Apex Learning®

EL Special Report

Best Practices for Supporting English Learners

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Defining the Opportunity

Nearly three out of four classrooms include at least one English language learner.[1] English learners represent the fastest growing student population in the United States.[2] This special report investigates the best ways to support them.

Instruction for English language learners needs to simultaneously build English fluency and subject-level mastery. This is challenging, both for ELL students and the schools and teachers that support them.

While EL students often develop conversational English skills quickly, it takes up to seven years to develop full academic proficiency.[3] Many district-level educators think their schools are unprepared to give EL students the support required to develop proficiency. Most teachers agree, saying they lack high-quality instructional materials to address students' language and academic needs — particularly in secondary education.[4] These challenges amplify when serving highly mobile families, as schools may serve students for only a few months or years of their academic journey.[5]

The struggle in finding high-quality resources to support EL students has a stark impact on achievement. Today, just one third of EL students reach basic proficiency on national exams in math and reading — half the rate as their non-EL peers.[6] The dropout rate for EL students is double the national average.[7] In addition, these outcomes have a significant impact on district performance, finances, and community standing. The achievement gap between EL and non-EL students has remained constant for nearly two decades.[8]

To deliver strong outcomes for *all* students, districts need highly effective, easy-to-implement resources. There are four best practices for designing resources to do this, each of which help achieve the dual goals of establishing English language fluency while simultaneously reaching grade-level mastery across each subject.

1. Accelerate Comprehension with Context-rich Instruction

English language learners obstain the vast majority of new words through context and only a small number through direct instruction.[9] Consequently, context-rich instruction dramatically accelerates the development of English language fluency.[10]

Context-rich instruction offers multiple ways to make meaning of an unfamiliar word or concept: combinations of visualizations, text, audio, and active learning opportunities. Context also includes leveraging familiar examples to activate prior knowledge, connecting new words to a familiar concepts. The power of context is strengthened through personalization, such as offering tailored support and individualized feedback throughout the learning experience.[11]

Each new representation, grounding example, and personalization presents students a new chance to assign meaning to word, giving language learners the greatest chance of understanding the material and expanding their vocabulary.[12] Contextrich instruction stands in contrast to context-limited instruction, where students have just one way of deciphering content in any given moment (e.g., simply a video or just a text) or lack the opportunity to access meaningful supports or scaffolds as soon as they need them.

The Apex Approach

Context-rich instruction is a centerpiece of the Apex Learning instructional design. It grounds each new concept in familiar, relevant, intuitive examples and presents them through a combination of responsive learning activities, images, video, audio, text, and on-demand supports. If students do not understand material when presented one way, they always have a range of immediately accessible alternatives for deciphering it –whether they are struggling with a word, a concept, or both. Furthermore, students actively engage with the material during every step of the learning experience, which allows them to receive instructive feedback to reinforce and refine their understanding. By designing curriculum with multiple points of access, relatable examples, individualized feedback, and a wide range of on-demand supports, Apex Learning offers the context-rich instruction essential to accelerating the development of both English language fluency and grade-level subject mastery.

2. Unlock Subject-level Success Through Comprehensible Input

English learners develop language and subject-area mastery when the content is comprehensible — when they understand what they're seeing, hearing, or reading.[13] There are three ways to maximize the comprehensibility of instructional content.

Attention to Vocabulary

With both text and speech, content is comprehensible when students can understand at least 85 to 90 percent of the words used.[14] Reaching this threshold for every studen requires careful attention to the vocabulary used as well as to the supports students have available to understand it.

Context-Rich Instruction

Context-rich instruction broadens comprehensibility by offering multiple ways to make meaning of a word or concept. If text initially proves incomprehensible, an image can provide the context essential to nderstanding it. If an image still isn't enough, a relevant example, interactive simulation, or alternative explanation can all push an idea over the edge to comprehensibility.[15] The richer the context, the more accessible it becomes.[16]

Literary Scaffolds

Specific literary scaffolds can be essential to closing the gap of comprehensibility.[17] These can include tructured reading activities, guided notes, audio support, dictionaries, native language translations, and active reading strategies. These supports are particularly important for emerging language learners, who more frequently recognize fewer than 85 percent of words used during instruction.

The Apex Approach

Apex Learning combines attention to vocabulary, context-rich instruction, and literacy scaffolds to ensure material is accessible to English learners. Apex Learning digital curriculum surrounds academic and other gradelevel vocabulary with familiar, readily comprehensible words to keep text within the range of comprehensibility for English learners building fluency. For students who need more assistance, Apex Learning offers rich, real-time literacy scaffolds. These include explicit instruction of active reading strategies, embedded definitions for academic vocabulary, contextual supports to explain idioms and cultural references, native language translation tools, and guided reading activities. When coupled with contextrich instructional design, these strategies offer powerful support to English learners at all levels of fluency.
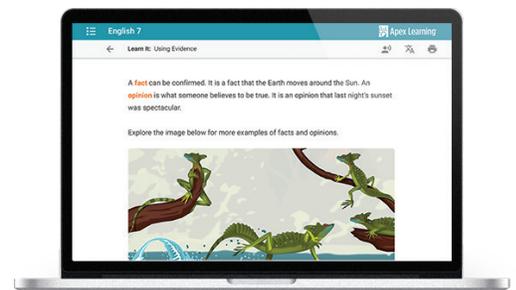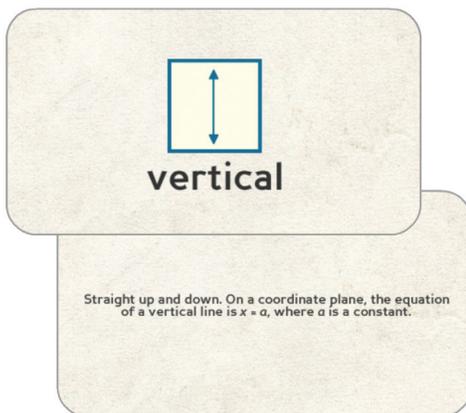

Content is comprehensible when students can understand **at least 85–90% of the words**.

3. Leverage Direct Instruction for Academic Vocabulary

Direct instruction is essential to learning academic vocabulary, as the definitions are often too technical or abstract to learn through context alone.[18]

For English language learners, effective direct instruction requires more than dictionary definitions.[19] A combination of accessible definitions, contextualized reinforcement, and explicit review gives English learners the clarity and exposure they need to acquire and retain academic vocabulary.[20] Particularly when used together, effective instructional strategies include utilizing student-friendly definitions, a variety of visual aids, examples of the word in context, questions to help students think critically about the meaning of the word, opportunities to compare and contrast words, and repetition to reinforce the target words.[21]

vertical

Straight up and down. On a coordinate plane, the equation of a vertical line is $x = a$, where a is a constant.

The Apex Approach

Apex Learning introduces and reinforces academic vocabulary through clear, accessible direct instruction. It begins with explicit, student-friendly definitions to ensure English learners understand the precise meaning of each word. It accompanies these definitions with visual representations, contextual supports, and applied examples where appropriate. After learning a word, students review and apply their understanding throughout the instruction in a series of no-stakes active learning experiences ranging from matching activities to open responses to complex interactives, giving them multiple opportunities to build mastery before low-stakes and summative assessments. The combination of precise comprehensible definitions with ongoing opportunities to apply words in context gives students the clarity, accessibility, and exposure they need to learn academic vocabulary.

4. Cement Mastery Through Output

When developing language skills, practicing words is as important as learning them.[22] English learners cement mastery through regular, varied output.

Output is most effective when it includes both controlled production (e.g., matching exercises and short answers) and free production (e.g., essays and discussions).[23] This balance of output facilitates syntactic processing, productive experimentation, and the automatization of knowledge and skills.[24] Output also allows for feedback, offering a natural mechanism for English learners to validate, revise, and reinforce their understanding through trial and error.[25] Given English learners' wide ranging command of and confidence producing English, many require support to generate grade-level responses — particularly for short answers, discussions, essays, reports, and other open responses. Such support can include controlled release, guided examples, scaffolded assignments, and more.

The Apex Approach

Apex Learning actively engages students in every moment of their learning experience. Throughout their instruction, students progress through a series of activities featuring controlled and free production. Activities increase in rigor to match students' level of mastery, building from simple identification and lassification activities to creative and analytical activities. This prepares students for long form roduction, such as essays, discussions, and performance tasks. For students who need additional support, Apex Learning includes graphic organizers and activity guides to help break down the activity and learn the skills they need to produce their strongest work. By guiding students' regular, varied, and meaningful opportunities for output, Apex Learning helps English learners solidify language fluency and content mastery.

Conclusion

Seizing the Opportunity

These strategies outline the path to offering highly effective instruction to support English learners. By combining these strategies, districts simultaneously build English learners' language fluency and subject-level mastery.

Doing this well gives English language learners the foundation needed to excel in school and beyond, while also raising districts' performance and community standing. This can be a challenging, time-consuming task for a district to accomplish alone, but it can be simpler and more efficient by joining forces with a partner committed to building a path to success for all students.

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An industry leader in online education with deep expertise in digital curriculum, Apex Learning works closely with school districts across the country to implement proven solutions that increase on-time graduation rates and create opportunities for student success in school and beyond. The company is driven by the understanding that supporting the needs of all students – from struggling to accelerated – strengthens schools and creates stronger communities, brighter futures and a more equitable world. Apex Learning is accredited by Cognia (formerly AdvancED) and its courses are approved for National Collegiate Athletic Association eligibility. Apex Learning, where opportunity thrives. For more information, visit http://www. apexlearning.com.

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