

Position Statement on Language and Literacy Development for Young English Language Learners

Introduction

Literacy learning and language acquisition are essential to young children's cognitive and social development. For all students, a strong and solid early education is critical to ensuring their long-term academic success. "Academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of grade 3" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Improving reading programs in early childhood and primary classrooms is the key to making sure that all students read on grade level by the third grade. For young learners of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), the challenges of literacy and language development are compounded by the fact that they must be achieved in a language that is not spoken in their home.

Principles and Recommendations

Based on research in early literacy development and second language acquisition, the following features of effective early literacy programs are recommended for young ESOL students.

1. Oral language and literacy development is supported by the student's native language.

Development and learning begin at an early age, and the language young children have heard since birth is the language they have used to begin to construct their knowledge and form meaningful communicative relationships. All young children come to school with knowledge and learning from home. Successful early childhood programs acknowledge and build upon this prior knowledge. Wherever possible, young ESOL learners should receive their initial reading instruction in their native language. The body of research in second language acquisition shows that literacy learning is easiest when the initial instruction is in the student's native language because literacy skills are easily transferred from the first to the second language. Moreover, use of the native language builds a connection between the home and school. ESOL students' families should be encouraged to read and talk to their children in the family's native language if this is their strongest language. ESOL students' interaction with their families in their native language will give them the richest possible language foundation, advancing the learning of their first language as well as English, in both academic and social situations. These experiences will allow young children to associate reading with meaning from the very beginning so that they do not *word call*, that is, pronounce words from print when they do not understand them.

2. Adequate time is provided for students to acquire literacy skills in English.

It is well documented that all children learn at different rates. This principle is especially true for young ESOL learners, who follow developmental patterns that are distinctly different from those of native English speakers. Young ESOL learners should not be hurried prematurely into formal literacy instruction in any language or into moving from reading in their native language to reading in English. Oral or social language proficiency, which can be achieved within 2–3 years, should not be equated with academic proficiency or literacy in a language. Literacy, cognitive, and conceptual development of ESOL students should be interlaced. Research shows that for young children in particular, the stronger the native language foundation, especially when learned in formal schooling environments, the greater the academic success in English literacy development. Of course, not all new English language learners or their families have had formal schooling opportunities. Therefore, accountability systems that hold teachers and schools responsible for English literacy development for ESOL learners in an unrealistic time frame may, in the long run, hinder the students' chances for academic success.

3. Instruction and materials are developmentally appropriate.

ESOL students who are at early stages of schooling (pre-K–Grade 2) need to experience developmentally appropriate instruction that will help them develop oral and written language proficiency in one or more languages. This kind of instruction engages children in meaningful interactions with adults, other children, concrete materials, and print materials. Moreover, the materials that are used need to be comprehensible to the learner and meet their developmental, cognitive, social, and cultural needs, which for young ESOL learners include language proficiency. In developmentally appropriate classrooms, students spend most of their time in rich language environments in which they observe, touch, listen, talk, and interact. Early reading and writing instruction is largely informal, playful, and based on oral language activities and personal experiences. Activities that typically challenge the attention span of young learners, such as sitting quietly and listening for long periods, and printing neatly on fine-lined paper, should be limited. Standards-based instruction, as described in *ESL Standards for Pre-K–12 Students* (TESOL, 1997) and *Integrating the ESL Standards Into Classroom Practice: Grades Pre-K – 2* (TESOL, 2001), should be incorporated into developmentally appropriate practices.

4. Literacy programs are meaning-based and balanced.

ESOL learners need to understand why people read and write in order to be motivated to excel in their own literacy development. A preponderance of isolated skills, such as an intensive phonics program that is not firmly grounded in books and stories, does not foster overall reading comprehension. A balanced literacy program will teach skills within the context of meaningful interactions with texts that elicit students' emotional and intellectual responses to ideas, characters, and events. Using children's literature, preferably from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, will be a key part of any such program. Effective literacy programs seek both literacy and content development, assert

that students within the program are learning the same content as native-English-speaking children, and look beyond the classroom for literacy experiences.

5. Assessment is reliable, valid, and ongoing.

Many young children cannot demonstrate the knowledge and skills they possess if they are assessed with methods more appropriate to older learners or those designed for native English speakers. In order to more accurately assess the literacy development of young ESOL learners, a variety of formal and informal tools should be used. Assessments that only focus on phonics, spelling skills, and writing content and style may be vulnerable to linguistic interference from the native language. Teachers should be aware that errors on assessments of English literacy skills can be developmental in nature and will disappear over time as students acquire English language proficiency. By continually using reliable, valid, and fair assessments, teachers are able to modify their instruction and tailor it to the individual needs of ESOL learners. Gathering classroom data on an ongoing basis, as described in *Scenarios for ESL Standards-based Assessment* (TESOL, 2001) keeps teachers apprised of student progress toward the attainment of ESL standards.

6. Professional preparation and development is continually provided for educators regarding linguistic and cultural diversity.

The presence of English language learners and culturally diverse classrooms—long a characteristic only of major cities—is more and more becoming the norm throughout the country. In order to face the challenges that come with a diverse classroom, *all* educators and administrators need to have both pre- and in-service training opportunities in linguistic and cultural diversity, and in principles of first and second language development. It is also critical for the early childhood educator to understand the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their children in order to facilitate learning and build cross-cultural understandings with their families.

Summary

For young children, the quality of education they receive in their first years of schooling is often a critical indicator of their long-term academic success. Early literacy and language development are interlaced with social and cognitive development and are vital elements in the education of young children. For young ESOL learners, the complexities involved with literacy and language development are compounded by the fact that they must be achieved in a language other than their native language, and often before they are literate in that language. Successful early childhood programs build upon the knowledge that young learners bring from home, and for young ESOL learners, this knowledge is learned and expressed in their native language.

Research in second language development has shown that literacy in a second language is much more easily achieved when literacy is developed in the native language, as literacy skills are more easily transferred from the first language to the second language. Differences between social and academic language need to be recognized and addressed by all teachers that ESOL students encounter. In other words, all teachers need to understand that social language is based principally on familiar and often concrete

concepts, whereas academic language is more linguistically complex, often involving abstract concepts, and is embedded into new cognitive information and topics. As a result, teachers, administrators, and families should understand that social language skills may develop within 2–3 years, as compared to full academic proficiency in a second language, which is more literacy dependent and can take 5–7 years to develop. Arbitrary time limits for mainstreaming ESOL learners should not be placed on programs, nor should educators be encouraged to move young students hastily into literacy programs before they are capable of performing successfully.

Instruction and materials should be appropriate in terms of developmental characteristics and language proficiency. Effective literacy programs maintain a balanced focus on both literacy and content development. In order to measure young learners' progress, a variety of formal and informal tools should be used that are reliable, valid, and fair. Most importantly, early childhood educators, just as their peers in K–12 education, need to receive pre- and in-service training on the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity as well as the foundations of second language learning for young children so that they can meet the needs and challenges of their diverse classrooms.

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