

## Effective Teaching Strategies for Facilitating the Language Acquisition of English Language Learners

by Jennifer Chen

English language learners (ELLs) have become the fastest rising segment of the student population in the U.S. public education system. According to NCES (2014), ELLs grew from an estimated 4.1 million (or 8.7% of the total public school student population) in 2002–03 to an estimated 4.4 million (or 9.1% of the total public school student population) in 2011–12. This growth suggests that nearly one in ten public school students is an ELL. Furthermore, while sharing similar challenges of acquiring English and a new culture, ELLs are not a homogeneous group—they come from many corners of the globe, with diverse cultural practices, and speak many different languages. It was reported that even back in 2000–2001, more than 460 languages were spoken nationwide by ELLs, with Spanish being spoken by the majority of them (79.2%) (Kindler, 2002). Learning the academic subjects is challenging enough for many English-speaking children. It is doubly challenging for ELLs, who must acquire the language skills to understand the academic content to excel in school.

### The Relationship between First and Second Language Development

Research has demonstrated the contributing role that ELLs' first language proficiency plays in their development of English and other areas, such as increased English vocabulary scores (Cummins, 1992) and better social skills and teacher-child relationships when their teachers are able to communicate with them in their first language (i.e., Spanish—Chang et al., 2007). It is also beneficial when ELLs are able to transfer concepts and skills acquired in their first language to learning English (Wong-Fillmore & Valadez, 1986). These findings suggest that when working with ELLs, the teacher should respect and use their proficiency in their native language as an asset on which to build culturally and linguistically responsive instruction to help them acquire English successfully.

### Effective Teaching Strategies

Teaching ELLs poses particular challenges for educators. Yet, these challenges also offer themselves as an opportunity for educators to develop a more expansive repertoire of effective pedagogical strategies to address the diverse developmental, cultural, and linguistic needs of this ever-expanding student population. Here, I discuss five of the many effective teaching strategies to use when working with ELLs:

- The teacher gathers as much information about an ELL as possible from multiple sources (e.g., the child; his or her family; his or her previous teacher, if any). This basic information includes the ELL's home language, culture, and learning needs. The teacher can then incorporate this knowledge in providing appropriate support.
- In a bilingual or dual language program, the learning environment is already orchestrated in such a way that it encourages ELLs' bilingual development. As ELLs' first language is also respected as a medium of instruction, a bilingual teacher can readily provide linguistic assistance in both languages. In a monolingual classroom, however, the teacher will need to make a concerted effort to recognize, respect, and capitalize on ELLs' cultural and linguistic knowledge, such as encouraging them to use words in their first language for what they don't know in English, and use nonverbal modes of communication (e.g., drawing, gesturing).

- It is important for the teacher to provide “comprehensible input” that is understandable to ELLs (Krashen, 1981), as they acquire a language by hearing it said in a way that they can understand but cannot yet produce independently. The language input, however, is more than about word choice; it involves providing complements, such as contextual cues, visual accompaniments, and elaboration using other words, to make the language understandable to the learner and provide support beyond his or her current level of linguistic competence (Krashen, 1981).
- In acquiring a second language, an ELL may go through what Krashen (1985) calls the “silent period” or the “pre-production” stage, which is a period of time during which the child is reluctant to communicate verbally with others in the new language, but is acquiring receptive vocabulary (the language ability to understand what is heard) by listening to others talk and observing how they interact and converse. This period is transient, varying in length from a few days to a year, depending on such ELL factors as personality and socializing experience. The teacher must respect and be patient with an ELL who is in this phase instead of pushing him or her to talk.
- Tabors and Snow’s (1994) four stages of sequential second language acquisition (Home Language Use, Nonverbal Period, Telegraphic and Formulaic Speech, and Productive Language) are useful for understanding the different phases ELLs go through in their process of acquiring a second language and the variability in the rate at which they do so. To determine the unique phase and rate a particular ELL is at, a teacher needs to conduct proper assessments using various tools, including observations. Using this information, the teacher can better support the learner’s second language acquisition. For instance, while acknowledging the communicative effort of an ELL in the Home Language Use phase, the teacher can encourage him or her to use nonverbal modes of communication as well. When an ELL in the Telegraphic and Formulaic Speech phase says, “Me go,” the teacher can model the correct production of a complete sentence by saying, ‘I understand that you want to go to the bathroom. You can say, “I want to go to the bathroom.” ’ ”

The rapid growth of ELLs in the U.S. public schools beckons educators to broaden their pedagogical horizon by developing and implementing responsive, creative, and flexible teaching strategies to effectively address these students’ diverse learning needs. Examine these five such strategies for consideration of adoption or adaptation. Importantly, as ELLs are unique in background characteristics and intellectual capacities, effective teaching requires educators to apply strategies that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for their individual ELLs.

## References

- Chang, F., Crawford, G., Early, D., Bryant, D., Howes, C., Burchinal, M., & Pianta, R. (2007). Spanish speaking children’s social and language development in pre-kindergarten classrooms. *Journal of Early Education and Development*, 18(2), 243–269.
- Cummins, J. (1992). Bilingual education and English immersion: The Ramirez report in theoretical perspective. *Bilingual Research Journal: The Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education*, 16(1–2), 91–104.
- Kindler, A. L. (2002). *Survey of the states’ limited English proficient students and available educational programs and services: 2000–2001 summary report*. Washington, DC: National

Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs.

Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.

Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. London, UK: Longman.

NCES (National Center for Education Statistics). (2014). *The condition of education 2014*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Tabors, P.O., & Snow, C. (1994). English as a second language in pre-schools. In F. Genesee (Ed.), *Educating second language children: The whole child, the whole curriculum, the whole community* (pp. 103–125). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Wong-Fillmore, L., & Valadez, C. (1986). Teaching bilingual learners. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 648–685). New York, NY: Macmillan.

*Jennifer Chen earned her Ed.D. in human development and psychology from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. She is currently an associate professor and the coordinator of the graduate program in early childhood and family studies at Kean University in New Jersey, where she has taught numerous preservice and inservice teachers. Her areas of scholarship include pedagogical practices, first and second language acquisition, child development and learning, and parenting practices. <jchen@kean.edu>*