

The Ten Key Points on Second Language Acquisition

1. Second language develops much like first language. Attaining language proficiency, whether a first language, second or beyond, is a lengthy process, not a short-term, unitary goal. Every learner needs opportunities to hear purposeful interaction, imitate it, and create new meaning in a language-rich, communicative environment. Moreover, language learners of all ages need encouragement, respect, and a safe environment in which to practice these new language skills.

2. Learning a second language is complex. Given time, opportunity, and motivation, second language acquisition is a multi-dimensional process that can be fostered (but not forced) by the right instructional environment. As with first languages, there is a natural, predictable sequence of building competence and confidence. That sequence is supported by social interactions involving the use of new language in meaningful ways. Once ELLs have mastered a certain level of vocabulary and grammatical usage, they can begin to learn the exceptions to the rules that distinguish new speakers from more proficient ones.

3. Individual children learn language at different rates. Some individual differences in rates of language acquisition are seen in age, personality and aptitude. Other important factors in our ELL students include the life trauma of immigration, culture shock, feelings of isolation, development of first language, internal motivation and external consequences of using their new language skills. The bottom line is that all students will have different influences that should shape their academic instruction. As a starting point, though, all must be provided with a welcoming environment, supportive personal relationships, and high expectations of their performance.

4. Social English is different from academic English. Students who appear “fluent” in English on the playground or in other social contexts may still continue to struggle with academic tests and assignments. That is because the breadth and complexity of language needed for success in school is much more demanding than that of everyday conversation with other children. We must assess their true academic vocabulary and concept knowledge, and move them forward accordingly.

5. First language development affects second language development. Students who have developed proficiency in their native language will gain more proficiency in English than those whose first language development was curtailed (Cummins, 2000). Moreover, students who attended at least a few years of school in their home country learned English at a faster rate than students who arrived in the US at a younger age but did not have previous schooling in their home language (Collier, 1987).

6. Students transfer what they know in their first language (L1) to their second language (L2). Many of the fundamental skills of reading, including phonological awareness, letter identification, spelling, and word recognition, can transfer from one language to another (in both directions) (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). Consequently, students who have learned to read in one language will have an easier time acquiring reading skills in additional languages. Moreover, any confidence they have in their native language abilities will support them in the challenges of English language acquisition, so it is important to acknowledge and honor those L1 proficiencies.

7. English language learners are diverse. Although ELLs are affected by many of the same issues and challenges, the individuals and subgroups under that umbrella term include a very diverse mix of cultures, languages, experiences, and attitudes. Each one should be considered as an individual

when assessing strengths, gaps, and instructional strategies for moving them toward learning objectives.

8. Cultural differences can affect students' understanding. Each student's culture provides a certain context for their current knowledge base. The principles of instructional scaffolding suggest that we must take students from the "known to the new." Students rely on their background knowledge to extract meaning from written and oral language. Without any familiar context, it is difficult to "hang" new information on a cognitive framework for building new knowledge and skills. The more teachers know about the cultural predispositions of their ELLs, the better equipped they will be to understand students' behavior and target their instruction effectively.

9. Collaboration between mainstream teachers and second language staff is essential. As the ELL populations in our schools grow, the once-common practice of separating ELLs from their native English-speaking peers is neither feasible nor effective. However, the research-proven model of educational inclusiveness, in which ELLs and native English speakers learn side by side in the same room, also requires close collaboration between the mainstream classroom teacher and the ESL specialist (Van Loenen & Haley, 1994). This approach allows teachers to pool their knowledge and expertise across disciplines in order to integrate both language support and content instruction. The teachers themselves and the school culture benefits, as the practice "reduced teacher isolation, increases commitment to the school's mission and goals, creates shared responsibility for the total development of students, creates powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice, and enhances understanding of course content and teacher roles" (Hord, 1997).

10. Academic standards are for all students. With the enforcement of the No Child Left Behind Act, schools are being held accountable for the performance of ELLs, independent of other student data. Many administrators and classroom teachers have expressed concerns as to how to apply academic standards in diverse classrooms, particularly when some of their students have not yet mastered English. In response to these concerns, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), a professional association of ESL professionals, has developed a set of language standards to accompany the state and local academic standards (See www.tesol.org for more information.) Some states have also developed their own ESL standards in alignment with the academic standards. These standards are intended for use by classroom and ESL/bilingual teachers to plan instruction for English language learners. In essence, the integration of language standards along with appropriate instructional adaptations provides a means for ELLs to access the same challenging academic content as their native English-speaking peers.