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## **Tracking the Progress of English Language Learners**

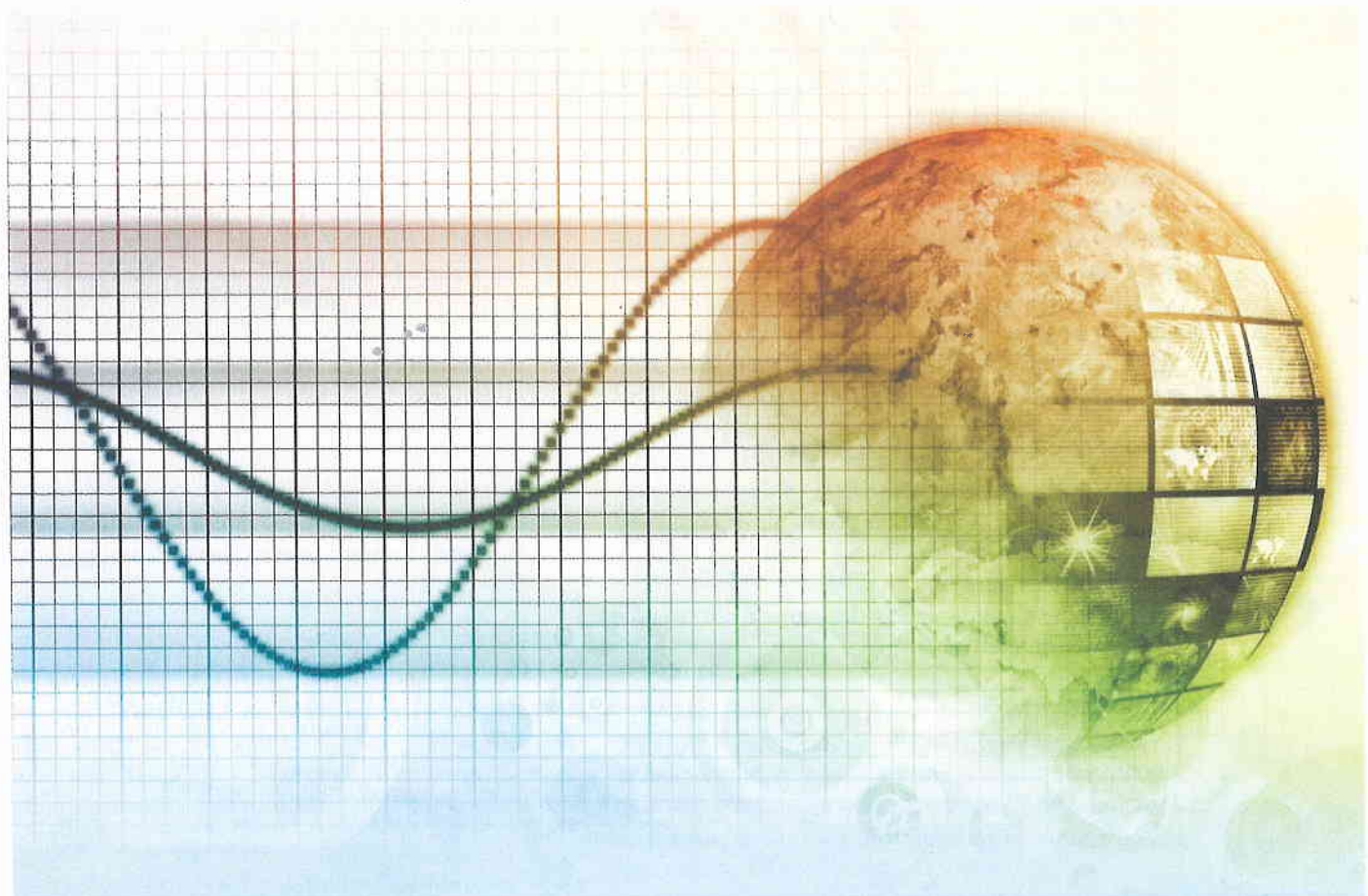
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# Tracking the Progress of English Language Learners

Educators must be methodical in identifying students' abilities to read, write, speak, and listen in order to ensure that students are improving their language skills.

**By Audrey F. Murphy**

Although No Child Left Behind requires schools to track the progress of all students and subgroups, documenting the advancement of English Language Learners (ELLs) has been particularly challenging. ELLs come to us with different language abilities and educational backgrounds, and they leave the subgroup when they no longer require services. How can educators know that English Language Learners are making progress?

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Educators will want to begin by establishing a baseline of a student's ability in each of the four strands of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Looking at proficiency in each of the four strands is essential because students may progress more rapidly in one language strand than another. By establishing a baseline, teachers can adapt instruction in each strand to provide the support where it's needed and track a student's progress.

Develop rubrics based on performance expectations from your state's ESL proficiency standards. Create a rubric for each language strand. Use dates to indicate when various behavior is observed. This will document the student's proficiency level as well as inform the next steps for instruction in that strand. Conduct a schoolwide assessment in each language strand at strategic points throughout the school year. See Table 1 for an example of a rubric used to assess speaking, modified to record three language proficiency levels (beginning, intermediate, and advanced).

### Listening

Use checklists, rubrics, or anecdotal records to document progress in listening comprehension. Gottlieb (2006) illustrates how to adapt a listening

strand from state standards to the five levels of language proficiency:

- Level 1: Student matches oral commands to learning strategies represented visually. (Write a word in the blank.)
- Level 2: Student follows oral directions involving learning strategies that are represented visually. (Choose the best one out of four possible answers.)
- Level 3: Student practices learning strategies with visual representation from oral directions.
- Level 4: Student selects and uses learning strategies that are presented orally with familiar material.
- Level 5: Student applies multiple learning strategies to new material through an oral presentation.

### Speaking

O'Malley and Pierce state that "assessment of oral language should focus on a student's ability to interpret and convey meaning for authentic purposes in interactive contexts" (1996: 61). Teachers should look for situations in which students are in-

**TABLE 1.**  
**Assessment of language proficiency level in the speaking strand.**  
In space indicated, record date when behavior is observed.

Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
<input type="checkbox"/> Student demonstrates little or no communicative ability in English.	<input type="checkbox"/> Student's speech demonstrates a range of common words and some low-frequency vocabulary, though they may avoid topics with unfamiliar vocabulary.	<input type="checkbox"/> Student can communicate effectively in most daily social and school situations.
<input type="checkbox"/> Pronunciation significantly impedes communication.	<input type="checkbox"/> Student occasionally expresses original ideas with limited grammatical structure.	<input type="checkbox"/> Grammar and pronunciation errors still arise but rarely impede communication.
<input type="checkbox"/> Student frequently needs assistance and is often misunderstood.	<input type="checkbox"/> Student begins to communicate on familiar topics of personal relevance.	<input type="checkbox"/> Speech is reasonably fluent and student is easily understood by native English speakers.
<input type="checkbox"/> Student is beginning to describe situations using a variety of short sentences.	<input type="checkbox"/> Use of academic vocabulary may be characterized by inappropriate word choice and awkward phrasing.	<input type="checkbox"/> Student can effectively engage in extended discussion in most social and academic situations.
<input type="checkbox"/> Student can ask and answer simple sentences and respond to simple statements.	<input type="checkbox"/> Grammar and pronunciation errors are relatively frequent, but do not impede communication.	<input type="checkbox"/> Student demonstrates mastery of almost all grammatical structures.
<input type="checkbox"/> Student is beginning to demonstrate some control of basic grammar.	<input type="checkbox"/> Student demonstrates control over basic and many complex grammatical structures and has a growing inventory of common idiomatic language.	

teracting orally with each other rather than relying solely on a dialogue between teachers and student, where the teacher usually takes the lead (Gibbons 1993). Some examples of expectations for student oral response at each level of language proficiency include:

- Level 1: Student can give one-word responses to questions.
- Level 2: Student can retell or repeat the instructions using his or her own words.
- Level 3: Student can summarize instructions.
- Level 4: Student can apply the instructions and include details in more complex sentences.
- Level 5: Student can explain instructions using complex language similar to that of a native speaker (Gottlieb 2006).

### Reading

Assessing reading for ELLs has always presented a dilemma: How can students learn to both read and speak a new language at the same time? One way that native English speakers learn to read is by applying phonic skills to sounds so that words on the page match their speaking vocabulary. English-speaking students can put together the initial sounds — such as /c/ /a/ /t/ — until they recognize the sounds as *cat*. But if the student doesn't speak English, the word "cat" might be meaningless if he doesn't recognize the spoken word (Slavin and Cheung 2004). As Linan-Thompson and Vaughn (2007) point out, solely monitoring progress of phonemic awareness may not tell you why a student is experiencing difficulty with reading. The problem may be due to a lack of exposure to the English language or a lack of sufficient opportunities to engage in tasks related to phonemic awareness.

To assess reading comprehension for ELLs, teachers can use alternatives by which students can demonstrate their understanding. Students may be asked to:

- Categorize, classify, or sort;
- Draw based on written text;
- Match words with pictures, phrases, or sentences, and match sentences with paragraphs;
- Underline or highlight main ideas or supporting details;
- Complete cloze exercises;
- Use a word bank, in which words are written in a box below the text for easy selection;
- Sequence pictures, sentences, or paragraphs; or
- Respond to oral comprehension and questions, such as running records or written text supported visually (Gottlieb 2006).

Capellini (2005) encourages teachers to use a formal assessment, such as the DRA, as well as a language assessment to track student progress and correlate results of reading and language development. Keep daily, informal records on student progress in reading and language development. For example, teachers can document language growth with a Reading Conference sheet, adding columns such as Language Strategies Observed (that is, speaking in full sentences, trouble with past tense, etc.) and use those observations to create future mini-lessons in language.

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### Writing

"Teachers need to know how written language contrasts with speech so that they can help their students acquire literacy" (Fillmore and Snow 2000: 25). Develop a rubric similar to that used for speaking in order to track indicators of writing progress relevant to ELLs.

Discerning what students can do independently in writing is essential before deciding the next steps for instruction. Just as with reading, students should be challenged to write something a little more difficult than they could do on their own (Calkins 2006). Use benchmark papers to document the current writing stage and formulate next steps for instruction.

### ASSESSING PROGRESS

Monitor language level throughout the year using a variety of formal or informal language assessments (Mora 2006; O'Malley and Pierce 1996). Assessments enable teachers to adjust and modify instruction and help them determine where to begin instruction the next day (Leahy et al. 2005).

Embed assessments into daily instruction so that some information is collected on each student over time on assorted language tasks (O'Malley and Pierce 1996). Gather data through a variety of formats, such as conferences, student journals, direct observation, and instruction-based tests (Calderon 2007; Hamayan 2006).

### LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES

Create language objectives by examining the content objective and deciding what function the language will play in each lesson. Base language ob-

jectives on the language functions that students must learn first, including academic language and social language (O'Malley and Pierce 1996).

Classes across the curriculum should have language objectives. For example, in a social studies les-

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son, a content objective might be understanding why colonists wanted to separate from England; the language objective might be learning to use the language of comparisons, describing what colonists were allowed to do and what they couldn't do. In mathematics, a content objective might be learning how to classify the differences between geometric shapes; the language objective might be using terms such as less than/greater than or similar/equal to/congruent to. In science, a content objective might be understanding how the steps in the experimental process affect one another; a language objective might be writing if/then statements to explain those steps (Hill and Flynn 2008).

Tailor language objectives for individual learners, based on how a student performs on each of the four language strands. Following are examples of language objectives in each strand based on assessment of student need:

- Listening: Distinguishing between /ch/ and /sh/; hearing plurals.
- Speaking: Subject/verb agreement expressed in conversations; explaining ideas.
- Reading: Sequencing words; understanding the differences between narrative vs. non-narrative text.
- Writing: Making comparisons using connectives; using sequencing words.

Plan language objectives for both long-term and short-term goals for ELL in order to continue language growth.

#### **DAILY ASSESSMENTS**

Assess student progress throughout the day by weaving assessments into all parts of instruction. Following are the various components of a balanced literacy lesson with modifications to assess ELL performance.

**The mini lesson.** In a balanced literacy model, the teacher uses the mini lesson to give explicit in-

struction to students. After this direct instructional phase, ELLs should have a chance to try the strategy on their own, perhaps working with a partner. Informal conversations and observations known as "kid-watching" (Goodman 1985) can be added to assess student language proficiency and plan for future instruction. "When traditional tests are not logical nor practical ways of assessing ELLs, the rubrics or observation protocols become the best way to assess ELLs" (Calderon 2007). Ensure that students have opportunities to talk to their partner about their writing or reading work. This helps them develop both social and academic language (Chen and Mora-Flores 2006; Moir 2007).

Teachers can watch, listen to students converse, and engage them in purposeful conversations while jotting down language structures used correctly and incorrectly. A student's developmental level of language proficiency can be correlated with the student's reading and writing progress. This will enable teachers to ensure that language proficiency is keeping up with the types of sentence structure they may need to understand as they tackle more advanced texts (Capellini 2005). Plan direct instruction through mini lessons, strategy, or guided groups, or set up conferences to meet student needs.

**Reading workshop.** To assess instruction during reading, choose texts that contain content and themes from the student's culture. Background knowledge helps readers understand material more easily. Give students access to books containing content with which they're already familiar, or expose them to content in the text before actually reading the material. Modify the curriculum unit by allowing students to read about a topic for several days, with the material becoming a bit more difficult as the students' background knowledge about the subject increases (Goldenberg 2008). These modifications will give teachers a truer picture of student comprehension unhampered by a lack of familiarity with the content or background of the reading selection.

Teachers can listen to students read text and conduct running records in order to analyze miscues. These miscues give teachers information on how students use strategies when encountering a problem. Analyzing miscues helps teachers determine if the miscues are based on a lack of language structure that might interfere with meaning. For example, if a student reads, "They sees the book," instead of, "They see the book," the teacher can plan a shared reading session with a language objective focused on subject-verb agreement (Mora 2006). Conduct running records at least every other month and more frequently with struggling students (Chen and

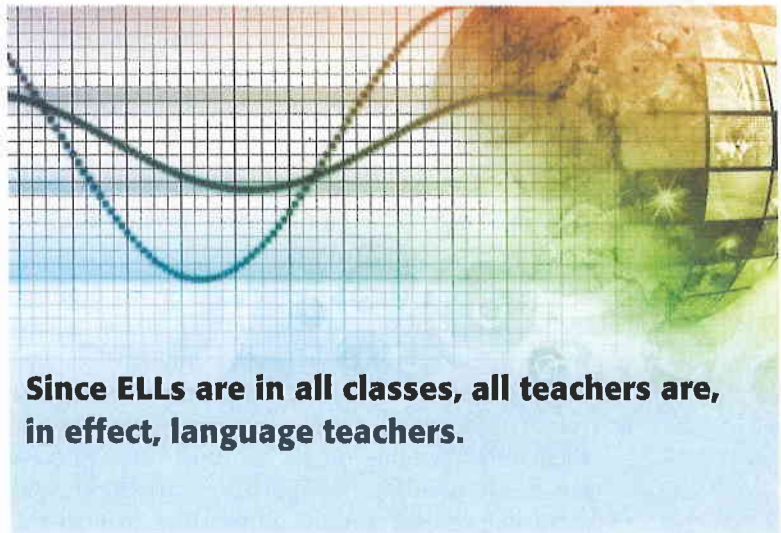
Mora-Flores 2006). Certainly, teachers should assess the level of texts that their students are reading in order to decide on the appropriate level of text for each student. Books have to be at the right level for students with the new words highlighted to facilitate comprehension (Moir 2007).

Educators need to know the cueing systems available to readers as they decode text. All three cueing systems (semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic) have a role in the reading process since good readers will use all three systems simultaneously. Less competent readers will need more strategies if they can't comprehend text using only one cueing system (Gibbons 1993). As students read more and are exposed to vocabulary and language patterns, language and reading will improve.

**Guided reading.** Use guided reading groups to assess student progress in reading, while keeping in mind the student's level of language proficiency. In guided reading for ELLs, group members need to have similar needs in both language and literacy. Scaffolding instruction can support students as they expand their reading strategies in order to comprehend text. Select books for guided reading so that the chosen text is a bit more challenging than students can read independently (Chen and Mora-Flores 2006).

**Writing workshop.** Even at the earliest stages of language proficiency, students can express their understanding by labeling objects, drawing, or generating lists based on their reading. As their proficiency increases, ELLs can write brief narratives, descriptions, or opinions. To evaluate student writ-

ing, use writing samples as benchmarks and a rubric with the characteristics of the ELL writer at each stage of writing development (See Table 3.11 in Gottlieb 2006: 57).



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**Conferencing.** Conferencing provides opportunities to assess progress in all four language strands. By using a language conference sheet, teachers can keep a record of the language structures that are being used by the student, the language strategy taught, and the next steps, focusing on one of the language strands. (See Table 2.)

**Vocabulary development.** Develop lists of words by drawing from texts used in literacy, social studies, and science. Incorporate into daily instruction some of the everyday words that aren't neces-

**TABLE 2.**  
**Language Conference Sheet**

Date		Language Behavior Noted	Language Strategy Taught	Next Focus
Strand	Level of Proficiency			
Listening	_____			
Speaking	_____			
Reading	_____			
Writing	_____			
Date		Language Behavior Noted	Language Strategy Taught	Next Focus
Strand	Level of Proficiency			
Listening	_____			
Speaking	_____			
Reading	_____			
Writing	_____			

sarily part of the curriculum (Gersten et al. 2007).

Teachers specializing in English as a Second Language should preteach academic or content vocabulary so that students will be exposed to the concepts and language they'll face in regular classrooms (Gottlieb 2006). Assessments of vocabulary can occur during conferencing or guided lessons or by listening to student conversations. Include vocabulary instruction in everyday instruction and assess throughout the year.

### ESL INSTRUCTION IN ALL CONTENT AREAS

In all content-area classrooms, teachers can modify instruction for ELLs by creating an inquiry-based environment. Assessment can occur as students demonstrate their understandings by conducting experiments, observing, and collecting data (Hernandez 2003). Often, ELLs are able to show their understanding of the concepts through such means as pointing, categorizing, matching, and recording of observations rather than through the text as is done by proficient English speakers (Gottlieb 2006). In all content areas, teachers should plan to work on new words in every lesson (Moir 2007).

Since ELLs are in all classes, all teachers are, in effect, language teachers. Science, social studies, art,

and mathematics teachers, as well as the ESL teacher, are all teachers of ELLs and responsible for their progress in language proficiency. Teachers of nonliteracy subject areas need to be aware of the language levels of their ELL students and adapt their instruction to include language development activities within their content areas. ESL teachers who push into classes should not be supporting ELLs only during literacy time. By pushing into content-area classes, such as art, science, computers, and social studies, ESL teachers can assist their students by providing valuable support with academic language and scaffolding difficult concepts. ESL teachers need not feel that they cannot support classroom instruction in such areas as computers or art because they are not equipped to teach these subjects. ESL teachers are *language* teachers who can use the content area as a vehicle to teach and assess the academic language that would not be as readily accessible during a literacy period.

### CONCLUSION

Adapting instruction to include language support for ELLs can be facilitated by incorporating language objectives in all content areas. Language objectives, based on state performance indicators, can

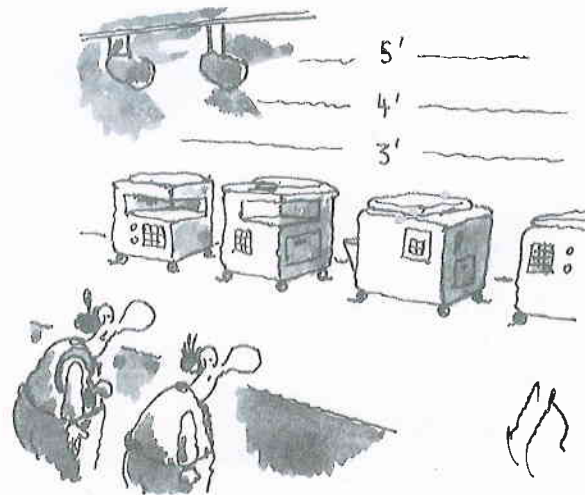
**TABLE 3.**  
**Schoolwide Language Goals — 2nd Grade**

Month	Literacy Unit	Listening Goal	Speaking Goal	Reading Goal	Writing Goal
September	Creating a focus for reading	Following oral and written directions	Describing a particular activity, book, or memory	Reading and responding to the setting of a story	Creating a personal story using newly learned vocabulary
October	Studying fictional characters	Recognizing point of view when listening to a story	Discussing the traits of a favorite character	Identifying and using basic reading strategies that make text comprehensible	Writing about actions, choices, and decisions in social and academic situations
November	Building comprehension	Making predictions based on text presented orally	Discussing opinions through collaborative activities	Reading and discussing literature of different genres	Applying writing strategies to evaluate a variety of materials
December	Reading with fluency	Listening to and discussing information from various sources	Using appropriate vocabulary, expressions, and language for various audiences	Recognizing how structural features affect readers' understanding of text	Using the process of prewriting, drafting, rewriting, and proofreading to compose written pieces
January	Nonfiction reading strategies	Listening to understand content vocabulary and colloquial references	Discussing the traits of a favorite character	Asking questions to obtain, clarify, and extend information and meaning	Composing personal responses to published writing and the work of their peers, referring to details and text features

be aligned to literacy units across all four strands and distributed to teachers for incorporation into their lessons plans (see Table 3). Following this format, language objectives can be created and aligned to such areas as writing, science, social studies, and mathematics. Most teachers are already incorporating these strategies within their instruction; what is needed is a focus on language functions and an awareness of student proficiency in each of the four language strands so that progress can be documented and tracked. Throughout all facets of daily instruction, teachers must view themselves as language teachers and commit to working together with trained ESL specialists to ensure that ELLs are attaining English proficiency and making adequate progress. **K**

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