

Teaching Gifted English Language Learners: Tools for the Regular Classroom

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All students thrive in classrooms where they have something new to learn and do. We know this has happened when we see children so absorbed they can't possibly stop. At some point, we have to pry them away because of the pressures of scheduling and curriculum goals. Nevertheless, it is a magical moment in teaching when students form a relationship with an idea or subject, making it their own. Helping students create this relationship should be a primary goal in teaching, particularly for gifted ELLs. Culture and language are so fundamental to the way children learn. They do not function as vehicles for thinking and communication; they *mediate* thinking (Vygotsky, 1962).

One of the first things to address is the learning environment, not just the space itself, but the atmosphere in the room, the feeling of care and cooperation, the resources, the learning adventures, and so on. A great deal of attention is paid to academic needs and skills, and rightly so. But meaningful engagement is the flame that lights the fire. Without it, children go through the motions, lose interest, and stop believing that school has anything to do with what they love or want to learn. Gifted ELLs feel this even more tangibly because they have had to navigate a cultural and language different from their own.

A Prepared Space

A prepared classroom enables teachers to offer gifted ELLs more academic and creative choices that embrace their culture. These may include visual displays, supplies, and other resources from cultural institutes (e.g., the Mexican Arts Museum in Chicago), celebrations, art traditions, cuisine, and so forth. Students can become part of this process by sharing their stories, talents, and interests throughout the year so that the classroom becomes their learning space. Educator-anthropologist Luis Moll showed the value of this when he coined the term "funds of knowledge" (1992), a term that has helped teachers focus on the hidden strengths (knowledge, skills, abilities) of bilingual communities as guides for their education. He conducted an extensive ethnographic study of the Mexican-American communities in the barrio schools of Tucson (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994). Many had entrepreneurial skills and knew specific information about archeology, biology, and mathematics. Expertise in cultivation, animal husbandry, ranch management, mechanics, carpentry, masonry, and electrical wiring, for instance, meant that students came to school with special areas of knowledge and skill. In rural and urban areas, children bring cultural art practices, stories, family histories, social values, and cooking experiences.

An Engaging Classroom for Advanced ELLs

- How can you help all ELLs feel accepted in the community of learners?
- How can neighborhoods in your district provide human and material resources that help ELLs connect to learning and use their talents?
- In what ways can you bring more of your students' interests and cultural gifts to the classroom (e.g., art works, inventions, poems, raps, crafts, cultural traditions, photographs of great moments, humorous stories)?
- Do the materials reflect the interests and learning styles of advanced ELLs as well as the other students?
- Are they consistent with the students' advanced developmental level, experience, and knowledge?
- Do they inspire curiosity and a sense of wonder?
- Do class activities stimulate higher-level thinking in different subjects?

- Do they allow a variety of learning styles and embrace different “intelligences” that accommodate those with language barriers?
- Are there bilingual professionals (artists, scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs) willing to share their experience, skills, and knowledge?
- Have you explored mentoring options for exceptional ELLs who want to pursue special interests? Do you keep an eye out for learning opportunities, competitions (online as well as local) and scholarships?
- Do you have strategies for encouraging positive peer relationships and collaborations in ways that are comfortable with English language learners?

Regardless of their level of ability or proficiency, English language learners thrive in classrooms that draw on the cultural and linguistic sources of these students. Teachers need not devote a lot of time to accommodate gifted ELLs. Rather, making small adjustments to the lessons they’ve already planned is often sufficient.

Teaching Tools for Reaching Gifted ELLs

The following pages describe a “toolbox of strategies” teachers can use in different settings that will assist Hispanic English language learners, including advanced students (adapted from Smutny, Haydon, Bolanos, & Danley, 2012). Not all fit the unique character of the school or work well in the community of learners in a classroom. Their value also depends on their workability for teachers who are already juggling many instructional and administrative responsibilities.

1. Display learning goals and questions.

All students feel more comfortable when they know the goals and activities for the day or week. Gifted English language learners particularly benefit because their cultural and linguistic differences increase the uneasiness they feel about not knowing what will be demanded of them. Doing excellent work ranks high among all gifted students, and high-ability ELLs are sensitive about their proficiency in English and the limitations they may experience from this. In posting goals, use clear, direct language with visual images (posters, pictures) if necessary. Include a thinking question for students to mull over. Gifted students—ELLs or not—need intellectual and creative challenges to develop their abilities and avoid them losing touch with what they love.

2. Allow choices, encourage adventure.

Learning is serious business, but it also has its magical, serendipitous moments. A random encounter captures a child’s attention in ways that planned instruction does not always achieve. As much as possible, create more than one choice for advanced ELLs to process new concepts and skills. Children of all levels want to discover things and gifted students particularly enjoy exploring mysteries that puzzle them (e.g., the science behind cephalopods changing their skin color or the musical and sociological sources of rap). Provide gifted ELLs with choices, especially in the area of written and oral communication and composition where some feel vulnerable. As much as possible, allow other media—photography, drawing/painting, videography, podcasting, constructing/ modeling with different materials, cartoons, theater, and so forth. Many ELLs feel less tentative when they can draw on other media as part of written and oral reports.

3. Determine prior knowledge.

How do we best determine what gifted ELLs know? A common error is to assume that language proficiency level extends to intellectual ability. It's important to discover what ELLs understand in a geometric calculation or the ecology of water or the music and rhythm of poetic verse. Conferring with parents, bilingual interpreters, or community members who know the children can sometimes be eye-opening. ELLs enter our rooms with abilities, experiences, and skills—much of which they either hide or lay aside, assuming they have no value in an English-speaking world. Give them credit for the knowledge and skill they possess and help them create alternative assignments that support their comprehension and composition in English. Avoid too much drill and practice assignments that make them feel trapped in remedial exercises. Here are some useful ways to assess prior knowledge and skill:

- Daily observation
- K-W-L (know-want to know-learned) chart
- Consultation with other teachers and parents
- Portfolio of prior work (from home or school)
- Informal discussion with students

4. Prepare ELLs in weaker areas.

For ELLs, vocabulary and terminology related to specific subjects can be intimidating (Marzano & Pickering, 2005). It would be like learning a geology lesson without knowing the words for the instruments used or the terms for assigned tasks. Before introducing a unit, review the process with an eye for potential linguistic barriers. Consider different ways to share vocabulary—words, diagrams, pictures, brief demonstrations, mime. Think about the backgrounds of your students—what sorts of professions and experiences in their families might provide a bridge to concepts in a new lesson. How does cooking relate to chemistry? Carpentry, design, art to mathematics? Rap, storytelling, and song to literature and composition?

5. Inspire and support new interests.

Provide advanced ELLs opportunities to discover and explore their interests. Former U.S. Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell, said: “There are three important things to remember about education. The first one is motivation, the second is motivation, and the third is motivation” (Ames, 1990). In a similar vein, E. Paul Torrance wrote a piece called “The Importance of Falling in Love with Something” (1983) that tells students to pursue what most calls to them and honor their greatest strengths. Teachers know, as few others do, that incorporating student interests has a powerful motivating effect and propels learning, and this is particularly so for gifted ELLs. Their challenges will become less burdensome; their self-doubts will give way to the excitement they feel. It is important to consider these possibilities:

- Use student interest inventories, open-ended opportunities to share new interests or curiosities, or student generated questions (“what I’ve always wanted to know”) to help students discover what they want to learn.
- Structure units that have some flexibility for you to incorporate student interests in ways that also support their language needs.
- Communicate with families and others who know the students (e.g., teachers or leaders in art workshops, youth programs, or community events they have attended, etc.).
- Have all students design their own portfolio—folder or container—where they can collect work from either home or class that they particularly value.
- Create opportunities for students to exhibit or share student interests (e.g., art works, performances, inventions, collections, experiments, writing, etc.).

6. Accommodate pace.

In any classroom, there are always students who know more at the beginning of a lesson than others, sometimes, significantly more. Most teachers accommodate different levels either through providing different options within an assignment, allowing students to skip content they already know and move on to more challenging assignments, and so forth. With ELLs, acceleration becomes a little more difficult in some cases as teachers need to assess level of mastery in the context of a developing fluency in English. For gifted ELLs with a need for language support, teachers can offer alternative media and activities (diagrams, visual images, instructions in native language, group learning with other ELLs, etc.) that would enable them to use their abilities without feeling hampered by linguistic factors. Creative thinking also frees advanced ELLs to extend their mental powers in new directions. Accelerated and creative thinking often coexist in such students. Presenting an open-ended math problem or allowing a child to combine Spanish and English in a song or spoken word composition can liberate that child.

7. Include creativity and the arts.

Creativity serves not only ELLs but all students. Creative teaching provides dynamic alternatives to traditional study, fosters original thought, and inspires students to become more engaged learners. Teachers who adopt a creative mindset to at least a portion of their day help them exploit the full potential of creativity and the arts, regardless of any specific skills or expertise they possess in these areas. As many have proved, creativity is not about paintbrushes and poems; it is a way of thinking and being. Consider how the following general principles might apply to your ELLs:

- Present open-ended assignments that ask students to draw on their creative and imaginative responses, their life experiences, cultures, and artistic inclinations.
- Create a safe environment for out-of-the-box learning and honor any and all creative ideas.
- Celebrate boldness or risk-taking however great or small.
- Model and teach coping skills to deal with feelings of frustration, being overwhelmed, and self-doubt.
- Support students' trust in their own creative powers through open questioning; point out the hidden jewels in their work, and guide them to new resources and materials.
- Provide opportunities to correct errors, refine visions, improve, elaborate, and emphasize creativity as an ongoing process rather than a means to an end product.
- Make arts activities and resources accessible to ELLs—visual art materials, mime, theater games, design, art designs from found objects, etc.
- Explore a variety of venues for students to show/demonstrate/perform/exhibit.

8. Nurture peer relationships.

Gifted ELLs need some experience working in pairs or small group situations. Ideally, this should involve contact with other Spanish-speaking students. But interacting with other gifted learners has the additional benefit of showing them how they share similar interests and traits as English-speaking students. In general, ELLs who demonstrate noticeable gains in academic language proficiency need to participate in small groups that include native speakers; social and emotional difficulties often diminish when these students realize that their talents and experiences have as much value as English speakers. Here are some examples:

- Pair more advanced ELLs together to work on an alternative assignment (a challenging science experiment; a design for a class research and mural project depicting immigration in their school).

- Create an interest-based group of Spanish- and English-speakers in cases where ELLs have a higher level of proficiency in order to increase confidence in their developing abilities.
- Collaborate with another teacher to combine advanced ELLs in a cluster group; share responsibilities for the group.
- For ELLs of any level who demonstrate high motivation and interest, try to establish a mentoring relationship with a parent or community member who possesses particular talents or expertise in an area of interest.

9. Encourage independent learning.

Working in small groups or pairs enables ELLs to become more independent learners. But teachers have to consider the level of planning and supervision involved in independent projects. Can they manage it? Can they find helpers who can assist? Then there is the level of ability and skill required for ELLs to feel comfortable and competent in English language assignments. Are there assistants to help? Are there different media for students to use? What sort of preparation and support do they need? How can teachers keep student ideas at a manageable level? For example, if students want to report on the stories of people in their community, they can narrow their focus—families on their street, shopkeepers in the neighborhood, and so forth. Student artists can collaborate with strong writers, designers, or even rappers. Here are some independent learning skills to consider while thinking about this option for gifted ELLs:

- Performing academic tasks without adult intervention for longer periods of time
- Understanding the main points of an assignment
- Locating (on their own or with others) different, yet reliable sources of information
- Demonstrating initiative as well as persistence in a challenging task
- Applying organization skills to meet deadlines (e.g., breaking assignments down into manageable steps, clarifying areas of responsibility, creating timelines)
- Identifying areas where they will need help (language support, skills, direction)
- Achieving some self-awareness as learners (knowing strengths and weaknesses) and focusing on personal strengths and aptitudes.

10. Find local talent to open students' minds.

Gifted ELLs often feel more liberated through exposure to people with special talents who can inspire their imagination and interests. This is particularly so if teachers include visitors/mentors who speak the students' language and/or know their culture. Making connections between their studies in school and such fields as architecture, entrepreneurship, the law, engineering, mechanics, publishing, and the creative arts opens their minds. Spoken word artists—so popular among groups who feel out of the mainstream—have enabled young talented students across the country to explore issues related to identity, history, society, and language. Business people have taught about the market economy, entrepreneurship, invention, design, and advertising. Given that many multilingual communities struggle in economically depressed neighborhoods, strong leaders in the arts, humanities, business, and civic projects provide the vision they need to act on their dreams and passions.

Applying these tools will enable you to address the learning needs of ELLs without undue strain on your time and resources. Obviously, you won't use all the tools all the time. The needs of ELLs, like all students, continually shift depending on what you're teaching and what strengths and needs they have. A gifted ELL, for example, may be

frustrated when the ideas in her mind exceed the subtlety of language and composition she needs to express them. An ELL with artistic or creative talent may still feel hampered by a lack of skills—for example, in oral expression (language arts), spatial movement and design (math), and color combination (science). While building skills, teachers can also release the talents that these students have so they can experience their strengths. It is a delicate balance between skill instruction and talent development, but it is the only way to avoid the frustration gifted ELLs experience when they focus too much on deficits and not enough on talents and abilities. These gifts are the foundation stones for building their lives.

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Ethical Issues in Educating and Counseling the Gifted¹

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In contrast to the situation in most Western countries, the area of giftedness has not been accepted in Israel as a sub-discipline of educational psychology, but rather as primarily an educational discipline. As a result, many of the people in charge of education of the gifted – teachers, headmasters and headmistresses, school counselors, supervisors, decision makers at both the municipal and the national levels, and policy-makers – have practically no knowledge about the psychological or didactical aspects of giftedness. I have analyzed many consequences of this situation. For example: the inability of untrained teachers to respond to gifted children's needs (David, 2011); not taking emotional-psychological-social components into consideration as a potential cause for dropping out of gifted programs (David, in press b); and the inadequacy of the decision-making process concerning the type of education for the gifted (David, in press a).

The present situation, where nonprofessionals at all levels are in charge of education for the gifted, is also the main reason for severe ethical problems concerning the emotional, social and familial needs of the gifted child. This article concentrates on Israeli examples. At this stage of formulating an ethical code for counseling the gifted, each country must take into consideration its own circumstances, legal facts and the balance of power in the triangle of parents, school, and the authorities.