Here’s a question in honor of helping all kids learn: Does it make sense to use small-group instruction for English language learners in middle school? The answer is yes. For six years, I experienced the power of teaching such students in small groups, and I know that it is an effective way to help students learn.

Who benefits?
The English language learners in all of our schools are real kids who want to learn English and gain content knowledge. They come from a multitude of countries and have various cultural backgrounds. Some come as immigrants and others as refugees, but they all share a desire to learn, to achieve, and to make a place for themselves and their families. And they span the stages of language proficiency in English.

Many beginning English learners are at the preproduction stage. These students, like Mingmei, an 11-year-old Chinese girl, find themselves surrounded by English and confused by the newness of school in the United States. Students in the early production stage, like 11-year-old Radu from Romania, speak a little English but are confounded by the cacophony of middle level slang and the number of content-area texts. Students at the speech emergence stage are often like María, an 11-year-old from Mexico, who makes frequent trips back home and misses many weeks of school. By the time students reach the intermediate stage, they conduct conversations in English that are approaching native fluency, but many at this stage are like José, a 12-year-old Spanish speaker who struggles with reading in science although he is fluent in oral English. Advanced students demonstrate near-native fluency in English but still benefit from extensive, contextualized, academic vocabulary development to understand what they are reading and writing about in history, English, math, and other content areas.

What is small-group instruction?
Small-group instruction for English language learners provides an environment in which students can feel comfortable practicing and receiving feedback and teachers can offer additional teaching and modeling. It’s important
for English language learners to have an opportunity to work in small groups, but a middle level school’s master schedule often makes small-group instruction difficult. Even if a small group configuration provides more support for some students, it may not be possible to schedule for such groups because of the need to configure classes for all students. Trying to schedule PE classes for 54 students may have to take precedence over providing a small-group environment for 15 students. However, there are a number of teaching environments in middle level schools where it is possible to provide small-group instruction. The first one occurs outside of the school day, and the other three occur during the school day.

**Before- or after-school tutoring.** Students stay after school every day to participate in a comprehensive after-school program or they attend intensive tutoring sessions several times a week. The lessons provide a bridge between what kids are learning in school and their lives as independent, lifelong readers outside of school. Group management is often easier in this setting because the students in the small group may be the only students present in the classroom.

**Workshops in regular class settings.** The whole class participates in a variety of independent activities that are designed to enhance instruction while the teacher works with a small group for strategy instruction. *Strategy instruction* refers to the comprehension strategies—such as making connections, asking questions, visualizing, inferring, determining importance in nonfiction text, synthesizing, and monitoring meaning and comprehension—that can be used to increase students’ understanding of text. Usually, the teacher has already taught these strategies to the whole class in mini-lessons and wants to do additional teaching and follow-up with English language learners. Students who are not in the small group frequently do independent reading as part of their workshop activities. In some instances, an additional teacher works in the classroom during this time.

**Flexible grouping.** The whole class is divided into flexible groups—such as centers, rotations, and work stations—on the basis of certain criteria. The criteria for belonging to a particular group change on the basis of instructional needs, so the groups’ composition changes frequently as well. One purpose for such grouping is to provide strategy instruction that matches English language learners’ stages of language proficiency.

Students participate in one to four different groups each day, depending on the class format. Group sizes can vary, but I have found that having more than five students in a group restricts the amount of conversation and learning that takes place.

Groups are generally assigned according to the students’ stages of language proficiency and strategy assessments (see Zimmerman & Keene, 1997) that determine comprehension levels, but groups often span more than one stage. If that is the case, it is important for teachers to be flexible and carefully observe how students comprehend the lessons so they can adjust instruction accordingly.

**Pull-out classes.** Students leave their classrooms to participate in small-group strategy instruction. Often, pull-out teachers work with programs for Title I or English language learners. Although some question the effectiveness of instruction that is isolated from classroom contexts, a skilled teacher in a pull-out setting can make it work. Success, however, requires constant communication with the classroom teacher to facilitate students’ integration of strategies into classroom activities.

**Why Teach in Small Groups?**

Small-group strategy instruction is beneficial to English language learners for many reasons, which include:

**Low-anxiety environments.** Small-group instruction promotes students’ oral language development and encourages students to write by creating a classroom environment in which students are relaxed and comfortable listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. In addition, students often feel more comfortable asking questions and clarifying their understanding in a small group.

**Opportunities for direct teacher-to-student interactions.** In small groups, it’s much easier for teachers to interact directly with students. There are more opportunities for students to develop their oral language skills by building background information and drawing on their prior knowledge through such methods as role play, hands-on activities, and interacting with realia.
Guided student-to-student interaction. Small groups provide frequent opportunities for peer conferences, peer revision, and partnered writing in a guided setting. With the teacher as a guide, students work together to take on and use the strategies of proficient writers.

On-task behavior monitoring. It’s easier for many kids to stay on task with writing in a small group. The teacher is in close proximity, and the other students provide models and motivation for students to stay on task.

Comprehension checks. Because they are close to the students, teachers can easily check for understanding. By posing questions that are appropriate to the students’ stages of language proficiency, teachers can easily determine when students are not “getting it” and gather data to determine next steps.

Individualized writing instruction. Matching writing instruction to students’ needs encourages students to take what they know and use it as a stepping stone for new learning. Teachers are more aware of students’ needs and can easily adjust instruction to promote the use of proficient writers’ strategies.

How Can We Do This?
Once middle level schools find time for small-group instruction for English language learners, the next step is to organize flexible and data-driven groups:

One of the first considerations with small-group instruction is identifying which students will work together. Flexible groups based on students’ need provide opportunities for students to have targeted instruction for a short period of time. Often, groups are formed just for particular students who are struggling with a particular strategy, such as asking questions. That means the groups do not always consist of the same students, as used to be the case, with the “bluebird” group being the low reading group.

With strategy instruction, groups are formed based on data. Students are assessed in a variety of ways to determine what they know about using strategies as they read. Then instruction is planned based on the assessment results. After the instruction, students are assessed again and groups are reconfigured based upon their instructional needs. It is this ongoing cycle—assessing, planning instruction, learning, and assessing again to plan the next instructional steps and regroup students—that provides a flexible structure for grouping students. Small groups are not formed based on ability but rather are data-driven, and students are frequently regrouped based on assessments. (Kendall & Khoun, 2005, p. 6)

The importance of classroom management for the success of small-group instruction cannot be overrated. Teachers can plan wonderful lessons, but it won’t matter how much time they spend planning or how creative the lessons are if classroom management doesn’t support small-group instruction and classroom routines don’t support independence.

Like other instructional strategies, small-group instruction for English language learners amounts to a booster shot or battery recharge, but it is an opportunity too often ignored. As a teacher, I saw the value of this instructional strategy, and I think that if middle level schools have to participate in high-stakes assessments and provide grade-level content for English language learners, they must also commit to using the best resources to do so successfully—and small-group instruction for English language learners is one way to succeed.

References

Editor’s note: Juli Kendall’s MiddleWeb Reading/Writing Journals are available in a collection at www.middleweb.com. Her journals for Teacher Leaders Network are available at www.teacherleaders.org/diaries.html.