

## 5

SIMPLE  
STEPSfor Working with  
Non-English Speaking  
ELs and SIFEs

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As an educator, how are you supposed to teach about arguments and claims to students who don't understand or speak any English? Not only do these students not know English, but they don't seem to have had much formal education in their native country either. But yet, you're expected to teach to the rigor of the standard and have them analyze text they can neither read, nor understand.

Such is the struggle of educators across the country who find themselves with students in their class who don't know any English. Before getting into the "how-to" of teaching these students, let's first explain who they really are. A student who is not proficient in the English language is classified as an English Learner (EL). There are different stages of being an EL, the first is a newcomer, but being new to this country does not necessarily mean being new to English. There is a misconception that a newcomer does not know any English and this couldn't be further from the truth. In reality, schools in many countries around the world teach English in addition to their native language. The United States is actually one of the few countries worldwide that still has a monolingual school system. So just because an EL is a newcomer, does not necessarily mean he or she does not know any English.

An EL who did not receive much or any formal education in their native country is also classified as a SIFE, or Student with Interrupted Formal Education. Why does this happen? Well, there are many reasons for the lack of formal education, and one of the most prevalent is money, or lack thereof. Education isn't free in all parts of the world. In some countries, only the affluent can afford to send their children to school. For poorer families, school is not

considered a necessity, unlike working, which is needed to survive. So, these students either work to help provide for their family or stay home to take care of younger siblings so their parents can work. There are also some villages or towns that are just too far from where the schools are located and transportation is not available.

When these students arrive in U.S. schools, we as teachers are faced with a very challenging situation. Not only do we have to teach these students content-based state standards using grade-level text while simultaneously teaching them the English language, but we are also responsible for teaching SIFEs the foundational skills needed to succeed academically. Sounds exhausting and impossible doesn't it? Well it is exhausting, but it's definitely not impossible. In fact, it's one of the most rewarding experiences a teacher will ever have! So how do we do it?

## Let's start with these 5 simple steps

### 1 Front Load Vocabulary.

We hear this all the time, but yet how many of us actually do it? My favorite response for not doing vocabulary frontloading is, "They have to use their context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words."

Well, if students don't know English, pretty much everything on the page is an unfamiliar word so there aren't any context clues. Furthermore, giving out a list on Friday for students to learn over the weekend about the passage they'll be reading on

Monday isn't cutting it. Teachers must take the time to pre-teach key vocabulary prior to students reading the text. And by key vocabulary I'm not just referring to tier 2 and multiple meaning words, but rather words that are necessary for understanding the text. So even if they struggle with comprehending what the text states explicitly, the vocabulary words they've learned will be sufficient for them to get the gist of the passage.



## 2

### Identify Cognates.

A cognate is a word that has a similar spelling and meaning in more than one language. For example, the word “important” in English is also “important” in French and it’s “importante” in Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. The word “information” is “enfomasyon” in Haitian Creole and “informacija” in Lithuanian. Note that you do not have to know the student’s native language to be able to identify cognates in the text. There are plenty of websites available that will do

this for you. My go-to site is [The Cognate Writer \(www.cognates.org/h\)](http://www.cognates.org/h). The Cognate Writer website allows you to cut and paste or type text into a box that automatically lights up all cognates in blue. This allows you to see how much of the text has words that ELs may recognize in their native language because they’re cognates. Giving the text to ELs prior to it being used in class so they can identify the cognates allows these students to build background knowledge and increases their comprehension of the text.



## 3

### Read Aloud.

Yes, this is true for high school students too. ELs need to have text read aloud because hearing the correct pronunciation and how words are decoded help them learn the English language. For example, if they don’t hear someone read the word “natural”, they will instead pronounce it phonetically, with a hard t sound in the middle of the word rather than with a **ch** sound. Teachers must read aloud to these students and take the time to enunciate syllables clearly. This simple step will help with an ELs’ English language acquisition.

## 4

### Discuss and Draw.

While reading with ELs, teachers should pause, highlight key details and take a moment to discuss the text with these students. Allow students to also discuss these key details with a nearby classmate. It does not need to be a lengthy conversation, but rather a time for clarification and reflection. Asking simple questions such as “Why do you think the author is so opposed to plastic bags?” can help students to gain a better understanding of the text and also helps teachers to gauge comprehension. Because their English is limited, traditional note taking is a challenge for ELs. Instead of writing, allow students to draw the important information that's been highlighted in the text. If the author opposes plastic bags because it harms sea life, then a simple drawing of a fish with a plastic bag wrapped around it is sufficient for them to understand this concept. These students may not understand the meaning of the details they highlighted, but they will understand the drawing they created in the margins next to that highlighted text.

## 5

### Use Graphic Organizers.

Now that students have these highlighted details and drawings, what are they going to do with it? The answer to that question is graphic organizers. ELs need to be provided with a format in which they can input information in a way that helps them to analyze the text. It is important that the graphic organizer be specific to the standard being taught. For example, if the standard is analyzing character development, then the graphic organizer must provide areas for students to input “characteristics”, “challenges” and “interactions” in the proper sequence. Non-English speaking ELs may have to rely on their drawings to complete their graphic organizer, and this is perfectly fine. Whether a student writes in the first box of the graphic organizer that the character was angry and confused in the beginning of the story or draws an angry face with question marks around it will mean the same thing.

It truly is amazing how much ELs can comprehend when provided with the appropriate tools and strategies. This is especially true in their first year in an American school. These students are like sponges, and with our time and effort, they can build a strong foundation that will enable them to simultaneously learn the English language and excel academically. They will not only surprise you, but you'll also surprise yourself with how far they've come because of you!

## About the Author

Sonia M. Barcelo is the creator of Scaffolded Standards for ELs and the Writing Prompter, a program designed to help ELs write cohesively. She has been an ESOL teacher since 1991 and has taught various bilingual education content areas including ELA, reading and social studies. She has also written English Language Development curriculum and instituted many successful ELD programs.

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