

Key Principles and Additional Teaching Strategies for English Language Learners K–2

For each standard throughout this book, suggestions for supporting English language learners appear at the ends of the “What the Teacher Does” pages. Here, these instructional ideas are supplemented with additional background, including information on the stages of language acquisition and the implications for differentiated scaffolding.

Focus on Acquisition

The young students in our K–2 classrooms, both native English speakers and English language learners, are learning language. In many respects they are remarkably the same in their quests for language acquisition. Both groups of students are rapidly developing their vocabularies, using language to communicate, and learning about academic language and formal English.

However, there is a difference between students who are native English speakers and those who are English language learners. ELLs are acquiring a *second* (or even third) language when they learn English at school; they already have their primary language with which they communicate at home and in the community. Thus, many of these children are fluent in their first language, an important point to remember so that our mind-set as teachers isn’t that these young kids are struggling learners overall.

We learn language through two processes. One process is called *acquisition* and the other is called *language learning*. Language acquisition is “picking up” a language. Language learning is what we experience when we take a class in a foreign language.

In our classrooms we want to focus on the natural process of “picking up” a language. Thus, for both native English speakers and English language learners, this book is filled with strategies and lessons to teach the standards through natural, motivating, and supportive teaching.

Consider the Five Stages

To understand the best ways to help your English language learners, and to differentiate instruction based on their language acquisition needs, it is important to understand that not all students learning English need the same scaffolds, the same types of instruction, or the same performance tasks. What they need depends on which stage of language acquisition they are in. While people don’t fit into boxes, and language learning is a fluid process, it truly helps to understand the five stages of language acquisition and assess

where your students are so you can tailor instruction based on their language needs. These five stages, as described in the table below, are preproduction, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advanced fluency (Haynes & Zacarian, 2010; Krashen, 1982, 2003; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

It is also important to note that students acquire language in a natural order (Krashen, 1982, 2003; Peregoy & Boyle, 2012). The key idea here is that students learn English not in the order that you teach it, but rather in the natural way that the brain learns language. In other words, you can't force students to learn a grammar rule by teaching it explicitly, but you can ensure that students acquire English rapidly by providing engaging language—rich, supportive, culturally respectful—and meaningful classroom experiences in English (Akhavan, 2006; Hoover & Patton, 2005).

Offer Collaborative Activities

To support language acquisition, it is important to provide learning activities that encourage English language learners to work together with native English speakers so that they have opportunities to talk, think, read, and write in English. It is also important to take into consideration the prior knowledge of the English language learners and preview, or front-load, information, ideas, and activities with them in small groups before they join the whole group for a lesson in English. This front-loading in small-group discussion gives English language learners the opportunity to develop knowledge about a subject, discuss the topic in a “safe” setting where they can question, and even use their primary language to discuss the lesson so that they have a foundation before receiving the main lesson in English.

Check the Clarity of Your Lessons

Making your lessons understandable to English language learners is the most important thing you can do to help these students be successful in your classroom. Making “input” comprehensible will help your students participate in lessons, help them understand what is going on in the classroom, and encourage them to speak in English as appropriate (Krashen, 2003). You need to provide comprehensible lessons that scaffold the language learner. Scaffolds can include pictures, objects, media from the Internet, and other realia; the important thing is that they powerfully contextualize what you are saying, making it comprehensible and concrete.

Speak Clearly and at an Appropriate Pace

It also helps to slow down your speech rate, and to repeat what you are saying to give students learning English “clues” about what you are teaching and time to process. This is true not only for students new to English but also for students who seem to be proficient because they can speak well in English but may not have yet developed academic language.

Attune Your Teaching and Learning Expectations to the Stages of Language Acquisition

Language-appropriate, culturally relevant instruction and instruction with high expectations for learning can support students as they learn English. The following table explains the five stages of language acquisition and highlights learner characteristics at

each stage. You can best support language acquisition by matching your expectations for student production and interaction in English with the stages that your students are in, as evidenced by their oral and written work.

Unfortunately, many students remain in the intermediate and early advanced stages for their entire school careers, never reaching full English proficiency. These students, considered long-term English learners, struggle in content-area classes. This is why it is so important that you know and understand the five stages of language acquisition; this knowledge enables you to differentiate instruction based on student needs.

The Five Stages of Language Acquisition: What to Expect of Students

Stage	Student Characteristics	Time Frame	Appropriate Instructional Activities
Preproduction	<p>Students are silent and do not speak.</p> <p>They may parrot English speakers.</p> <p>They listen a lot and may be able to copy words from the board.</p> <p>They can understand gestures and movements (e.g., they can nod yes or no).</p>	0–6 months	<p>Ask students to point, touch, or use gestures.</p> <p>Provide listening experiences without the expectation to talk in English.</p> <p>Build vocabulary through physical response (i.e., having students act out words and phrases).</p> <p>Pair students with primary language students.</p>
Early production	<p>Students can speak in one- or two-word chunks and phrases.</p> <p>They may use memorized phrases, but will not always be correct (e.g., May I get a drink of water?).</p> <p>They may produce short sentences with present-tense verbs.</p>	6 months to 1 year	<p>Ask yes or no, either/or, and who and what questions.</p> <p>Provide comprehensible listening activities.</p> <p>Use pictures, language frames, sentence starters, and simplified content through picture books and modified texts.</p> <p>Build vocabulary through pictures and realia.</p>
Speech emergence	<p>Students can speak in simple sentences.</p> <p>They can understand a lot of what is said.</p> <p>They make grammatical errors in speaking and writing.</p> <p>They may pronounce words incorrectly.</p>	1–3 years	<p>Involve students in short conversations in small groups with other students.</p> <p>Provide short or modified texts.</p> <p>Use graphic organizers and word banks.</p> <p>Provide writing activities through response journals or short writing assignments.</p>

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Stage	Student Characteristics	Time Frame	Appropriate Instructional Activities
			Provide contextualized support for content work. Develop vocabulary through matching activities and lessons that develop conceptual understanding.
Intermediate fluency	Students comprehend basic communication well, but may not understand academic and content lessons. They make few grammatical errors when speaking, but may still make errors when writing, especially with academic writing. They can use more complex language and can participate in class with teacher support.	3–5 years	Provide longer writing assignments. Engage students in group work, project-based lessons, and relevant instruction. Provide instruction in grammar and language conventions as related to student needs (e.g., assess student needs by examining writing journals and reading records). Provide English language development lessons in vocabulary, content, and grammar tailored to student needs.
Advanced fluency	Students are near native in their ability to speak and use English in content areas or with academic language. They need continued support with academic language to continue acquiring language and conventions in academic domains.	4–7 years, or longer	Provide rich and engaging instruction based on standards and grade-level content expectations. Continue to contextualize language and content. Provide English language development lessons tailored to student needs.

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