

Strategies: Harmful or Helpful?



Kate Kinsella offers a perspective on the impact of too many versus too few evidence-based strategies when teaching English learners

Federal law dictates that U.S. school districts must provide “research-based professional development” to any teachers, administrators, and staff who work with English learners, whether in high-incidence or low-incidence contexts. The training must focus on methods for working with English learners and be substantive enough and offered frequently enough “to have a positive and lasting impact” (ECS, 2018). Many states, including Arizona, California, and Massachusetts, require additional certification for teachers serving English learners in core academic subject areas.

Although educators from coast to coast approach lesson planning and delivery with appropriate bilingual or ESL (English as a second language) endorsement, many struggle on a daily basis to meet their English

learners’ diverse and compelling needs.

Limited Professional Learning Options

In a concerted effort to improve outcomes for English learners, U.S. school districts introduce teachers serving English learners to strategies through various professional learning formats, each of which has its strengths and limitations. A district might capitalize on one of the coveted student-free days allocated for mandatory, paid professional development to address instructional priorities.

Contractually required and remunerated in-service trainings are characteristically limited to one day at the advent of the school year and another mid-year. With only one or two full days calendared for collegial interaction and learning, administrators and teachers are often vying for time to address focal

initiatives, ranging from standards-based grading protocols to decreasing chronic absenteeism to accelerating English learner reclassification. As a consequence, the target initiatives rarely receive the critical time, conscientious presentation, practical application, and dialog they warrant for teachers to enter their classrooms with clarity and conviction.

Many districts have modified their schedule to afford teaching staff time to collaborate for a couple of hours on a weekly early-release day to share data and best practices. These brief weekly meetings are strictly assigned for department, grade-level, or unified staff on specific dates. Typically, only one monthly meeting slot is reserved to focus on school-wide instructional priorities, with the target practices hastily addressed due to time and end-of-day attention span



constraints.

As an outcome of the nationwide dearth of substitute teachers, only a select few staff members can be released to attend regional professional development institutes or state educational conferences. Often, those most likely to attend are teachers on special assignment working as instructional coaches and a cohort of lead grade-level or subject-matter teachers. These select individuals are then charged with distilling the principles and strategies outlined in a detailed institute into a “turn-key presentation” to fit within the one-hour slot they have been afforded during a department meeting or after-school professional learning community (PLC). Understandably, colleagues with a tenuous grasp on the “why and how” of executing the target strategies are unlikely to readily rethink their lesson plans and retool their delivery.

With few dedicated and substantive workweek opportunities to enhance their

instructional repertoire, many earnest teachers turn to virtual learning sources, including webinars, Teachers Helping Teachers, English learner instruction blogs, Pinterest, and Teaching Channel videos. While the curriculum and instruction-support options at their fingertips are arguably easily accessible, the practices suggested are not uniformly clearly outlined, research informed, abundantly classroom tested, and carefully refined to work effectively with English learners.

An Overwhelming Array of Strategies

Teachers are likely to experience a barrage of hastily introduced strategies over the course of a school year, both formally in meetings or trainings and independently via colleagues, print, and online resources. There are at least three potential and worrisome impacts. One indisputable effect is that everything can be perceived as equally viable or avoidable, creating a pedagogical smorgasbord from which one can recklessly dabble.

A quick internet search for “effective strategies with English learners” readily presents a host of blogs and school district–posted resources offering “Best Practices for English Learners.” The strategies introduced can be well-intentioned and efficient references, but this is a loosely cobbled-together effort to support teachers in making content comprehensible, accelerating English language proficiency, and building second-language literacy skills. The litany of strategy tips, often as many as 50, without informed and detailed explanation, can range from “assign language stems” and “structure wait time” to “use adapted text” and “encourage primary language use.” Each of these prospective best practices warrants more than a brief justification for a neophyte ESL or SDAIE (specially designed academic instruction in English) practitioner to at once comprehend and feel compelled to skillfully apply them in an upcoming lesson. Moreover, when a strategy to support

language)(

English learner lesson engagement as vital as “provide visual support” or “modify verbal delivery” is followed by candidates like “incorporate field trips,” “play music,” and “use a random student selector app,” it places into question the viability of the recommended practices.

In their efforts to better prepare teachers to address English learner social and academic needs, some schools and districts have quite understandably turned to branded and more substantively developed strategic initiatives.

The sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP) model, for example, includes eight key components for planning and delivering lessons that make content more comprehensible for English learners. Secondary-content-area educators are introduced to a wide array of strategies to enhance interaction and curricular access. The same school may have a team of teachers participating in the national AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program, designed to motivate and equip prospective first-generation college students with a scholarly mindset, learning strategies, and academic literacy skills. The promoted instructional strategies focus on WICR (writing, inquiry, collaboration, reading).

These are just two of a number of professional development options intended to maximize learning and achievement for English learners and their peers. While both have viable aims and positive practices, they can have competing messages and pedagogical emphases. If employing them in tandem with any number of legacy instructional programs such as guided reading and cooperative learning, teachers can struggle to manage such an eclectic strategic array and to hone their teaching craft.

“The word “strategy” in K-12 instruction is applied rather indiscriminately and at times to classroom practices that are far less than pedagogically defensible.”

Issues with the Term Strategy

Another challenge with district and school-site strategy initiatives is that frequently the target teaching “strategies” are, in fact, lesson activities, homework assignments, formative assessments, procedures, or student learning strategies.

Within the K–12 teaching profession, the term strategy is used endemically and all too often inappropriately. When the field refers to a vast assortment of teaching techniques including word sorts, exit slips, skits, choral reading, Cornell notes, elbow partners, summary snowball tosses, and equity sticks as “strategies,” it does lead one to perceive a strategy as “any imaginable technique that a teacher uses to accomplish a lesson task.”

Outside the K–12 instructional arena, in professions from medical care to marketing, *strategy* is commonly understood to mean something quite different. The online *Merriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary* defines a strategy as “a careful plan or method for achieving a particular goal, usually over a long period of time.” Experimenting with a “student picker” app to randomly select participants can hardly be called a “careful plan for achieving a goal.”

Within the news media, one is apt to encounter more precise and targeted applications of the term, like the following: “The commission is striving to develop a coherent and impactful community policing strategy” or “The agency is developing innovative strategies to assist

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The word *strategy* in K–12 instruction is applied rather indiscriminately and at times to classroom practices that are far less than pedagogically defensible. As an illustrative example, one of the most widely used strategies by underprepared teachers serving struggling readers and English learners is “popcorn.” Faced with a complex text and a class striving to access meaning in a second language, many teachers have resorted to the “popcorn reading” strategy they experienced in their preservice coursework or with a substitute teacher in their own formative schooling. The name derives from the practice of randomly calling on students to read aloud, whether their hands are raised or not. The unsuspecting victims are charged by the teacher with a cold reading of unfa-

miliar text in front of peers. After stumbling through polysyllabic words and daunting syntax within the assigned paragraph, the exhausted reader then quickly popcorns to a nominated classmate, who is expected to continue the spontaneous decoding process with the subsequent paragraph before turning the reading reins over to an anxious peer dodging eye contact. Some might argue this stress-inducing practice builds grit; however, this widespread strategy has no evidence base for reliable development of fluency, word knowledge, or comprehension, let alone complex text enthusiasm and stamina.

A Call for Clarification of Instructional Terms

It would seem prudent for the K–12 educational profession to clean up our linguistic

act. We can surely serve to gain from having more clarity and consistency in our pedagogical lexicon. In an effort to support preservice and employed educators in adopting more evidence-based instructional practices, we can introduce and advocate for high-priority instructional practices with more lexical precision.

I offer the attached list of commonly used terms, definitions, and illustrative examples as a starting point. It is challenging to avoid using the term *strategy*. I am making a concerted effort in my professional interactions to deploy the term with key descriptors such as *high-impact*, *selected*, *research-informed*, or *evidence-based*. In fact, I consciously avoid employing the term *strategy*, as it has assumed such a vacuous meaning. Rather, I have leaned toward usage

Clarifying Widely-Used Instructional Terms: Definitions and Examples

Terms	Definitions	Examples
Teaching Strategy	<i>A technique that a teacher uses to accomplish a specific lesson task.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popcorn Reading • Equity Sticks • Think-Pair-Share
Learning Strategy	<i>A technique that a student uses to accomplish a specific task or skill.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marking Texts • Reviewing Study Cards • SQ3R
Instructional Routine	<i>A research-informed, classroom-tested, step-by-step sequence of teacher and student actions that are regularly followed to address a specific instructional goal.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using Response Frames • Teaching High-Utility Academic Vocabulary • Building Reading Fluency (Oral Cloze) Writing Model
Procedure	<i>A fixed sequence of actions or behaviors that are followed the same way to correctly perform a classroom action.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call Response (“Class-Class” etc.) • Lining Up • Heading a Paper White Bear
Protocol	<i>A set of rules, customs and language used in formal spoken and written interactions.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing Lesson Objectives • Peer Feedback • Exit Slips
Task	<i>A small step or action assigned or expected for students to complete during a lesson.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underline • Restate • Highlight • Reread
Activity	<i>A participatory experience students engage in to understand or practice lesson content.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KWL Chart • Debate • Vocabulary Bingo • Role Play Snowball Fight
Assignment	<i>A piece of work that students are given to acquire knowledge, practice a skill, or demonstrate mastery of lesson content.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timeline • Article Summary • Copy Definition & Write Sentences (Video, PowerPoint)

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of *instructional routines* and *proven practices* when introducing and demonstrating practices I know from both research and abundant experience will make profound differences in English learners' educational engagement and outcomes. I also recommend that fellow educators strive not to use *teaching strategy* as a generic term when they, in fact, are referring to something as distinct as a project, learning strategy, protocol, or task.

"I consciously avoid employing the term *strategy* as it has assumed such a vacuous meaning."

Instructional Routines vs. Strategies

Because *strategy* has come to mean anything an educator hazards in the K–12 classroom to achieve an instructional goal, the term is unfortunately applied to practices that merit either being promoted or purged. Like many fellow teacher scholars and researchers, I am now deliberately using the term *instructional routine* to reference the highly impactful teaching practices I advocate to support English learner achievement. What distinguishes an instructional routine from many teaching strategies is that a routine is a "research-informed, classroom-tested, step-by-step sequence of teacher and student actions that are regularly followed to address

a specific instructional goal."

In contrast to the much-maligned popcorn reading strategy, I would offer as a productive alternative the oral cloze fluency routine (Harmon and Wood, 2010; Kinsella, 2017). To achieve even basic text comprehension, a reader must first be able to read the selection relatively fluently. This is rarely the case for English learners approaching authentic text in core subject areas. A fluent text reader is one who is capable of the following: 1) accuracy (pronounces the words correctly); 2) rate (reads at an appropriate pace, not too fast or slow, and pauses appropriately); 3) expression (reads with emotion, emphasizing key words); 4) punctuation (interprets signals such as commas and question marks). Extensive research has identified repeated reading as the key strategy for improving students' fluency skills (NICHD, 2000). Repeated reading incorporates two essential elements: 1) giving students the opportunity to read and then reread the same text passage, and 2) having students practice reading orally with guidance provided as needed.

The oral cloze fluency routine avoids the pitfalls of embarrassing less-able readers or subjecting the class to poor examples of reading. This research-informed routine is designed to model fluency and assign students an observable task of involvement. Rather than passively listening as the teacher reads aloud a text section, students follow along, silently tracking, and chime in with a word the teacher has selectively omitted within a sentence. Students pay close atten-

tion to the teacher's pronunciation, intonation, and timing and stay engaged because they are poised to fill in the missing word. The lowest-performing readers may not be able to pronounce every omitted word, but they will not be singled out or humiliated and will be provided with a skillful reading model. This low-stress fluency-building routine provides access to challenging text and models an active and accountable process students can replicate with an assigned peer reader during "partner cloze."

Need for a Delimited Set of Proven Practices

Our most vulnerable students deserve a more consistent and pedagogically defensible set of proven practices across the school day. Youths approaching rigorous standards-based lessons with language and literacy voids cannot devote their cognitive capital to learning when they must constantly adjust to a chameleon pedagogy, one that changes regularly within classrooms and subject areas.

As colleagues committed to equity, we can begin by agreeing upon and committing to a manageable toolkit of high-yield instructional routines, proven practices with dynamic and dependable teacher and student roles. In so doing, we will ensure that English learners and their under-resourced classmates will navigate the school day with greater confidence and have everything to gain.

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