



# Professional Development Seminar

Delivering Content to EFL Learners ♦ Diane Menga

## General Preview of Session



### Part One: Who are the learners?

This section will briefly touch on the demographics of the English language learners at LBC, and will discuss basic background distinctions, learner profiles, and differences in language proficiency.

#### A. LBC Demographics:

Unlike many colleges, we do not get the majority of our international students from a specific region or country. Currently, we have students from Korea, China, Honduras, Japan, Jamaica, and Africa, with the largest number coming from Korea.

#### B. General Learner Backgrounds:

- Immigrants*** Have resettled to the US, usually in search of better economic opportunities. Although some immigrants arrive highly educated, a higher percentage of those who immigrate at young ages have experienced economic and academic disadvantages.
- Refugees*** Have fled their home countries due to persecution, poverty, or war. Many of these learners have had limited or interrupted formal education.
- Internationals*** Are studying abroad for a time in the United States. Many of these learners are from more affluent backgrounds and have had a great deal of academic and economic advantage in their home country.
- Generation 1.5*** Have spent most of their life in the US, but have a home language other than English that is used in their family and community. In conversation, these learners may be nearly indistinguishable from native English speakers. However, when they engage in academic tasks such as writing, second language learner characteristics may emerge.

### C. Sample learner profiles

#### Learner Profile #1

Julie grew up in the United States. Her parents were first generation Spanish-speaking immigrants to the United States who had settled in a Spanish-speaking community in Lancaster. Both spoke enough English for their jobs as factory workers, but rarely used English in other contexts. Both were literate in their first language, but did not spend much time reading to Julie in Spanish, as they wanted her to assimilate, and felt that English would be much more advantageous for her future.

As a young child, Julie's grandmother, who spoke only Spanish, watched her while her parents were at work. Because the family used only Spanish in the home, and attended a Spanish-speaking church, Julie knew only a few words and phrases of English when she started kindergarden.

Julie was friendly and sociable, and progressed rapidly in her ability to communicate with her peers. In fact, soon, her conversational ability was so good that others could barely recognize her as a non-native English speaker. However, when it came time to write essays, Julie's English was much more broken. She struggled with reading, and remnants of style and grammar structures from her native Spanish were evident in her writing.

#### Learner Profile #2

Xin Sheng grew up in China. His parents were highly educated, and made certain that he was afforded the best academic opportunities available. Throughout middle and high school, he took the required English courses and received excellent grades. The focus of his English study was to pass the entrance exams for prestigious schools. The exams focused on reading, writing, and grammar, with no oral component.

Eventually, Xin Sheng became a medical researcher. In this position, he read numerous advanced articles that had been published in English. Additionally, although he hired a professional editor to check his writing, he published numerous articles in English himself.

Xin Sheng was eventually hired at a research hospital in the United States. In this position, he found himself struggling to communicate with native English speaking colleagues. Although he could read and understand medical research in English, he found even the most basic of workplace conversations often left him confused. He resorted to emailing his ideas and thoughts to his colleagues, as it was simply too tedious to communicate orally in English. He was consistently embarrassed that coworkers were unable to understand his pronunciation.

#### Questions for Reflection

Based on what you know about Julie and Xin Sheng, what might be some strengths of each learner? Some potential needs? What factors have contributed to their development as language learners?

D. Distinctions in Language Learner Proficiency

<b>BICS</b>	<p><b>What is it?</b> The ability to communicate well conversationally in everyday situations.</p> <p><b>Factors that promote this:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral cultures</li> <li>• Educational background that engages oral skills</li> <li>• Access to native English speakers</li> </ul> <p><b>Often encouraged within:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Latin American cultures</li> <li>• African cultures</li> <li>• Generation 1.5 learners</li> </ul> <p><b>Example:</b> Julie – Generation 1.5 student</p>
<b>Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills</b>	
	

<b>CALP</b>	<p><b>What is it?</b> The ability to engage in the use of academic language for reading, research, and writing.</p> <p><b>Factors that promote this:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literacy-oriented cultures</li> <li>• Educational background that emphasizes print</li> <li>• Lack of access to oral English or native speakers</li> </ul> <p><b>Often encouraged within:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asian cultures</li> </ul> <p><b>Example:</b> Xin Sheng – Chinese researcher</p>
<b>Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency</b>	
	

In a naturalistic second language learning setting where learners have access to speakers of the target language, most learners will progress from BICS to CALP. However, without the support of years of English language literacy and academic guidance in the home, it can take learners many years to develop CALP. And indeed, that is what happened in the case of Julie. However, in Xin Sheng’s case, the learning environment which was devoid of native English speakers and emphasised purely academic language use greatly influenced his progression of skill development. This resulted in a learner with high CALP who could diagram sentences, describe grammatical structures, and read academic articles, but could barely have a conversation in English.

## Part Two: How do They Learn?

In this section we will examine some general principles that assist language learners in mastering course content. Practical techniques that explain how to apply these principles in your own classroom will be introduced in Part Three.

**Because many language learners have uneven proficiency levels across the language skills, there is a need to intentionally link the oral and written forms of language**

To be successful in an academic environment, students need both oral and written language skills. For example, they will need skills such as reading course texts, listening to presentations, discussing with peers, and responding in writing. Because previous learning environments may have fostered certain skills in isolation, students may be strong in some of these areas and weak in others. If the teacher is intentional in linking the written and oral forms of language, the learners can work from their areas of strength to build on their areas of weakness.

**The nature of oral versus written language and the advantages of each make it desirable to use multiple channels of communication to support student comprehension.**

Incorporating and linking oral and written forms of language allows the learner to benefit from the unique characteristics of each. For example, written language offers them features such as permanence, providing them the opportunity to look back and reread multiple times. It also offers clues such as punctuation marks and clearly defined boundaries between words and paragraphs. Oral language, on the other hand, is transient in nature. To further complicate things, native speakers also use linking and reduction strategies that may make it more difficult for students to identify the breaks between words or even recognize the words themselves. However, oral language typically offers more interactive and nonverbal support to assist learners in making sense of what is said. And, it offers the opportunity to question and seek clarification immediately when a breakdown in communication occurs.

**Context-embedded language is more comprehensible than context-reduced language**

Context-embedded language provides support to enhance the message that is being conveyed through words. A sense of context can be developed by providing students with prior knowledge, hands-on experiences, supporting visuals, or relevant gestures and facial expressions. Context-reduced language relies solely on the words themselves to convey the message. Because most academic language is context-reduced in nature, any steps that the teacher can take to provide extra context can lead to increases in student comprehension.

**Deeply ingrained cultural beliefs regarding what it means to be a good student can greatly influence a learner's academic practices and behaviors**

Academic expectations in a student's home culture often dictate their ideas about what a good student should do. These expectations may include ideas such as the following: a good student copies down everything that is on the board or Power Point, doesn't ask questions in class (because it is viewed as a challenge to the teacher's authority), doesn't make eye contact with teachers (to show respect), is quiet in class, memorizes rather than questioning or thinking critically, or reads every word in an assigned passage regardless of comprehension. The behaviors or strategies that were valued in their home culture may not be the same ones that are valued within an American academic context. Thus, the teacher may need to explain and model effective skills, behaviors, and practices within his or her classroom.

**A student's background knowledge plays a significant role in his or her ability to comprehend an oral or written text.**

Numerous studies with second language learners have demonstrated the impact of students' prior knowledge on their ability to comprehend oral or written language. In fact, general background knowledge on the topic is a greater predictor of student comprehension than is the linguistic difficulty of the text (oral or written). Thus, building the students' background knowledge through the use of previews, images, videos, brainstorming, or direct experiences before they engage in a learning task can significantly increase comprehension.

### **Part Three: What can I do?**

Part Three will provide practical techniques that you can use to help language learners to succeed in your classroom. The techniques discussed will address ways that you can facilitate learning in terms of course reading and various stages of lesson delivery. Due to a lack of time, issues of student participation, methods for checking comprehension, and assessment of student learning will not be addressed in this session.

#### **Course Reading:**

##### **1. Assign reading before you address the topic in class**

Written language is more permanent, and new terms or confusing concepts can be reread multiple times. Oral language is more transient, and once students have missed it, it is more difficult for them to figure out where they went wrong. Take advantage of these differences, and have students use the reading so that they are better prepared to listen and interact orally in class. Many language learners will take advantage of this opportunity as they know that it will help them to better understand what is happening during class.

**2. Set a purpose for the reading that correlates with what you are doing in class**

It often takes second language readers at least three to four times the amount of time that it takes an average native speaker to comprehend the same material. And, despite the extra time investment, these learners may not know what to focus on in the reading. Setting a purpose for the reading lets them know exactly how to focus and use their time wisely. Setting a purpose could be as simple as providing three questions they should be able to answer after completing the reading. Or, it could involve a study guide or note-taking template that they fill out for each chapter. This helps them focus on the main ideas and most significant content from the reading so that they do not get caught up in trivial details.

**3. Explain the role of reading in your course**

Let students know what the purpose is for the reading in your course, and how it will be used. Some teachers assign large quantities of reading, but just want students to glean the main ideas. Others, may assign less reading, but expect a more thorough knowledge of the material. Let students know which readings will be used for quizzes, class discussions, papers, or other purposes.

**4. Model how to do the reading for your course**

As proficient readers, we probably don't think about how we go about reading a text. However, many English language learners have one approach to the text—labor through it slowly, word-by-word, whether or not they understand the big picture. Demonstrate to struggling readers how you would go about using features like previews, summaries, headings, bold, italics, graphics, or the glossary to do the reading in your own course textbooks.

**Starting your lesson:**

**1. Find out what your learners already know about the topic**

When learners can link their existing knowledge with new information, they are more likely to understand and remember it. You can explore what students already know through a brainstorming session. Or, you can post a question that students discuss briefly with a partner at the beginning of class. In some instances, you may ask them to revisit and discuss that question at the end of class in light of the new things they have learned during the session.

**2. Preview the material you will cover at the beginning of each class session**

Preview the main points that you will cover—and what you expect students to do with them, at the beginning of each class. This helps students to keep the big picture in mind. And, even if they miss a few details somewhere in the middle, they are better able to focus on the main ideas you want to emphasize through the lesson.

**3. Consider providing a graphic organizer or note-taking template for students to follow in class**

Providing a structured form for students to take their notes in, whether it is a flow chart, a table, a timeline, or a brief outline, allows them to anticipate the organization of the class, and to follow along more effectively.

**Addressing Vocabulary:**

**1. Provide key vocabulary terms in advance, and link the oral and written forms**

Before launching into a lecture or activity that repeatedly uses terms that may be unfamiliar to language learners, make sure to provide and define key vocabulary. Also, make certain to show students the written form when you teach them a new word orally, and vice versa. This is especially helpful, as sometimes learners may know a word when it is written, but not recognize it orally because of differences in pronunciation and spelling. Key vocabulary can be noted in the syllabus or posted in Moodle.

**2. Use examples and illustrations in addition to definitions**

Using examples, illustrations, and stories from everyday life helps to facilitate understanding of new terms or concepts. This is particularly true for students from cultures which emphasize more holistic story-based methods of communication rather than the more linear point-by-point Western models. If you have trouble coming up with all of the creative illustrations on your own, engage your students in this process by giving them opportunities to work together to generate examples and stories that represent the content effectively.

**3. Repeat and emphasize key words and phrases**

Once you have introduced and explained key words and phrases to students, make sure that you repeat and emphasize those words and phrases as they come up throughout that lesson and subsequent lessons. Be intentional about using repetition and consistency to link emphasize what they have already learned, and to link it to new information.

**Using Multiple Channels:**

**1. Use visuals to support oral communication**

Use real world objects, photographs, images, charts, graphs, tables, maps, videos, or drama to visually illustrate what you are teaching. The use of multiple channels of communication can assist students in making sense of unfamiliar content.

**2. DO NOT overload your Power Point with words**

While using multiple channels of communication can greatly aid students, using large quantities of print and oral language simultaneously can defeat learning efforts. Because educational systems in many countries stress copying and rote memorization, a number of language learners will feel obligated to copy every word from the Power Point. Because they are already less proficient language users than native speakers, they are not able to focus on listening and copying simultaneously. The unfortunate result is that they may have copied all of the slides, but have not comprehended either the notes or the lecture.

**3. Use your voice and body to enhance communication**

The use of body language—gestures, facial expressions, and general animation provides a greater context for listening than words alone. Using non-verbals along with vocal variety that emphasizes and draws attention to key points and highlights emotions, attitudes and priorities promotes greater comprehension for language learners.

**Advance Planning:**

**1. Plan your questions in advance**

When teachers pose questions to learners on-the-spot, they are more likely to pose questions that are wordy or linguistically complex. So, when you really want students to engage with conceptually complex questions, take the time to plan them out in advance so that language does not interfere. Pose the question orally, and then show it to learners on a Power Point slide or in a handout.

**2. Plan your instructions for activities in advance**

Sometimes language learners don't fully engage in classroom activities because they feel uncertain of the instructions or expectations. Because listening comprehension is often an issue, directions that are not carefully planned in advance can be particularly troublesome. Consider the following instructions: "So, uh, yes, if you, you can find a partner...then with your partner go ahead and talk about why you think this philosophy might be really popular today, well, actually first, first talk about if...whether or uh...whether or not you agree. Then, discuss why it is popular today, and how you maybe have seen it in action with your peers or others. OK?" Instead, write out your instructions in advance and say them, then post them on a Power Point slide, or hand them out on a sheet of paper. You may also ask students to repeat the directions back to you.

**Maintaining the lesson & finishing well:**

**1. Check comprehension regularly**

Regularly engage your students in activities that allow you to check, clarify, and confirm comprehension. Do not simply ask if they understand, instead ask them to use, evaluate, or explain the content.

**2. End each lesson with a brief review**

Ending each lesson with a brief review helps to consolidate key information for learners who may have missed a few of the minor details of the lesson due to language proficiency issues.

### Questions for Reflection:

1. Choose two of the techniques from the list above that you are already using in your classes. Share how you have gone about integrating them into your classes.
  
2. Choose any two of the techniques from the list above that you would like to implement in one or more of your courses. Explain how you might go about this.

### Additional Resources:

Himmele, Persida and William. *Total Participation Techniques: Making Every Student an Active Learner*. ASCD, 2011.

This resource is filled with techniques for actively engaging students in the lesson. These techniques are valuable ways to build regular comprehension checks into any lesson. Although this resource is directed toward K-12 educators, a majority of the techniques are commonly used for English Language Learners of all ages.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online, Pearson ELT, <http://www.ldoceonline.com/>

This is a free online (abridged) version of an English Language Learner dictionary. English language learner dictionaries differ from standard dictionaries in their use of a core defining vocabulary that is limited to high-frequency words in English. This ensures that learners will not need to look up several words that are used in the definition itself.

An additional feature of this dictionary is that students can click on either British or American pronunciation to hear the words read aloud (facilitating the linking of oral and written language). The link can be posted on Moodle and made available to language learners in a course. The full version which includes additional subject-specific vocabulary as well as the names of famous people, places, and events is available to students for purchase.

Reiss, Jodi. *120 Content Strategies for English Language Learners: Teaching for Academic Success in Secondary School*. Second Edition. Pearson Education, 2012.

This resource has very straightforward and easy-to-implement tips for teachers who have non-native English speakers studying in the same classroom as native English speakers. Although it is geared toward secondary school teachers, the majority of the techniques would be applicable to the college setting as well.