

SECOND LANGUAGE, LITERACY & LEARNING CONNECTION, LLC

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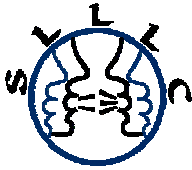
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Attaining Success for Second Language Learners



Working to Effectively Understand and Support the Educational Needs of Young, Diverse
Second Language Learners

Our schools and early education programs show a dramatic increase in the number of second or English language learners who come from homes where English is often not spoken or spoken little. This represents a challenge often to effective management and delivery of literacy based instruction when the teacher/ educator and child come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Second language acquisition and cultural awareness aspects are just some of the bodies of information professional development endeavors must continue to focus upon across the country to arm educators with what is now necessary information and expertise to possess in the face of increasing diversity.

Myths become critical to debunk and truths and realities regarding bilingualism and second language learning need to be disseminated and shared with the professional community and parent groups as well. Among critical pieces of information include:

- 1- A bilingual environment is most often a necessity, not a choice. There is an increasing emphasis on being diverse and it being correlated with higher outcomes in every area throughout one's lifetime.

2- Hearing two or more languages in childhood is not a cause of language disorder or language delay

Since language is linked to emotion, a home language should be preserved at all costs.

3- Children's use of two languages within the same sentence is not a sign of confusion.

Children will do this when they are aware that people around them in their environment understand both languages.

4- Children do not just "pick up" a language: They need a strongly supportive and rich environment for a positive second language learning experience.

Language learning in the first 10 years forms a critical basis for the development of strong academic and social skills. Clearly, the investment in a child's bilingualism and multilingualism will yield a high return especially when a strong, innovative approach is undertaken to arrive at this goal.

It has been well established that the demographics of American schools are changing . The National Center for Education Statistics tells us that many students come from ethnic, racial or linguistic backgrounds that are different from the dominant culture and that the number is steadily increasing. Educators are often at a loss for knowing how to reach these children and to lend the necessary support their academic needs. Following is some general pieces of advice and guidelines for reaching this population that has been reported as being quite effective:

- 1- Make sure the input the child is receiving from you is comprehensible by slowing down and allowing the child to process the information.
- 2- Focus on teaching meaning rather than focusing on modeling appropriate grammar for these children as meaning will emerge more readily in English language learners.
- 3- Try to avoid having the child respond immediately to any questions asked.
- 4- Encourage the child's growth and development via the use of his/her primary language. This will give the child a sense of pride in his/her heritage and native background.
- 5- Do encourage the child to interject their own cultural backgrounds into learning and classroom situations.
- 6- Include parents and community members in classroom activities who represent the cultural diversity in the community.
- 7- It is a good idea to collaborate with people from the local cultural community who may act as cultural informants and interpreters. To use knowledge from those in the child's community will help you obtain accurate information about the child and his community and help lessen the gap between school and family.
- 8- Educate yourself as much as possible about the family's culture and language. This information can be obtained from a local library or the cultural group in question.
- 9- It is recommended to learn some basic working vocabulary in the student's language so the child can see you, the educator value his/her language. Multicultural families' often appreciate the efforts put forth by professionals to connect with them and it also

shows a deference to the minority culture.

It is critical that educators realize the thought process that is involved in determining and distinguishing a disorder from a difference.

Examining these case profiles should begin to highlight the degree of comprehensiveness that is needed when looking to distinguish a possible language difference versus a problem.

PB is a Hispanic kindergartener who came to school only speaking Spanish. A home language survey in the school file indicated that only Spanish was spoken at home. PB's family had only been in the US 2 years. This child was classified as non English speaking by the teacher and the school child study team. Spanish was determined to be the language of dominance. PB was retained in kindergarten. At the end of the second year of school, She still showed little progress in acquiring English. Teachers felt that possibly this child required special education support. The speech language pathologist also felt that PB's basic English conversational skills were limited and continued to be. Pre and post testing revealed little progress in learning English. What the SLP found out was the family did not interact much with the English speaking world and received little opportunity to practice English outside of school.

Does PB need special education? Should she undergo special education testing because of limited progress in acquiring English? It may be tempting to say yes but the limited opportunities present to learn English must be considered.

Recommendation:

This child needs more experience with English and it is best accomplished via a native language approach. A proficiency test may be administered later to see if the child is acquiring proficiency with English. Although a language learning disability can not be ruled out fully, for now, modifications in the classroom including more time with English through a native language approach must be attempted first.

LN, a first grade boy, was referred for a speech language screening by his first grade teacher. The SLP assessed the child informally in the classroom setting. The student conversed readily and spoke of wanting to be a doctor in the future. LN was hard to understand due to morpho syntactic errors and misarticulations. The SLP reviewed the Home Language Survey and learned that the mother indicated that English was the language used in the home most by the child and by the family. This being the case, the SLP decided to send consent home to prepare for a formal speech language referral and testing.

After receiving this notice, Dad came to school and let the SLP know that Mom spoke Cantonese with the child mainly even though this was not noted on the Home Language Survey. The mother who was not a proficient English speaker, tried to tutor her child in English daily, Dad was from Mexico and spoke English with a heavy accent and made many grammatical and articulatory errors in English. The parents did not feel the child had difficulty learning English. Rather, the language models in the home impacted the child's

speech patterns. Although the child had some expressive limitations, it was determined his needs could be met within the classroom. The “problems” did not appear to stem from a disorder so the child, at this time, was not referred for special education.

What needs to be understood is that these days it is very important and beneficial if you can speak more than one language as well as the clarity of that speech model. Brain research reveals that our brains remain protected against age-related linguistic and cognitive decline when they have been exposed to two languages. Further, children who learn more than one language experience vocabulary spurts and tend to experience greater brain elasticities that lead these children toward higher and more robust academic successes. Clearly, for the purposes of job opportunities later on, knowing a second language can be particularly beneficial. Learning a foreign language also increases your chances of increased first language intactness and strength as it is associated with higher metalinguistic skills. Metalinguistic skills allow an individual to use language to talk about language.

To successfully master a second language, certain factors become very important: The subject needs to have adequate opportunity to speakers of the second language-the more and better the quality of the opportunity, the more it will help the subject learn the second language. Also, internal motivation of the subject to learn the second language is very instrumental in allowing the subject to master the second language completely and comprehensively. Quality of the language models the subject hears in the second language are also critical. The better and richer the quality of the language model, the more likely the

person will achieve full fluency and a clear pronunciation in his or her speech in that new language.

There are certain phenomena associated with second language learning that often are confused with a person experiencing a difficulty when in reality, they are a normal aspect of learning a new language. First, a child may speak with the grammatical structure from the first language or in a way that loses its meaning in the new language. This is called interference or transference and an example is a person who speaks Spanish as a first language learning English secondarily may say: “I have 56 year.” Instead of “I am 56 years old.” Notice the individual said “I have ” since in Spanish the verb form used to express age in English literally translates to “I have.” Also, the plural “s” was dropped in “years” since plurality is coded differently in Spanish than it is in English. This child does not have a problem-rather this is a linguistic difference and is a normal part of second language acquisition. Another common part or stage of second language acquisition is called the “Silent Period” wherein a person may not use the new language for speaking but can comprehend it –this is often mistaken as a problematic behavior when it is clearly quite normal. Remember, the brain needs time to cope with the new linguistic input with its own unique features. Additionally, when learning a new language, the subject will need time to process the new language so a clear, slow model is often needed in that second language to be used by one’s conversational partner. This will facilitate true, long lasting mastery of that language.

Specialized supports and services including use of a paradigm called Language Experience Approach is usually strongly advised in second language learning endeavors. This involves making the language tasks involved more comprehensible lending itself toward a greater and faster facility in that language. Teaching for mastery which includes for content and not only for “discrete learning” becomes critical as well. This allows for accessing of “prior knowledge” so second language children can make the most of what they already know in the native language which augments language learning opportunities in the second language like English.

Second language children clearly need specialized language support to be given the opportunity to prosper in their native language so as to augment second language learning opportunities. Language experience approach allows the child to use experiences he is familiar with to make sense and accommodate new concepts the teacher introduces. Also, the complexity of the linguistic demand is taken into consideration as well such where a simpler linguistic demand may be used for a beginning second language learner and ascend to more complex linguistic demands for the more advanced second language learner.

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