

Teaching Content to English Language Learners: Strategies for Secondary School Success

Jodi Reiss. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education 2005. 144 pp.

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In the world of publishing, elementary- and college-level books on language theory and methodology tend to be relatively common. But, it seems, the needs of high school English language learners (ELLs) are not so frequently addressed in handbooks or teacher materials. That is why Reiss' book is simultaneously a pleasant surprise and a welcome addition to teacher education resources. It is concise and informational, covering a spectrum of pertinent topics, and most of all exuding an understanding of English language learners and their needs. Although this book is not a new publication, it is a practical guide to teaching that is instantly accessible to non-TESOL-trained teachers in content areas and thus deserves to be brought back to teachers' attention. Clearly meant for high schools, it can also be easily used by college instructors in different disciplines and elementary educators as well because it offers a common-sense approach to teaching second language learners.

Teaching Content to English Language Learners: Strategies for Secondary School Success is divided into three parts: I. Teaching in Multicultural Classrooms: An Introduction; II. Strategies for Instructors; and III. Strategies for Assessment. In Part I, Chapter 1 examines the challenges mainstream teachers face with second language or multilingual learners and offers "solutions that work," such as scaffolding instruction and carefully planning daily teaching. This is worth emphasizing because in today's busy and demanding classrooms, particularly in public education; with so much oversight and micromanagement of teachers, it is ever harder to remember the basic golden rules of teaching any subject: scaffolding and pacing (Gibbons, 2002). Chapters 2 and 3 address social and cultural aspects of language learning and are meant to build sensitivity in teachers to the many challenges their learners face in a new culture. In Chapter 3, Reiss addresses ways of learning in the classroom, such as group, pair, or whole-class instruction, placing these modes within a larger cultural context. Particularly noteworthy is the section "Questioning Patterns" (p. 19), which discusses the American classroom preference for interaction and students who ask questions or freely offer answers. As Reiss points out, however, students from other cultures might not be so willing to engage in constant interaction. Although many trained ESL (or ESOL, as Reiss uses this term: English to speakers of other languages) teachers are likely to be aware of this fact, many content teachers might not be. Reiss spends some time on basic cultural notions, such as numerals, by comparing Europe and the United States, and she points out cross-cultural differences in math when grouping or representing numbers. For many secondary math teachers in the United States, this may be new information—even in urban settings, where the cultures mix the most.

Part II is the practical core of the book, offering to content teachers excellent, realistic strategies for incorporating language in their daily instruction. Reiss provides a brief overview of theory in a layperson's terms. This aspect of the book will be welcomed by content teachers in high schools, who may not be well versed in language teacher education jargon. Emphasis is placed on empowering the learners by teaching them the language of requests for clarification or help. Next, Chapter 5 focuses on different ways of using

textbooks with language learners—something that may seem simple but in fact graphic presentations of textual structures tell us a lot about their content (Gibbons, 2002). It makes sense to recommend the use of such visual tools—particularly when teaching Asian language speakers, because they are accustomed to different textual organizations in their native languages. Also covered are academic vocabulary, dictionary use, and reader-response tools (pp. 57–59). Particularly valuable are the staples of literacy applied in science, literature, and math, such as tables with simple columns to be filled while reading “text page/I get it/I think I get it/I don’t have a clue” (p. 62).

Moving on, Chapter 6 presents ways to “modify” assignments for ELLs by using word banks, chunking (breaking material into smaller parts, including modifying homework assignments), offering models for written assignments, and evaluating student work in a “split fashion”: either content or language. Reiss suggests a number of handy learning aids, such as sentence openers for answering questions in a history class, earth science class, and a social studies class (pp. 72–73). Of particular note are problem-solving organizers (pp. 76–81) that offer “cluster or web” graphic representations of tasks, Venn diagrams, and timeline examples in social studies. To language and writing teachers, this may sound familiar, but content teachers are not always equipped with tools that present language and information more directly and visually to their students. Chapter 7 is recommended for helping with background knowledge activation. It uses the premise that learners bring to new learning situations what they know from prior learning, real experiences, and the world at large. Thus, activating such knowledge might help future learning (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994). Reiss lists well-known devices such as the K-W-L-H chart (what I **k**now, what I **w**ant to know, what I have **l**earned, and **h**ow I learned it), and suggests reasonable practices such as linking lessons, giving clear directions, and avoiding idioms—in a word, staples of solid teaching. Also covered in this chapter are classroom teacher–student interactional strategies, such as asking students questions and giving them “face-saving” devices when they don’t know the answer. Chapter 8 focuses on adapting personal teaching techniques by looking at the teacher’s tone, pace, and pronunciation and making suggestions how to adjust them for ELLs.

Part III covers issues of assessment in three brief chapters (9–12). Chapter 9 reviews classroom-based assessment and suggests ways to modify tests for ELLs. It also offers an excellent guide for constructing multiple-choice questions and provides concrete examples from different content areas. Reiss covers elements of test development, validity, and reliability well, handling abstract concepts in a very down-to-earth way. This chapter can support different levels of instruction, as the examples are clear and visually well presented. The last two chapters address the question of state standards and high-stakes testing. They seem deliberately short (perhaps making a statement about the actual classroom “value” of standardized and high-stakes tests). The brief discussion, however, is honest and seemingly impartial. Also covered are test-taking skills and test accommodations—both relevant aspects of testing.

Reiss deserves praise for making highly theoretical topics accessible to most educators. Her directness and brevity produce a quick manual that can be easily used, and by content teachers as needed. It is a true skill to be able to show teachers who are not trained in TESOL or applied linguistics how they too can help language learners by incrementally changing some aspects of “regular” classroom instruction (Walters, 2004). Reiss’s suggestions are not overwhelming or too demanding. They can be done gradually and with smaller time investments than one would think. We, as ESL specialists, should share this book with content teachers and have it on our book- or e-shelves. Though some may find the absence of theory-heavy references a potential weakness, I find the practical real-life approach to teaching a relevant and desirable way to help both learners and teachers in content areas reach higher levels of educational success.

References

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- Gibbons, P. (2002). *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning: Teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
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