LANGUAGE FOCUS LESSONS
Planning Lessons to Support the Acquisition of English Vocabulary and Structures

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**Language focus lessons** (Gibbons, 1993) are lessons in which the emphasis is on English vocabulary and usage, rather than the curricular content. These lessons may involve exploration of content such as math, science, or social studies, but the focus of the lesson is on the language being used rather than the content itself. The language selected for language focus lessons is based upon teacher observation and knowledge of the language forms and functions that give English language learners difficulty. Examples of appropriate language for language focus lessons include:

**STEP BY STEP**

The steps in teaching a language focus lesson are the following:

- **Observe and note language errors**—Observe your students and take notes on the types of language that they tend to misuse. Plan time to work with small groups of students who have the same needs for direct instruction in language usage.

- **Gather materials**—Gather realia, visuals, and ideas for hands-on demonstrations of the language usage to be taught.

- **Explain and model language usage**—Introduce the vocabulary and model its use, simultaneously using the language as you model. Give several examples for each term so that students can see when and how the language is used.

- **Practice in active mode**—Give the students an opportunity to actually perform or model a hands-on movement or activity as they use the focus language.

- **Practice for mastery**—Design an activity that allows you to observe the students’ mastery of the focus language. If they do not connect the language to the actions correctly, repeat the third and fourth steps.

**Assessment for Enhancing Instruction**

Performance tasks can be planned to determine each student’s mastery of the language focus lesson. Provide an opportunity for each student to use the focus language in context and use an anecdotal record or checklist to keep a record of the student’s performance. See the following examples of an anecdotal record and checklist to document a performance task:

**Sample Anecdotal Record and checklist to document a performance task**

4/30/10 Claudio was given six plastic frogs. Teacher asked, “How many frogs do you have?” Claudio – Six
Teacher – Tell me in a whole sentence.
Claudio – I have six frog.
Teacher – Remember to add the “s”
Claudio – I have six frogs.
Teacher moves one of the frogs in a jumping motion to a lily pad.
Teacher – What did the frog do?
Claudio – He jumped.
Teacher – YES! He jumped. How many frogs do you have now?
Claudio – I have five frogs.

Checklist Format

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<th>Name _____________________</th>
<th>Date</th>
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Context: Performance task to test plurals and ed endings

<table>
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<th>Task</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses plural “s” spontaneously</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uses plural “s” when reminded</td>
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<tr>
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Comments:

APPLICATIONS AND EXAMPLES

Mr. Lee is concerned because his first graders often leave off endings of words both orally and in writing. He observes and notes the students who are doing this and plans a language focus lesson for these students. During math the next day, Mr. Lee gathers six students to do an activity with joining sets and writing story problems. Each student is given a laminated picture of a lake with large lily pads and small frogs in green and brown. He instructs the students to pick out 15 green frogs and put them on the lily pads. He then says the following sentence, emphasizing the plural /s/ each time he says it, “There are 15 brown frogs on the lily pads in the lake. Six of them jump into the water to cool off. How many frogs are left on the lily pads?” As the students count out the six frogs he asks, “How many frogs jump into the water?”

The students answer, “Six.”

“Yes,” Mr. Lee says, “Six frogs jump into the water.”

Mr. Lee then asks each student to repeat the words, “Six frogs,” emphasizing the final /s/.

“When you add /s/ to the word frog, it lets you know there is more than one frog,” Mr. Lee explains. “It is very important to pronounce the /s/. One thing you will notice is that when you add the /s/ to the end of the word frog, it sounds like a /z/. The ‘s’ at the end of the words sometimes sounds like a /z/ but we still spell it with an ‘s.’ We will make a chart of the words that sound like a /z/ at the end when we add ‘s’ to them.
“We will put the word *frogs* in jail because the ‘s’ doesn’t follow the rules and sound like an ‘s’ should sound,” Mr. Lee says as he writes the word *frogs* on a 3-by-5 card and puts it on a bulletin board that has bars on it like a jail cell. “We will put other words in jail whenever we find that they are not following the rules. If you find any more words that are spelled with an ‘s’ at the end but sound like /z/, be sure to tell me so we can put those words in jail.”

Next, Mr. Lee has the students write the story problem about the frogs, emphasizing the writing of the “s” on the words *frogs* and *lily pads*.

“Mr. Lee, Mr. Lee!” calls Gustov. “We have to put *pads* in jail too! It sounds like a /z/, just like *frogs*.”

“Good for you, Gustov! You’re a great word detective,” Mr. Lee says as he hands Gustov a blank card and a marker. “Put that word in jail.”

“Now, I want you to think of other word problems you can write using the frogs and the lily pads,” Mr. Lee says.

After the students have a chance to write some problems, Mr. Lee has them read the problems aloud and the other students work them out using the frogs and the lily pad pictures. Once Mr. Lee sees that the students are adding the “s,” both in speaking and in writing, he changes the focus of the lesson to the “ed” ending, using the same materials but emphasizing that the frogs already jumped into the water. Because the “ed” at the end of the word *jumped* sounds like a /t/ instead of /ed/, the children decide that *jumped* must also go to jail.

Jose says, “English is hard, Mr. Lee. There are a lot of rule breakers.”

“This is very true,” Mr. Lee says with a sigh. “But you are very smart and you will learn to speak English. Just look at the word jail if you need help with a rule breaker. Maybe we need to write the rule that each of the words breaks so we can remember. What should we say about *frogs* and *pads*?”

“They sound like /z/ when they should sound like /s/,” Arturo suggests.

“What about *jumped*?” asks Mr. Lee.

“It sounds like /t/ when it should sound like /ed/,” Tomas says.

“Let’s put them in different cells!” Katey adds.

At the end of the lesson, Mr. Lee teaches the students a signal he will use to remind them when they are leaving off endings in their oral speech and in their written work. The signal he and the students agree on is a pinkie finger touched to the end of the nose. The students and Mr. Lee practice giving this signal to each other to help them to remember to carefully pronounce ending sounds.

Mr. Lee knows that one lesson will not solve the problem of the dropped endings on words, but he will use the pinkie to the nose signal to remind the students to clearly pronounce the /s/ and /ed/ when they are speaking, and to add them in writing. He also signals toward the word jail board to help the students remember how to pronounce the endings.

As the year progresses, Mr. Lee plans to teach more language focus lessons and add the other sounds for the “ed” ending as he sees the need. The children, in the meantime, are looking for more words to put in jail.
Ms. Karras plans to teach a language focus lesson with her sixth-grade English language learners who are having difficulty understanding words that describe the classroom rules. She plans a lesson in which they will review the rules and use examples to help the students understand the meanings of the words must, may, might, should, and could. To teach this lesson, Ms. Karras will refer to the rules and procedures chart shown here:

- We must raise our hands before we speak.
- We should always be polite to one another.
- We must do our homework every day.
- We may go to the bathroom with permission from the teacher.
- We might get extra time at recess if we obey the rules.
- We may sharpen our pencils if the teacher is not speaking to the whole class.
- We could earn extra credit points for doing extra assignments.

Ms. Karras poses questions based on the statements printed on the chart. As Ms. Karras and the students discuss each item, they make a “requirement line” on the chalkboard, placing each of the “requirement words” from the chart along the line according to its strength. The students decide that must is a very strong word that means “every time, no question about it,” and they place must at the far right of the “requirement line.” They place may to the far left and discuss the word could in relation to may. They decide that could and may are about the same in strength. Should is discussed next. The students decide that should is not really as strong as must but in the classroom both words are often used to mean “It’s required. You have to do it.”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>may</th>
<th>might (could)</th>
<th>should</th>
<th>must</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have permission to do this.</td>
<td>I'm not sure.</td>
<td>I'm expected to do this.</td>
<td>I HAVE to do this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I may go to the pencil sharpener.</td>
<td>I might get a good grade.</td>
<td>I should be polite.</td>
<td>I must finish my work.</td>
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The lesson continues this way until all the words are placed along the line according to their strength. Ms. Karras then asks the students to think of laws and rules from home and the community that would be examples of each of the words on the chart. Cher suggests, “My dad got a ticket because he didn’t stop at a stop sign. Stopping at stop signs goes under must.”

“Great example!” Ms. Karras says. “The laws are musts. Can you tell me why?”

“Because you can kill someone if you drive a car and don’t follow the laws,” Cher states solemnly.

“That’s true, Cher,” Ms. Karras says. “Can you think of an example for might?”

“If my mother has time after dinner, she might bake a cake,” Tina suggests.
“Good example, Tina,” Ms. Karras says. “She doesn’t have to do it; it’s just a possibility. Is there another word you can use in place of might in that same sentence?”

“If my mother has time after dinner, she could bake a cake,” Tina replies.

“Does that mean the same thing?” Ms. Karras asks.

“Not really,” Juan comments. “Might means she’s thinking about it. Could means it’s something she can do but maybe she’s not even thinking about it.”

“I think you’ve got it,” Ms. Karras says. “Let’s practice some more.”

Ms. Karras gives the students cloze sentences written on sentence strips and asks them to take turns reading the sentences and decide which word from the chart completes the sentence best. After they decide on the best word, they have to explain their choice.

Conclusion

Language focus lessons are appropriate whenever the teacher identifies a mispronunciation or misuse of language that occurs consistently. The lessons can be used with individual students, small groups, or the whole class. However, it is important with young students or those just beginning to risk oral communication, that the lesson not be allowed to interfere with communication. If a student mispronounces or misuses language but the message is clear, it is always important to respond to the request or message. The teacher should note the misuse and the speaker or speakers who misuse the language, and plan a language focus lesson to support English learners in refining their use of English. Language focus lessons are most effective when they are presented in a positive way and the students are encouraged to practice the newly acquired skills in an authentic context.

REFERENCES
