Supporting English Learner Content Learning and Language Development Through Performance Assessment

Written and oral language development are essential elements of content area learning for all students. English learners cannot develop academic language proficiency in isolation — they need supported opportunities to develop content knowledge and oral and written language skills in tandem. Performance tasks, which ask students to provide evidence of their learning through a tangible product or performance, offer an excellent opportunity for teachers of English learners to simultaneously engage students in meaningful language development and content learning.

We know that English learners need learning opportunities that are both intellectually challenging and appropriately scaffolded. At the same time, all students need learning opportunities that are motivating and engaging, and that also accurately reflect and build on the students' cultural and linguistic background knowledge and experiences. Additionally, English learners need guided support to engage with complex texts, ample opportunities to engage in conversation related to their learning, and chances to produce oral and written language. Embedding well-constructed and carefully implemented performance tasks in the curriculum can provide English learners with these opportunities.

Whether teachers are developing their own performance tasks or using existing ones, these tasks can be made the most useful in supporting English learners when teachers do the following:

- Provide authentic, real-world tasks that are interesting and meaningful for all students, including English learners. Relevant and engaging tasks ask students to apply their knowledge and skills to something that matters to them. For example, students could be asked to advocate for parks in their community, make recommendations for traffic safety, make an argument about immigration policy, or learn about community members.
- Include scaffolded opportunities to engage with complex texts and opportunities to make sense of complex linguistic forms and meaning. When appropriately scaffolded, performance tasks can provide an opportunity for students to tackle challenging disciplinary text. Teachers can help students build discipline-specific language skills in context by highlighting vocabulary and language structures they encounter in text, especially those specific to the particular genre or discipline. Teachers can support English learners by structuring discussions that support the strategic use of new grammatical structures and specific vocabulary.
- Optimize opportunities for students to produce and refine written and oral language. In order to provide rich opportunities for students to write and improve their writing, performance tasks can be designed with opportunities for students to produce informal written reflections followed by structured opportunities to build on these written products to produce more formal writing. Oral language opportunities can also be embedded at all stages of a performance task, with ongoing opportunities to work with peers and the teacher to discuss and hone expression of their ideas, as well as the ideas themselves.

- Cultivate conversations and opportunities to collaborate among students. For example, performance tasks can be designed to offer students opportunities to collaborate in discussions of complex text, conferencing about their own work, and the development of culminating products like written papers, debates, presentations, and graphs or charts.

In addition to developing performance tasks that provide rich language opportunities like those just described, teachers can attend to some additional considerations about performance tasks to help their students grow as readers and writers.

- Teachers should establish clear and fair success criteria and ensure that students understand the expectations and how they will be assessed.
- Teachers should ensure that performance tasks are geared toward students' current levels of English language proficiency. State English language development standards, and corresponding frameworks, can provide guidance about levels of English language proficiency.
- Finally, teachers should systematically and strategically use scaffolding to allow learners to successfully participate in performance tasks. Scaffolding practices should be used intentionally and be based on learner needs and anticipated task challenges.

In sum, performance tasks provide a unique opportunity for teachers to engage English learners in authentic and meaningful content and language learning experiences. Through careful planning and intentional scaffolding, teachers can leverage the built-in opportunities of performance tasks to engage students in rich conversations and support their growth as careful readers and effective writers.

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