

# Strategies for English Learners

A Guide for Novice Teachers

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# ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This guide offers practical strategies to help educators effectively support English Learners (ELs) in early learning settings. It includes approaches for integrating home language support, building vocabulary, designing small group instruction, and making books and lessons more accessible. Educators will also find guidance on reducing anxiety, encouraging learner motivation, and using assessment to inform instruction. With classroom-ready examples and suggestions, this resource is designed to strengthen instruction and foster a supportive environment where ELs can thrive.

## INTRODUCTION

### Understanding the EL Landscape

ELs are students who are in the process of acquiring English as a second language. Classrooms today are increasingly linguistically diverse, with approximately one in four young students identified as ELs. This growing demographic underscores the importance of designing effective learning environments that support both language development and access to academic content. As educators begin or continue this work, it is important to reflect on one’s current understanding and approach to teaching ELs, considering how instructional practices can best meet the needs of students learning English while developing foundational academic skills.

### The Importance of Early Childhood Education

High-quality early childhood learning environments are essential for developing foundational skills that support long-term academic success. These environments help young children build readiness in areas such as language, literacy, and math skills that are critical as they transition into formal schooling. For ELs, the process of acquiring English as a second language plays a central role in their educational journey. Their proficiency in English directly impacts their ability to access literacy instruction and understand mathematical concepts presented in English. Establishing strong language skills early on helps ensure ELs can fully engage with academic content and continue progressing across subject areas.

**In this guide, you’ll learn how to:**

- Support ELs’ language development through home language strategies
- Use small group instruction effectively
- Scaffold instruction with visuals, vocabulary supports, and structured play
- Design lessons that boost motivation

# Strategy 1: Home Language Support

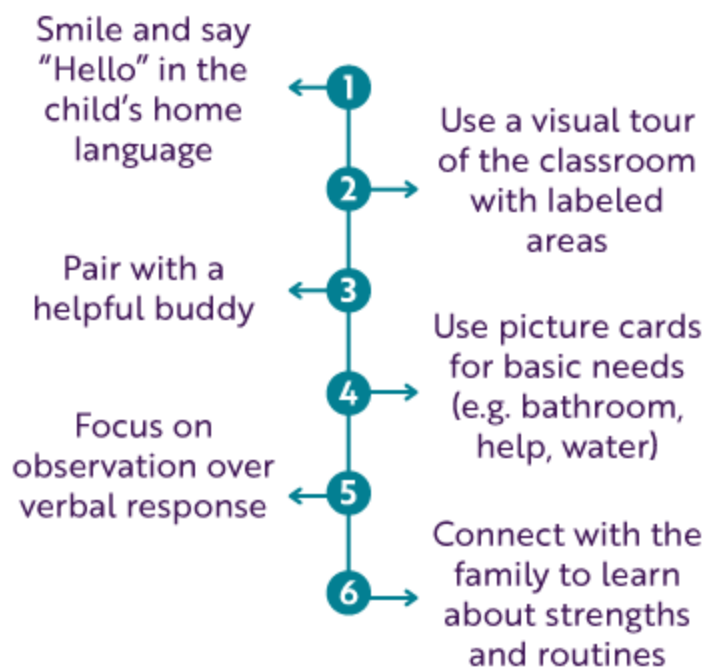
Supporting a child's home language in the classroom is a powerful way to promote overall language development and academic readiness. Introducing and reinforcing skills in a child's home language can strengthen their understanding of concepts and accelerate their progress in English. Skills learned in one language often support development in another, making home language integration a valuable instructional strategy. Even educators who do not speak the child's home language can take simple, meaningful steps, such as learning a few key words, incorporating familiar songs or rhymes, and connecting with families to better understand the child's background and daily experiences.

There are several practical ways to incorporate home language support throughout the school day. For example, classroom objects and spaces can be labeled in both English and the student's home language, ideally with visuals to support recognition. Teachers can use pictures, gestures, and real-world objects to reinforce understanding and help children navigate routines. Technology can also play a role — tools like translated notes, digital libraries, or basic translation apps can help with communication and access to materials. However, such tools should be used judiciously.

Teachers can also invite family members to share words, phrases, literature, or songs that are important in the child's home environment. When possible, educators can work with community volunteers who speak the students' language to assist with classroom tasks such as labeling or reading. Using familiar language and visuals not only aids comprehension but also helps students feel recognized and supported.

When welcoming a student who speaks only their home language — such as Mandarin- on their first day, it is especially important to create a calm and reassuring environment. Teachers should use non-verbal communication extensively and give the student a visual tour of the classroom. Pairing the student with a kind peer and incorporating simple words in the home language, like “hello” or “thank you,” can help ease the transition. Teachers should focus on observation, noting how the student engages with peers and routines, and gradually gather information about their strengths, interests, and language background. These early steps help establish trust and provide a foundation for long-term success.

## What Welcoming a Newcomer Might Look Like



Strategy	What It Looks Like	Why It Matters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Label in two languages</li><li>• Visual + verbal cues</li><li>• Family &amp; community input</li><li>• Tech tools (with care)</li><li>• Learn keywords</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use dual-language labels with images on classroom furniture and materials</li><li>• Use pictures, gestures, and real objects</li><li>• Invite families to share words, songs, or read</li><li>• Digital libraries or translated notes</li><li>• Teacher uses greeting or basic terms in the student’s home language</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reinforces vocabulary and helps students navigate the space</li><li>• Builds comprehension, reduces reliance on English proficiency</li><li>• Boosts relevance</li><li>• Supplements access when adults can’t translate directly</li><li>• Builds rapport and eases transitions</li></ul>

## Strategy 2: Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning is a highly effective strategy for supporting ELs in early childhood settings. These activities provide natural opportunities for language interaction while helping children build key developmental skills. When play is designed around children’s interests, it encourages active participation and meaningful engagement with new vocabulary and concepts. Teachers can enhance language development during play by using strategies such as explicit vocabulary instruction, modeling, repetition, gestures, and visual aids. Incorporating these elements helps ELs make connections between words, actions, and ideas.

New play scenarios or themed units can be used intentionally to introduce academic and social concepts in a way that is accessible and enjoyable. For example, a superhero-themed unit can be used to explore pretend and real-life abilities, while also reinforcing vocabulary concepts. Teachers can read a book or poem about superpowers to launch the theme, then extend the idea to include positive behaviors such as helping, sharing, and showing kindness. Activities might include small-group discussions, one-on-one creative projects, and sociodramatic play to reinforce the theme and encourage language use.

Throughout these activities, teachers can continue to support ELs by incorporating visual supports, peer interaction, and opportunities to practice using language in context. Themed units and imaginative play allow for repeated exposure to targeted vocabulary and create safe, low-pressure spaces for children to express themselves, explore new ideas, and build confidence in using English.

Play-Based Activity	Language Support Strategy
Dramatic play	Repetition, vocabulary, modeling, peer interaction
Themed units	Visuals, explicit vocabulary, hands-on
Creative centers	Gestures, descriptive language, peer talk



# Strategy 3: Rethinking Whole-Group Time

Whole-group activities can be challenging for ELs, particularly when they involve extended periods of passive listening. To increase the effectiveness of these activities, it is important to reduce the overall length of whole-group instruction and incorporate opportunities for interaction and support. Shortening direct instruction into manageable segments — such as 10 to 15 minutes — can help maintain engagement and improve comprehension.

Traditional Practice
Read-aloud + visual = guided peer discussion
Structure turn-and-talk to process ideas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)
Interactive instruction with realia and opportunities for feedback

One effective strategy is to integrate “turn and talk” activities, where children are paired with a peer to discuss ideas or respond to questions. When possible, pairing students who share the same home language can provide an added layer of support, allowing them to process information in a familiar language before engaging in English. Teachers can also rely on visuals, gestures, and real-world objects to reinforce concepts and vocabulary during instruction. Labeling classroom materials and using props can help ELs follow along more easily.

Incorporating explicit vocabulary instruction is another key support. Teachers can introduce key terms before or during the activity using repetition and modeling to strengthen understanding. Choral responses, songs, and rhymes offer additional ways to encourage language use and participation. These methods are beneficial when paired with physical movement or actions that give students non-verbal ways to engage.

To further support comprehension, educators should regularly check for understanding by observing student responses and using simple, low-pressure questions. When planning to read a book or introduce new content, prereading the material in the student’s home language — when possible — can also improve access and confidence. Finally, adapting language and using sheltered instruction strategies ensures content remains aligned to grade-level expectations while remaining accessible to ELs at various stages of language development.

# Strategy 4: Vocabulary Development

Building vocabulary in both English and a student’s home language is a powerful approach to supporting language development and concept understanding. Teaching new words in both languages reinforces meaning and helps ELs make connections across linguistic systems. Presenting vocabulary in context — using pictures, objects, or actions — helps children grasp word meaning more quickly and retain it more effectively. Repetition, modeling, and opportunities for meaningful use are key components of effective vocabulary instruction.

It is important to provide frequent opportunities for ELs to use and revisit new vocabulary in small-group settings, during shared book reading, and throughout center-based activities. These interactions allow students to hear, see, and practice using words in varied contexts, supporting both language development and content understanding.

For example, in a unit on “Family,” teachers might introduce essential vocabulary in both English and Spanish, such as:

Family	→	Familia
Mother	→	Madre
Father	→	Padre
Brother	→	Hermano
Sister	→	Hermana
Grandparents	→	Abuelos
Home	→	Casa
Love	→	Amor
Child	→	Niño/Niña
Together	→	Juntos

Incorporating vocabulary in both languages — supported by visuals, gestures, and repeated exposure — helps ELs strengthen their understanding of key concepts while continuing to develop both English and home language proficiency.

# Strategy 5: Scaffolding During Book Reading

Making books accessible to ELs during read-alouds requires intentional planning and the use of scaffolds that support both comprehension and language development. Simple strategies — such as pointing to words, running a finger along the text, and asking guiding questions — help draw students’ attention to language patterns and text structure. Teachers can further enhance understanding by engaging students in discussions before, during, and after reading. These conversations support vocabulary development, build background knowledge, and allow for real-time language practice.

Selecting picture books with rich illustrations and repetitive phrasing can make the reading experience more meaningful for ELs. Illustrations provide visual context for unfamiliar words and concepts, while repeated phrases help students internalize sentence structures and vocabulary through repeated exposure. Teachers can encourage participation by inviting choral responses to familiar or repeated lines in the book.

A large version of the book cover can be used during pre-reading to activate background knowledge. Teachers might ask students what they notice on the cover, what they think the story will be about, and introduce related vocabulary. Sticky notes can be placed on the cover or inside pages to highlight key terms or ask guiding questions. These same sticky notes can be used during and after reading to emphasize vocabulary, label familiar objects, or prompt simple comprehension checks.

## Scaffolding Techniques

Strategy		Support for ELs
Pointing to words	→	Directs attention to language features and text structures
Asking guiding questions	→	Promotes comprehension and encourages verbal interaction
Using choral responses	→	Encourages participation and reinforces repeated language patterns
Using realia and visuals	→	Provides multisensory input and supports comprehension
Small-group follow-up activities	→	Allows for personalized support and checks for understanding

Visual aids and realia (real-life objects) are essential tools for reinforcing understanding. Before reading, teachers can show pictures or physical items that represent new vocabulary. During the story, visuals can be used to illustrate key ideas, and gestures can be paired with words to provide multisensory input. After reading, visuals can support story retelling or sequencing activities. In small-group settings, these materials also provide a concrete way to assess understanding and extend learning through vocabulary games, matching activities, or student-led retellings.



# Strategy 6: Small Group Activities

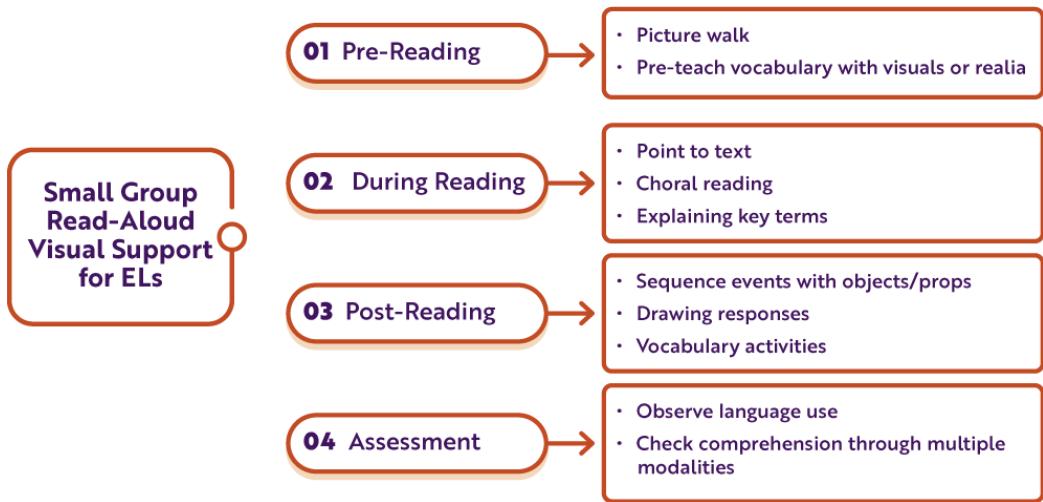
Small group instruction offers a valuable opportunity to support ELs by creating a more conversational and low-pressure learning environment. These settings encourage children to verbalize their thinking, ask questions, and build language skills in a supported space. When forming groups, it is helpful to pair ELs with supportive peers and, when possible, with another student who speaks their home language. This type of strategic grouping allows ELs to clarify understanding and gain confidence through peer interaction. Limiting group sizes to six or fewer helps maintain an engaging and responsive atmosphere.

Before reading, teachers can pre-teach key vocabulary using visuals and realia to build background knowledge and support comprehension. A picture walk through the book can help ELs anticipate content and connect ideas to images before encountering the text. If possible, prereading the book with the child in their home language — either through family members or bilingual staff — can make the English version more accessible and meaningful.

During the small group read-aloud, scaffolding techniques such as pointing to words, modeling pronunciation, running a finger along the text, and asking questions help guide understanding. Teachers should be prepared to explain unfamiliar vocabulary and provide context for terms that may be new, such as "patriotic" or "accomplishment." Interactive elements — like choral responses, flannel board visuals, and puppets — can enhance engagement and create shared moments for language practice.

Small group sessions should emphasize oral language development. Teachers can facilitate conversation around the book or related materials, encouraging students to share ideas and respond to each other using targeted vocabulary. Post-reading activities such as story retelling, drawing responses, and vocabulary games help reinforce comprehension and extend learning.

Finally, small group time offers a natural opportunity for assessment. Teachers can observe student participation, language use, and understanding of new vocabulary, adjusting instruction and support as needed to meet each child’s language and learning needs.



# Strategy 7: Focus on Motivation and Learner Autonomy

Fostering learner autonomy and motivation is especially important when supporting ELs. When students are given opportunities to set personal learning goals and explore topics of interest, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with instruction. Providing space for choice and decision-making promotes a sense of ownership over learning, which contributes to long-term academic success.

One effective strategy is to design play-based activities around children's interests. These activities can be adapted to reflect students' backgrounds and experiences, helping make instruction more relevant and engaging. Incorporating "child planning" or "choice time" into the daily schedule allows children to decide where to work or play, promoting self-regulation and purposeful interaction with materials and peers. Planning tools, such as simple visual planning sheets, can support ELs in this process and may include options in both English and their home language.

During structured learning, teachers can continue to capitalize on student interests by using familiar themes and materials that reflect what children enjoy and value. Learning centers should provide opportunities for language-rich exploration and reflect both English and home language supports. In small-group settings and collaborative projects, teachers can facilitate open-ended conversations and support ELs in expressing their ideas. These settings give students agency while also serving as a space for language development.

In content areas such as math, real-world connections can make learning more meaningful. Drawing on students' experiences outside of school helps make abstract concepts more accessible and shows the relevance of academic content to their lives. Finally, differentiated instruction — tailored to students' language proficiency levels and learning styles — ensures that all students can participate fully, remain motivated, and continue progressing toward their individual learning goals.

# Strategy 8: Increasing Student Engagement

Creating a supportive classroom environment is essential for supporting ELs, as classroom climate plays a significant role in language learning. A student-centered classroom encourages participation and minimizes hesitation around making mistakes. Many ELs may remain quiet in class to avoid being called on, so it is critical to build an environment where every student feels welcomed, respected, and encouraged to contribute. This begins with establishing predictable routines, maintaining a warm and welcoming tone, and explicitly signaling that mistakes are a natural and expected part of learning.

Teachers can strengthen engagement by using visual supports, hands-on materials, and nonverbal cues to clarify meaning and enhance understanding. Strategies like small group instruction, partner talk, and collaborative learning reduce pressure and create conversational opportunities for language development. Structuring speaking activities with sentence frames and offering choral responses or songs can promote participation, especially for emerging English speakers. Leveraging students' home languages — through bilingual labeling, courtesy phrases, or materials provided by families — also affirms students' identities and supports communication.

Scaffolding is another important element in promoting access and understanding. Teachers should explicitly pre-teach vocabulary, clarify instructions, and provide visuals to support comprehension. Instructional practices that connect to students' backgrounds and experiences help make content more accessible. Teachers can also create space for learners to pursue interests, set learning goals, and participate in classroom decisions, which builds confidence and investment.

Knowing students well allows teachers to plan responsive instruction. Building relationships with families, gathering insight into students' interests and cultural backgrounds, and proactively seeking input are key strategies. Teachers should be encouraged to collaborate with other educators, language specialists, counselors, and interpreters as needed to support the whole child. Schools should also provide ongoing professional development to ensure that all staff members are equipped to meet the needs of ELs in developmentally and linguistically appropriate ways.

## The Importance of Ongoing Assessment

Assessment is a critical component of effective instruction for ELs. Initial assessments help teachers learn about their students' current skills and set realistic, developmentally appropriate goals for the year. These early assessments may include observations, language surveys, and informal performance tasks that provide a snapshot of what the student can do in both their home language and English.

Ongoing assessment is equally important, offering continuous feedback on the effectiveness of instruction. Through regular check-ins — such as informal observations, small group discussions, and performance-based tasks — teachers can adjust their methods and materials to better meet students' evolving needs. These formative assessments help educators identify when to provide additional scaffolding, introduce new vocabulary, or revisit concepts.

Gathering information about a student's development in both languages — home language and English — provides a fuller, more accurate understanding of what the child knows and can do. This dual-language perspective helps teachers distinguish between language acquisition needs and true

learning gaps, allowing for more targeted support. In this way, assessment is not only a tool for measuring progress but also a means for shaping instruction to ensure that every EL can grow and succeed.

## Strategy 9: Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is essential for meeting the varied language proficiency levels, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds of ELs. Effective differentiation begins by tailoring instructional strategies and resources to students' needs in order to enhance motivation and ensure access to academic content. In a lesson on fractions, for example, teachers can adapt their approach based on students' English proficiency while also leveraging their home language and cultural knowledge to support comprehension.

All students benefit from real-world, concrete examples — such as dividing food items or sharing materials — to anchor the concept of fractions. For emerging English speakers, teachers can provide support in the students' home language when possible, allow them to interact with bilingual peers, and use manipulatives and visuals to demonstrate understanding. As students progress, sentence frames like “This is one half” or “The numerator is...” can help build confidence and reinforce academic vocabulary. For students at more advanced proficiency levels, opportunities to explain reasoning, compare terminology across languages, and engage in peer discussions deepen their understanding and language development.

Explicit vocabulary instruction plays a key role. Terms such as whole, part, half, and numerator should be introduced with visuals and repeated in context. Teachers can also provide translations and visual labels to support early learners, while more advanced students can practice academic language in written and oral formats. Scaffolding instruction by breaking content into manageable steps, modeling expectations, and reducing language complexity helps ELs of all levels engage meaningfully with instruction.

Throughout the learning process, educators should build in frequent opportunities for practice through small group work, interactive centers, and collaborative conversations. Teachers can observe students' participation and comprehension during these activities and use that information to guide future instruction. Ongoing assessment — tailored to students' language levels — provides essential feedback and ensures each learner is appropriately supported. For example, early proficiency students might demonstrate understanding by pointing or labeling, while bridging-level students can explain their thinking in writing or through oral discussion.

By combining intentional scaffolding, culturally responsive teaching, and varied instructional methods, differentiated instruction ensures that all ELs can access and succeed in core academic content.

### The Value of Collaboration

Effective support for ELs requires a collaborative approach that draws on the knowledge and expertise of a wide range of stakeholders across the school system and broader community. Every educator is responsible for supporting ELs, and multiple models of intervention may be appropriate depending on each student's unique needs.

Within schools, general education teachers, content-area instructors, EL service providers, and special education staff must work together to plan instruction that supports both language development and academic learning. School administrators and district leaders play a critical role in ensuring that qualified

personnel are in place and that professional development opportunities are available to build capacity among staff.

Support personnel — including paraprofessionals, tutors, and bilingual aides — can extend instructional time and reinforce concepts under the guidance of certified teachers. School-level teams such as IEP or Section 504 committees, SBLCs, and pupil appraisal teams should include members with expertise in second-language acquisition, disabilities, and content instruction to ensure that ELs receive appropriate, coordinated support.

Families are indispensable partners in the educational journey of ELs. By engaging families in meaningful ways, educators gain insight into students' experiences, language use, and strengths. Schools should provide communication in families' preferred languages and seek to involve parents in school activities, decision-making, and instructional planning.

Outside the school, communities offer additional support. Cultural centers, community volunteers, and refugee or (im)migrant leaders can bridge language and cultural gaps. Libraries, faith-based organizations, and local businesses may serve as partners in promoting learning and family engagement. Qualified interpreters and translators must be used to facilitate communication — students or untrained staff should never be asked to fill this role.

Advocacy organizations such as TESOL, NABE, and Colorín Colorado offer research, resources, and professional learning that support systemic improvement for ELs. By engaging in collaborative partnerships both within and beyond the school building, educators can create a comprehensive network of support that ensures ELs thrive both academically and linguistically.

## Key Considerations for ELs with Disabilities

ELs with disabilities must receive both language assistance services and disability-related supports under federal law. School systems are responsible for ensuring timely and appropriate identification, evaluation, and service provision for all students, including ELs who may have a disability. Importantly, an EL's classification as an English Learner cannot be the basis for determining the presence of a disability, and special education evaluations must not be delayed due to limited English proficiency.

To ensure proper support, school systems must implement a timely and accurate identification and referral process. Referrals for special education services can occur at any time if a disability is suspected, regardless of a student's EL status. However, referrals should be based on documented concerns that extend beyond language acquisition challenges. Pre-referral interventions help to provide targeted support and clarify whether observed difficulties are related to language development or a potential exceptionality.

When conducting assessments, teams must consider the student's English language proficiency and ensure that evaluation materials are administered in the child's native language or preferred mode of communication whenever feasible. Assessments must measure the student's abilities rather than their English proficiency, and multiple sources of data should be reviewed, including classroom observations and results from assessments conducted in the student's home language. Qualified interpreters and

culturally competent professionals are essential for ensuring valid assessment practices, particularly given the complex relationship between linguistic diversity and learning differences.

All personnel involved in serving ELs with disabilities — including general education teachers, EL program teachers, and special education staff — must have appropriate training in both second-language acquisition and disability-related instructional strategies. School leaders should provide professional development and ensure that evaluation teams include individuals with the necessary expertise in language development, content instruction, and special education. Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Section 504 plans must address both language and disability-related needs, and should be developed by a team that includes members familiar with the student's linguistic background.

Effective support requires intentional collaboration. EL and special education staff should coordinate regularly to ensure instructional strategies, accommodations, and services are aligned. School-based teams such as SBLCs, IEP or 504 teams, and pupil appraisal teams must include professionals with experience in both areas to develop appropriate plans and monitor implementation.

Engaging families is a vital part of the process. Parents must be informed of their rights and involved in decision-making, with all communications provided in a language they understand. Qualified interpreters and translators must be used for meetings, documents, and updates related to their child's educational progress and services.

Finally, progress monitoring is essential to ensure ELs with disabilities are advancing toward both their language and disability-related goals. Educators should collect and analyze data from multiple sources, adjust instructional strategies as needed, and provide domain-specific accommodations — such as speaking or listening exemptions on English proficiency assessments — when warranted by the student's exceptionality. Ensuring that ELs with disabilities receive coordinated, well-informed support across all settings is critical to their academic and linguistic development.



# CONCLUSION

Supporting ELs effectively requires intentional strategies that foster language development, engagement, and belonging. One foundational approach is leveraging the home language. Reinforcing skills in a child's first language can support their acquisition of English. Even monolingual teachers can play a critical role by learning key words, educating themselves about the students' background, and collaborating with families to incorporate familiar language, literature, and songs. Developing cultural and linguistic awareness strengthens classroom connections and validates each child's identity.

Interactive and engaging teaching methods are also central to success. Play-based learning rooted in students' interests provides authentic opportunities for language use. Whole-group time can be restructured to prioritize turn-taking, visuals, and paired discussions. Vocabulary development should be embedded in meaningful contexts, supported by visuals, repetition, and modeling. Scaffolding during book reading and maximizing small group interactions promote comprehension, oral language development, and confidence.

Finally, creating a supportive, differentiated, and collaborative learning environment is essential. Encouraging student motivation and learner autonomy fosters engagement, while addressing anxiety helps build a safe space for risk-taking and language growth. Differentiated instruction ensures that all students can access grade-level content at their level of English proficiency. Ongoing assessment enables teachers to monitor growth and adjust instruction. Collaboration across EL service providers, special education teams, and family members ensures that support is comprehensive and responsive to each child's unique needs.

As you reflect on your own practice, consider this: What is one specific action you can take this week to better support the ELs in your classroom? A commitment to continuous reflection and growth is key to creating a brighter future for all learners.

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