plan for Teaching Young English Language Learners

Your principal has just informed you that a 3rd-grade student who speaks no English will be joining your K-3 multigrade classroom next week. You have little time to prepare for a smooth entry for this child. You have no prior experience teaching English as a second language (ESL). What strategies

and resources can you call upon for help?

In this article, a teacher called “Norma” and a Korean student called “Sol” will be used to illustrate some best practices and tips from expert teachers of English as a second language.¹ The ideas described here illustrate a limited number of strategies and resources because the literature on teaching English language learners (ELLs) is vast, varied, and nearly inexhaustible. Let us follow Norma over several months as she implements some of these ideas.

After praying for divine guidance, Norma took the following steps to ease her new student into her 15-student classroom. She brainstormed ways to make Sol feel welcomed and accepted by her peers and teacher. Norma tried to view each task from Sol’s perspective. She planned ways to use Sol’s own cultural background and first language to launch her into the English language world.

Using an interpreter, Norma met with Sol’s parents. From this initial meeting, she was able to observe some of Sol’s needs, interests, and family customs. Sol was a Korean girl whose parents planned to place her with an English-speaking host

family. After they returned to Korea, they would visit their daughter in Canada every three months throughout the year. They told the interpreter that they were eager for their daughter to become proficient in English and were willing to make this sacrifice in order to achieve this academic goal. Norma gently cautioned the parents that it would take much longer than a year for Sol to achieve fluency in English.

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Preparing for the ELL’s Arrival

Norma began her preparations to welcome Sol into her classroom. She went to the school’s professional development library to search for materials using best ESL instructional practices. These included: scaffolding, validation of student learning, student-centered experiential learning, ESL academic assessment, as well as second-language acquisition learning theories. She also used the Internet to find relevant resources such as <http://www.everythingsl.net> and Websites for professional ESL organizations such as

TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) at <http://www.tesol.org>.

The same day Norma learned about her new ESL student, she called her colleague and ESL expert, Maria, who loaned her a copy of *Supporting ESL Learners Resource Book K-12*,² Elizabeth Claire’s and Judie Haynes’ books, *Newcomer Program K-2 Activity Copymasters—Teacher’s Guide*,³ and *Classroom Teacher’s ESL Survival Kit No. 1*.⁴ Norma was able to order more of Judie Haynes’ ESL books through Amazon.com at a reasonable

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cost. These resources offered flexible hands-on activities and practical strategies for inclusive and differentiated instruction of ELLs in the classroom, in addition to a level-appropriate year-long assessment plan.

Assigning a Peer Mentor

When Sol arrived at school the following week, Norma introduced her to Madge, a native English speaker near her age who was willing to act as a peer mentor. Madge quickly learned to communicate with Sol via sign language, pictures, and body gestures, which she used to help Sol learn the classroom routines and explore her school and playground.

Norma used picture symbols⁵ to help Sol develop the vocabulary needed for the daily schedule, classroom rules, and basic instruction. The picture symbols empowered Sol to make choices and find information.

As the year progressed, Norma asked Sol to give each of her classmates Korean names and show them how to write them with Korean symbols. She challenged her students to learn a few words in Sol's language. Norma arranged for Sol to help her peers cook some Korean foods, and the students introduced Sol to some of their favorite foods such as pizza and pierogi.

Although Sol quickly acquired a number of isolated English words, Norma wanted her to use English patterns of speech. This meant that Sol's speech patterns had to be retrained for the second language. However, Norma made it clear that Sol could still use and value her first language and Korean heritage. To accomplish this goal, Norma used dialogues and realistic drills.⁶

Resources

To motivate Sol to immerse herself in English, Norma continued to implement the strategies she would normally use to teach speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills to her multigrade students. Norma provided a language-rich environment. She displayed interesting books with wonderful illustrations on topics that grabbed Sol's attention, from gorillas to whales, from how to draw horses to how to create origami. Norma selected concept books for Sol to read, since "For the child just beginning the move into a new language, one of the first priorities is the acquisition of new labels for old experiences, and for many new experiences of life in a second culture."⁷ Concept books provided strong support at this point because they described

the varied dimensions of a single object, a class of objects, or an abstract idea.⁸ For additional vocabulary support, Norma had her students help Sol label everything in the room, such as clock, door, cupboard, computer, wall, ceiling, sliding glass door, floor, desk, telephone, etc.

Norma also implemented Virginia G. Allen's advice that books for young ESL students should have the following features:⁹ (1) a strong emphasis on the development of concepts (i.e., Anne and Harlow Rockwell's *The Toolbox*¹⁰ and Tana Hoban's *Push, Pull, Empty, Full: A Book of Opposites*¹¹); (2) predictable patterns of events and repetitive sentence patterns (i.e., *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin, Jr.¹²); (3) illustrations that support and extend the meaning (i.e., Mirra Ginsburg's *The Chick and the Duckling*¹³); (4) a format that invites talk (such as *A Taste of Blackberries* by Doris Buchanan Smith¹⁴); (5) a framework that supports writing or other areas of the curriculum; and (6) content that is linked to the English language learner's culture.

In terms of lending support to the curriculum, Allen comments: "For ESL children in the United States, stories of pioneer life on the prairie are not a part of their heritage. Pam



Conrad's book *Prairie Visions: The Life and Times of Solomon Butcher*¹⁵ can make those days come alive. The text of this book, though fascinating, would be difficult for the second-language learner, but the photographs are magnificent . . . the reader sees actual sod homes, children playing in the yards . . . the opportunity to see real faces makes history come alive in a dramatic way. . . .¹⁶

Allen adds: "It is important to have books in the classroom library that relate to ESL children's own culture. Not only does it help the self-esteem of the ESL children, it also supports the growth of other children's awareness of and respect for the cultural groups that make up their society."¹⁷ For example, Harriet Rohmer has edited a series of bilingual texts such as Tran-Khan-Tuyet's version of *The Little Weaver of Thai-Yen Village*¹⁸ in English and Vietnamese, Min Paek's *Aekeyung's Dream* in English and Korean, and Rohmer's adaptation of *Uncle Nacho's Hat* in English and Spanish.¹⁹

As Norma used the Internet to find ways to teach ESL, she initially felt overwhelmed by the thousands of Websites available. One site Norma found useful was by Shelley A. Vernon, which offers an e-book called *101 English Language Games for Children*. There are also elementary lesson plans on a variety of topics. Norma could e-mail questions to Shelley Vernon at info@teachingenglishgames.com to get helpful teaching tips.

Norma began to use games, songs, and chants to teach the rhythm and pronunciation of English phrases and sentences,²⁰ after reading an ESL expert's statement that: "Songs and chants are regular ways of fixing words in the memory. The rhythms of English are quite different from the rhythms of other languages so this kind of practice is really important."²¹

Norma also decided to use the British Columbia Ministry of Education Special Programs publication, *English as a Second Language Learners: A Guide for Classroom Teachers*.²² This publication offers guidelines and resources for teachers on such topics as adjustment challenges facing ESL students, assessment and placement of students, plus tips and strategies for teaching English to immigrant students. For example, "In the course of learning a new language, comprehension often precedes production. Beginner ESL students may initially be silent for a period, as they listen and internalize."²³ Norma found that many of the suggestions were just as useful for native English speakers as for ELLs, so she began to use these guidelines as a framework for her daily lesson plans.

Norma also obtained videos from her local community college that demonstrated teaching techniques for engaging ELLs. Through them, she learned that routines such as taking attendance and calendar activities provide important listening skill practice. To build on what students already know, the teacher can say: "Look at Sol's pretty dress! What color is it?" To further extend Sol's understanding and use of color vocabulary, Norma assigned a cooperative learning group activity. They put a large rainbow puzzle together. The students asked Sol, "What do you call a rainbow in your language? Where do

Norma used picture symbols to help Sol develop the vocabulary needed for the daily schedule, classroom rules, and basic instruction.

you see a rainbow? When do you see a rainbow?" The ensuing discussion not only extended Sol's language learning but also reassured her that her own language and heritage were valued by her peers.

Categorizing ESL Strategies

As she guided this process of language interaction between Sol and her peers, Norma found that ESL strategies can be "grouped into two broad categories: those pertaining to how the teacher uses language to present information or interact with the students" (giving wait time, teaching the language of the subject, simplifying sentences, and rephrasing idioms or teaching their meaning) and "those pertaining to classroom procedures or instructional planning" (presenting important ideas with key words, using visual and non-verbal cues, using the student's native language to check comprehension, using tactful and discreet ways to respond to the student's language errors, and using directed reading activities and audio-tape texts to combine aural and visual cues).²⁴

Norma sought further help to manage Sol's English-speaking skills and social integration into her peer group. One suggestion was to use humor in the form of riddles such as: "How many books can you put into an empty school bag? None. If you put a book in it, the bag is no longer empty."²⁵ Norma found that the book *101 American English Riddles* included "many types of language-based humor," and stimulated thought about language while being an enjoyable learning tool for non-native speakers of English.²⁶

Introducing the ELL to the Community

In addition to these classroom-based practices, Norma realized that Sol would need to be introduced to her new community and culture. To provide Sol and her peers with more opportunities for authentic language practice, Norma planned for all the students to participate in field trips. For example, they would go shopping for items to fill a Christmas Shoe Box to send to children in Colombia, South America. Sol would use a digital camera to record the events of the trip, and with her classmates, produce a book that would be read over and over in the classroom reading corner.

After each field trip, Norma encouraged Sol and her classmates to create PowerPoint presentations, scrapbooks, charts, journals, and bulletin boards to represent their activities and validate their learning. As these projects were revisited later, the concepts could be consolidated, reviewed, and internalized in a pleasurable manner. Sol and her peers would engage in conversational English, listening, and speaking as they collaborated and cooperated in group learning. This would lead to opportunities for reading and writing in various subject areas of the curriculum.

Norma also decided to use the school telephone to enhance Sol's real-life communication skills. She obtained a Tele-trainer kit. (With this kit, one child takes a phone out of the room, while a peer carries on a conversation with him or her

from inside the classroom. When the children have built up enough confidence and knowledge, the real telephone conversations can begin.) Norma planned to save up her telephone errands and give Sol, Madge, and other students the real-life learning experience of calling a repairman or ordering pizza delivery for a class party.²⁷

Putting the Focus on Communication

As Norma implemented these new instructional strategies to help Sol become comfortable in the mainstream classroom, she kept in mind this admonition: “When we are giving our students experiential language practice, the focus is on communicating, not on accuracy of pronunciation or grammar . . . the teacher can make a note . . . of language items which are obviously giving problems and, at a suitable time, review them.”²⁸ She also found Bell, Burnaby, and Love’s summary of their module on teaching speaking skills to ESL students: “The purpose of all our speech instruction in the classroom is to help our students communicate on their own without us being there to feed them the words. To do this effectively, they need to know

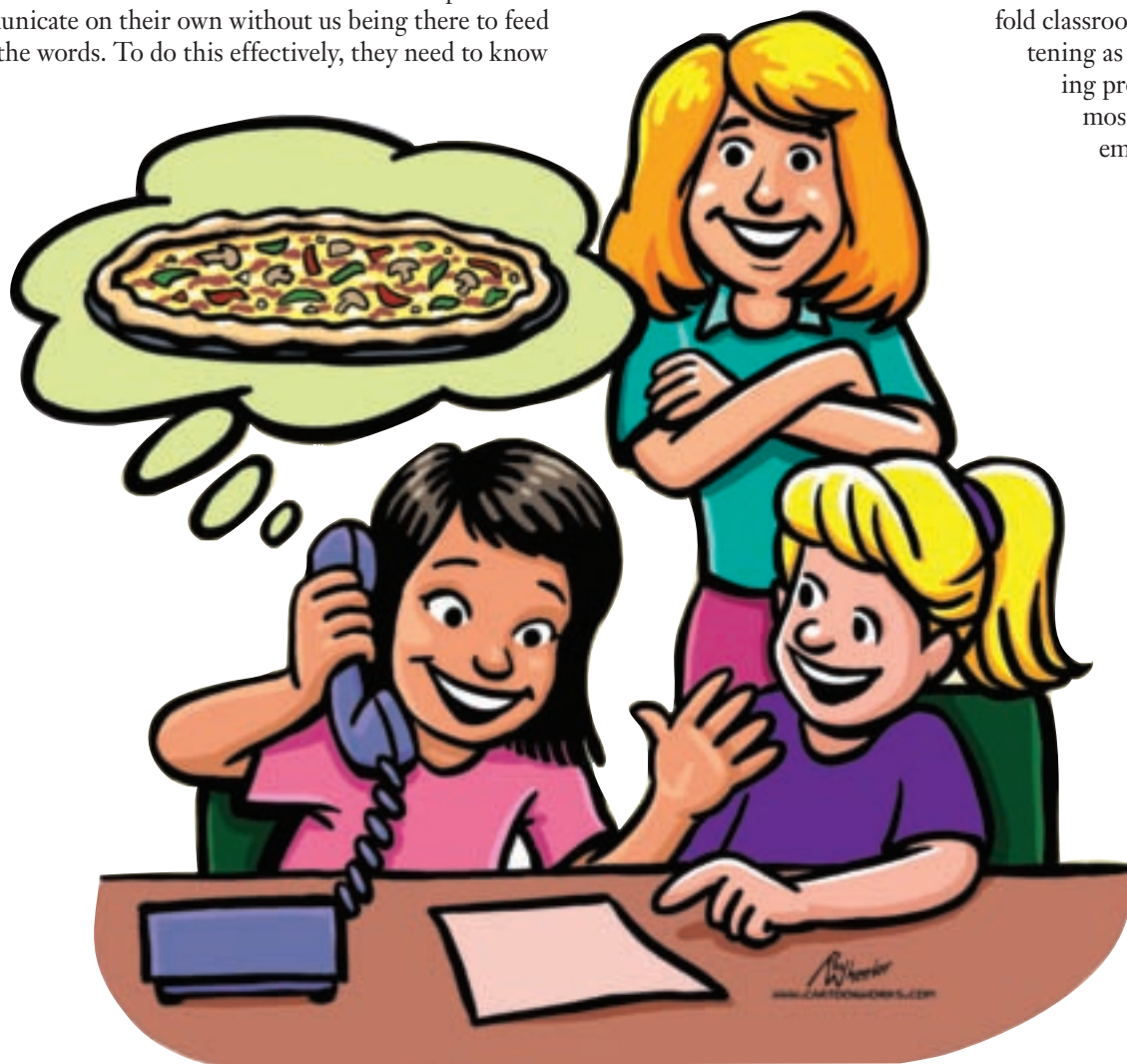
Norma arranged for Sol to help her peers cook some Korean foods, and the students introduced Sol to some of their favorite foods such as pizza and pierogi.

how to say what they mean and how to say it appropriately, and they need to have the opportunity of getting out there and communicating. We should aim at giving them practice in all three tasks.”²⁹

To encourage Sol to communicate independently, Norma facilitated her attempts to speak English by using the principles of scaffolding based on Pauline Gibbons’ book, which also contains a glossary of specific teaching strategies for ELLs.³⁰ One strategy to teach listening skills is “Describe and Draw,” a barrier game

where neither child can see the other and each child takes turns describing something he or she is drawing. His or her partner then has to draw the same thing.³¹ Another helpful teaching activity Norma found was *Dialogue Journal*. This, as “the name suggests . . . is a conversation that is written down. It may be between the student and teacher, or between an ESL student and an English-speaking buddy.”³²

Norma found chapters two and six of Gibbons’ book, which focus on how to use questions to scaffold classroom talk and listening as an active thinking process, to be the most helpful. These emphasize a balance



between asking questions and demanding specific answers, allowing “learners to negotiate what they want to say.”³³

Norma also used Gibbons’ suggested questions when quizzing Sol about her classwork:

“Tell us what you learned.

Tell us about what you did.

What did you find out?”³⁴

Norma made sure to allow “wait” or “lag” time, to allow Sol to think about her answers and to revise her responses. This “makes a big difference to how much students say, how clearly they say it, and how much they are able to demonstrate what they understand.”³⁵ She found that Gibbons’ simple strategy worked well: “to ask the student to clarify meaning rather than take responsibility for doing this herself. Her responses to the student do not simply evaluate what the student has said; instead, they prompt the student to have another go: ‘Can you explain that a bit more?’”³⁶

Norma found this important advice in the ESL literature: “One of the most important things that ESL learners need to be able to do is ask for clarification when they don’t understand something.”³⁷ So, she had Sol model and practice phrases like these:

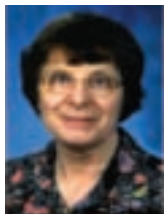
“Excuse me, I’d like to ask something.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Can you repeat that?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear that. Can you say it again, please?”³⁸

Gibbons advises teachers to use their own judgment in relation to individual learners, deciding how much responsibility for clarification they require, but warns that “almost certainly most ESL students will be able to say more if they are given more time during the process of an interaction . . . It is not an exaggeration to suggest that classroom talk determines whether or not children learn, and their ultimate feelings of self-worth as students. Talk is how education happens.”³⁹

After accessing these resources, identifying best practices for ELLs, and implementing the ideas described in this article, Norma experienced success in teaching both Sol and her other students! ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

2. School District 41—Burnaby, *Supporting ESL Learners Resource Book*