

Intervention: Bilingual/ESL Instructional Strategies for ELL Students

Comprehensible Input (All Grades)



What Is Comprehensible Input?

A critical concept for second-language development for students with and without learning difficulties is comprehensible input. **Comprehensible input means that students should be able to understand the essence of what is being said or presented to them.** This does not mean, however, that teachers must use only words students understand. In fact, instruction can be incomprehensible even when students know all of the words. Students learn a new language best when they receive input that is just a bit more difficult than they can easily understand. In other words, students may understand most, but not all, words the teacher is using.

Making teacher talk comprehensible to students goes beyond the choice of vocabulary and involves presentation of background and context, explanation and rewording of unclear content, and the use of effective techniques such as graphic organizers. **By using context or visual cues, or by asking for clarification, students enhance their knowledge of English.** When input is comprehensible, students understand most aspects of what is required for learning, and the learning experience pushes them to greater understanding.

One way teachers can ensure that material is sufficiently comprehensible is to **provide relevant background knowledge and content.** Teachers should try to explain ideas or concepts several times using slight variations in terminology and examples.

Comprehensible input is related to more than just language development and curriculum content. Appropriate context is crucial. One way for teachers to be sensitive to the language and cultural backgrounds of their English-language learners with learning difficulties is to **provide instruction that draws on the experiences of their students.** This does not mean that teachers have to be experts in their students' cultures, but they do have to understand how effective it can be to connect students' learning to their past experiences. Such understanding can often be gained by listening carefully and attentively to students.

Many other techniques can be used to increase the likelihood that students will understand what is being said to them, such as **the use of consistent language, frequent use of visuals, and providing frequent opportunities for students to express their ideas.** Comprehensible instruction requires that teachers carefully control their vocabulary and use graphic organizers, concrete objects, and gestures when possible to enhance understanding. It is important to limit the length and number of lecture-type presentations.

During instructional dialogs, **the focus should be primarily on accuracy of content,** not rigid requirements associated with correct language use. Spending time defining, discussing, and clarifying vocabulary words unlikely to be familiar to the students prior to

reading a passage has demonstrated consistently positive effects on reading fluency, accuracy, and comprehension for students with learning, speech, and language disabilities.

To continually modulate and clarify the language of instruction, teaching must also be highly interactive. **Teachers must constantly involve students, ask many questions, and encourage students to express their ideas and thoughts in the new language.** One strategy for motivating students is to give them opportunities to share their language, culture, country, and experiences. Opportunities to use language orally create, in turn, opportunities to increase receptive language skills.

Students need to be given more opportunities in the classroom to use oral language and to engage in cognitively challenging tasks. **Cooperative learning and peer tutoring strategies** have the potential to effectively and rapidly increase English-language development, particularly when working with highly de-contextualized and cognitively challenged language concepts.

For older students, expressing ideas orally can be risky in some classrooms. The use of **dialog journals**, even computer journals, with feedback from the teacher, can become a more comfortable vehicle for English language development.

In conclusion, it is important to realize **that comprehensible input is as much an ideal as it is an achievable reality.** In teaching English-language learners with learning difficulties, we can attempt to reach this ideal level of support and challenge, but in the context of complex and fast-paced classroom interactions, it may rarely be achieved as much as we would like. Nonetheless, this is a critical principle as you develop an instructional program for each English-language learner.

Excerpted from *Teaching English-Language Learners with Learning Difficulties*

Provided in partnership with [The Council for Exceptional Children](#).

From: <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/learning-disabilities/bilingual-education/10260.html>

Techniques to increase comprehensibility:

- Use a lot of visuals and hands-on materials—pictures, drawings, hands-on demonstrations, charts, timelines, maps, outlines, etc.
- Use gestures, facial expressions, body language, etc. when speaking
- Speak clearly
- Model procedures
- Build on what students already know
- *Pre-scan* readings, look at the pictures and headings to lay a foundation of understanding
- Provide frequent opportunities for students to express their ideas
- Be careful of idioms, slang, and pronouns
- Establish a safe environment
- Decide which key vocabulary/phrases/sentences & concepts the students needs to learn from the text and provide a list to your students
- Have the LEP student work with a "buddy"
- Use small-group and cooperative learning activities
- Give students the opportunity to demonstrate understanding of the material in ways other than verbal or written, perhaps through the creation of a product or through performance assessments.

From: *Working with English Language Learners: A Resource Document for After-School Providers*, Massachusetts Department of Education (2005)

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/21cclc/ta/ell.doc>