Developing College and Career Readiness Skills in English Learners in English Language Arts

College- and career-ready standards provide a set of clear expectations that aim to prepare all students to be successful in college, careers, and civic life.These standards require students to develop not only content knowledge, but also complex skills and abilities, like applying new learning, solving problems, analyzing information, thinking critically, and clearly communicating ideas.

In order to adequately assess college and career readiness, next-generation assessments, like Smarter Balanced, use performance tasks to measure these college- and career-ready skills in ways that traditional multiple-choice questions cannot.In English Language Arts, these performance tasks gauge students' ability to integrate various reading and writing skills, including: reading multiple complex non-fiction texts for a specific purpose; developing and defending a central idea; synthesizing information; and using relevant evidence from multiple sources in their writing.

Purposeful reading of multiple complex texts and organizing coherent, evidence-based writing can pose challenges for all students. For English learners, these tasks can be particularly challenging because of the complexity of the language demands. Although complex, the challenges posed in these performance tasks represent an opportunity for English learners to develop language and content knowledge in tandem.

In this video, we share various reading and writing techniques that teachers of English learners can use to provide the support students need to develop essential 21st Century language skills.

In terms of reading, English learners must manage potentially unfamiliar content, determine meaning of sophisticated academic language and vocabulary, and comprehend a wide range of text types.

Writing challenges for English learners include knowing how to write different text types like argumentative, informative, and narrative writing; using precise vocabulary appropriate for the audience and purpose; and using transition strategies to build the progression of and convey the relationship between ideas.

Teachers can work closely with students to support their growth in both reading and writing, which in turn helps English learners demonstrate development of the skills targeted by these performance tasks.

Modeling reading techniques can support English learners to develop purposeful reading skills and improve their reading comprehension in ways that help them identify and use evidence from text to support their writing. There are several high-leverage ways teachers can support English learners' reading skills:

- Teach students how to unpack the performance task prompt: teachers can model for students how to look carefully at the language in the prompt, highlight potentially confusing language, emphasize the goal of reading as meaning-making, and identify action verbs.

- Teach students how to read for a purpose aligned to the prompt: teachers can model different ways to approach a text, for example, close reading, reading for main ideas, and skimming for specific information or evidence. Teachers can help students match these different approaches to the purpose they identify in the prompt.

- Teach students how to unpack dense academic language: teachers can help students by structuring discussions so that all students have equitable opportunities to practice using new grammatical structures and specific vocabulary, such as teaching students strategies like looking for key words and phrases, deconstructing grammatically dense sentences, and identifying the main message at the sentence, paragraph, and whole-text level. Teachers can also guide students to understand text organization and grammatical features that are new or challenging and draw students' attention to grammatical differences between the primary language and English.

In addition to reading skills, modeling writing techniques can support English learners to organize their evidence and ideas when writing to support a central idea.There are some important areas for teachers to focus on to support English learners in their writing:

- Provide opportunities for students to talk about their ideas with a peer before (or after) writing.

- Teachers can help students use mentor texts to understand specific language features like power verbs, abstract nouns, and transitional phrases. Mentor texts can also help students analyze the different language features among various genres.

- Teach students how to build elements of an essay: Teachers can explicitly model how to use outlines or graphic organizers to structure their essays.   Teachers can work with students to jointly construct different parts of an essay, including the controlling idea or argument, an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Teachers can also provide written language models, such as language frames such as sentence or paragraph frames and charts of important words or phrases, as appropriate.

- Teach students how to use evidence in writing: teachers can model for students how to match evidence from the text to their ideas, and can model strategies to help students elaborate on evidence to integrate it into their writing.

Carefully designed and ongoing curriculum-embedded performance tasks provide an excellent opportunity to support English learners to develop these essential reading and writing skills by allowing students to:

- Build content and language knowledge simultaneously

- Have meaningful discussions with peers and the teacher about complex texts and the ideas they present

- Engage in collaborative writing activities, group projects, and presentations

- Develop vocabulary and background knowledge

- Focus on the organization and grammatical structures of complex texts

While performance tasks pose challenges for English learners, they also provide rich opportunities for students to develop language and content knowledge in tandem. Modeling reading and writing strategies and carefully planning opportunities for students to engage in scaffolded language analysis can help English learners develop the skills they need to be successful in college, careers, and civic life.

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