

Position Paper on Language and Literacy Development for Young English Language Learners (ages 3-8)

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 who are speakers of other languages (ESOL), the challenges of literacy and language development are different if they are learning in an all-English environment where they need the language to function in school, or if they are in an environment where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in school. The focus of this position statement is those children who speak a language other than English at home and are entering school environments where English is the principal medium of instruction.

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.

All young children come to school equipped with a foundation in knowledge and learning from home. Development and learning begin in the first language, and it is in this language that children begin to construct their knowledge and form meaningful communicative relationships. 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. Research on second language development has shown that literacy in a second language is supported by literacy in the native language. Language and literacy knowledge in one language can serve as the foundation for a new language (Cummins, 1991; Paez & Rinaldi, 2006; Proctor, August, Carlo, & Snow, 2006). 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. Families should be encouraged to develop literacy in the native language even when schools are not able to provide it, keeping in mind that not all families have had formal schooling opportunities. 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. Incorporating the native language to the second language learning process will allow young children to associate reading and writing with meaning and literacy knowledge derived from their home experiences.

2. Literacy learning in English is an on-going process that requires time and appropriate support.

It is well documented that all children learn at different rates. This principle is especially true for young ESOL learners, because L1 language development is distinctive from English L2 development. It varies based on a number of factors, such as how much literacy background they already have, the difference between the languages' writing systems, the age of the student when they were introduced

to schooling in English, and the nature of the demands (i.e., are they learning English as a subject in Qatar vs. going to second grade in Australia where all the subjects are taught in English). Contrary to what was once believed, ESOL learners can begin to develop literacy in English while they are still acquiring English (Hudelson, 1989). Literacy, cognitive, and conceptual development of ESOL students should be interlaced. However, even once they begin literacy instruction in English, ESOL learners will still need to continually develop their English proficiency. 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. Academic language develops over time, with repeated exposures to content and experiences and can take between 5 and 7 years (Cummins, 1991). Therefore, accountability systems that hold teachers and schools responsible for the English literacy development of ESOL learners in an unrealistic time frame may, in the long run, hinder the students' chances for academic success.

3. Instruction and materials are culturally and developmentally appropriate.

ESOL students who are at the early stages of schooling (ages 4–8) need to experience developmentally appropriate instruction that will help them acquire oral and written language proficiency in one or more languages. Developmentally appropriate practices require knowledge of child development including language and literacy learning, knowledge of students' strengths and needs, and knowledge of students' social and cultural context (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This kind of instruction engages children in meaningful interactions with adults, other children, concrete materials, and print materials. The materials that are used for young ESOL students need to be comprehensible, that is, designed to meet their linguistic and cultural needs as well as their developmental, cognitive, and social needs. 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 initially (ages 3–5) largely informal, playful, and based on oral language activities and personal experiences and can effectively incorporate the content areas. Instructors should limit 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. More formal instruction in reading and writing is gradually introduced (ages 6–8), although emphasis on oral language activities, personal experiences, and learning through the content areas continue to be some of the most effective means of making instruction comprehensible for ESOL students. Standards-based instruction, as described in *PreK–12 English Language Proficiency Standards* (TESOL, 2006), *Integrating the ESL Standards Into Classroom Practice: Grades Pre-K–2* (TESOL, 2001), and *Paper to Practice: Using the TESOL ELP Standards in PreK–12 Classrooms* (TESOL, 2009) 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 instruction focusing on the development of isolated skills such as phonics and reading fluency does not foster overall reading comprehension for ESOL students. For these students, reading comprehension is advanced when such skill instruction is connected to language that is comprehensible to them and firmly grounded in experiences with whole texts. A balanced literacy program will teach both reading and writing skills within the context of meaningful interactions with texts that elicit students' emotional and intellectual responses to ideas, characters, and events. Such texts should represent the variety of texts people have access to in their daily lives (i.e., newspapers, letters, directions, recipes, various forms of literature) to provide students with an accurate knowledge of the possibilities available to them for either reading or writing. Exposure to variety is key for ESOL students, as they may not only be learning a new language but a new culture as well. Using children's literature from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds will be a key part of such a program and will ensure that ESOL students feel included and represented. Writing experiences should also be varied and teach students to write in different genres across content areas. 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.*

A variety of formal and informal tools should be used to accurately assess the literacy development of young ESOL learners. These tools should be culturally and developmentally appropriate as well as connected to the instruction and curriculum of the classroom. Models that are culturally responsive and operate within a collaborative structure such as Response to Intervention (RTI) provide a fair assessment context. Culturally responsive systems are grounded in the belief that ESOL students can excel academically. Such models use universal screening, tiered instructional delivery, and continuous progress monitoring systems in both languages when warranted. Specifically, a variety of formal and informal tools should be used to accurately assess the literacy development of young ESOL learners. 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 through a variety of assessments 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 (Capp, R., Fix, M., Murray, J., Ost, J., Passel, J.S. & Herwanto, S., 1995). 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 early childhood educators to understand the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students in order to facilitate learning and build cross-cultural understandings with their students' families.

Preparing all teachers as well as teacher educators on the principles of second language and literacy development and effective instructional practices to engage ESOL learners can favorably impact the education of ESOL students (Brisk, 2008; Menyuk & Brisk, 2005).

Summary

The quality of education young children receive in their first years of schooling (ages 3–8) 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 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 on second language development has shown that literacy in a second language is supported by literacy in the native language. Language and literacy knowledge in one language can serve as the foundation for a new 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

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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 (Collier, V. P., 1989; Cummins, J., 1984). Arbitrary time limits for mainstreaming ESOL learners should not be placed on programs. Acquisition of language, particularly academic language, continues through education. Therefore, all teachers should view themselves as teachers of the English language and engage students in multimodal activities that include speaking, listening, reading, and writing within their content-area instruction to support students' success in English.

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 important, 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 children from ages 3–8 so that they can meet the needs and challenges of their diverse classrooms.

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