

# 1 Adapting Oral Language to Increase Comprehension for New English Learners

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The way we use oral language can make a big difference in how well students understand us and are able to build proficiency. Following are a dozen suggestions for using our own language to help our learners:

1. **Articulate clearly:** avoid blending one word into the next. We naturally compress language a great deal in oral American English, so we need to be self-aware about it. Learners will do best when we pronounce sounds clearly, but naturally, and separate words rather than blending them.

No: *What...is...your...name?*

(Speech is too slow to be understood.)

No: *Wachername?*

(Although we do this in conversation, it will be hard for learners to hear the words.)

Yes: *What is your name?*

(Language is natural, but clear)

2. **Face students:** Watching the mouth positions and movements of a speaker provide extra clues to the language. Make sure that you stand so your students can see your mouth and facial expressions to aid learners' comprehension.

3. **Use pictures, gestures and realia** (real things to see, handle, and talk about). Pictures, things, and actions are very helpful cues to meaning for newcomers. Use these whenever you can to accompany language you use with beginners. You can guide learners to use their own things (e.g., school materials), create their own pictures, or imitate gestures and actions for learning. Do you think you can't draw? An excellent resource for you and students is *1000*

*Pictures to Copy for Teachers*, by Andrew Wright (1985).



4. **Increase wait-time.** Recall your own experience learning another language. It takes more time to process oral input in a new language. Provide that time by waiting before you ask a student to respond. We tend to be uncomfortable with quiet seconds in class, but they are much needed to give ELs time to think. The normal wait time in a classroom is only about 1-2 seconds, but with practice you can learn to be comfortable with more. Researchers have found that increasing your wait time to 5-7 seconds will give many more learners time to respond. So, be comfortable with a little quiet time after a question. Count slowly to 5, or 7, or whatever time is needed until most students are ready to respond. Also remember that if you call on the first student to raise a hand, you will tend to spend most of your time speaking with the most proficient learners. To facilitate increasing wait times, teach learners that you will nominate responders rather

than getting a show of hands. Keep sticks with student names on them in a can on your desk so that you can randomly nominate a student to respond while others respond mentally.

5. **Stop to paraphrase often.** Watch learners' faces carefully and notice when they are not with you. When needed, re-explain instructions or explanations in language ELs are likely to understand.
6. **Explain or rephrase idioms and figurative language.** Idioms are a fun and interesting part of our language, but they are difficult for beginners to understand – they can make the comprehensible incomprehensible - and are not used very frequently. Be aware of your use of idioms and figurative language, so that you can explain it when needed, and limit its use. Think before you use phrases like these, and determine if it is valuable to spend the time explaining and demonstrating them: *Piece of Cake. Chip on your shoulder. Fly off the handle. In your face. Smell a rat. Burn the midnight oil. Bad hair day.*
7. **Connect new language to what ELs know.** Language is more comprehensible if students start with the known and move to the unknown. So, to learn something abstract like measurement, have learners begin by measuring their surroundings and/or writing their own recipes. If they are learning the geography of countries and continents, begin with your students' or their families' countries and continents of origin. If they are learning about money, have them come up with problems about making change from their own experience shopping for things they need.
8. **Use more direct and simplified sentence structures and adjust vocabulary with beginners.** Active voice (*You will put your homework in this box.*) is easier to understand than passive voice (*Homework will be placed in this box.*) Sentences with many clauses are complex and difficult. Two simple sentences (*First, multiply or divide. Go from left to right. Then, add or subtract. Go from left to right.*) can be more comprehensible than a complex or compound sentence (*When solving a mathematical expression, remember to multiply and divide before you add and subtract, and to perform the operations from left to right.*) When possible, explain concepts using high-frequency, commonly used terms. When you need to use low-frequency, more technical terms, remember to provide explanations and demonstrations. Also consider translation: sometimes translations are the fastest way to help learners comprehend new words, so use, or have students use a translation dictionary or online translation when needed for key terms.
9. **Highlight key ideas and vocabulary.** Learners can only take in so much information at a time, so focus on the most important information and omit unnecessary elaboration. Really think about what is most important in what you teach – not just what is in the textbook. Highlight important ideas and terms through stressing the words in oral language, through writing the words on the board, through pointing out words, putting them on a word wall or in learner dictionaries, and through repeated, meaningful uses of the terms.
10. **Check comprehension frequently.** Keep in mind that students are not eager to tell you that they do not understand. Because they respect you and want to be seen as learning, many times students will watch you and nod their heads as you speak, while they comprehend very little. So you will not find out what students get by asking, "Do you understand?" but by asking for specific responses. See "Dipsticking" for more ways to check comprehension.