THE LANGUAGE OF LEARNING

How to encourage broad-based personalized learning among English learners

By Lynmara Colón and Rita E. Goss

As interest in education technology, innovation, and personalized learning have increased, some educators find it challenging to craft meaningful experiences that might help English learners (ELs) access a rigorous curriculum and increase their language proficiency. While some schools have strong practices for personalized learning in place, some still struggle to find a way to ensure that students have access to a viable curriculum while learning English.

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has allocated a significant amount of funds to support schools in this effort. DOE statistics from 2014–15 say there are more than 4.8 million ELs in the country, and nearly all (97 percent) participated in a language instruction education program. But it is not enough to teach students language basics without focusing on the deeper learning a personalized experience can provide. When we provide students with interactive experiences that address their individual needs and increase engagement, we can advance learning in multiple areas during instruction.

Our school division found this truth when we conducted instructional rounds: Teachers who experience success with personalized learning understand and implement the structures necessary to engage students in the learning process, while allowing them to take charge of their own learning through voice, choice, and the use of multisensory technology tools and strategies. Because we believe in the power of collaboration among teachers and students, this isn't a new initiative we are trying to implement; it is a way to model an organization designed around shared responsibility.

A New Lens

Personalized learning can be viewed in different ways. We have visited schools that carve certain times out of the day for personalized learning depending on their EL population, while others

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create pathways for students to take part in this experience. However, a common theme is the back-and-forth between teachers and students around what is "meaningful" learning.

Seeing ELs as the center of the learning process in spite of their language ability has given personalized learning a new meaning for us. Our schools create environments in which students from diverse backgrounds are empowered and encouraged to take on challenges that advance their learning. Curriculum unit guides, programs, and courses developed by teachers and central office leaders are carefully crafted for ELs. Conversations about progress measurement take place weekly, and a robust teacher professional learning plan is in place.

While we understand that ELs can present unique challenges depending on their

backgrounds and prior schooling, we are relentless when it comes to motivating them to achieve their fullest potential. We focus on addressing students' individual needs effectively, and we make every effort to ensure that teachers are prepared to address diverse learning styles. We also work closely with school leaders to provide resources and support that help ensure a quality personalized experience.

Since our division serves more than 20,000 ELs, we understand the importance of providing every student access to the learning experience they deserve. Making a difference in practice and planning for quality personalized experiences goes beyond the "why," though. Below are seven examples of the "hows" we have experienced in the field in providing personalized instruction for all ELs:

1. Start with the mindset that all English learners *can*. We deny access to students when we adopt a deficit mindset, and a deficit mindset skews the way we view our students' potential. So, we must adopt a developmental strength and growth mindset. Build on strengths and focus on the promise and potential in each student. Every student deserves an educator who believes in them, regardless of the language they speak. Educators must understand ELs, and content instruction should not be the only educational priority. You can address this in answering the PLC question, "What will we do when students do not know the answer?"

Our district provides rigorous professional learning that prepares teachers to understand ELs as individual learners. Additionally, we have high expectations for all students, regardless of their first language. When we plan personalized experiences, we never lower expectations due to their backgrounds or relative strengths. Instead, we believe that all ELs are as capable as other students of thinking at high cognitive levels.

2. Let students drive the learning. In order to provide students with a unique personalized experience, a strong, positive, and trusting relationship between student and teacher must exist. Just because a student is from another country doesn't mean they aren't literate in their own language. It is only by getting to know our learners that we can tap into their true knowledge and potential.

We have replicated the "Genius Hour" in several schools. Regardless of language proficiency, students at one school regularly spend time exploring areas of personal interest and passion.

By engaging in experiences that require collaboration, they are able to share their strengths with peers. We intentionally avoid scheduling language support instruction at this time, because we understand that this approach supports other academic areas as well.

3. Create learner profiles. We have seen students experience success when schools have systems in place to profile ELs as learners beyond a percentage or score. Educators who dig into students' personal stories are better able to support those who speak another language. We have found that qualitative information has a significant impact on a performance. A student who experienced trauma while moving to the country or has trouble adjusting to an American school will look different from a student whose parents moved to the country to work for an embassy. Taking time to know each student allows educators to adjust the personalized experience based on individuals' language proficiency levels, as well as their social and emotional needs.

4. Use data-driven conversations. Data is an important piece of personalized learning for ELs. Looking beyond standardized tests allows teachers to gain a better understanding of students' strengths. In supporting schools, we discuss data openly to evaluate the effectiveness of ELs' learning experiences. Creating conditions under which socioeconomic status and language ability are not at the center of education has allowed schools to embrace an "all kids matter" attitude. Evaluating learning experiences to provide additional support based on the data has allowed our teachers and school leaders to be intentional about the experiences they craft.

5. Provide targeted instruction. Teachers who master the art of differentiation are better able to ensure that students have access to the curriculum, and this is part of the experience we strive to provide to ELs and all learners. Differentiation in curriculum requires intentionality and a clear understanding that students are expected to have access to state standards without watering them down. Students succeed in classrooms where there is flexibility, and we provide targeted instruction in a variety of models, including rotations, project-based learning, small-group instruction, co-teaching, and other models. Our goal is to consider a variety of approaches that make each student's experience personal to that student's unique needs.

6. Encourage student reflection. Student feedback and reflection can be one of the most powerful tools in personalized learning, and knowing this can offer educators a greater lens on their capabilities. Taking ownership of learning is one thing, but getting students who speak another language to reflect on their experience can shape the way they see themselves as learners. The goal of self-reflection is to give students ownership of the learning process and progress.

Actively listen to students and ask them to share their views on their progress and potential areas of improvement. Use questions that are grounded in your knowledge of the students, and you'll often get authentic feedback. After student-led conferences, we have also seen parents benefit from listening to their students' self-reflection and improvement plans.

7. Enhance the approach with technology. Many see personalized learning as something heavily connected to technology. While this may be true, school and district leaders must be intentional about the software they use to support ELs. Ask questions about the applications under consideration and how they handle the needs of unique learners; the key is to make sure students have access to digital experiences in which language ability progresses alongside knowledge of the standards. Resources such as Lexia Core 5, the Apple Book Creator App, Nearpod, Brain Pop, and Flocabulary may be appropriate.

Coming together as a team to craft personalized experiences for ELs can be a daunting task, but if you focus on authenticity, it can be of great support. Allowing students to join the learning process and asking them for feedback will help them grow into creative individuals who are engaged in their own learning. Every student needs to have access to learning that prepares them to be a successful member of our global society. It takes time to build a personalized learning environment, but you can help ELs reach their goals and full potential. ▣

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RESOURCES FOR REFLECTION

For guidance on using student-led conferences and other tools to build self-reflection among students, look to the following:

▮ Student-led conferences: **eleducation.org/ resources/chapter-5-student-led-conferences**

▮ Developing agency in students: **www. edutopia.org/ video/developing-agency-student-led-conferences**

▮ Voice Thread, a platform where students develop critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity skills: **voicethread.com**