

Accelerating Growth for ELs through Formative Assessments

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Between 2000 and 2015, Pennsylvania has seen more than a 20% increase in the numbers of English learners (ELs) in its public schools. As a percentage of total EL enrollment, the increase has been close to 50%, within that same 15 year window (NCES, 2017). The impact is unevenly felt across schools, with most schools serving few to no ELs, while others serve hundreds (PDE, 2019).

Whether or not teachers of ELs have one or several ELs on their rosters, the angst that many teachers feel is all too real. A 2013 survey found that teachers feel less prepared to teach ELs than they do for any other nationally reported demographic of students (Editorial Projects in Education). Progress for ELs confirms that teachers are right to be concerned. One third to one half of ELs do not complete high school. The weaker an EL's English skills, the more likely they are to drop out of school (NCES, 2015; August & Shanahan, 2006). Improving achievement for ELs is a matter of urgency, and this urgency starts early and spans the K-12 spectrum.

It is estimated that ELs make 6–8 months of academic growth for every 10 months of growth made by their English-only peers (Thomas & Collier, 2002). That gap might not mean as much if it were a measurement of the loss of academic growth for one year alone, but accumulated year after year, the annual loss of two to four months of growth becomes persistent and can feel overwhelming to students as well as their teachers. Mathematically speaking, in order to bridge the achievement gap, ELs who start off behind academically will need to make more than 10 months of academic growth every year. Where excellence in teaching is concerned, there is a great deal at stake. We will not simply need to improve student performance; if we want students to catch up, we will need to accelerate their growth, so that they grow faster than what would typically be expected.

The Importance of Formative Assessments

When it comes to bridging the EL achievement gap, the effective uses of formative assessments becomes a matter of urgency. William (2007) notes that consistent checks for understanding (formative assessments) can add 6 to 9 extra months of growth per year. That's important. If our goal is to accelerate learning, we will need to consistently check for student understanding. Unlike many of the current standardized tests that have dubbed themselves as "formative assessments," William is referring to a much more frequent, as-you-teach-it form of assessment. In his own words, such assessment will take "helping teachers develop and day-by-day formative assessment practices" (William, 2007, p. 184). It is not enough to assess at the

end of every lesson or unit, especially when it comes to ELs who desperately need accelerated learning growth. Instead, if EL achievement is to be accelerated, checking for understanding needs to be happening consistently and constantly throughout every lesson.

Total Participation Techniques

Total Participation Techniques (TPTs) are teaching techniques that allow for evidence of active participation and cognitive engagement from all students at the same time (Himmele & Himmele, 2009, 2017). An example of a non-TPT approach to teaching would be a traditional question-and-answer (Q & A) session between the teacher and his or her class. With a traditional Q & A, teachers hear from engaged students who raise their hands, while there is little or no evidence of learning from the majority of the class. In contrast, using Total Participation Techniques, teachers ask all students to demonstrate participation and cognitive engagement at the same time.

For example, after a presentation on the women's suffrage movement, a teacher might ask all students to complete a Quick-Write template (see Figure 1) with the following prompt, "What's it about?" This might be followed up by a brief pair-share, where students share their responses with a partner. Once students share with partners and get their thoughts freely flowing, the students would then be asked to dig deeply into the content, bypassing the surface summaries and making connections to the world, the things they've read about, issues of social justice, etc. in order to answer the next prompt. "Now that we know what it's about, dig deep and tell me what's it really about." Or as Keely Potter, our friend and colleague asks, "What's it reeeeeeeaaaally about?" That minor twist with an emphasis on the word "really" serves to alert students that a literal summary is no longer being sought; at this point teachers are looking for students to search for deeper meanings, principles, and truths about what is being studied. This Quick-Write activity is meant to facilitate this type of learning.

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Figure 1. Quick-Write template

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| Name _____ | Date _____ |
| What's it about? | |
| | |
| What's it <i>really</i> about? | |
| | |

Himmele, P., Himmele, W., & Potter, K. (2014). *Total Literacy Techniques: Tools to help students analyze literature and informational texts*. p.59. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Most TPTs function as formative assessments, allowing teachers to gauge what students are grasping and what they need while the lesson is taking place. In a study of 211 fifth grade ELs in four North Texas schools (two TPT-practicing schools and two non-TPT-practicing schools), the ELs in the TPT-practicing schools outperformed the non-TPT practicing schools on standardized reading assessments (De la Isla, 2015).

TPTs provide benefits for ELs in multiple ways. In addition to providing teachers with opportunities to check for understanding, TPTs also provide opportunities for students to interact around the content being learned. That interaction is ideal for ELs because, not only are students processing the content, they are also interacting in academic conversations while they process the content. These academic conversations can provide practice in using academic language in ways that are relevant to students. This can be enhanced by grouping students in random ways, so that even shy or quiet ELs who struggle with interaction are able to interact in non-threatening ways.

Not surprisingly, active participation and student engagement produced very high results in meta-analyses on strategy effectiveness (Hattie, 2009). TPTs require students to actively participate while they reflect on, summarize, and analyze key components of what they are learning. David Sousa reports 4 to 10 times more retention for students who are involved in verbal and visual processing (audiovisual, demonstration, and discussion groups) when compared to those exposed to the verbal processing alone found in lectures and readings (Sousa, 2006). Such as with the *What's it Really About?* Quick-Write shown above, and the Concept Mapping example that will be explained next, the best strategies are those that require students to do something with the content in a way that provides evidence of learning.

Concept Mapping

One strategy that serves as a Total Participation Technique is called Concept Mapping (Novak & Gowin, 1984). Concept mapping functions as a formative

assessment in that it provides teachers with evidence of student learning as they are sorting their cards, explaining their understandings, and completing their written summaries.

Steps in Concept Mapping:

- 1) Students sort the terms in ways that make sense according to what was read.
- 2) Students meet with peers and explain their placement of the terms.
- 3) Students make changes based on new understandings and glue the terms in place.
- 4) Students connect the terms using arrows and their own words. The idea is that readers should be able to read through the concept map without ever leaving the page.

Concept Mapping (see example in Figure 2) has several benefits for ELs. First, it supports and builds comprehension, because it asks students to make sense of key terms that have been selected by the teacher as important for understanding the text. Second, concept mapping provides an opportunity for students to interact with each other while they explain how they organized the concepts. Students talk through their understandings, and if they glean new understandings after talking with their peers, they can rearrange their cards prior to gluing them in place. Third, concept mapping requires that students create complete thoughts using the cards that have been glued in place. Students record their thoughts so that readers can read the concept map without ever leaving the page. Throughout this whole process, the teacher is circulating around the room, affirming students' understandings and providing prompts to students who need support.

Concept mapping is excellent for ELs in that it allows students to process their understandings using interaction within the context of academic conversations held with peers. It is an example of just one of the strategies that can help ELs be fully present as they make progress toward deeply understanding what they read. While concept mapping is somewhat time-consuming, other TPTs are not. For example, another TPT that functions as a formative assessment is as simple as asking students to provide you with a one-word summary of a selection that they've read and provide a quick rationale for their one-word summary.

Final Thoughts

Helping ELs succeed will take a commitment toward accelerating their academic growth. When we share our strategies with teachers, the most common comment that we hear is, "These techniques are good for everyone. They are just good teaching." While that statement is true, the danger that we see is that educators will forget that for ELs these techniques are a lifeline. This belief, that the only thing that is needed is *the practicing of good teaching*, is passive and somewhat dismissive; if you are a good teacher, then you will not need anything else. This somewhat

dismissive approach can pose a danger in that it allows for passivity to settle in, and can lead to us forgetting that these techniques are ESSENTIAL for EL success. A non-EL might or might not succeed with approaches like the traditional Q & A; an EL's success is dependent on our accelerating growth by making formative assessments standard everyday practice that is embedded in every lesson that we teach. We can do this through the use of Total Participation Techniques. For ELs, this is a matter of urgency; if we hope to bridge the persistent achievement gap that threatens the academic success and well-being of our ELs, commitment to the everyday use of TPTs and formative assessments may be the simplest and quickest way to do so.

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**Appendix
Figure 2: Concept Mapping**

