

10 Ways to Support ELLs in the School Libraryⁱ



By [Jacqueline Jules](#)ⁱⁱ

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The school library is an important resource for English language learners. It may be the first place many students and their families get experience using a lending library. What can school librarians do to show ELLs that libraries are welcoming places of entertainment and enrichment?

1. Provide Foreign Language Materials in Easy-Access Displays

There are a number of ways to keep bilingual or foreign language books front and center in the library, and to integrate them into the curriculum:

- **Translated books:** Keep your Spanish and other translated books on shelves close to the action, rather than in a hidden corner. If possible, mark these sections with bilingual signs in Spanish/English, Chinese/English, etc.
- **Curriculum resources:** Be familiar with the curriculum and have as many translated books as possible on topics students will be studying. For example, many of the *Magic School Bus* books are available [in Spanish](#)ⁱⁱⁱ and French as well as in English and could be powerful learning tools for ELLs who need some extra support in a science class.

2. Provide Books and Information on Countries of Origin

ELLs love seeing colorful pictures from their birth countries in books or online. You can offer them access to those resources by making these materials available:

- **Books about different countries:** With limited school and library budgets, you might not be able to buy many books in languages other than Spanish. Perhaps if you don't have a large population from Vietnam, for example, you won't be able to buy more than two books in Vietnamese — but you can have books about Vietnam! Choose books with dynamic photos and illustrations of important symbols such as the flag or national bird.
- **Online resources:** There are also a number of educational websites that provide information and pictures from countries around the world. Some are free, while others require a paid subscription to access a database or encyclopedia. A homesick child might really enjoy an online trip back home and will learn some computer skills in the process.

3. Provide Electronic Access to Materials in Other Languages

Many online resources are also available in other languages, such as the following:

- **Reference materials:** A Spanish version of World Book Online (Enciclopedia Estudiantil Hallazgos) is available as part of Idaho's LiLI.org subscription. You may also wish to show students how to use the English-Spanish online dictionaries that include audio pronunciation guides, such as [Merriam-Webster](#)^{iv} or [WordReference.com](#)^v.

- **Reading materials:** Share stories with your students from the [International Children's Digital Library](#)^{vi}, which includes children's books in more than 50 languages.

Post links to these websites on your library web page for easy access from school or home.

4. Provide Audio Materials and Instruction on How to Use Them

Audio materials can be very helpful to ELL learners, from books on CD to free podcasts. However, some students will not have the electronic devices required to play the materials at home. Here are some ways around that:

- **Playaways®:** These are audio books that are preloaded on a portable player. A number of children's and young adult titles are available. Students may need instruction on how to use the players and help changing batteries. (Note: these are fairly expensive for a school library to purchase. Consider partnering with your public library to access Playaways.)
- **Library-owned CD players, MP3 players, or iPods:** Many classrooms and libraries are using technology to support ELLs' language acquisition. Students can use these players in the library to listen to ESL podcasts, listening activities on CD, or other audio programs.
- **Library computers:** Students can use headphones to listen to free podcasts or watch educational videos.

Short translated instruction sheets and stickers for players and computers will help students learn how to use these technologies effectively.

5. Share Culturally Meaningful Stories

With curricular demands, classroom teachers have little time to acknowledge holidays through stories and read-alouds. This can be done in the library, however. Here are some ideas for different holidays:

- **Halloween:** Read one of the children's book versions of "La Llorona, the Weeping Woman" — a Hispanic folktale the students may have heard from family members.
- **Thanksgiving:** Remember that ELLs may feel left out when hearing stories of families eating traditional American foods which are not served in their own homes. Share stories of immigrants celebrating Thanksgiving in their own way, such as *Molly's Pilgrim* and other titles featured on the Colorín Colorado bilingual [Thanksgiving Tales booklist](#)^{vii}. This topic is near and dear to my heart, and I focus on this issue in my children's book [Duck for Turkey Day](#)^{viii}.
- **Ramadan, Divali, or Chinese New Year:** Recognize ELL students' home celebrations by doing read-alouds on these holidays and asking students to share their own traditions.
- **Winter break:** Spend a week promoting winter and holiday stories from around the world that feature a number of traditions and cultures.

By incorporating these stories into library time, we validate a child's cultural heritage, and foster their self-esteem and adjustment.

6. Watch Your Words!

ELLs sometimes need help with instructions, vocabulary, or understanding a key piece of background knowledge in a story. It's important not to take their comprehension for granted as you might for English-speaking students. Support their comprehension in the following ways:

- **Clarify instructions:** Be on the lookout for puzzled faces. Reading instructions aloud doesn't always clear confusion for ELL learners. If you ask your students to practice Atlas skills with a worksheet and you see they are having trouble getting started, find out if there is an unfamiliar word in the directions or questions.
- **Help students build background knowledge:** During read-alouds, be prepared to stop and explain words like "patriotic" and "accomplishment." Never make assumptions that students will understand references to American culture and geography. Ask if the students know where the Grand Canyon is if it is referenced in the story. Encourage students to raise their hand if they don't understand a word.

7. Make Story Time Interactive

Interactive story time is a favorite activity for many ELLs at our library. You can get kids participating by using these strategies:

- **Choral response:** Everyone can say "Moo!" For story time, choose books that have a short repeated chorus or animal sounds everyone can chime in with. ELL students like to participate, and a repeated phrase or song will allow them to feel included, even if they don't yet understand the meaning of "I'll huff and I'll puff!"
- **Music:** Songs are a great way to teach library skills and promote a love of reading. Easy-to-learn ditties can become earworms students will repeat, giving them more practice with the English language. Use simple songs to begin and end story time. I have a favorite reading song, which you can listen to [on my website](#)^{ix}.

8. Use Visuals at Story Time

Using visuals will help ELLs learn new vocabulary words and will add meaning to stories or read-alouds:

- **Flannel board pieces, props, and puppets:** These are great tools for engaging all students and will enhance comprehension of new stories.
- **Tangible objects:** If a gourd is featured prominently in a story, bring one in to show ELL learners who might not understand the word in English. Whenever possible, use "realia" — ELL learners especially benefit from any three-dimensional objects you bring in to enhance the reading experience.

9. Use Visuals in Your Correspondence Home

The concept of a lending library may be new to immigrant families. You can help them get familiar with library books by doing the following:

- **Recognizing library books:** Prepare a short-translated note explaining when library books must be returned. Include a bar code, a spine sticker, and library stamp on the letter to help parents identify library materials, which must be returned in a timely manner, as opposed to RIF books and Title I materials.
- **Overdue notices:** If books are overdue, send home a print-out from your catalogue that contains the book cover, or send an e-mail with the book cover graphic. Visuals can get better results than a translated note simply listing the name of the overdue book.

10. Promote the Public Library, too!

There are a number of things that school librarians can do to encourage ELL families to use the public library:

- **Library cards:** Encourage your ELL families to obtain a public library card. Keep a list available (in different languages if possible) of different resources at your local library so that you can show parents what they will be able to use if they get a card.
- **Librarian outreach:** Invite a public librarian to come to an evening event, provide an overview of library materials and resources (with lots of visuals!), and sign up new families for library cards.
- **Family night:** Arrange for an evening family event at the public library, where families can take a tour, visit the children's section, and learn about programs offered at their local branches.

Try some of these ideas this year! I hope you find they go a long way in helping ELLs feel comfortable and welcome in the school library, and that they support student learning throughout the year.

AASL Report on ELLs: School Libraries Count!

In 2007, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) initiated an annual survey of school library media programs. Each year, the survey addresses a current issue within the school library field in addition to its standard questions. In 2009 AASL focused these questions on English Language Learners (ELLs). [This report](#)^x summarizes those findings.

A Welcoming Library

Learn how to make your library accessible for children in multiple languages in this clip from [Launching Young Readers: Becoming Bilingual](#). This video is also available on [YouTube](#)^{xi}.

URLs for references in article:

ⁱ <http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/10-ways-support-ells-school-library>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.colorincolorado.org/author/jacqueline-jules>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks-spanish&field-keywords=autobus+magic&x=0&y=0

^{iv} <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

^v <http://www.wordreference.com/>

^{vi} <http://en.childrenslibrary.org/index.shtml>

^{vii} <http://www.colorincolorado.org/booklist/thanksgiving-tales>

^{viii} <http://www.jacquelinejules.com/duck.htm>

^{ix} <http://www.jacquelinejules.com/index.htm>

^x <http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/researchandstatistics/slcsurvey/2009/ell2009.pdf>

^{xi} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsoxNg-Oeec>