



Supporting Children Learning English as an Additional Language

The ability to communicate in more than one language is a lifelong asset. Children who learn more than one language tend to develop a larger vocabulary and have a greater awareness of how words sound and relate to each other. This promotes good writing and spelling skills as well as the ability to relate comfortably to more than one culture. When we support children's efforts to learn English and also help them maintain their first language, we offer them a future full of promise. To do this, it is important for parents and care providers to understand:

1. How children acquire language.
2. The importance of preserving children's first language.
3. Ways to support children who are learning English as an additional language.

How Children Acquire Language

Children learn language through everyday interactions with others. They are also more likely to communicate with those with whom they have a trusting relationship. Parents, teachers, caregivers, family members and peers are among those who play an important role in promoting children's language development. Children learn a language better from those who are fluent in that language. This is because they are exposed to a richer variety of words and well-formed sentences. Language development always occurs in the same sequence – first receptive language, then expressive language.

Receptive Language

Receptive language always comes first - we understand what is said long before we are able to say it ourselves. Children develop receptive language by learning bits and pieces through repeated exposure to words and phrases combined with visual cues and symbols. Play situations, storybooks and songs are all useful in encouraging children to experiment with language.

The following specific receptive language skills are required in order to be able to understand language:

- Hearing differences in sounds, for example, 'tree' and 'three'
- Being able to remember what is heard and to repeat it or to follow directions.
- Understanding vocabulary and concept words, for example, 'dog' is the word used to describe a specific animal.
- Understanding different grammatical forms, for example, 'dog' and 'dogs' or 'on' and 'in' have different meanings.

Expressive Language

Receptive language is essential to language use or expressive language. Expressive language usually develops over time as the child develops physically, mentally and emotionally. If a child has trouble understanding what is being said, he/she might respond inappropriately, have trouble following a conversation and begin to withdraw from others. Development of children's

expressive language also requires many opportunities to talk – to exchange ideas, observations and opinions with both adults and other children. It takes practice to learn how to communicate one's thoughts and feelings effectively to others. Expressive language skills include:

- Being able to reproduce the sounds used in a particular language.
- Choosing word forms and word order appropriately.
- Choosing words to accurately express a thought.
- Using a wide variety of language systems; for example, speech, sign language, writing.

Learning English as an Additional Language

According to speech and language experts, the language a child learns before the age of three is considered to be his/her first or home language. This is because by the age of three, a child has usually figured out the basic rules of the language he or she hears from those around him. Children learn a new language more easily by building on these foundations. Research has shown that children who are competent in their first language become skilled in a new language more quickly.

Language acquisition is always a complex process. Learning an additional language is even more complex. Children need time to absorb the new language. It takes a child approximately three months to begin to understand the new language and approximately two years to be able to carry on a conversation fluently. It can be more than five years before he/she begins to think in the new language.

The Importance of Preserving the First Language

Experts recommend that, when a child is learning English as an additional language, the child's family help the child maintain his/her first language. Research has shown that when children have a strong foundation in their home language, it is easier for them to learn another language. If the first language is 'lost', there can be a negative effect on future language development, self esteem, family relations and cultural identity.

Benefits of preserving a first language include:

- Quality relationships and interactions between the child and other family members.
- Formation of emotional bonds between the child and those with whom he/she uses his/her home language skills.
- Maintenance of connections with the child's heritage and culture.
- Feelings of confidence and pride in his/her cultural identity.
- Improved cognitive development through learning and thinking fluently in the first language.

Supporting English Language Acquisition in an Early Childhood Setting

For many children, coming to a child care program or play group is their first experience in an English language environment. The child might understand or speak little or no English. This can cause feelings of isolation, confusion and frustration. There are strategies that early childhood educators, caregivers and others can use to support children as they adjust to the English language environment.

1. Help parents understand the importance of continuing to use their first language at home. Suggest that they talk, play, sing and read to their children in their home language.

2. Encourage each person to use one language in speaking to the child. For example, grandma might always use the child's first language while the 'teacher' always speaks English. This helps to reduce confusion between the two languages.
3. Encourage children with better English skills to model English for the less experienced English speakers through the normal socialization process.
4. If a caregiver speaks the child's first language, it is appropriate to comfort the child in his/her first language when he or she is upset.
5. Set up a supportive learning environment that reflects every child's language and cultural background.
6. Promote language awareness for all children. Teach simple words or phrases in all the languages represented in the group to the children while also supporting English language acquisition.
7. Talk, talk, talk. Use simple words and phrases over and over everyday in every way. At every opportunity repeat the names of objects, action words and simple descriptors related to size, colour and numbers - the building blocks for development of more complex language structures later on.

More Information:

Fostering language development in preschoolers (video)

One child, two languages: a guide for preschool educators of children learning English as a second language

Patton O. Tabors

Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1997

Learning language and loving it: a guide to promoting children's social and language development in early childhood settings

Elaine Weitzman

Toronto, Ont.: The Hanen Centre, 1992

These and other resources are available through the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre Library. Call toll free 1-877-262-0022 or visit our website at www.wstcoast.org.

The information presented in this document is for reference use only. Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre does not assume any responsibility for actions taken based on any of the information provided in this document.