



Setting Clear Learning Purposes for ELLs

The language of school is demanding; much of the content is decontextualized and abstract, and it concerns matters that are far removed from the daily life. Students are expected to learn about rain forests and prime numbers, literary motifs, and historical events that occurred centuries ago.

Consider the additional cognitive demands confronting ELLs, who must tackle academic language and translate between their native language and English. For students who are recent immigrants with limited formal schooling, the classroom environment is even more complicated. Their teachers must teach not only the content, but also the language and social demands of the lesson. Understanding the purpose of their learning activities in all three areas—*content, language, and social interaction*—can help ELLs excel.

Starting a Lesson with Learning Purposes

Learning is hard work, and it's even harder when you are doing "double the work" of everyone else.¹ Teachers can mitigate this challenge for ELLs by establishing content, language, and social *learning purposes* (also known as *learning objectives* or *learning intentions*) at the start of the lesson and redirecting students to these purposes frequently.

Content Purposes

Content purposes are derived from curriculum standards, but they address only a specific part of the standard that can be learned in a single lesson. For instance, consider a 3rd grade science

standard that requires students to understand how variations in the characteristics of organisms can provide them with advantages in survival, finding mates, and reproducing. The content purpose for one specific lesson may be, *Identify how some insects use camouflage to hide from predators*. The broad curriculum standard is important, of course, but we also need to explicitly share with students what they will be learning about today.

Language Purposes

As teachers identify the objectives of the lesson, it's important not to overlook the language demands that are intertwined with the content. These language demands include vocabulary, structure, and function.

For example, in the case of the 3rd grade science lesson, the language purpose might

be to learn essential vocabulary terms, such as *disguise, blending, and camouflage*. For a second lesson related to the same science standard, the language purpose may focus on using structure—for instance, *Summarize the article about stick insects using a paragraph frame to describe how these insects use camouflage*. The paragraph frame provides a scaffold for English learners to correctly structure written and spoken language as they engage with content.

The third aspect of language—function—includes such tasks as expressing an opinion, describing a phenomenon, summarizing a passage, persuading an audience, or providing justification and reasoning. For instance, the 3rd grade science teacher may inform her students that their

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WATCH the Video

In the video at www.ascd.org/el0216fisherfrey, see a 6th grade English teacher introduce a lesson by walking students through the content, language, and social learning purposes they will achieve.

language purpose for a lesson will be, *Compare the ways two different species disguise themselves.*

Social Purposes

English language learners—especially those with limited academic experience—benefit tremendously when teachers explicitly target the nonverbal communication skills needed for the lesson, such as tracking the speaker, making eye contact, and listening while others speak. Social skills vary according to grade level.

For example, a social purpose for middle school students working on a project may be, *Work with a group to set goals and deadlines for a project.* A social purpose in high school may be, *Incorporate the ideas of others in discussions and challenge ideas and conclusions respectfully.* Returning to the 3rd grade science lesson, a social purpose in the lesson might be, *Ask questions of the teacher and peers to check your understanding of the ways different insects use camouflage.*

See Learning Purposes in Action

In the video that accompanies this column (www.ascd.org/el0216fisherfrey), we see 6th grade English teacher Amy Miles spend a few minutes at the beginning of a lesson establishing the learning purposes. It's just a few weeks into the school year, and Ms. Miles's students are still learning the expectations for how "English scholars" communicate. She explicitly conveys the content, language, and social purposes of the lesson, both verbally and in writing. Because many of her students are English language learners, she makes sure to spend time unpacking the vocabulary of the purpose statements before moving forward with her lesson.

The beginning of a lesson is a crucial time for English learners, who can easily get lost at the onset. By spending an extra minute or so building initial knowledge about

words such as *intend*, Ms. Miles primes students for the learning that will follow.

Although the video shows just the purpose setting at the beginning of class, Ms. Miles reaped the rewards of this purpose setting during the rest of the lesson. For example, a few minutes into the lesson, she turned her students' attention back to the written purpose statements on the wall as they began their collaborative table conversations, reminding them of the social purpose (*Collaborate with peers while demonstrating behaviors of an active and engaged listener*).

When Iman struggled with the language demands of identifying contradictions in the article the students were reading, Ms. Miles suggested she revisit the content purpose, which stated that writers use transition words to *guide the reader from one idea to the next*. Ms. Miles then asked Iman to find the transitional phrase that signaled two contrasting ideas. After reading it aloud to herself, Iman said, "I get it. The author says, 'Despite the fact' in the sentence." Ms. Miles confirmed, "That's the transition, and you found it!"

As the lesson drew to a close, Ms. Miles used the purpose statements one more time to prompt students to think metacognitively:

How did you do? Were you successful at this? I'd like you to rate yourself as to how successful you were in reaching these purposes. Log on to our learning management system and send me a message so I know what we need to do tomorrow.

Shining a Light on the Learning Path

As Hill and Flynn² explain, "The educational environment . . . becomes a friendlier place for ELLs when they have a clearly stated target for learning" (p. 22). Every student, regardless of language learning status, can benefit from the regular and repeated use of purpose statements throughout the lesson. But more vul-

nerable students, especially those who are learning English or those who are struggling with content and social expectations, have the most to gain. Shining a light on the learning path can help these students take purposeful strides in their learning. ■

¹Short, D., & Fitzsimmons, S. (2007). *Double the work: Challenges and solutions to acquiring language and academic literacy for adolescent English language learners: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

²Hill, J., & Flynn, K. (2006). *Classroom instruction that works with English language learners*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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