



TIPS | for Educators of ELLs in Grades 7-12: Reading

The tips below offer some great ways to help your English language learners (ELLs) become confident and successful readers. Add a new language strategy each week, and watch your students' reading improve!

Note: These tips can be used with both newcomer and long-term ELLs. Newcomer ELLs are students who have just arrived in the United States. Long-term ELLs are students who have been in the United States for a longer period of time.

- **Help students learn to monitor their comprehension.** Use “think-alouds” to model the practices good readers use to make sure they understand what they’re reading.
- **Provide systematic instruction in comprehension skills.** Teaching basic comprehension skills—such as picking out the main idea, recognizing cause and effect, summarizing and outlining—will support ELLs’ learning in all their classes.
- **Check for understanding.** English language learners at this level may be able to decode text flawlessly, even though gaps in vocabulary and background knowledge continue to affect their comprehension. Use rich discussions and questions that require higher-level thinking to make sure your students understand what they read.
- **Use outlines to scaffold comprehension.** Providing a brief, simple outline of a reading assignment or an oral discussion in advance will help ELLs pick out the important information as they listen or read.
- **Teach students to use graphic organizers.** Graphic organizers allow ELLs to organize information and ideas efficiently without using a lot of language. Examples include Venn diagrams, K-W-L charts, story maps, cause-and-effect charts and timelines.
- **Provide students lots of different ways to “show what they know.”** Drawings, graphs, oral interviews, posters and portfolios are just a few ways that students can demonstrate understanding as they begin to develop their reading and writing skills in English.
- **Provide explicit, systematic instruction in phonics.** Students need explicit instruction in sound-symbol correspondences to become successful readers in English. Make phonics instruction part of a balanced program that includes reading meaningful text and writing. Make sure to use age-appropriate materials related to phonetics and pronunciation in addition to the modeling of language, poetry, jazz chants, songs, etc. Older students tend to be turned off by phonics materials targeted to younger children.
- **Discuss different types of texts.** Teach students the difference between fiction and nonfiction, the various forms of nonfiction writing (newspaper and magazine articles, brochures, medical information, etc.) as well as different forms of creative fiction (short stories, epic novels, etc.). Discuss the different kinds of information found in academic content (what will be found in science vs. social studies texts, for example) in order to strengthen academic reading skills.
- **Use “high-low” texts to capture students’ interest.** Many publishers offer high-interest, low-readability texts designed with older readers in mind. Written on a beginning reading level, these books include topics and themes that appeal to the adolescent reader. However, don’t hesitate to expose students to more challenging texts when appropriate.

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- **Choose “friendly” expository texts.** In choosing expository books (e.g., newsletters, catalogs, reports), look for texts that are well-organized and have built-in scaffolds, such as clear section headings and bold print to identify important terms. Note that newcomer students without prior formal education may need an introduction to the basic parts of the text, and how the text is organized.
- **Ask questions that require higher-level thinking.** Students may be able to answer simple, factual questions about text, even if they do not fully comprehend what they have read. To probe for true comprehension, ask questions that require students to analyze, interpret or explain what they have read.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Asking questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer gives students practice with organizing their thoughts in English and fosters English language proficiency. It’s also a great way to check reading comprehension.
- **Practice makes perfect for fluency.** Activities such as readers’ theater and poetry or speech reading allow students to practice their parts before performing them with a partner or in a small group. This builds both reading and oral language fluency.
- **Provide models of fluent reading.** Listening to fluent reading by a teacher or another student helps ELLs improve their own fluency in reading and in speaking.
- **Use choral reading to develop more oral fluency.** Frequent and structured opportunities to practice reading aloud, speaking and hearing themselves will give students more confidence in their English skills.
- **Provide opportunities for students to work in pairs or groups.** Working with peers during classroom activities supports language development and content learning. Like native English speakers, ELLs must continue to expand and extend their English vocabulary as they “read to learn” in the upper grades.
- **Make reading practical.** Help students overcome some of the literacy obstacles they may face in their everyday lives. Practice reading movie schedules, signs, telephone books, bills, letters and job applications.
- **Watch out for idioms.** Expressions such as “opening a can of worms” or “pulling my leg” are common in our everyday language, but they may be very confusing for ELLs, especially newcomers. Explain idioms used in conversation and in readings.
- **Make time for individual reading.** Build in some time each day for students to read on their own. You may want to use this time for one-on-one instruction with students who need extra help.
- **Give students a choice in what they read.** Adolescents are more interested and more engaged in reading when they have some choice about what they read. Provide a wide variety of texts, representing different genres and reading levels, and occasionally let your ELLs choose for themselves. Help them identify texts that interest them and that they can comprehend.
- **Make your students the experts!** Reading to and with younger children is a great way for English language learners to improve their own reading skills. Pair your students with reading buddies in kindergarten or first grade during a structured tutoring or reading mentoring session. Everyone will benefit.
- **Use physical responses as one way of checking comprehension.** Techniques such as total physical response (TPR) give students an opportunity to show what they know by acting it out in skits and by playing games.
- **Consider books on tape and captioned movies.** Providing textbooks on audiotape and films with captions are effective alternatives for some English language learners who struggle with the increased language demands posed by content-area textbooks.
- **Make use of multicultural texts.** Including texts that feature multicultural themes and settings not only validates English language learners’ home cultures but also allows students to draw upon existing background knowledge to support comprehension.