

EL Newcomers in Our Schools

Stages of Language Acquisition

All new learners of English progress through the same stages to acquire language. However, the length of time each student spends at a particular stage may vary greatly.

Stage I: Pre-production

This is the silent period. English language learners may have up to 500 words in their receptive vocabulary but they are not yet speaking. Some students will, however, repeat every thing you say. They are not really producing language but are parroting.

The silent period may last for a few days or a year depending on a variety of factors. It occurs before ELLs are ready to produce oral language and is generally referred to as the “**Pre-production**” stage of language learning. ELLs should not be forced to speak before they are ready and we don't want to embarrass students by putting them on the spot.

ELLs need time to listen to others talk, to digest what they hear, to develop receptive vocabulary, and to observe their classmates' interactions. When they do speak, we want the speech to be real and purposeful instead of contrived. **This does not mean your students are not learning.** They may understand what is being said, but they are not yet ready to talk about it.

Stage II: Early production

This stage may last up to six months and students will develop a receptive and active vocabulary of about 1000 words. During this stage, students can usually speak in one- or two-word phrases. They can use short language chunks that have been memorized although these chunks may not always be used correctly.

Stage III: Speech emergence

- Students have developed a vocabulary of about 3,000 words and can communicate with simple phrases and sentences. They will ask simple questions, that may or may not be grammatically correct, such as “ May I go to bathroom? ” ELLs will also initiate short conversations with classmates. They will understand easy stories read in class with the support of pictures. They will also be able to do some content work with teacher support.

Stage IV: Intermediate fluency

- English language learners at the intermediate fluency stage have a vocabulary of 6000 active words. They are beginning to use more complex sentences when speaking and writing and are willing to express opinions and share their thoughts. They will ask questions to clarify what they are learning in class. These English language learners will be able to work in grade level math and science classes with some teacher support. Comprehension of English literature and social studies content is increasing. At this stage, students will use strategies from their native language to learn content in English.

Stage V: Advanced Fluency

- It takes students from 4-10 years to achieve cognitive academic language proficiency in a second language. Student at this stage will be near-native in their ability to perform in content area learning. Most ELLs at this stage have been exited from ESL and other support programs. At the beginning of this stage, however, they will need continued support from classroom teachers especially in content areas such as history/social studies and in writing.

Be Aware of Culture Shock

Don't underestimate the results of culture shock. The emotional upheaval of moving can be devastating to any child. These symptoms are compounded when the child comes from a different culture and does not speak English.

What is Culture Shock?

Newcomers who act out in the classroom are probably suffering from culture shock. This is a term used to describe the feelings people have when they move to an unfamiliar culture. Immigrant children may become withdrawn and passive or they may be aggressive. The more different the new culture is from their own, the greater the shock. Newcomers have left behind family members, friends, teachers, and pets. They have lost their language and culture. Often they do not have the support of their parents who are in shock too.

Seven Teaching Strategies for Classroom Teachers of ELs

1. **Provide comprehensible input for ELLs.** Language is not “soaked up.” The learner must understand the message that is conveyed. Comprehensible input is a hypothesis first proposed by Stephen Krashen. (Krashen, 1981) He purports that ELLs acquire language by hearing and understanding messages that are slightly above their current English language level. When newcomers are assigned to a mainstream classroom and spend most of their day in this environment it is especially critical for them to receive comprehensible input from their teachers and classmates. If that teacher provides information by lecturing in the front of a classroom, the English language learner will not be receiving this input. Teachers need to speak more slowly, use gestures and body language to get across the meaning to ELLs.

2. **Make lessons visual.** Use visual representations of new vocabulary and use graphs, maps, photographs, drawings and charts to introduce new vocabulary and

concepts. Tell a story about information in the textbook using visuals. Create semantic and story maps, graphic organizers to teach students how to organize information.

3. **Link new information to prior knowledge.** Teachers need to consider what schema ELL students brings to the classroom and to link instruction to the students' personal, cultural, and world experiences. Teachers also need to know what their students do not know. They must understand how culture impacts learning in their classroom.

4. **Determine key concepts for the unit and define language and content objects for each lesson.** Teachers write the key concept for a unit of study in student-friendly language and post it in the room. New learning should be tied to this concept. Additionally, teachers should begin each lesson by writing a content objective on the board. At the end of the lesson, students should be asked if the objective was met. Classroom teachers also need to set language objectives for the ELLs in their class. A language objective might be to learn new vocabulary, find the nouns in a lesson, or apply a grammar rule.

5. **Modify vocabulary instruction for ELLs.** English language learners require direct instruction of new vocabulary. Teachers should also provide practice in pronouncing new words. ELLs need much more exposure to new terms, words, idioms, and phrases than do English fluent peers. Teachers need to tie new vocabulary to prior learning and use visual to reinforce meaning. Content area teachers should teach new vocabulary words that occur in the text as well as those related to the subject matter. Word wall should be used at all grade levels.

6. **Use cooperative learning strategies.** Lecture style teaching excludes ELLs from the learning in a classroom. We don't want to relegate ELLs to the fringes of the classroom doing a separate lesson with a classroom aide or ESL teacher. Working in small groups is especially beneficial to ELLs who have an authentic reason to use academic vocabulary and real reasons to discuss key concepts. ELLs benefit from

cooperative learning structures. Give students a job in a group. Monitor that they are participating.

7. **Modify testing and homework for ELLs.** Content area homework and assessments needs to be differentiated for ELLs. Teachers should allow alternative types of assessment: oral, drawings, physical response (e.g., act-it-out), and manipulatives as well as modification to the test. Homework and assessment should be directly linked to classroom instruction and students should be provided with study guides so that they know what to study. Remember that the ELLs in your class may not be able to take notes.

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