

8 Strategies for Preschool ELLs' Language and Literacy Development

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Early childhood education can play an essential role in preparing young English language learners (ELLs) for later success in school. Children who have an opportunity to develop basic foundational skills in language and literacy in preschool enter kindergarten ready to learn to read and write (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & McLaughlin, 2008).

Reaching ELL Families

Learn how preschools can [recruit ELL families \(/article/25820\)](/article/25820).

But how can early childhood educators know if their programs are providing children with the skills they need? This article will describe some of the methods and strategies that research has proven effective in preparing young ELLs for kindergarten.

Language Development for Preschool ELLs

Essential to any preschool program for ELLs is effective instruction in language development. Children need explicit instruction in English vocabulary, as well as opportunities to hear and speak the language throughout the day. Examples of strategies are listed below.

5 Classroom Strategies: Language

Provide explicit, systematic instruction in vocabulary.

Children require multiple exposures to words in order to develop a rich understanding of their meaning and use. Teachers should make a point of introducing interesting new words for children to learn into each classroom activity (Tabors, 2008).

- Presenting vocabulary thematically helps children make associations between words and scaffolds students' learning (McGee & Richgels, 2003).
- Read-alouds that include explanations of targeted vocabulary can support word learning (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004), as can dramatic play organized around a carefully chosen theme (Barone & Xu, 2008; Tabors, 2008).

Ensure that ELLs have ample opportunities to talk with both adults and peers and provide ongoing feedback and encouragement.

English language learners need lots of opportunities to engage in social interactions with other children, but they also need support from adults as they develop the language skills they need to negotiate those interactions (Ballantyne et al., 2008). You can use the following strategies to foster social interaction:

- For group activities, pair English language learners with children who have strong English language skills, and make sure that all the children who speak the same home language (L1) are not grouped together (Barone & Xu, 2008).
- Provide opportunities for self-directed activities so that ELLs can choose activities that match both their interests and their language abilities (Bunce & Watkins, 1995).
- Encourage child talk by providing prompts when children need help in expressing themselves (e.g., "Tell Bobby, 'May I have the red crayon now?'").
- Use open questions, or questions that can have multiple answers, to help ELLs expand their own utterances (e.g., "Why do you like this doll best?" instead of "What is this doll's name?").

Expose ELLs to rich language input.

Exposure to rich language, whether through shared book reading or through teacher talk, has been shown to enhance children's oral language development (Aukrust, 2007; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). One effective strategy is for the teacher to provide an ongoing commentary on activities that are taking place in the classroom in order to expose children to language associated with the immediate context (Bunce & Watkins, 1995; Tabors, 2008).

Structure the classroom space and routine to provide scaffolding for ELLs' language learning.

Arrange the classroom in a way that supports each type of instructional activity that will take place, and then keep changes to the physical environment to a minimum. Once ELLs learn

which activities take place in various parts of the classroom (e.g., centers, circle), the physical environment will cue them as to what they are to do and how they are to behave in that area (Barone & Xu, 2008).

Predictable classroom routines can also provide scaffolding for English language learners by allowing them to anticipate what will happen each day, including the type of language they will need for each activity (Bunce & Watkins, 1995; Tabors, 2008).

Encourage continued L1 language development.

Strong L1 skills support both language and literacy learning in English:

- Encourage parents to talk and read to their children in their home language as a way of strengthening children's L1 language skills.
- Incorporate children's home language in the classroom when possible. Songs and videos can be used effectively for this purpose if teachers do not speak their students' language (Gillanders, 2007).

Literacy Development for Preschool ELLs

Research has shown that alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and print awareness are early literacy skills that contribute significantly to later reading achievement (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). English language learners can begin to develop these essential foundational skills in preschool, even before they have developed strong English language skills.

Early Literacy Skills

Alphabet knowledge

Skills appropriate to preschool include recognizing and naming upper and lower case letters and beginning to associate letters with the sounds they make.

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to manipulate the sounds that make up language, independent of meaning. In preschool, children benefit from:

- learning to recognize rhyming words
- listening for syllables within words
- learning to recognize beginning sounds in words
- matching those sounds to letters

Print awareness

Print awareness is an understanding of the features of books and print. Children should:

- be taught to recognize the parts of a book (e.g., front and back covers, top and bottom)
- learn that printed letters and words run from left to right and from top to bottom

- learn that a book has a title, was written by an author, and has illustrations that were drawn by an illustrator

3 Classroom Strategies: Literacy

Design instruction that focuses on all of the foundational literacy skills.

Activities that promote early literacy skills in preschool include:

- interactive storybook reading
- "pretend" reading and writing
- games and other activities to help children identify the letters of the alphabet
- interactive experiences with language and print through poems, nursery rhymes and songs

The emphasis should be on code-based instruction, or instruction that helps children understand the relationship between spoken language and print (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Recognize that many literacy skills can transfer across languages.

A child who has developed early literacy skills in his or her first language will find it easier to develop those same skills in English. Parents who are not proficient in English should be encouraged to help prepare their children for learning to read by using the home language to:

- teach rhymes and songs
- play word games
- share storybooks

Teachers can support parent-child reading by sending home books in the child's home language. This makes L1 text available to parents, and it lets them know that the teacher considers reading to children in the home language to be important.

Accelerate English literacy development by helping ELLs make the connection between what they know in their first language and what they need to know in English.

Similarities between English and the child's home language can be used as a foundation for instruction (Helman, 2004). For example, if L1 has some of the same phonemes as English, start with those phonemes for rhyme or beginning sound activities because those are sounds the child is already familiar with.

Children usually have the most difficulty when they encounter sounds that are present in English but do not occur in their home language. For this reason, Spanish L1 speakers often have difficulty with the "short" or lax sounds of *a*, *e*, *i*, and *u* and with the consonants *j*, *r*, *v*, and *z* (Bear, Templeton, Helman, & Baren, 2003; Helman, 2004).

Preparing for the Future

Much attention has been given to the persistent achievement gap between English language learners and their English-speaking peers. Unfortunately, by the time children arrive in kindergarten, differences in foundational language and literacy skills have often already set the stage for this disparity in achievement (Miller & Garcia, 2008).

The good news, however, is that recent research has shown that high-quality early childhood education programs can have a significant impact on children's later academic achievement (Barnett, 2008). Programs that provide research-based, age-appropriate instruction in early language and literacy skills can ensure that English language learners enter school equipped with the tools they need to be successful learners in kindergarten and beyond (Ballantyne et al., 2008).

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