TESOL Connections
Keeping English language professionals connected

Designing a Whole-Class Approach to Supporting ELs
by [Kimiko E. Lange](#), [Rose K. Pozos](#), [Annie Camey Kuo](#), [Melissa Mesinas](#), and [Shelley Goldman](#)

Meet Kristen,* a third-grade teacher with a small but increasing number of students designated as English learners (DELs) in her classes each year. Despite more than 10 years of classroom experience, she felt underprepared for and a little overwhelmed by the task of supporting English language development for her DELs. Sound familiar?

Supporting DELs is the responsibility of all teachers, whether a 30-year veteran English as a second language (ESL) specialist or a mainstream teacher with a single DEL in their class this year. Readers may already be familiar with TESOL's "[6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners](#)" (TESOL International Association, 2018) as a guide to doing this. Certainly, it is hard to argue with the value of principles such as "P1. Know your learners," "P2. Create conditions for language learning," or "P6. Engage and collaborate within a community of practice." But how might one go about enacting these principles? Read on to see an example of how Kristen, with a little help from an unconventional teacher professional learning model, developed a strategy that focused on DELs but ultimately supported her whole class.

A Fresh Take On Teacher Professional Learning

Our project, known as English Learners and Design Thinking (ELDT), began in 2017 (Goldman et al., 2020). ELDT is part of a long-term research-practice partnership (Coburn & Penuel, 2016) between university researchers and surrounding schools. We work with 15 primary schools in five surrounding school districts to address a mutually identified problem of practice: raising awareness of and support for the needs of DEL students among teachers and administrators, and creating curricular and systemic changes for their benefit.

As we deepened our engagement with this work, we came to use the abbreviation "DEL" in lieu of the more common "EL." This serves as a reminder that the latter is merely a designation—a label placed upon students by our school systems that so often implies that these students are somehow not up to the task of learning, instead of highlighting their rich cultural, linguistic, academic, social, and experiential assets.

To support teachers and administrators attend to their DELs' potential, we use a combination of design thinking (Goldman & Kabayadondo, 2016) and hybrid workshops (Rutherford-Quach et al., 2018) as a new take on professional learning.

Design Thinking

Design thinking is a set of mindsets and practices that relies on an empathy process to support active teacher learning and engagement. The process is flexible (see Figure 1), with the teacher cycling through iterations of discovering their user's needs (in this case, their DEL student), figuring out what issues are presenting challenges for them, and intentionally engaging their own empathy to draw out fresh insights to inform design solutions.
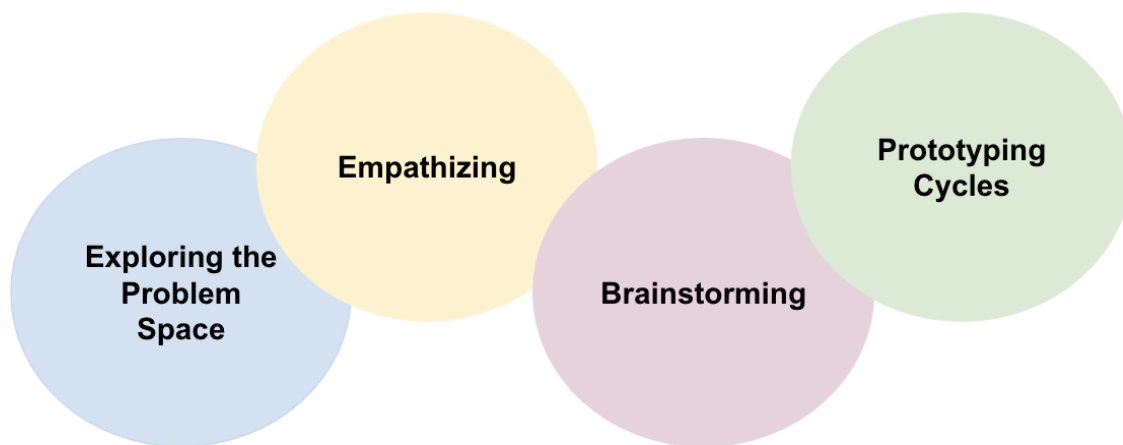
Figure 1. The Design thinking process: A method for solving complex problems. (Used with permission from Shelley Goldman, Stanford University)

In ELDT, teachers apply design thinking by starting each year with an empathy project. They select a DEL "focal student" in their class for whom to design, then gather data about them through methods such as observations, surveys, and interviews. They analyze what they've gathered to figure out the challenges, needs, and resources of their student, then brainstorm and prototype ideas for possible interventions. Over many months, teachers try out their interventions and iterate on them, learning from failures and feedback to design subsequent iterations and track their effectiveness through each.

Hybrid Workshops

Hybrid workshops support teachers' designing process by offering timely research on DEL topics, which the teachers bring to the forefront in the learning prototypes they create for their students. Content and resources are cocreated by members of the research-practice partnership to be as relevant as possible to the DELs' specific contexts. Workshops occur both virtually and in-person throughout the year, facilitating not only the development of knowledge and strategies, but simultaneously engaging teachers in the empathy-driven design thinking process through discussion, reflection, and application.

Examples of workshop topics include

- "Social Emotional Well-Being" (developing a line of communication between teachers and DELs' families)
- "Dually Identified Students" (supporting DELs who are also receiving SPED services
- "Constructive Classroom Conversations" (facilitating student-to-student conversations and enhancing pair-share activities)

Several teachers in our project found the workshop on "Constructive Classroom Conversations" (Based on materials developed by Understanding Language) particularly helpful as an integrated approach they could take to enhance language support for DELs in their classrooms. We illustrate one such case with Kristen's story.

Kristen's Design: From One to Many

Recall Kristen, a veteran teacher who wanted to improve her instruction for DELs in her third-grade classroom. She joined the project alongside two fellow teachers and her principal.

Kristen began her design thinking cycle at the start of the school year with her empathy building activity: observing her focal DEL student, Sonia. Initially, she noted that Sonia was "very quiet." "I just didn't see her bonding with friends," she observed. Through this activity, Kristen realized she needed to take time to learn what Sonia was experiencing in the classroom. She would need to set up her classroom in a way that would help Sonia feel more comfortable talking.

Following the design thinking cycle, Kristen conducted further observations. This time, she noticed that Sonia was

> involved in listening, reading to herself and writing her group's main idea sentence in her Reader's Workshop journal.…She talked once, but so quietly, I don't think others heard. [However,] she was fully engaged in the activity as an active listener and recorder.

These observations launched Kristen's prototyping phase of design thinking. Inspired by the "Constructive Classroom Conversations" hybrid workshop, Kristen teamed up with two colleagues to redesign their daily morning meeting routines, to incorporate a way for their students to learn about elements of conversation. Three times a week, student pairs conversed on nonacademic topics by using sentence starters. In her class, Kristen set Sonia up in a purposeful partnership with a classmate to help create a social bond, which played a crucial piece in leveling the languaging playing field.

At first, Kristen couldn't hear what Sonia was saying, which made it difficult to determine her progress. So she iterated and codeveloped a skills poster with her colleagues (Figure 2). The poster outlined how a "good speaker" and an "active listener" might look, sound, and behave. Each student would choose a conversational skill to work on that day, and place a clothespin with their name next to it. At the close of their morning meeting, their conversation partner would provide feedback on how they met their goal. With this one change, Kristen expanded her support for conversational skills from being focused on Sonia to meeting a whole-class need.

Kristen shared that the poster was empowering for students, including but not limited to DELs. It provided structure, in the form of a visual, but also in its predictability (when they'll practice what) and social motivation (partners). Every student worked on their respective goals over extended periods of time, in a way that held them accountable to one another. Soon, Kristen was able to hear Sonia speak and stay on topic. As Sonia continued to make progress, Kristen continued to build on her social conversations by integrating these speaking skills with academic activities. In the next school year, Kristen and her colleagues rejoined our ELDT project in order to continue refining their model.
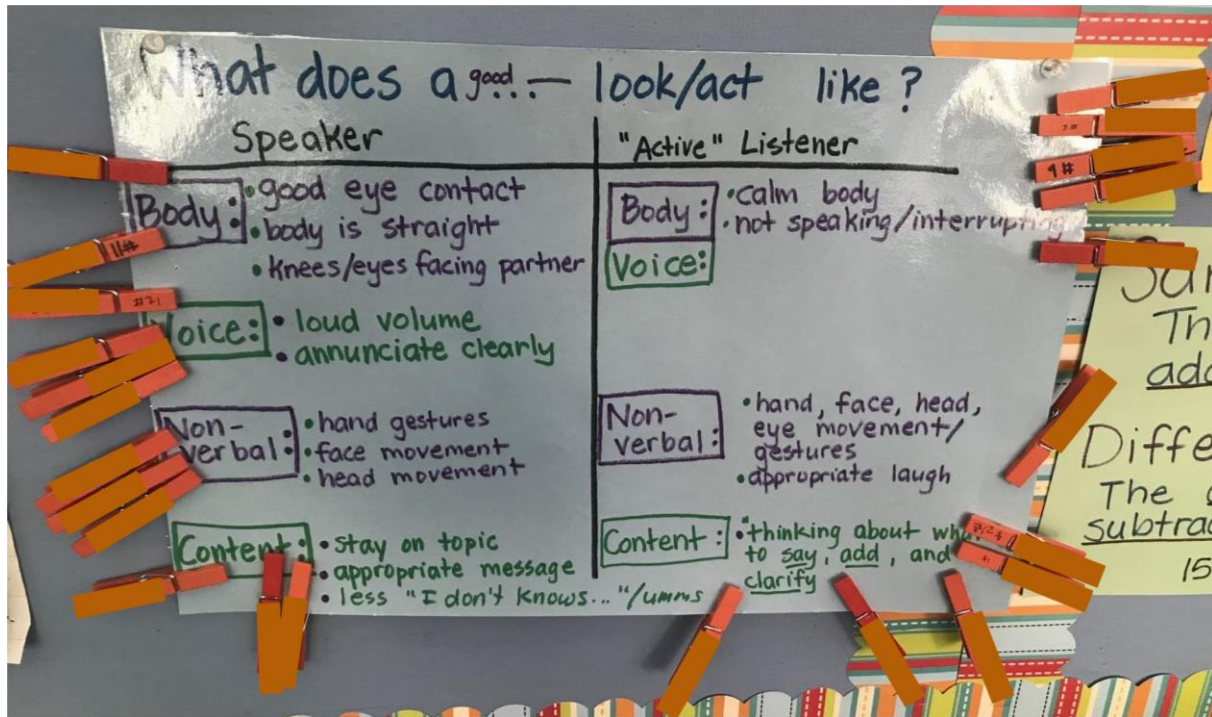

Figure 2. Kristen's conversation board.

Characteristics of Success

What made Kristen's design so successful? Certainly a combination of factors, but three characteristics of Kristen's case stood out across the educators who seemed to have the most success with their prototypes and reported transformative results engaging their DELs.

Embracing Empathy

First, these educators embraced empathy. Observing students may have already been part of their practice before ELDT, but embracing empathy was what really helped them gain more information and new insights about their students. Teachers who embrace the empathy process develop a heightened focus on the social nature of language acquisition and positive or more nuanced perceptions of DELs. Like Kristen and Sonia, teachers observed their DELs become more engaged and comfortable communicating. They also expressed understanding of the importance of creating a welcoming classroom environment for DELs.

Failing Forward

With the information they collected and new insights they gained, the teachers were able to try different innovations, adjusting them as they saw what worked and what didn't. This embodies the second design thinking characteristic we noticed: failing forward. Kristen, her colleagues, and other educators in our project constantly iterated on their designs, seeking and incorporating students' feedback along the way instead of giving up. They used information from their so-called "failures" to design better iterations for their students each time.

Finding Partners

Finally, finding partners in designing innovations frequently led to more success. We like to think that Kristen not only found her fellow teachers as partners, but enlisted her students as well, taking a whole-class approach to supporting DELs—and benefiting all students in the process.

Conclusion

We offer our project as an example of how educators can improve their support of students designated as English learners using design thinking. From Kristen's example, we saw how insights about one student's experience can provide inspiration for whole class instruction. However, the key to supporting DELs does not lie in any singular design; what is more important is the mindset of the teacher and their willingness to observe carefully, embrace empathy, fail forward, and find partners in their work. This can yield fresh insights that lead to more effective supports for language development.

*NOTE: All participants' names are pseudonyms.

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