

Assessing the Work of English Language Learners

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Introductions

Who are the English Language Learners at Haverford?

- Numbers of int'l students increasing recently, nationally and at Haverford.
- Currently approximately 125 int'l students total (F-1 visa + Permanent Residents + dual citizens, but not all are ELLs); 43 of those 125 are from China
- Standards for entering Haverford as an ELL are high (600 TOEFL)
- Specific ELL support resources on campus: ISSO, ISO, ISA, OAR, Writing Center
- Many ELLs are first-generation college students, or at least first generation attending college in the US. Most speak English better than their parents do.
- Class of 2018: 20% speak a language other than English at home.
- Class of 2019: 21% speak a language other than English at home.

International student "types" (by educational path):

- "Traditional Haverford International Student": English-dominant bilinguals who attended int'l or American schools abroad, nearly all in English
- Students who followed specialized "study abroad tracks" or "English language" tracks at schools in their native country (esp. in China)
- Graduates of high-level but not specialized schools in their native countries
- "Parachute kids" (attended independent or in boarding schools in the US)
- Students from any of the above categories with additional complexity

But domestic students can be ELLs, too

- Age of immigration is key; 12 is the "critical age" for attaining native-like fluency
- Some immigrated to the US in middle or high school (may be perm. residents); only some of these had ESL in school
- If they learned English in US elementary school: fluent; may have fossilizations

Academic Language Development for Advanced ELLs

Academic English skills require time, effort, exposure, and scaffolding. Low-stakes environments for practice inside and outside of the classroom are key.

Core skills: passive (reading and listening) vs. active (writing and speaking); these skills don't develop in "lockstep", and can vary greatly for students. *Substantial* "cognitive load" (mental effort) required in developing these skills.

Performing well on a test of English skill is much easier for most students than applying what they know appropriately in context. **Normal to struggle at first.**

Exposure to academic English in high school may have been de-contextualized (vocabulary lists) or limited to specific subject areas like science or literature.

ELLs need access to as much authentic, naturally occurring spoken English as possible (with scaffolding) in both academic and non-academic settings.

Even after initial adjustment, new linguistic and cultural challenges require great effort and make great demands on "cognitive load", which can divert resources temporarily from managing linguistic "correctness".

ELLs may need better time management skills than others because managing complicated reading and writing tasks takes a lot of time and stamina.

General Pointers for Supporting ELLs

1. Recognize that sometimes students don't perform well because of cultural expectations and frameworks rather than language. You may need to explain/teach what to do, how, and why more often and more explicitly with ELLs.
2. Realize that ELLs may be used to traditional, top-down norms, and may be extremely reluctant/worried about how to speak appropriately to authority figures.
3. When ELLs struggle, help them develop *authentic* confidence. Don't just be "nice"; be clear, encouraging, and willing/able to give them "bad news" in positive ways.
4. Set and maintain reasonable boundaries for providing help.
5. Remember to pay attention to WHAT your ELLs say, not only to HOW they say it.

Before assessing ELL student learning:

Create a learning environment in which ELLs can thrive

When lecturing...

- Speak loudly and clearly.
- Post PowerPoint slides or notes before class for students to preview and follow.
- Provide an agenda in class.
- Write down new terminology on the board or highlight it on the outline.
- Be redundant: repeat, paraphrase and make key connections clear.

- Give concrete examples and/or illustrate key points with visual materials.
- Avoid overwhelming students with *unnecessarily* difficult terms or references but don't completely avoid using academic jargon or slang. This can be a great opportunity to model academic language use, and thus encourage students' language development in context.
- If you mention pop culture references, give some context (e.g. "The Big Bang Theory is a popular TV sitcom; several of the characters work in STEM fields...")

When holding class discussions...

- Encourage a welcoming classroom community in which everyone's contribution is valued, mistakes are a part of learning, and "correctness" is not the only goal.
- Explain what you mean by class participation.
 - Consider speaking (privately) to ELLs about your expectations regarding class participation.
 - Encourage them to *listen for and enter the conversation* in class, rather than just "speaking for the sake of speaking". Help them to see how speaking and listening in your class can support everyone's learning.
- If ELLs struggle to speak in class or you think their comments don't seem clear or understandable to the other members of the class, help them find words in the moment. Make sure the class listens patiently and welcomes the ELL student's contribution.
- If the ELL makes an English usage mistake during class discussion, let it go if the overall point was clear (unless doing so reinforces inaccurate information).
- If you notice a persistent grammatical structure or pronunciation problem in the student's speech that makes it much harder for others to follow them, consider mentioning it to the student *privately*. Teach them the standard English usage or pronunciation to use in this case.
- Give students chances to prepare a bit in advance or to practice beforehand.
 - Ask students to prepare questions or ideas before class on a topic.
 - Allow students to share ideas with a partner or in small groups before sharing with the whole class. This gives them an opportunity to rehearse their ideas in English.
 - Give students 1-2 minutes to jot down their thoughts on a topic before launching the discussion.

- Leave ample wait time during discussion after asking a question so ELLs can formulate their response (about 7-10 seconds).
- Ask open-ended rather than yes/no questions. Instead of asking, "Do you have any questions?" try, "What questions do you have?" Instead of asking, "Do you understand?", ask students to summarize or synthesize what you've just said.
- Since ELLs sometimes have difficulty understanding their American classmates or other ELLs in class, try paraphrasing/summarizing student contributions every few minutes or explaining embedded cultural references.
- Remember that students may have very different levels of skills as speakers and writers in English.
- Encourage ELLs to draw on their international experiences and perspectives to enhance classroom discussions but avoid pigeonholing them as representative of/spokesperson for their entire cultural group.

Advice on Assessing ELL Student Work

When assessing homework...

- Designing the homework to involve low-stakes opportunities to practice using academic language in your discipline is very helpful.
- Be explicit about collaboration policies when you give assignments. For classes that assign problem sets, are students allowed to work together outside of class? What would be considered cheating?

When assessing group work...

- Be very explicit about the rationale, the process and the output. Why are the students doing the task? How are they going to do it? Who is going to do what? What are the expectations for the final product?
- Decide if you are going to assess the process as well as the product, the individual as well as the group. Make this clear to the class.

When assessing papers...

- Give students reasonable deadlines for producing written work that will be graded. ELLs may need to devote more time to reading and writing tasks than native speakers do, and may need to schedule Writing Center appointments.
- Give explicit instructions/prompts. Include details like paper format, clarity about which parts of the assignment are mandatory and which are suggestions, required length for papers (since many international students think longer is always better), and expected standards of citation.
- Provide students with a clear, accessible grading rubric.
- Especially in intro-level classes, give students examples of a lab report, literature review or reflective essay early in the semester so they understand the expectation. Emphasize that reproducing the example exactly is not their goal.
- Consider breaking big assignments into “parts”. Provide feedback along the way.
- Allow students opportunities to get your feedback on drafts ahead of time. Remember that early drafts should focus on “higher order” concerns (argument, organization, etc.) rather than on perfecting mechanics (a final stage concern).
- Realize that some ELLs struggle more with different cultural understandings of/expectations for academic writing than with English language skills per se. They may need explicit clarification of or coaching about elements of academic writing that American-educated native speakers of English take for granted.
- Decide what matters to you in evaluating ELL student writing and why. Consider emphasizing content and understanding over grammar when grading.
 - Are you looking primarily for depth of content that indicates understanding of the material and critical thinking skills? If so, realize that students may need to sacrifice some precision in English correctness.
 - If you require perfect grammar and English usage from ELLs, why? Realize that emphasizing correctness may *decrease* the depth of insight and learning students are able to offer in the paper.
- Learn to “read past” small mistakes in grammar and English usage, as you would listen for a speaker’s point in a conversation.

- You may have different requirements for English correctness for different assignments. (Informal writing assignments meant to push students' thinking may be less focused on correctness, while formal papers or theses may be good occasions for focusing more on correctness.)
- If you do comment on grammar/mechanics, avoid vague blanket statements like, "You need to work on your grammar" without identifying any trouble spots.
- If grammar/mechanics are very important to you, provide students with a Proofreading Checklist ahead of time so they know exactly what you expect.
- Do not hand-write comments on essays or exams. ELLs will probably struggle to read your writing, but are likely to be too embarrassed to ask you what it says.
- Do not copy-edit/rewrite the paper for the student as a way of giving feedback; this is often embarrassing, and it does NOT help them improve their English.
- If you can't follow the student's essay at all, despite several attempts to "read generously", meet with him or her in person to figure out how to move forward. Did the student mis-understand the prompt? Did he or she understand the reading? Was the student working from a different understanding of academic writing than you expected? Did the student seem to "blow off" the assignment? Can he or she explain the content of the essay to you verbally? – and if so, does that help you to follow the paper more easily? Would the student benefit from a chance to re-write the essay? (If so, be specific: what should he or she work to improve? Does the student need Writing Center support in doing so?)
- Do not suggest that students "just ask their roommates" to proofread for them.
- Understand how the Writing Center can support your students.
 - The Writing Center staff can help students brainstorm and organize their ideas, help them learn how to proofread more effectively, and can give feedback on drafts at all stages of the Writing Process.
 - The tutors do not proofread papers *for* students.
 - Unless students have specific questions or a pattern of English usage issues emerges, sessions typically only focus primarily on grammar and English usage issues for otherwise complete drafts. "Higher order" concerns come first, and an explicit, sustained focus on English correctness (word choice, sentence structure, etc.) comes at the final draft stage.