

ENGAGING YOUNG ENGLISH LEARNERS

Fostering children’s language skills is a major focus of the early care, pre-school and prekindergarten experience. The number of “kindergarten ready” language guidelines indicates that early childhood educators and providers need to spend a significant amount of instructional time on language development. This is particularly true for providers and teachers of English Learners (ELs). Early childhood educators of ELs face the task of developing the communication skills of children in not just one, but two or more languages. These children have a dual challenge — they are learning language skills and content in their home language, while simultaneously acquiring language skills and content in a second language.

Early childhood educators must also consider each EL’s, or dual language learners, stage of **language acquisition**. Children at different stages have different instructional needs. When teachers and providers are aware of these stages and where each learner falls, they can establish realistic expectations for what each dual language learner is able to do.

Here are a few recommendations that will help early childhood educators and providers engage and challenge beginning-level dual language learners:

Consider Each EL’s Stage of Language Acquisition

Be aware of and understand the five stages of second language acquisition, identified by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell in *The Natural Approach*:

- **Preproduction Stage:** can last up to six months; is also known as “the silent period” because an individual may not hear children speak any English during this stage
- **Early Production Stage:** characterized by children using single words or two-word phrases in English, as well as yes-or-no responses, names, and repetitive language patterns (i.e., “Have a good weekend!”)
- **Speech Emergence Stage:** children are able to speak in short sentences (i.e., “I walked to the movie.”)
- **Intermediate Fluency Stage:** children can express sentences of increasing length and complexity
- **Advanced Fluency Stage:** children demonstrate a near-native level of fluency

By understanding this process, providers can set realistic expectations for what each EL should be able to do. Although ELs need to be held to the same standards as native English speakers on what they know and understand, how they get there and how they demonstrate that knowledge may look different depending on their level of proficiency in English.

Characteristics of Verbalization at Each Stage

Once a teacher or provider knows a child’s stage of second language acquisition, he or she can pose questions about content that match the way a child in that stage is able to understand and respond. As the child progresses, prompts or formats should be increased to the next level to match the child’s stage—a strategy called “tiered questioning”.

Here are explanations of the five stages of Second Language Acquisition and corresponding examples of “tiered questioning”:

Stage	Characteristics of Student Verbalization: The student ...	Tiered Questions (Prompts)
Preproduction	Has minimal comprehension without support May not verbalize Nods “yes” and “no” Draws and points	Show me ... Circle the ... Where is ...? Who has ...?
Early Production	Has limited comprehension when scaffolding is not in place Produces one- or two-word responses Participates using key words and familiar phrases Uses -ing verbs	Yes-or-no questions Either-or questions Who, what, and how many questions
Speech Emergence	Has good comprehension Can produce simple sentences Makes grammatical and pronunciation errors	Why ...? How ...? Explain ... Questions requiring short-sentence answers
Intermediate Fluency	Has excellent comprehension Makes few grammatical errors	What would happen if? Why do you think? Questions requiring more than a one-sentence response
Advanced Fluency	Has a near-native level of speech	Decide if ... Retell ...



Source: From *Using Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners (2nd ed.)* (p. 12) by J. D. Hill and K. B. Miller, 2013, Alexandria, VA: ASCD © 2013 by McREL. Adapted with permission.

When teachers and providers ask questions at the child’s stage of second language acquisition, they increase the child’s access to, and comprehension of, the content and provide ELs with opportunities to practice their new language. Asking questions from the next stage of acquisition is a transitional strategy that keeps children moving through the continuum of learning English. With the aid of tiered questions, children in the stages of Preproduction and Early Production can be included in all early care and classroom instruction.

Engage ELs at the Same Level of Thinking as Other Children

It is not necessary to simplify curriculum and instruction for ELs at early levels of English language acquisition. When applying tiered questions with children who are in the process of acquiring English, it is important to distinguish between low-level questions, which lead to low levels of thinking, and high-level questions, which promote higher-order thinking.

Teachers and providers should design learning tasks for ELs that require the same levels of critical thinking we expect of other children. Teachers and early care providers must teach higher-order thinking skills while using language that is appropriate to the ELs’ levels of English language acquisition. The newer a child is to English, the more clear input he or she will need.

Be Aware of Your Own Language Use.

In early learning environments, there will be many times when information related to content is transmitted. Remember that words alone do not convey meaning for ELs. To help ELs follow the presentation of information, slow the

rate of speech, use nouns to convey more meaning, speak in complete sentences, and use one or more of the following:

- Manipulatives and objects
- Visuals (photos, pictures, and drawings)
- Gestures and body movement
- Facial expressions



Classroom Strategies and Frequently Asked Questions for Working with Young ELs

Practices early childhood educators use in the classroom every day are conducive to learning English language skills. Being aware of children's stages of second-language acquisition along with these useful strategies below should help the teacher or provider and the student feel more comfortable in their early learning environments.

Classroom Strategies for Working with Young ELs

- Use visual aids
- Model appropriate behavior and language for children
- Use gestures, body language, and facial expressions to develop understanding
- Perform demonstrations to ensure comprehension and in depth understanding
- Provide vocabulary previews of forthcoming lessons
- Ask children to make predictions when reading stories aloud
- Adapt material in books to make it more comprehensible
- Use cooperative learning groups
- Provide multicultural content in early learning environments
- Provide home language support for children
- Create a non-threatening environment where students feel comfortable taking risks with language
- Make connections between content being taught and children's prior knowledge and experiences
- Provide more time for engagement and interaction between the child and the teacher or provider
- Allow time for children to practice and apply daily lessons
- Provide wait time for children's responses

Frequently Asked Questions for Working with Young ELs

Here are some of the most often asked questions by providers and teachers who are new to working with ELs that will help your ELs to feel safe and comfortable in their classroom.

Communicating with ELs

How can I communicate with a child who doesn't speak English? Is there anything else I can do to help my ELs understand what I am saying?

Use hand gestures, facial expressions, and visuals to communicate. You will be surprised at how much you can convey with these alone. Just like any other young child, ELs will also pick up on your body language, so be relaxed and confident, smile often, and let them know when things are going well. Speak clearly, enunciate your words, and avoid use of regional idioms and slang such as, "having a blast", "goofing off", or "bling".

Try to provide visuals and props whenever possible to help ELs better understand a concept. For example, use pictures to communicate classroom rules. When singing a song, use a prop or puppet. For example, if singing the song Five Green and Speckled Frogs, model what happens in the song using five frog props (stuffed animal type or puppets) to help ELs. Every time a new unit of study is introduced, use a thematic word wall with pictures of each word and lots of hands-on learning with manipulatives whenever possible to strengthen understanding.



The Silent Period

Help! My ELL children never talk; I don't think they're learning. What should I do?

Don't worry, most ELs will go through a "silent period" that can last anywhere from six weeks to three months or more. During this time the ELs are acquiring their new language and are often afraid of speaking and making a mistake. It is very important that the teachers and providers do not force ELs to speak during this time or punish them for not speaking. However, a lot of praise and encouragement often works wonders in helping ELs through the silent period. Try enticing ELs to speak through the use of props and music. What four year old doesn't love speaking into a microphone and hearing his own voice or singing along to a song with a big alligator puppet? By making English less scary and more fun, ELs are often talking freely and with confidence by the end of the year.

Native Language

I have several ELs who all speak the same language and they are always talking to each other in their home language. Is this bad? Should I put a stop to it? How can they learn if they don't speak English in my program?

Discouraging the use of the home language in an early learning environment or at home is counterproductive. Often, ELs will discuss concepts they are learning in their home language, which improves comprehension.

English shouldn't replace the ELs' home language; English should be learned as a second or other language. Banning ELs home language in the classroom will force ELs to lose their identity and have the feeling that neither their language nor their culture is valued. Sometimes parents mistakenly think they are helping their children by banning the use of their home language in the home, forcing them to speak English only. However, this only results in children who have no home language or cultural identity which can lead to problems later in life.

Social Interaction

My ELs are extremely shy and never interact with any of their peers. What can I do?

The buddy system is a great way to help ELs adjust to their new classroom or program environment; pair new ELs with English speaking peers. The native English speaker acts as a shadow and a helper so there is less worry about the new EL getting lost on the way to the bathroom or wandering away when the class transitions outside. Make sure the pair is a good "fit" for both children, and be sure to pair children up carefully based upon their personality traits.

Communicating with Parents

How can I communicate with the parents of my ELs if they don't speak English?

It is as important to communicate with the parents of ELs as it is to communicate with other parents. To help communicate with families, a monthly or weekly newsletter might be very helpful. Use lots of clipart for visuals and break the text up into smaller chunks of information. Provide the information in a language that is understood by the parent to the best extent possible. Provide real visuals at parent orientation and conferences. For example, to explain that a backpack is required, hold up an actual backpack. For a "no flip-flop" policy, hold up a pair of real flip-flops and shake your head in the no motion.

