

Supporting English Language Learners (ELLs) with Disabilities

Providing Effective Instruction for Students with Language and Learning Needs

Purpose & Overview

This guide supports educators in effectively teaching students who are both English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities. These students require support in both language development and academic skill acquisition, making instruction more complex and intentional.

The purpose of this guide is to help teachers differentiate between language-related challenges and disability-related needs, while providing strategies that support both areas without lowering expectations.

Instructional Outcomes

By applying the strategies in this guide, teachers will be able to:

- Recognize the difference between language acquisition and learning difficulties
 - Provide instructional supports that address both language and academic needs
 - Use strategies that increase comprehension and participation
 - Support students in accessing grade-level content
 - Promote confidence and engagement in learning
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Understanding the Needs of ELL Students with Disabilities

Students who are both ELLs and have disabilities may experience challenges with:

- understanding academic language
- expressing ideas clearly in English
- processing information in a second language
- keeping up with grade-level content

It is important to recognize that language barriers and disabilities can overlap, but they are not the same. Instruction should address both areas intentionally.

Common Instructional Challenges

Teachers may observe students who:

- struggle to follow directions given verbally
- have difficulty participating in discussions
- require additional time to process information
- appear disengaged due to language confusion
- have difficulty demonstrating understanding

These challenges may be related to language development, learning needs, or both.

Instructional Strategies in Practice

| <i>Strategy</i> | <i>What It Supports</i> | <i>Classroom Example</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Visual supports | Comprehension and clarity | Use pictures, diagrams, and anchor charts during lessons |
| Simplified language | Understanding instructions | Break directions into shorter, clear steps |
| Modeling and demonstration | Skill development | Teacher shows how to complete a task step-by-step |
| Sentence frames | Language development | Provide sentence starters for responses |
| Repetition and review | Retention | Review key vocabulary daily |
| Wait time | Processing and response | Allow extra time before expecting answers |
| Small-group instruction | Targeted support | Work with students in a group to reteach concepts |

These strategies help students access content while supporting both language development and academic growth.

Real Classroom Examples

Example 1: *Difficulty Understanding Directions*

A student does not begin an assignment after directions are given verbally.

Teacher Response:

The teacher provides written directions and models the first step.

Example 2: *Limited Participation in Discussions*

A student avoids answering questions during whole-group instruction.

Teacher Response:

The teacher provides a sentence frame such as:

“I think the answer is ___ because ___.”

Example 3: *Struggling with Academic Vocabulary*

A student does not understand key terms in a science lesson.

Teacher Response:

The teacher uses visuals and reviews vocabulary before the lesson.

Differentiating Language vs. Learning Needs

Teachers should consider:

- Does the student understand the concept in their first language?
- Is the difficulty related to understanding English or the skill itself?
- Does the student show understanding when given visual or simplified support?

This helps ensure students receive the right type of support.

Supporting Student Participation

Teachers can increase participation by:

- allowing multiple ways to respond (speaking, writing, drawing)
- encouraging partner or small-group discussions

- providing structured response supports
 - creating a safe environment for making mistakes
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Student Check-In

Students can reflect on their learning with prompts such as:

- What helped me understand today's lesson?
 - What part was difficult for me?
 - What strategy helped me the most?
 - What can I try next time?
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Student Self-Monitoring Example

| <i>Reflection Question</i> | <i>Student Response</i> |
|----------------------------|--|
| What helped me today? | The pictures helped me understand the lesson |
| What was difficult? | Understanding new words |
| What helped me learn? | The teacher explained the steps slowly |
| What will I try next time? | Use the sentence starter to answer questions |

Teacher Implementation Reflection

Teachers may consider:

- Are directions clear and supported with visuals?
 - Are students given multiple ways to participate?
 - Is language simplified without lowering expectations?
 - Are key vocabulary and concepts explicitly taught?
 - Are students engaged and able to demonstrate understanding?
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Connection to Instruction and Student Success

Supporting ELL students with disabilities helps:

- increase access to grade-level content
 - improve communication and participation
 - build confidence in learning
 - support both language development and academic growth
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Closing Reflection

Students who are English Language Learners with disabilities require thoughtful, intentional instruction that supports both language and learning needs. When teachers provide clear instruction, visual supports, and structured opportunities for participation, students are better able to engage, understand, and succeed in the classroom.