

## COMMENTARY

Published February 7, 2018, in *Education Week Teacher*

# Being an English-Language Learner is Hard. Here are 5 Ways Teachers Can Make it Easier

By Justin Minkel

**M**any of us have had the experience, when sitting in a foreign language class or visiting another country, of fumbling for the words to convey our thoughts.

In a brilliant essay from his book *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, comedic writer David Sedaris describes a discussion about Easter that took place in his conversational French class. His teacher asked who brings chocolate on Easter morning, and Sedaris answered, “The Rabbit of Easter.”

“A rabbit?” The teacher, assuming I’d used the wrong word, positioned her index fingers on top of her head, wiggling them as though they were ears. “You mean one of these? A rabbit rabbit?”

“Well, sure,” I said. “He come in the night when one sleep on a bed. With a hand he have the basket and foods.”

The teacher sadly shook her head, as if this explained everything that was wrong with my country. “No, no,” she said. “Here in France the chocolate is brought by the big bell that flies in from Rome.”

I called for a time-out. “But how do the bell know where you live?”

“Well,” she said, “how does a rabbit?”

This demented conversation—with its various semantic and cultural misunderstandings—provides a window into the struggle our English-language learners face every day.

There are plenty of hard things about school for all kids. Too many tests, too much sitting, too little recess. But for English learners, there is an added layer of difficulty. The constant effort to understand and make yourself understood can be exhausting.

All 25 of my students speak either Spanish or Marshallese at home. Here are five ways I’ve found to make school a little easier for them.

## 1. Get them laughing.

Many of us have observed how much better we speak a foreign language—or at least think we do—when we’ve had a



Justin Minkel

few glasses of wine. Alcohol lowers the “affective filter,” that barrier of embarrassment, self-consciousness, and fear of looking foolish that can stifle our thoughts and trip up our tongues.

Kids don’t have that option for lowering their affective filter, but we can help lower it in other ways. One of the best is to get them giggling, then laughing out loud. It’s hard to feel anxious when you’re cracking up.

Have your students sing silly songs. Read hilarious books aloud like the *Elephant and Piggie* series by Mo Willems or the chapter on whizzpoppers from Roald Dahl’s *The B.F.G.*

Don’t be afraid to be ridiculous. Last week during our shared reading time, I had covered up the letters between “b” and “s” in the word “bones” for the sentence, “*Jellyfish don’t have b\_\_\_\_s.*” My 1st graders tried to guess a word with those beginning and ending sounds that would also make sense in context. When I suggested, “butts?,” they roared with laughter. (True fact, by the way. Jellyfish have neither bones nor butts.)

Three 2nd graders, all English-learners, stand outside Jones Elementary in Springdale, Ark., in 2007.

## 2. Warm them up.

When I taught a class of new arrivals to California from Tibet, Japan, South Korea, and other countries, we’d start our day with a game called “Invisible Ball.” We sat in a circle and pretended to pass a ball from one child to the next without talking. The ball could change sizes, squishing down to a marble or expanding to a boulder-sized sphere that almost crushed you under its weight. It was a great way to get the kids engaged in a warm-up activity that didn’t require them to say a word.

Shared reading can be a great warm-up, too. In that choral babble of the whole class reading together, no one has to feel self-conscious about their errors or pronunciation. Read Aloud can be a warm-up in the morning or a midday break, a time when kids can just sit and absorb the language without having to speak it. I also have my class do a think-pair-share

at our morning meeting about some easy subject—what they like to do after school, or their favorite place in their house to read—before we get into denser topics with academic language like “characters” or “photosynthesis.”

### 3. Make most of the talking happen with partners or small groups.

Most kids feel a little nervous when called on to speak in front of the whole class, and that’s especially true for many English learners. It makes sense to equalize whole-class participation with methods other than raising hands, like pulling popsicle sticks that have the students’ names written on them. But if you’re going to do that, have the kids do a think-pair-share first. That way they have the chance to practice the language they’re about to use before the daunting experience of talking in front of the whole class.

It’s a good teaching practice, with all students but especially English learners, to do less “teacher talk” and more conversation and group work. The kids, not the teacher, are the ones who need practice speaking English. If you give them frequent think-pair-shares, partner work, and opportunities to work in small groups, they’ll learn more, talk more, and feel less nervous as they develop their language abilities.

### 4. Don’t let your frustration show.

There is no faster way to make a child clam up than to express anger or frustration. The affective filter clangs up like a gate.

I can find myself getting frustrated when a child isn’t doing what I have asked her to do—to get out her crayons, or to bring her clipboard and paper to the rug. I often assume she’s not paying attention, when sometimes she simply didn’t understand the directions—either because I talked too fast, used words she doesn’t know yet, or because she’s exhausted from trying to understand a foreign language all morning. Take a deep breath, slow down, and show your students the same grace you would want if you were taking an Algebra class in Russian.

### 5. Realize that more is going on in their minds than they can express.

One of the hardest parts about struggling with a foreign language is that you don’t have the words to express your

thoughts. At a dinner party where everyone is speaking French, I might have a deep observation about literature that sounds sophisticated in my head, but comes out in caveman talk: “Me like books when they is good and not bad.”

A 12-year-old English learner is capable of the same complexity of thought, innovative ideas, and profound questions as a native English speaker of the same age. But that adolescent English learner might be limited to the vocabulary of a 5-year-old until his speaking abilities catch up with his thoughts.

If you can give a child a chance to speak in his native language, do it. If you speak the child’s native language, speak it with him once in awhile. If you speak the language like a toddler, even better—it’s a wonderful role reversal to have the words rolling off his tongue while you fumble and make mistakes.

If you can put together a small group once in awhile of kids who all speak the same language, especially for content areas like math or science, do it. There’s a pervasive idea that children will learn a new language faster if they’re forbidden from speaking their native language. The reality is that opportunities to speak your maternal language provide a bridge to difficult concepts by removing the language barrier.

English learners contribute a lot to our classrooms—cultural richness, a different perspective on the world, and a fresh take on language itself. We can make their days more joyful by taking the time to put ourselves in their shoes, then making the path a little easier for them to walk. ■

*Justin Minkel teaches 1st and 2nd grade at Jones Elementary in Springdale, Ark., a high-performing, high-poverty school where 85 percent of the students are English-language learners.*

Copyright ©2019 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder.

Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source.

For additional print or electronic copies of a Spotlight or to buy in bulk, visit [www.edweek.org/info/about/reprints.html](http://www.edweek.org/info/about/reprints.html)

Published by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc.  
6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100  
Bethesda, MD, 20814  
Phone: (301) 280-3100  
[www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org)