Smile for the camera—your students are going to love it! Do you know how to use digital photography as a creative learning tool in your classroom? Original nonfiction photo big books, annotated photo albums, and photo stories or talking slide presentations are all “photo ops” that allow students to engage in authentic oral and written language development. Both English Language Learners (ELLs) and their English-speaking classmates can share excitement and language-learning opportunities as they take pictures, and then review, describe, talk, and write about photographs that are the most personally meaningful and academically appropriate.

When ELLs and their classmates participate together in an activity—be it planting seeds, caring for a class pet, touring the school building, reading to kindergarten students, or taking a field trip the zoo—they engage in authentic conversations and meaningful use of language. To augment learning during these authentic, hands-on learning experiences, design activities that focus on oral and written English language skills, advanced technology, and creativity.

Photo Project Goals and Outcomes
Through various photo projects, students can achieve these general objectives:

- participate in listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities related to the photo project;
- develop appreciation of photography;
- interact with other students, parents, and teachers to accomplish and share the photo project;
- demonstrate increased oral and written language production; and
- work cooperatively throughout the process.

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ELLs especially benefit from specific learning outcomes. Through interactions with classmates and utilization of visual resources, they are able to

- realize that photography can be a learning tool;
- gain firsthand experience through field trips and activities appropriate to their ages and language needs;
- produce a series of photo projects related to their educational activities;
- engage in meaningful interpersonal communication with peers and teachers;
- dictate stories for experience charts, semantic webs, flow charts, and other graphic organizers to put oral language in print;
- select, describe, and sequence photographs;
- dictate or write captions and speech bubbles for photos; and
- share finished projects with parents and other classes.

When ELLs participate in photo projects, they benefit from a range of language development activities that enhance their skills in oral communication, literacy, and critical thinking. The following tasks promote these skills:

**Oral Communication**

- Describe location, physical characteristics, and past actions.
- Note differences and similarities.
- Express feelings and opinions.
- Identify self, others, objects, and places.

**Literacy Readiness or Reading and Writing**

- Recall details.
- Sequence pictures.
- Learn conventions of print.
- Dictate and write captions, labels, and speech bubbles.
- Participate in shared reading.

**Critical Thinking**

- Compare and contrast actions.
- Describe what happened before and after a photo.
- Sequence events.
- Make generalizations.

**An Example: Photo Big Book**

During a trip to a farm, my colleagues and I took pictures of students at important points of the trip they would remember easily. After the trip, the class discussed what they saw, telling what they liked and did not like. They drew pictures of their favorite part of the trip, which was a hayride. The children also dictated a story about the trip for an experience chart. To increase their background knowledge and enhance their conceptual understanding of farm animals and life on a farm, we read more stories about farm animals and made individual pop-up books.

Once the photos were printed and enlarged, the students were excited to find themselves in the pictures, which highly motivated them to take part in accompanying learning activities. These activities included picture description, photo sequencing, picture and caption matching using sentences from the experience chart, and recording a sentence that elaborated on the photo commentaries. All were used to create a digital photo story.

If a picture had no matching sentence, the students provided new sentences. At times, the children voted for the best possible sentence description, debating whether “We fed the goat.” or “Kevin fed the goat.” was best. Because Kevin was in the picture, some children reasoned, it should be “Kevin fed the goat.”

Beginner ELLs used repetitive sentence structures following the scaffolded sentence starter: We saw a cow. We saw horses. Linguistically more advanced students gave details: The cow had a baby. It is called a calf.

When the book was finished, the children enjoyed rereading “their” story. Their lively conversation about the trip was a powerful example of oral language development based on real-life experience. They never got tired of smiling at themselves in the pictures either!

**Resources**

