

English Language Learners: Diverse or At Risk?

In 2022, 21% of children in the U.S. spoke a language other than English in their homes (Early Learning Nation, 2024). Beyond English, Spanish is the most common language in the United States. Among non-English households, 4% of children—nearly two and a half million children—have difficulty speaking English, which puts them at a disadvantage (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Learning English is important because it enables children to fully participate in school and American society. However, English language learners (ELLs) continue to perform academically at lower levels than their English-speaking peers, even though intellectually they are of average intelligence.

If you are an early childhood teacher, your classroom will often be the first place in which a young child is immersed in English. It is not unusual for teachers of young children to have an immigrant child who speaks no English in their class. Because most non-English-speaking infants and toddlers are cared for in their home by extended family, it is typical that the children are not formally exposed to English until preschool or kindergarten age. So how do we build relationships with non-English-speaking parents, and how do we communicate with and teach their children?

First, it is vital to build a trusting relationship with the child's family. This may be difficult to do if language is a barrier. In fact, about half of immigrant adults have limited English proficiency (KFF, 2024). Additionally, parents often have a limited education level, so reading in their native language may be difficult or impossible. They also are trying to integrate into a predominantly racially White society, which may add feelings of isolation and mistrust. If they are in the U.S. illegally, fear of being deported may make the parents unwilling to share information about their family or even to enroll their children in programs they are eligible for, such as Headstart. Language and cultural barriers make it difficult to access medical treatment, child care, food subsidies, and other government or community subsidies. Therefore, it is up to the administration of the school or daycare to find interpreters who can work with you to establish open lines of communication. And it is up to the early childhood teacher to be aware of community resources and the family situation.

Second, we need to encourage parents to build the child's first language. The stronger the child's first language, the easier it will be for them to learn a second language. We need to encourage parents to read, tell stories, build vocabulary, etc. in the home language with their children. Learning a sense of sentence structure, being exposed to basic concepts, and building a rich vocabulary will give their child a foundation upon which to build their English language skills. For example, if you are teaching an academic concept, think of how much easier it is for the non-English speaking child to just have to learn the new vocabulary versus having to learn the concept plus the vocabulary!

Research shows there are clear benefits to ensuring that a child's first language is maintained. Speaking two or more languages is associated with increased abilities to concentrate, solve problems, and focus. Being bilingual is associated with better mental flexibility, increased cultural competence, stronger connections to family, and greater access to higher-paying jobs. Parents and youth who can converse in English are better equipped to connect with health care, employment, and community resources. Therefore, maintaining and building the young child's first language proficiency is a high priority.

Third, it is necessary to understand the stages of second language acquisition. According to Jim Cummins's theory, students learn Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) in two to five years. But learning fluency in Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills (CALP), which are the language skills needed for academic proficiency, can take another four to seven years, depending on their academic skill level in their home language.

All new learners of English, no matter what their home language, progress through the following stages:

- 1) **Pre-production**: This stage is often referred to as the "silent period." Children are absorbing new vocabulary (up to 500 words) but do not yet have the confidence to speak, or will only parrot what you say. Children at this stage can listen attentively but have little comprehension of the words. They can follow gestures, movement, pictures, and other visuals, so teachers need to augment their verbal instruction with visuals. At this stage, teachers need to focus on building receptive vocabulary.
- 2) **Early production**: During this stage, students develop a vocabulary of about 1,000 words and can usually speak in one- to two-word phrases. Though they can speak in very short 1–3 word sentences, they make many errors in their speech. Make sure to avoid excessive error correction. Instead, model the correct use of language. Teachers need to accept 1–2 word answers, model longer sentences, ask yes/no or either/or questions, and continue to use visuals to enhance meaning. Content needs to be modified to the language level of the ELL student and needs to be focused on learning key concepts and vocabulary. Start exposure to writing in English by having students label items or pictures, and in reading, use books with simple, predictive text.
- 3) **Speech emergence**: The student has now developed a vocabulary of about 3,000 words and can communicate in simple phrases and sentences. They will initiate conversations with peers and will ask simple questions that may not be grammatically correct. They can start doing some content work with teacher support, including reading easy stories, sounding out words phonically, matching vocabulary words to pictures, and doing simple math problems with visuals. The student will still rely heavily on context clues and familiar topics, and their questions will be literal. Teachers can help them read modified texts in content subjects, teach using graphic organizers and word banks, explicitly teach content vocabulary, have students work in pairs with good role models, and use choral reading activities. In writing, fill in the blank activities will get them writing and using English vocabulary. Continue to focus on minimal error correction; focus on the meaning of the content.
- 4) **Intermediate fluency**: Students at this level have a vocabulary of about 6,000 words. They produce more complex sentences and begin to share their thoughts and opinions. Their social speech is fairly fluent, but academic language is still challenging for them. They can ask clarification questions and can do grade-level work with adult support. Depending on their home language's structure, their writing may still have numerous errors as they master the complexity of English grammar and sentence structure. Teachers still need to make sure they

are comprehending more complex concepts and using learning strategies. Activities such as “Think, Pair, Share” give the student the opportunity to process language concepts in a fairly safe environment. Teachers still need to explicitly teach academic vocabulary and idioms. They can also teach specific learning skills such as brainstorming, prioritizing, categorizing, summarizing, and comparing and contrasting.

- 5) **Advanced fluency:** It takes 4–10 years to achieve Cognitive Academic Learning Proficiency (CALP) in a second language. Communication in the second language is now fluent, but the student’s academic language may still have some gaps in vocabulary or concepts. At this stage, students are no longer in any English language learner program, so teachers need to ensure they are understanding the concepts being taught. Teachers also need to continue to offer error correction as the student fine-tunes their oral and written skills. The learner may still have an accent or may use idiomatic expressions incorrectly, but they are fluent and comfortable in communicating in the second language.

Instructional Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners:

There are a multitude of instructional methods and instructional strategies teacher can use to teach English language learners the English language. Some strategies for accommodating a non-English speaker into your class are listed below.

- 1) Learn about the child’s culture and teach acceptance to your students. Talk factually about similarities and differences in culture, dress, behavior, religious beliefs, etc. Model the behaviors you want your class to emulate so there is no bias or prejudice in your classroom.
- 2) Allow the child who is learning English to shine in other areas, such art or motor skills. Make sure the other students are not treating the non-English speaker as if they are younger than their chronological age.
- 3) Use varied non-language-based assessments to measure what they do know, and use the skills they do have as background information on which to build new skills.
- 4) Scaffold instruction by using concepts and vocabulary that the students knows to build new concepts and teach new vocabulary. You can also teach a concept using smaller steps to ensure understanding.
- 5) Create opportunities to spend time with the individual student daily. Talk to them about their interests and give them the opportunity to share what they are having difficulty with.
- 6) For students who speak Spanish or a language based on Latin, teach cognates (words containing the same root in English as the foreign language).
- 7) Allow time in your classroom for self-directed activities so that all students can choose activities that match their interest and language level. And don’t forget that during social time, non-English speakers may need help navigating the social environment. In order to learn English, they need to engage with their peers socially.
- 8) Exposure to a rich language environment has been shown to enhance all children’s oral language development. Reading storybooks, commenting on their ongoing activities, and

incorporating the student's home language into the classroom experiences will all build language for the ELL learner.

- 9) Preschoolers and kindergarteners can begin to build alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rhyming skills, and print awareness even before they gain solid English skills. Remember that a child who has developed early literacy skills in their first language will find it easier to develop these same skills in English. Parents should be encouraged to teach their child songs, engage in wordplay games, and read stories in their native language to build basic literacy skills. Teachers can provide parents with access to storybooks in the native language to encourage literacy development at home.
- 10) Above all, have high expectations for these students. Support them when they struggle, and celebrate with them when they have success!

English Language Learners At Risk

Compared with their native English-speaking peers, students who are English language learners consistently demonstrate lower academic achievement. ELLs are less likely to graduate from high school, have lower rates of school attendance, are more likely to live in poverty, and have parents who are less well educated (Callahan & Shifran, 2017).

It is true that our ELLs are not meeting U.S. academic standards. We also must remember that it takes up to 10 years before a student becomes fluent in the cognitive academic language. So even though a student has exited ELL support programs, they still may not be entirely fluent in the academic concepts and language required for middle and high school teaching concepts, especially if they do not have academic fluency in their home language.

We also need to examine the efficacy of the ELL programs our English language learners have been exposed to. Research shows that programs that continue to teach academic concepts in the student's native language while also teaching English have higher rates of success for students. However, these programs are very expensive to operate and are difficult to find certified teachers for, and they require that the ELL students be segregated from their English-speaking peers. Two-way immersion programs that include English and non-English speakers have developed in the lower grades of many schools where instruction is in both English and Spanish. This is feasible when the ELL students are mostly speaking one language (e.g., Spanish). Other programs include sheltered instructional strategies, push-in support with an educational assistant, pull-out support for vocabulary and concept instruction, and so forth.

The larger question is not which model of instruction is best, but whether the curriculum and instruction is culturally relevant to the student. Instruction that is inappropriate for the student is not going to be beneficial. Children from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds may come to school with different learning styles and with behaviors that are different from the norm. This creates conflicting expectations and makes the education not relevant to the learner. Ineffective instruction can lead to lower academic performance and to behavior problems. By the time they reach high school, if the student cannot see why school is relevant to them and how it will train them to find a good job, they are likely to drop out.

Another issue is schools' not having assessments that are culturally relevant for a student and/or not giving assessments in their native language. There is an overrepresentation of students who are

English language learners in special education, especially in categories such as Specific Learning Disability and Other Health Impaired. Statistics would guide you to understand that the incidence of disabilities should not be higher in one ethnicity than another. But if the student has not received relevant instruction, if the teacher has low expectations for the ELL learner, and/or the school does not have a strong ELL intervention program, students may end up being placed in special education.

We also need to look beyond the schools, to see where our ELL students are coming from. A child is considered an immigrant if they were born in a foreign country OR if they have at least one foreign-born parent. Hispanic families far outnumber any other immigrant ethnicity. Eighty-nine percent of immigrants are U.S. citizens. The current trend is that immigrants coming to the U.S. are poor, have a low educational rate, and are often fleeing from violence. This means that the children have been exposed to numerous adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and may be traumatized. If so, then they will exhibit learning difficulties and social issues such as separation anxiety.

Poverty can have devastating effects on brain development, learning, and overall developmental growth. Because most of our immigrant families come to the U.S. with few resources and no job, all the effects of poverty will come into play. In fact, 50% of immigrant families are low income. The other challenge is that if there is no adult in the family who speaks English, it is very difficult for the family to access resources such as medical care, food resources, and employment resources. So it is important that teachers understand the family background and situation so resources can be offered and additional supports given to the child and their family.

Although quality teaching is vital for English language learners, we need to look beyond just the academic issues for these students. We need to accept them for who they are, we need to celebrate and support their diversity, and we need to support the needs of the whole family. We are losing the potential of these learners when they are not given access to programs that meet their needs. To reflect on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, we need to ensure their basic biological and safety needs are met first, and we need to ensure that every child feels accepted and worthwhile. Yes, many English language learners are at risk due to their struggles to learn English, poverty in the home, and trauma in their past. But they also bring to our classrooms a rich diversity of cultures, ideas, and experiences that enrich the learning of all students when we celebrate each individual for who they are.

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