

Action Strategies to Connect ELLs with the Common Core Standards

by Dorothy Taylor

As ESL teachers move from working independently in pullout classrooms to collaborating with teachers in the content area and mainstream classrooms, it is important that English language learners receive instruction that not only supports language development and content area in a way that is cognitively challenging and aligns with the Common Core Learning Standards, but also provides sufficient scaffolding and context to meet their linguistic and cultural needs. One solution to this challenge is to use movement to teach content area and language skills. Total physical response (TPR), a method of learning language by modeling movements and performing actions, is a proven and successful technique for teaching beginning language learners (Asher, 2009). By planning carefully thought out lessons that actively engage our students, we can extend the idea of TPR beyond the beginning language learner and into mainstream or content area classrooms as well as ESL classrooms.

Following are some of the benefits of using active learning strategies:

- They help students focus and keep their attention.
- They are particularly beneficial for students who are kinesthetic learners.
- They encourage collaboration among students.
- They involve all students.
- They support participation of students who are shy, reluctant to talk, or who come from backgrounds where volunteering isn't the norm.
- Formative assessment is built into the lesson by providing immediate feedback about students' understanding.

Activities that involve movement may be incorporated into almost any area of study, including language arts, math, social studies, science, and art and music. In addition, they can address many aspects of the Common Core Standards, and include all stages of Bloom's taxonomy (1956), from the basic skills of remembering and understanding to the transfer of that learning by applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating, often referred to as higher level thinking skills.

For example, for a math lesson about percentages, a teacher creates a large circle on the floor with rope or tape, and demonstrates varying percentages by asking students to step inside the circle. At first, the teacher shows 100% by asking all of the students to step inside the circle. The teacher illustrates this percentage on the board in two ways, with a graphic and with numbers on the board. For example, if there are 28 students in the class, the teacher writes $28/28 = 1.00$ and *move the decimal point over two points to make 100%*. Next, the teacher asks half of the students to step out of the circle. The teacher once again draws a graphic to represent the percentage. Underneath or beside the graphic, the teacher writes the fraction (e.g., $14/28$) on the board and elicits from the students how to calculate the percentage (e.g., 14 divided by $28 = .50$ and *move the decimal point over two points to make 50%*). As the students explain the calculation, the teacher or another student illustrates the calculation on the board. The teacher proceeds by asking students to step inside or outside the circle to represent various percentages while he or she, or other students, represents the percentages on the board. A more detailed explanation of this and other activities is presented in *Moving Forward: Connecting English Language Learners with the Common Core Standards* (Taylor, 2015).

This activity, which involves no more materials than painter's tape or a rope, incorporates several of the common core mathematical practice and content standards, including:

- Making sense of problems and persevering in solving them
- Reasoning abstractly and quantitatively
- Attending with precision
- Modeling with mathematics
- Looking for and making use of structure
- Operations and algebraic thinking
- Ratios and proportional relationships
- Interpreting functions

Teachers can include movement as well in more language-oriented subjects, such as language arts and social studies. For example, teachers can ask students to stand up when the teacher states a fact (e.g., *The earth rotates around the sun*) and sit down when she or he states an opinion, (e.g., *It is a beautiful day today.*) By asking students to explain how they recognized one statement as a fact and the other as an opinion, teachers will help students tease out the difference between facts and opinions while addressing speaking and listening standards such as “Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally,” and “Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.”

Sorting by cause and effect helps students understand the relationship between events and the words that signify the relations. Students work in pairs to place sentence strips under the correct “Cause” and “Effect” headings. For example, following a unit on the American Revolution, students would place the statement *Britain needed money after the French and Indian War* under the “Cause” heading. Under “Effect” they would place the sentence *As a result, the British government placed taxes on the American colonists.* This activity supports reading standards such as “Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.” Exploring cause and effect transition words, such as *as a result*, addresses the language standard “Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meaning.”

A significant advantage of these and other active lessons is that they engage all students in a classroom while allowing English language learners at many different language learning levels to not only physically participate, but also challenge themselves mentally.

References

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