

EDUSKILLS EL SPOTLIGHT

English Language Acquisition in the American Classroom: An Overview

Comprehensible Input Support in the Classroom

Encourage Collaboration

Create structured low risk learning opportunities to practice academic language with peers

Incorporate Visuals

Use pictures, graphic organizers, realia, manipulatives, and other real life materials to support meaning

Relate Learning to Students' Experiences

Build background knowledge by tying instruction to previous experience of students. Learn about student's language, culture, and community and incorporate cultural understanding in the classroom

Use Context Clues

Use dictionary as a last resort instead of a primary support with ELs. Instead, teach student to use clues surrounding unknown words to gain understanding

Use Peer Tutoring

Pair proficient students with English learners



According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), there are approximately 5 million EL students attending public schools across the United States. As the number of English Learner (EL) students continues to grow across the nation, so too does the need for teacher education related to understanding how EL students learn language in educational settings. Although language learning is a complex process that differs on a case by case basis, there is an extensive corpus of research (see references) that gives guidance on the language learning process and the variables to consider when educating English Learners. In this article you will learn some of the key features of language acquisition research, an overview of second language acquisition theories, language learning stages, the role of students' native language, and language learner variables with a focus on concept application in the classroom.

Second Language Learning Theories

Research related to how second languages are learned came into prominence in the 1950s through 1970s (Chomsky, 1972; Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972; Skinner, 1957) and a vigorous debate on language learning theories continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Krashen, 1977; Bialystok &





Instructional Support for Each Stage

Silent Period: Be patient! Use visuals, gestures, realia, Total Physical Response (TPR), materials in the student's native language when available, and the buddy system for support. **This Non-Verbal Period can last a few months but may last at most up to one year.**

Early Production: Continue to use Silent Period techniques, ask Yes/No questions, simplify instructions, allow for short responses on assignments, and use pictures to support assignments and to promote vocabulary retention. **The early production period may last 6 months to 1 year after the Silent Period.**

Speech Emergence: Make frequent use of word banks, graphic organizers, pre-printed classroom notes, and assignment journals. Allow for short responses on homework and tests. **The Speech Emergence period may last from 1-3 years depending on many variables.**

Smith, 1985; Swain, 1985). The Natural Approach, one of the most prominent theories related to second language acquisition in the classroom, suggests that students learn language only when they are receiving comprehensible input (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Comprehensible input is language that the student finds generally intelligible but slightly beyond the student's language acquisition level. When teachers use comprehensible input, it is more likely that the student will remain engaged and connected to the content material. As all content teachers are language teachers and the majority of teachers serve EL students in their classroom, it is important to specifically plan for using comprehensible input in the classroom. Consider integrating the comprehensible input strategies in the classroom described on page 1. Focusing on comprehensible instruction does require extra front end planning and work on the teachers part but reduces the amount of time teachers need to review previously taught content. Academic content and instruction that is comprehensible fosters student engagement and academic growth.

Stages of Second Language Acquisition

Research related to Second language acquisition (SLA) suggests that there are five general stages of language learning (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; & Hill & Flynn, 2006), each of which is detailed in on the left-hand column of this page. Understanding the stages of each EL student and which instructional supports can help students in each stage should be an integral part of support provided by educators serving EL students in their schools and classrooms (Mitchell et. al, 2013).

During the Preproduction, or "Silent Period," students tend to shy away from engaging in conversation, especially in the classroom. Although students are not communicative during this period, they are learning by observing and listening. At times students in the pre-production stage may feel overwhelmed with all of the new language and information. In the Early Production stage, students begin using key words and phrases mostly in the present tense. The student has limited comprehension and makes many errors when speaking and writing but can respond to many Yes/No questions. For many EL students, after being in a U.S. school for approximately 1 year, they enter the Speech Emergence stage when they have good comprehension and are able to



Intermediate Fluency: Prioritize academic vocabulary notebooks and opportunities to practice academic vocabulary with the support of sentence starters. When practical, give students leadership roles and opportunities to support students in beginning stages of language acquisition. **The Intermediate Fluency stage may last 2-3 years beyond the Speech Emergence stage.**

Advanced Fluency/Proficient: The Advanced Fluency stage is typically achieved within **5-7 years** after entering U.S. schools but may take up to 10 years depending on multiple variables to fully develop CALP.

Integrating the Home Language

Encourage Reading in Native Language

Reading skills developed in any language can be transferred to the skills needed to become a proficient English reader. Reading skills stall if the student does not continue to read in the native language while learning English. Incorporate Visuals, use pictures, graphic organizers, realia, manipulatives, and other real-life materials to support meaning



make use of simple complete sentences but still make many grammatical errors and have difficulty understanding idioms and jokes.

After 2 to 3 years, during Intermediate Fluency, students begin to attain mastery of colloquial and social language known as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). At this stage educators may mistakenly believe that the student is proficient in English, but they are typically not fully proficient in academic English or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). After approximately 5-7 years, during the Advanced Fluency stage, students have near native-like grade level English proficiency in BICS and CALP. It is at this point that students exit EL services and enter into the proficiency monitoring period. Understanding the stages of each EL student and which instructional supports can help students in each stage (see instructional support recommendations on the left column starting on page 2) should be an integral part of support provided by educators serving EL student in their schools and classrooms (Mitchell et. al, 2013).

The Role of the Home Language

Additionally, it is important for educators to understand the role of students' native language in the educational process. While some monolingual English speakers may assume that learning a second language (L2) should happen more quickly than learning a first language (L1), achieving proficiency in a L2 can take as long as achieving proficiency in L1. Within 6 years from birth, most children acquire proficiency in



Post Information in Native Language in Classroom

Create signs or have a student volunteer to create signs in multiple languages to be placed strategically around the classroom and school.

Preview and Review Academic Content in Native Language

When possible utilize a bilingual teacher's assistant or proficient volunteer to provide a preview/notes in the native language of students prior to the lesson and a review of the lesson in the student's native language

Develop Bilingual Academic Vocabulary Notebooks

Work with students to develop bilingual academic language vocabulary notebooks that incorporate pictures and definitions to key classroom academic vocabulary in English and in the native language of students

Create Cognate Notebooks

Work with students to identify and create a notebook of words that look and sound the same and have a similar meaning in English and their native language (*also highlight "false cognates," or words that look similar but have a different meaning).

communicating in their L1; achieving proficiency in L2 typically takes as long as or longer than acquiring proficiency in L1 (Hill & Flynn, 2006). The first language is a "natural" part of everyday life for individuals, but a second language rarely feels "natural." Learning a second language requires mental translation to and from the first language and the exertion of extra mental energy. A student learning English in the American classroom is challenged with learning new cultural norms in addition to a new language which can be very overwhelming for many EL students.

EL students enter the U.S. school system with previous experiences and the asset and "resource" (Ruiz, 1984) of a home language that can be used as a bridge to learning English. When students understand the similarities and differences between their first language (L1) and a second language (L2), their understanding and use of both languages improves. While it is not necessary for a teacher to learn the home language of their students, the strategic use or integration of students' home language can support linguistic and academic growth of students (see the left-hand column beginning on the previous page for language use suggestions). Creating a classroom environment that is welcoming and respectful of students' native language and culture will help students build a bridge to acquiring English which in turn supports that academic and linguistic growth of EL students.

Language Learner Variables

Lastly, educators must consider variables such as an EL student's age, proficiency in their native language, and previous schooling when developing plans for instructional opportunities. Research around age and second language learning suggests that, contrary to popular opinion, adults and children placed in similar language use environments may pick up a second language at a similar rate (Brown, 2007). The primary advantage to learning a second language prior to teenage years is the likelihood of speaking the new language with a native-like accent. When learning a language during the teenage years and beyond, it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to speak without an accent affected by the primary language.

A student's proficiency in their native language and previous academic experience will play a larger role in the



Learner Variable Supports

Age: Provide age appropriate language rich environments regardless of EL students' age

Proficiency in Native Language:

When possible, assess recent arrivals in their native language and promote continued growth in native language through reading and other native language opportunities that align with English content instruction (for a basic oral language assessment tool, access SOLOM at <http://www.cal.org/twi/EvalToolkit/appendix/solom.pdf>)

Previous Schooling: When available, reference reports from schooling in previous country of residence. Base instructional content and targeted remediation on academic knowledge in native language in addition to English



process of acquiring English than the student's age. While advised, it is uncommon for districts to assess students' proficiency in their native language. Even an informal language proficiency assessment like the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM) in their native language can benefit students. For students with previous education outside the U.S., it is also helpful to review and understand their academic records from the schools outside the U.S.

Students who have limited schooling and proficiency in their native language will typically need more remediation and targeted support than a student with a strong academic background and proficiency in their native language. Encouraging continued learning in students' native language through reading and other opportunities within the school environment or outside of the school context will support students' learning in English. Reading in any language will expand EL student's opportunities in all languages (Krashen, 2004).

In conclusion, each of the approximately 5 million EL students attending public schools in the U.S. have unique needs, but there are general principles and concepts that may help address the needs of all EL students. Understanding how languages are learned, the role of the native language in learning English, and the unique language learner variables to consider when educating ELs will support their linguistic and academic growth in English. It is essential that educators use comprehensible input, understand where their students are on the continuum of the stages of language acquisition, and make strategic use of students' native language. When integrating these general principles of serving EL students, educators will be setting EL students up for success.

Contact Dr. J. Taylor Tribble, President at EduSkills (taylor@eduskills.us) to learn how EduSkills' services support teachers and EL students. Through EduSkills' professional development and EL Cloud-Database support services your team will learn approaches to teaching and learning that significantly improve EL student outcomes. For example, in the EduSkills Instructional Coach module, your team will have access to an in-depth bank of activities and videos that will support educators in their efforts to support the academic growth of all EL students.



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