Language Instruction

English learners require explicit language instruction for a dedicated period of time each day to gain English proficiency. As English learners move through the grades, they may become proficient in spoken English but still need focused, explicit instruction in academic English, the language required for school tasks, texts, and tests. Without explicit English language development, most English learners stall at the intermediate level of English proficiency and become long-term English learners (Olsen, 2010).

Academic language comprises more than vocabulary, although a robust vocabulary is necessary. Academic language also encompasses oral language, grammar, genre knowledge, and other literacy skills (Short & Echevarria, in press). Teachers can systematically address language development by designing and posting language objectives.

Ms. Pham writes content and language objectives for every lesson and reviews them with students at the outset of teaching the material. Thus, students know the purpose of the lesson (investigate an endangered animal using multiple resources, provide evidence for conclusions); and they know what language skills are required to complete the lesson or further develop their academic language proficiency (engage in discussion using key vocabulary, use past and future verb tenses in writing).

Ms. Pham relies on her state's English language development standards to guide selection of language objectives, focusing on one aspect (such as verb tenses) for a given period of time. In addition, she analyzes the type of language students will need to be successful in the lesson. In the example above, students need to learn key vocabulary to be able to write about endangered animals and cite evidence. Ms. Pham explicitly teaches the meaning of the words at the beginning of the lesson and has students use the words in discussions. Each group has a discussion rubric to encourage students to use these words.

Throughout the lesson, Ms. Pham reminds students of the lesson's objectives. She encourages them to cite evidence for conclusions (content objectives) and to practice using particular language forms and vocabulary terms (language objectives). As the class reads and takes notes to prepare for their discussion on endangered animals, she points out past-tense and future-tense forms they come across and writes them out for students to see and refer to later. During collaborative discussions, she circulates among groups asking about the rubric and whether students are using the vocabulary terms. Before students commence writing, she reminds them of the objectives. For 30 minutes each day, an English as a second language teacher works with the English learners in Ms. Pham's class, reinforcing the language students have been learning and practicing.

It's About Time for Success

The four areas of focus—access, climate, expectations, and language—are equally important and interdependent. Educators need to think about all four areas and determine where they are strong and what they need to work on. In areas that need improvement, educators can collaborate with colleagues to identify ways to close the gap. That's what it will take for English learners to succeed. EL

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