

# SECTION 3

## Second Language Acquisition and Learning, Literacy Development, and Multicultural Education

In deciding how to best meet the linguistic and cultural needs of migrant students, one can take a number of approaches. For the purpose of this guide, the focus will be on integrating the research findings on second language acquisition and learning, literacy development, and multicultural education.

### Second Language Acquisition and Learning

Stephen Krashen has written extensively about five key hypotheses related to second language acquisition. Although initially debated, over the past twenty years the hypotheses have gained a high level of acceptance in the field of second language education and research. They are as follows:

#### The Acquisition-Learning Distinction

*Language acquisition:* A subconscious process not unlike the way a child learns their first language. Language acquirers are not consciously aware of the grammatical rules of the language, but rather develop a “feel” for correctness. This hypothesis claims that adults do not lose the ability to acquire languages the way children do.

*Language learning:* The conscious knowledge of a second language: knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to discuss them.

#### The Natural Order Hypothesis

This hypothesis states that “acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order.” For a given language, some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early, others late, regardless of the first language of the speaker. Krashen is emphatic that this does not

mean that grammar should be taught in this natural and predictable order of acquisition.

#### Monitor Hypothesis

The language that one has subconsciously acquired is responsible for fluency, whereas language consciously/formally learned acts as an internal editor in situations where the learner has enough time to edit, is focused on form, and knows the rule, such as taking a grammar test, preparing a presentation, or writing. Krashen calls this conscious editor the “monitor.”

#### Input Hypothesis

Second language learners acquire new language skills and vocabulary when they receive comprehensible input that is slightly above their current proficiency. Language learners acquire new and increased language skills and vocabulary, and achieve higher levels of fluency, when they understand language that contains structures that are “a little beyond” where they are now. Students reach this greater level of understanding by using the context of the language being heard or read, and by relying on their existing knowledge of the world.

According to Krashen this hypothesis answers the question of how a language acquirer develops competency over time. If language teachers focus on communication that is understandable and connects to students existing knowledge of the world, production ability emerges.

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### Affective Filter Hypothesis

Motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety all affect language acquisition. The higher the motivation and self-confidence and the lower the anxiety, the more quickly a language student will acquire fluency in a second language.

To summarize Krashen's theory in his own words... "real language acquisition develops slowly, and speaking skills emerge significantly later than listening skills, even when conditions are perfect. The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input and not from forcing and correcting production."

### Stages of Learning to Speak English

Stages of learning to speak English as a second language are similar to those of children learning their first language:

#### The Silent Period (pre-production)

The student observes and listens but may not be able to actively participate. Don't force oral production! The student's responses are non-verbal: pointing, gesturing, or nodding. This stage can last between six and eight months, usually longer for the older students. It is important to remember that learning *is* occurring at this stage.

#### Early Production

The student expands on listening comprehension by responding to questions using yes/no answers, one-word answers, or two or three words strung together (often with errors).

#### Speech Emergence

This stage often occurs after about one year, when the student begins to speak in simple sentences. The student can respond with short phrases, longer phrases, dialogue, complete sentences, or short routines and patterns.

#### Intermediate Fluency and Beyond

Intermediate fluency usually occurs between one and two years. The student is able to respond by using complex statements, stating opinion, reporting on events, or giving instructions. Although they may appear to have attained near-native fluency, students at this stage need to continue to expand their vocabulary and concept formation.

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### Literacy Development

Although emerging from aural/oral language development, *literacy* relates to reading and writing. Literacy abilities enable students to use reading and writing to make sense of their world. Developing these skills allows students to succeed both in and out of school for the rest of their lives.

In her guide, *Classroom Strategies for the English Language Learner*, Socorro Herrera refers to August, Calderdon, and Carlo who have identified the elements that are essential to any balanced literacy program:

- Time to develop phonemic awareness;
- Direct instruction in decoding skills;
- An emphasis on building comprehension skills;
- Development of critical thinking skills;
- Dedicated time to teach writing and time for students to write about meaningful topics; and
- Literacy instruction that is engaging and meaningful in order to develop a love of reading and writing.

Herrera states that “the elements they have identified are consistent with current research by experts on literacy development and by most reading researchers regardless of philosophical orientation. Scientists clearly understand that phonological awareness, vocabulary development, fluency, comprehension, and a love of reading and writing are the keys to ensuring academic success and opening the world to students everywhere.”

The following is excerpted with permission from the “Teaching of Language Arts to Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners: A Resource Guide for All Teachers,” NYSED Office of Bilingual Education.

*Over the past 30 years there has been a consistent body of research which points to the importance of native language literacy in the development of second language literacy. Furthermore, research findings suggest that the reading and writing processes function similarly for native and second language learners (Grabe, 1991.)*

*Similarly, in addressing the universal aspects of writing, Conner and Kaplan (1987) indicate that writing requires cognitive planning, problem-solving, and learning strategies that once learned in the native language, can be transferred to learning a second language.*

*The transfer of literacy skills from one language to another is made possible due to the universal aspects of literacy. Research supports the theory that second language learners transfer native literacy skills into second language reading and writing in an interactive, reciprocal process (Escamilla, 1993; Rodriguez, 1988; Cohen, 1987; Garcia and Padilla, 1985; Barnitz, 1985). Students use their native language literacy skills and strategies to become literate in the second language, and what is learned in the second language enhances native language literacy.*

*Concepts and skills in literacy in one language will only transfer if they have been completely learned. Cummins (1981, 1989) calls this “the threshold hypothesis” and asserts that native language literacy can only transfer to a second language when students have reached a critical threshold in their native language. In a longitudinal study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education to compare the effectiveness of early-exit bilingual education, late-exit bilingual education and English immersion strategy, Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, Pasta and Billings (1991) looked at the progress of 2000 students enrolled in these programs from 1984 to 1988 in*

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*California, Florida, New Jersey, New York and Texas. The results of this study indicated that by the end of third grade, there were no significant differences in reading, math or English among students in the three programs. However, by the end of sixth grade there were significant differences favoring students who were in late-exit bilingual programs.*

*Similarly, Thomas and Collier (1996) analyzed the academic progress of 42,000 students over periods of eight to 12 years. Their research indicated that:*

- 1. for LEP/ELLs with at least two to three years of schooling in their native language, it takes five to seven years to reach full proficiency in English*
- 2. for LEP/ELLs with no schooling in their native language, it takes seven to ten years to reach full proficiency in English*
- 3. for LEP/ELLs schooled bilingually in both their native and second language, it takes about four to five years to reach full proficiency in English. Their findings confirmed that the amount of time to reach full proficiency in English is significantly enhanced when students have academic competency and literacy in their native language.*

*Both studies found, in support of Cummins' threshold hypothesis, that students with the highest levels of native language literacy were those who eventually became the strongest readers in their second language. They concluded that the single best predictor of second language reading proficiency for second language learners is native language literacy.*

*In conclusion, the development of native language skills plays a pivotal role in the acquisition of English language arts by limited English proficient/English language learners.*

State education departments, national organizations, and researchers all agree that the students most at risk of not learning to read and write are those whose home language is not English, those with interrupted formal education, those with low socio-economic backgrounds, and those who attend schools that are not prepared to address the different learning needs of diverse populations. For all of these reasons, our migrant students are at risk of not achieving high levels of literacy.

In English-only classrooms, students who are not fluent in English are often not provided many opportunities to write because teachers inadvertently wait until students have "enough" English to communicate with the written word. The Diversity Project has found through its collaboration with the migrant summer schools and other programs that all students can express their thoughts and feelings on topics that are relevant to their lives, and that staff can help them to express them in their native language and/or English, through illustrations, or by writing out stories that they have had students narrate to them.

Personal narratives and journals are important ways for students to express themselves through writing. Creating opportunities and providing writing prompts on meaningful subjects such as their journey here, what it means to speak another language, being uprooted from their family and friends, and what schools could do to be more inclusive, all create possibilities for self expression.

All students are capable of learning to high levels, and their dreams can be given voice in the reading and writing that they do. It means providing them with writing experiences in which their particular talents and strengths can be nurtured and selecting high-quality, inclusive literature in which they can see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected in positive, meaningful ways.