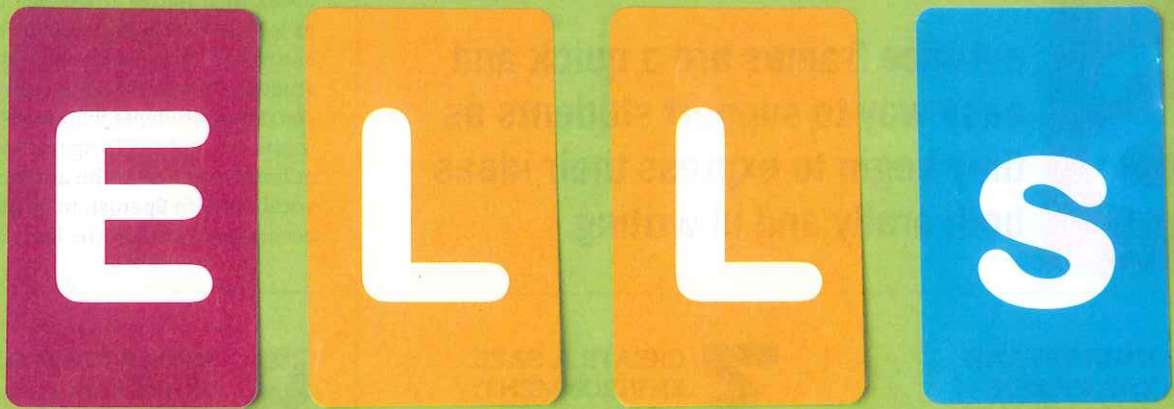


# Unlocking Language for



**12** tips for building skills for English language learners. BY KIM GREENE

**KNOLLWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL** in Salisbury, North Carolina, is a transformative kind of place. Almost half of the students are English language learners, and many come to school speaking very little English, says Katie Gardner, a kindergarten ESL teacher. One little boy “came to kindergarten not knowing any English,” says Gardner. “He cried for the first half of the year.” But by year’s end he could speak short sentences in English and retell a story. “He was very excited to come to school and learn,” Gardner recalls. “He’s teaching his mom to speak English and read his books at home. Mom signed up for an adult ESL class at night so she can start to learn with him.”

As with any student, transformations don’t happen overnight. The services an ELL receives

vary by district and students’ abilities. In some schools, including Knollwood, pullout classes are the norm, whereas others emphasize push-in support and co-teaching. “In inner-city schools, there might be bilingual classes,” says Judie Haynes, a retired K–6 ESL teacher of 28 years and author of several ESL books, including *Getting Started With English Language Learners: How Educators Can Meet the Challenge*.

As more and more ELL students spend a majority of the school day in a general education setting, this can present challenges for you as a classroom teacher, especially if your area of expertise isn’t second-language acquisition. To that end, we’ve put together a primer of ready-to-implement tips to help you unlock your ELLs’ potential.



**1 ALLOW FOR WAIT TIME:** Wait time—the length of time you give a child to think about a response before calling on him or her—is important in any class. It affords more students the opportunity to participate and allows children time to formulate deeper responses. But wait time is especially crucial for ELLs. “When you orally ask a student a question, they’re probably not going to respond immediately,” explains Gardner. “It takes time for them to process what you’re asking, gather the words they know, and [figure out] how they’re going to say it.” The next time you pose a question, allow a few more seconds than usual (up to 10) before inviting student responses.



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**2 UNDERSTAND THE PHASES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:** Before you employ strategies, find out where your students stand in their acquisition of a new language. If you teach in one of the 35 WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment) states, the ELL teachers in your building will likely use a WIDA assessment to determine a student’s level—entering (level 1), beginning (level 2), developing (level 3), expanding (level 4), bridging (level 5), or reaching (level 6). Once you know students’ levels, visit WIDA’s website ([wida.us](http://wida.us)) to find a list of “can-do descriptors.”

“They will give you an idea of what students should be able to do in each grade level and at the different stages,” explains Haynes. The descriptors break down skills by listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Keep these descriptors on hand as a reminder of both the age- and level-appropriate tasks you should expect of your students. “Even if you’re not in a WIDA state, that’s an excellent document,” Haynes says.

**3 CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT:** “If you raise your voice or correct students all the time, a lot of them will clam up,” notes Gardner. If a child makes a mistake, she says the sentence correctly and then asks the student to repeat it. “If it’s a shy student, I would correct them off to the side,” she says. “With social language, it’s okay to be more lenient. When it comes to academic content, it’s good to practice using standard English.”

**6 PROVIDE SENTENCE FRAMES:** Sentence frames are an easy way to support students as they begin to express ideas orally and in writing. Gardner displays a pocket chart with sentence frames. The strips feature phrases such as “I have \_\_\_\_” and “Look at \_\_\_\_.” The frames are useful tools for scaffolding instruction. “Students have the same outcome as the native speaker, but they produce the work in a different way,” says Gardner. “As they reach level 4 and 5, you can start to take away those supports.”

**4 USE STUDENTS AS MENTORS:** When possible, pair ELLs with students who speak the same native language; they can serve as mentors, helping translate rules and procedures as new students acclimate. Melissa Nankin, an eighth-grade advanced ESOL teacher at William Wirt Middle School in Riverdale, Maryland, lets students speak their native language in class as long as it’s on topic. However, she says, “I discourage relying on students to translate the entire lesson. Many students who were born in the U.S. but might speak Spanish at home don’t have the academic vocabulary in Spanish to be able to accurately translate the lesson.”

**5 NOTICE YOUR RATE OF SPEECH:** Be sure to pay attention to the speed at which you speak. “The idea is not to speak fast, but you also don’t want to keep breaking things up in between every word,” says Haynes, noting that a good rule of thumb is to think about how kindergarten and first-grade teachers normally speak to students. “You want it to be natural speech, but slow it down and stop at breath groups.”

**7 FRONT-LOAD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE:** While some Common Core approaches caution against providing students with too much information before reading, your ELLs may not have the necessary background knowledge to comprehend certain texts, especially if they are new to the country. "Find a short video clip or article that will give them background information," says Nankin. When her students studied the Underground Railroad, she showed them a video and online simulation of the route. "Once we read about Harriet Tubman, they were able to picture what that looked like."

**8 FORM A PARTNERSHIP WITH AN ELL SPECIALIST:** Your ELL teachers can help you create personalized plans. Pick your colleagues' brains for ideas, invite them to co-teach a lesson, or ask to observe their classes. Gardner says partnerships like these are invaluable. "I want my classroom teachers to feel safe and trust that when I pull out my students for 45 minutes each day, I am supporting and giving students what they are missing in the regular classroom," she says. "I always ask the regular classroom teachers to sit in my class and observe what's going on."

**9 ENGAGE PARENTS:** Haynes strongly recommends including parents early on. Open the dialogue by asking parents to share information about the child's previous schooling. "That helps me know what they have or haven't learned," Haynes says. Gardner's school has an extensive parent outreach program, including a back-to-school night and workshops for ELL parents. She also connects with families through home visits. "I'll bring a book and we'll read together. If they have a computer or tablet, I'll show them websites where children can practice their English."

**10 USE VARIOUS MODES OF COMMUNICATION:** Using multiple modalities for both receptive and expressive language is key, says Nankin. Take students at the "entering" level. For receptive language practice, you might rely on pictures and gestures to help with comprehension. For expressive language, "provide them with activities such as matching words with pictures or having them draw. If you're going to ask them questions, limit them to yes/no or 'wh' questions for short responses," Nankin recommends.

**11 BE MINDFUL OF HIGHER-LEVEL LANGUAGE LEARNERS:** "Everybody is kind of surprised they're even in ESOL," says Nankin of the advanced students she teaches. She's noticed that level 4 and 5 students have developed good speaking and listening skills, especially socially, but struggle with academic reading and writing, which typically prevents them from exiting the ESOL program. "They can get confused about Tier 2 vocabulary words," she says. "Graphic organizers help them keep their ideas straight."

## STEP IT UP WITH E-RESOURCES

- **UniteforLiteracy.com** "On this free website, students can find stories that are read to them in English. They can also change the narration to be in other languages," Gardner says.
- **Colorincolorado.org** With its extensive library of ELL-related articles, "this is a wonderful resource for parents and educators," says Haynes.
- **EverythingESL.net** Haynes has her own site with free lesson plans, teaching tips, and resource lists.
- **#ELLChat Educators** meet up on Twitter every Monday night at 9 P.M. ET to discuss ELL education.

## 12 HONOR A STUDENT'S NATIVE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE:

While students are learning a second language, it's vitally important for them to maintain fluency in their first language, says Gardner. "I stress the importance of practicing their Spanish. I say, 'Please practice speaking, reading, and writing in Spanish at home. When you grow up, think of how many more job opportunities are available to a bilingual person.' I always tell parents this as well."

Nankin sees other benefits. "Having ESOL students is a privilege," she says. "I have 31 students from 11 different countries. I take it as an opportunity to learn about the world and also use it as a way to teach my students how to embrace ideas that may be different from what they grew up thinking." □