EVER-INCREASING numbers of English-language learners (ELL students) arrive at the doors of U.S. public schools each year. They present myriad challenges for the educators who must serve their needs.

Administrators worry about complying with federal and state accountability standards and face a number of difficult questions: How do we fairly assess students with limited English skills using the instruments developed by the state? What happens to our accountability ratings if large numbers of students arrive with limited experience with formal education and have to take the tests? How can we find highly qualified ESL (English as a second language) teachers with certification and experience?

Teachers who are not well prepared for ELL students struggle to address their needs in the classroom: How can I teach the students if I don’t speak their language? What do I do when the students don’t understand?

Even the types of programs offered by districts and states to serve these students frequently come under fire. A great deal of energy is expended selecting and defending the model used: Should it be late- or early-exit bilingual, dual language, or English immersion? Often, too little attention is paid to improving the quality of what is available: Are personnel, resources, and facilities used in the best possible way? If not, what can be done differently?

When schools and districts begin to reflect on how best to address the needs of ELL students, they should first consider the prevailing attitudes in the school system toward those who are learning English as a second language. The goal of any district should be an ecological approach rather than a medical model. That is, students who arrive from other cultures with other languages should be viewed as assets rather than liabilities.

If myths and misconceptions about those learning a new language are accepted, the type and quality of instruction for ELL students can be adversely affected. Teachers who adopt an ecological approach take the initiative to learn how to address the needs of diverse learners in their mainstream classrooms. They don’t expect the ESL teacher to “fix them” first. If you often hear such comments as “How can he be gifted if he doesn’t even speak English?” or “She’s ESL! She can’t be in an honors class,” it is unlikely that ELL students will be well represented in programs for the gifted and talented or in honors and advanced courses. As a result, the long-term educational opportunities for ELL students will not be equal to those of their English-speaking peers.

In the medical model, the wealth of experiences stu-
students from other cultures bring with them are not recognized and validated. Thus ELL students may be placed in courses designed for struggling readers and writers who are native speakers of English. Many ELL students arrive with a solid academic foundation, so their time is poorly spent remediating skills they already have in a language they have yet to acquire.

A better solution would be to place these students in AP courses in their native languages, so that they can develop their grade-level literacy and critical-thinking skills, which will then transfer into English. Such scheduling gives value to what students bring, rather than emphasizing what they need to acquire. AP language courses have been available in high schools for many years, and some middle schools are also offering them. The San Antonio Independent School District in Texas is an example of a district that offers AP Spanish in several of its middle schools, and many students from the ESL program enroll. Parents have reported a high level of satisfaction with the course, and administrators have noted a decrease in discipline referrals, as well as an increase in the students’ academic achievement in other classes.

Summer enrichment programs offer another way to develop second-language and content knowledge together. Designing a cross-curricular program that engages and challenges students to investigate current events or local history and culture helps students identify with and connect to their new community and culture and provides a solid place to start or continue developing their second language.

Another means of engaging students is through a reading partner program. At Edison High School in San Antonio, intermediate students who are learning English visit a second-grade classroom in a neighboring elementary school once a week. The high school students and the elementary students pair up to read and complete a project based on the book they read. The high school students get to practice their oral language skills and develop fluency without embarrassment, using children’s literature that is at a level appropriate for both reader and listener. Many students cite this experience as the one that contributed the most to their language learning and confidence during the year.

It is also essential that the school or district accept the success of the ELL population as a schoolwide responsibility — one that does not rest solely with the ESL teacher. However effective an ESL teacher, an expert in the content area is the best person to teach that subject, particularly in high school, where the vocabulary and concepts for particular courses are more specialized and complex. Problems arise if content-area teachers do not have the training and skills needed to make content comprehensible to second-language learners. In order to maximize the success of ELL students, every teacher needs to be skilled in scaffolding instructional experiences and differentiating assessment tasks so that all students can participate meaningfully.

Fundamental information about second-language acquisition should be required training for all school personnel. However, administrators and teachers must accept that there are no short cuts to acquiring a second language. Language acquisition is a complex, recursive process that takes time and practice. Districts now waste hundreds of thousands of dollars on “quick fix” programs that claim to develop students’ English skills in little time, despite all credible research that shows it takes 7 to 10 years for non-native speakers to become competitive academically with their peers.

Many of us learned a foreign language by memorizing vocabulary lists, irregular verb tenses, and scripted dialogues, only to find our studies of little use if we were later placed in a situation where we actually had to use the language. Our task as educators today is to recognize that learning a language Berlitz-style is vastly different from true acquisition of a second language. Moreover, ELL students in our schools are not expected to use English only in social settings but must also demonstrate mastery of the knowledge and skills required in such courses as chemistry, world geography, and algebra.

One common misconception about second-language learning is that errors are undesirable and problematic. On the contrary, as students take risks with a new language, errors in speech and writing are likely to become more frequent. A basketball player who tries to extend his shooting range or a golfer who tries a new club is unlikely to be successful after a single attempt. Hours of practice are required.

Acquiring a new language is comparable: it is only by practicing and making adjustments over time in response to constructive feedback that one’s proficiency develops. Rather than penalize a student who takes risks with new structures or vocabulary, the teacher should look at what was attempted and provide focused, supportive feedback so that the student develops the knowledge and confidence to grow as a learner. Without meaningful feedback, students are not likely to learn how to express themselves effectively. And, of course, one drawback of an excessive focus on eradicating errors is that ELL students may rely on simple and familiar structures and become fossilized in their language use.
Errors in writing may be addressed in conferences— with the teacher or with peers — that focus on such specific aspects in the students’ writing as consistent use of verb tenses. Trying to correct everything at once in writing is overwhelming and often discouraging for everyone involved. An excellent strategy for peer editing, particularly for long-term ELL students, is explicit mediation, in which the teacher forms groups of students who make similar errors in their writing and has them work together to make revisions on samples of their work before returning to their original work to make revisions there.

Modeling the use of academic language and formal structures is another way to provide supportive feedback to ELL students. When a student says, “Let me have the glass thing to put the stuff in,” the teacher may rephrase the request, “Are you ready to put the solution in the beaker?” While English speakers may understand academic language without significant support, ELL students may struggle to identify the important terms when they appear amid large amounts of language, either in textbooks or lectures.

Examining the expectations for the use of academic language in a content-area classroom may be new for mainstream teachers, but it is an essential step when considering how to plan instruction to address the needs of ELL students. When planning instruction for ELL students, one should consider both content objectives and language objectives. The language objective should indicate what the students are expected to do with language. Students may be asked to annotate text and paraphrase key terms or concepts, to use language to create a report or graphic organizer, or to compare and contrast works or ideas from different eras.

Collaboration between the ESL teacher and mainstream teachers in a school is crucial. The ESL teacher should be an onsite resource for content-area teachers, able to share and model a wide repertoire of reading, writing, vocabulary, and note-taking strategies to scaffold instruction. Scaffolding instruction for ELL students does not mean simply modifying a few practices, such as reducing the number of answer choices or questions or replacing grade-level texts with simplified material. Content and ESL teachers need to take time to plan together and look at grade-level standards to determine the depth and type of understanding expected before developing a unit plan. Are students asked to compare and contrast events or leaders from two eras? Can they determine the best method for solving a mathematical problem? What are the possibilities for assessment tasks that demonstrate a particular level of understanding for a student who is not yet proficient in English? Does the assessment task have to look the same for each student in the class?

Scaffolding instruction may mean providing students with a partially completed graphic organizer for a reading selection, rather than expecting the students to complete it independently. Materials in a student’s native language may be used to preview or review concepts or be used side by side with English texts. Scaffolded reading strategies should be chosen carefully, with attention paid to the demands of the text and the level of proficiency of the student. What’s more, the length of the text doesn’t necessarily correspond to the level of difficulty: math textbooks may contain the fewest words but present the most conceptually demanding concepts.

It is only through generating language and using it in new ways that students truly acquire facility in a language. The mantra “teaching doesn’t cause learning, learning causes learning” is especially true for second-language learning. Until students are given multiple opportunities to make meaning of the content and the academic language they are learning and to use their knowledge in other contexts, chances are slim that the newly acquired language skills will become internalized.

Imagine how a basketball team would perform if the coach allowed his players only to watch film or practice dribbling in isolation before sending them out to play a game. Yet a similar scenario is frequently played out in classrooms that have the “sage on the stage” model: the teacher lectures, and the students are given vocabulary words and definitions to copy, assigned a chapter to read, and asked to answer recall questions at the end of a chapter. None of these traditional activities addresses what we know about how people best learn: making connections to what we have learned or experienced previously before we apply our new knowledge in a different setting or context.

A much better scenario would be for teachers to determine what students know, both linguistically and academically, before launching into a new unit. This may be done using a cooperative learning strategy, such as a People Hunt or an Anticipation Guide. Teachers may then use engaging strategies to preview vocabulary, such as an Open Word Sort or a Think Pair Square, rather than simply presenting lists of terms and definitions. At an early stage, students are not expected to have a thorough understanding of the words, but exposure to key terms before starting a new unit makes it more likely that students will recall them when they
When students arrive at the point where they must delve into reading material, teachers should explore ways to differentiate the reading assignment. The teacher may “jigsaw” the assignment, dividing up a chapter and assigning each group of students a different section to read thoroughly, after which they will teach their classmates. Another option for breaking an assignment into smaller parts might be to use a strategy such as “double column” note-taking and offer an array of tasks for students at different levels of proficiency. Beginners may receive a page on which the main ideas of the selection have already been identified, and their assignment would be to find supporting details. Students with higher levels of proficiency would be expected to find both the main ideas and supporting information independently. After reading, students may be asked to use a Q-Matrix to formulate questions about the text or to interview a historical figure or character in the novel. Students can then exchange questions or be assigned roles and asked to respond to their classmates’ questions using material from the text. With appropriate support and preparation time, it is reasonable to expect ELL students to participate fully in each of these activities.

When one asks why we have millions of long-term English-language learners in our school system, we must consider that low expectations are undoubtedly one of the culprits. Rather than scaffold instruction to ensure that all students provide evidence of having mastered the expected standards, teachers may simply assign passing grades to substandard work and ignore grade-level expectations because “the students don’t know English and can’t be expected to do the same as everyone else.” For example, a well-meaning English teacher might not require students to take original pieces of their work through the writing process strictly in English but ask only that something be written in the native language and translated into English.

When it comes to vocabulary instruction, Robert Marzano found, “Thanks to a well intended but misguided attempt to allow them to learn the ‘easier’ terms first, ESL students never receive systematic instruction in the more difficult academic terms.” As a result, ELL students fall further behind with each year of instruction, until they arrive in high school with gaps in their academic background and insufficient knowledge of English. Because many of these students are fluent in conversational English, teachers don’t realize that they continue to need support to succeed with tasks that require them to understand and use academic English.

We as educators have a moral obligation to prepare students in our schools to be successful in the world that awaits them. In order to address the needs of ELL students, teachers need high-quality training and support to become skilled at planning and delivering instruction that integrates second-language learners into the mainstream classroom. Every classroom teacher, whatever his or her content area, should be able to incorporate strategies to scaffold instruction and develop language skills of ELL students. Districts will find the challenges of educating second-language learners far less daunting when they are recognized and shared by all staff members.

6. Spencer Kagan, Cooperative Learning (San Juan Capistrano, Calif.: Kagan Cooperative Learning, 1997). In a People Hunt, each student receives a paper with a grid containing questions related to the topic. The students read questions aloud until they find someone who can answer. When a student knows an answer, he writes it in the square and signs his name. No student may sign the same paper twice. The goal is for students to share knowledge so that they have a common foundation.
7. Mary L. Barton and Clare Heidema, Teaching Reading in Mathematics (Aurora, Colo.: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2000). For an Anticipation Guide, the teacher presents several sentences that relate to the upcoming lesson. Students indicate whether they agree or disagree with each sentence and explain their thinking. This is a means to assess students’ prior knowledge of the topic, to introduce vocabulary, and to provide a general context for the new information.
8. Kagan, op. cit. In a Word Sort, small groups of students receive 12 to 15 words that are related to the unit studied, and the students work together to categorize the words, identify similarities and differences, and identify relationships. The objective is to have students review vocabulary and concepts and make meaning based on their prior knowledge and experience. A Think Pair Square requires students to work in pairs to decide how to explain new concepts or vocabulary.
10. Kagan, op. cit. A Q-Matrix or question matrix contains rows of question stems. The first row is for low-level knowledge and comprehension questions (What is, who is, how is?), and the rows that follow have stems that require progressively higher-order thinking and questioning (What might, how might, why should?). Students also might write their own questions about what they have read or use the matrix to interview fictional characters or historical figures.

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