

# Introduction

---

## Making Content Accessible to English Learners and Struggling Students

**T**his book addresses the challenges that teachers of English learners and struggling students face as they try to meet the language needs of their students within the increasing demands of the curriculum. The academic language that is needed to succeed in school entails a broad knowledge of words, grammar, and pragmatic conventions for expression, understanding, and interpretation; it also requires frequent interaction with books and conversations about topics that are outside of everyday experiences. Many students struggle throughout their years in school because their background knowledge and language skills do not match school expectations: Words associated with content and academic knowledge fall outside their everyday interactions, and many children have never heard them; sentences can be long and complicated; summarizing, synthesizing, and retelling information is often an insurmountable obstacle that grows in importance as students move up in the grades. Some of these struggling students may be EL students who have entered school with interrupted schooling or with low literacy skills in their native language. Other students may have been born in the United States, but they also lack literacy skills in English.

We refer to English learners using the acronym EL. In some school systems, teachers and administrators refer to those students as ELL (English Language Learners) or LEP (Limited English Proficient) students.

We have written this book taking into consideration the challenges that teachers face on a daily basis, working with multilingual students and different levels of academic proficiency in their classrooms. Grouping children according to fixed stages of language acquisition sounds plausible, but it is not feasible within the time allotted for instruction and the demands of the curriculum, particularly when we are asking teachers to group students according to their academic proficiency. Some EL students may not have the language to work with an advanced group within the classroom, but they may have the academic proficiency in their native language to understand the content. Some students may be proficient in English but may lack the literacy skills to deal with advanced academic content. Throughout the units that we present in this book, we scaffold the work for recent EL arrivals, but we do not divide the students according to their level of English proficiency; instead, we focus on language development for every activity we plan.

The National Core Standards outline the skills and knowledge that every student (including EL students) should have in English language arts and mathematics. Teachers have the ultimate responsibility to ensure that all their students meet standards in order to

succeed in school, but the major challenge they face in achieving this goal is making the content accessible to their struggling students. To move at the pace the curriculum demands, some teachers often resort to simplifying the material or cover it superficially. The main contribution that our book makes is to show teachers that they have other options rather than simplifying the material. They can scaffold the content that the unit requires, and at the same time they can focus on teaching the language that will enable the students to succeed. Throughout the book we offer ideas teachers can use to plan their units of study integrating content and language goals to meet the needs of their most challenging students.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section focuses on language components. It integrates ways of developing language that are often studied separately—conversation, vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. These elements are explained and incorporated into language goals in the sample units of study. We focus on the basic knowledge that teachers of ELs and struggling students should know about background knowledge and how it affects learning and language; they need this knowledge to support the linguistic and academic growth of their students. Within this section of the book, the continuum of social to academic language is examined. Researchers agree that the mastery of academic language plays a determinant role in school achievement (Baker, 2006; Cummins, 1979, 2000, 2007; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 1998; Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1976). We stress the role that conversation plays in the development of academic language and present ways to develop language skills through a curriculum of talk.

The second section of the book focuses on lesson components. It shows teachers how they can use specific structures of balanced literacy—read aloud, shared reading, and shared writing—to develop background knowledge and to teach the language skills students need to understand the content. We provide specific units of study in language arts, social studies, and science, as well as a thematic unit. This section presents multiple strategies for teachers to structure and deepen the classroom conversations within each unit of study and templates to organize language goals. In this second section of the book, we have included theory to practice connections that link theoretical elements presented in the first section of the book to the units of study developed in the second section.

The basic premise of our book is that learning academic language has to be planned. Students have multiple opportunities to talk, discuss, and analyze the words and structures that are pertinent to the content being developed and multiple reading and writing experiences, both independently and within a group. This view of planning for academic language development entails that we are not viewing academic language as occurring in fixed, developmental stages, but rather that it requires exposure, practice, and teaching. For every sample unit, we provide planning templates to help guide teachers as they integrate content and language goals. These guides will help teachers scaffold the unit, breaking down essential components to make the language and content comprehensible to ELs. In addition we provide a self-assessment guide for the teacher at the end of each unit.

This book was written with teachers by our side and is for teachers in bilingual settings, in regular classrooms, and for ESL teachers. We hope that it can be valuable in teacher training programs where we have successfully taught teachers to incorporate language objectives into all their planning. Our ultimate goal is to empower our students to develop the language skills that will allow them to flourish in school. Note: An appendix containing the templates we use throughout the units is available online at <http://www.corwin.com/connectingcontent4ell>.