

SHELTERED ENGLISH

Techniques for Ensuring Comprehension

By L. David van Broekhuizen

Over the past several decades, one of the obstacles to providing effective, high-quality instruction for English language learners (ELLs) has been the debate about whether it is better to teach children in their native languages or use only English as the medium of instruction. It is difficult to identify an effective instructional program that is suitable for all ELLs because ELLs enter school with a wide range of language proficiencies and content knowledge (see “Four Approaches to ELL Instruction”). No single program is appropriate for all of them.

Sheltered instruction is an approach for teaching ELLs using specific methods to ensure that students understand the content while expanding their English language development. Since all instruction is in English, teachers need to make some adjustments so that the lesson is comprehensible to ELLs. The following procedures provide guidelines to “shelter” your English:

- When giving explanations and directions, use simple sentences with a set of already developed standard directions students are familiar with. Students will then be able to focus on the content of the lesson rather than on the lesson procedures.
- Speak at a normal rate, but lengthen the pauses between sentence boundaries (i.e., where there would be a comma, period, or question mark if speech were written down). Check frequently for comprehension by listening to and observing verbal and nonverbal cues from students.
- Control your vocabulary. Focus on the vocabulary related to the topic, but do not teach a long vocabulary list.
- Emphasize reading, writing, and thinking skills. Use activities such as note taking, report writing, individual projects, group problem solving, and textbook reading to develop these skills.

For information on developing a lesson based on the principles of sheltered English, see “Steps for Developing a Sheltered English Lesson.” By using sheltered English, teachers can make content in any subject area understandable for ELLs, allowing them to improve their English language skills while learning the material.

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Photo: Jennifer Padua

▷ Annie Lilo, a student at Siliaga Elementary in American Samoa, reads aloud while reading specialist Hannah Lafita looks on.

Four Approaches to ELL Instruction

English only: Instruction is entirely in English. Teachers strive to deliver lessons in simplified English so that students develop English language skills and learn academic subjects.

English as a second language: The language of instruction is mostly English but may include some support to students in their native language. Classes may be composed of students who speak many different languages but are not fluent in English. They may attend classes for only one period each day, to work strictly on English skills, or attend for a full day and focus both on academics and English.

Transitional bilingual education: Instruction for some subjects is in the students’ native language but a certain amount of each day is spent on developing English skills. Classes are usually made up of students who share the same native language.

Two-way bilingual education: Instruction is given in two languages to students, usually in the same classroom, who may be dominant in one language or the other, with the goal of the students becoming proficient in both languages. Teachers may team teach, with each one responsible for teaching in only one of the languages. This approach is also sometimes called dual immersion or dual language.

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Steps for Developing a Sheltered English Lesson

1. Review the curriculum and/or textbook for the content area. Talk with subject area teachers or resource teachers to find out what they think are the most important vocabulary, skills, and concepts.
2. Identify the key concepts and vocabulary needed to teach the lesson. Introduce vocabulary you think ELLs are unfamiliar with at the beginning of the lesson. Be prepared to use gestures, objects, or other visual aids to ensure students learn important vocabulary before you start the main lesson.
3. Develop activities and resource materials that demonstrate the vocabulary and concepts to be taught. This may include bringing in objects and pictures, using a simplified vocabulary, and preparing different ways of describing or explaining the topic.
4. Early in the lesson, tap into students’ prior knowledge of the concept or vocabulary by constructing a semantic map (word web). This will help students identify, organize, and build on what they know about the topic. This can be extended as the lesson progresses and students add to their knowledge of the topic.