Emergent Bilingual Learners

Introduction to Work with Emergent Bilingual Learners

The experience of learning a new language can vary significantly from one individual to the next. The information in the sections below will help you to understand some of the variations in how young children learn a new language, and will also provide some guidance to tutors and other adults working to support the literacy skills of Emergent Bilingual Learners.

- How do children learn a second language?
- Stages of Second Language Learning
- Reading Instruction
  If the child has not had any formal reading and writing instruction in his/her first language there are several ways in which you can proceed.
  If the child has received instruction in reading and writing in his/her first language, the process will be slightly different.
- Language Experience Approach for EBL children

Literacy Development for EBL Students

Speed and fluency with a new language will vary from one child to the next.

Like adults, children vary in the speed with which they acquire a new language. Some children may have perfect pronunciation, but may not understand the meaning of the words they speak, and some children may communicate well with peers in the playground or park, but may not understand any of the words spoken by a teacher at school.

Language acquisition is a very complex process that may not always follow a straight path. A student may appear to be communicating with increasing regularity, but then will become silent and shy. While an observer might see an apparent decrease in the student’s language skills, an informed tutor or teacher may understand that this is part of the natural course of learning a new language—the learner is simply more aware of the language he or she doesn’t understand, and therefore is more shy about participating in conversation.
Oral language must come first for EBL students. Once they have developed oral language skills in English, they can begin to learn about writing and reading in English.

While a literacy tutor’s goal is to help the child learn to become literate, it is important to remember that when tutoring children who are Emergent Bilingual Learners, the acquisition of oral language must precede written language. As a tutor, you may expose your student to written words and text through reading and telling him or her stories, but the student should not be expected to begin reading or writing until a foundation of oral language has been developed.

While children, who learn a new language will do so in a variety of ways and at different speeds, most will pass through a series of stages that describe the process of learning a new language.

**Stages of Second Language Learning**

Below are nine stages of Second Language Learning. They have been grouped in to three phases that outline the initial steps to learning a new language for any individual, young or old.

These stages provide an example of how students acquire a new language, however, it is important to keep in mind that different children may enter school at different stages, and that all children may not pass through all stages at the same rate or even in the same sequence. Regardless of how your student progresses through these stages, your continued support and encouragement will help him or her with the very difficult task of learning a new language.

**Phase I: Observation and imitation**

1. Silent stage (which may be combined with emotional shock). The child is taking in the new situation and listening to the language to begin to make sense of what goes on around him/her.
2. Child will imitate what other children do in the class. In a sense, s/he is pretending that s/he understands.
3. A very outgoing child may use a lot of body gestures, or actually grab other kids in order to make him/herself understood. This may be misinterpreted as physical aggression by other children or by the teacher.

**Phase II: Single word and phrase use**

1. Child begins to use words or phrases that are important for his/her survival in the classroom. Example: “Stop it!” “I’m next!” “Me too!” “that’s mine!”
2. Child begins to use the language but is still not sure of what constitutes a separate word in English. Example:
   “I like it” which s/he hears over and over is used as if it were two words:
   “I like it play ball.”
   “I like it little trucks.”
   Eventually, the “it” part of the phrase is released and the child will say:
   “I like little trucks.”

**Phase III: Initial understanding of grammatical rules**

1. Early on in his/her use of English, the child may leave out plurals or past tense markers. This doesn’t mean that the child does not understand the concept of “more than one” or “past events.” S/he may be using these forms quite comfortably in his/her first language. One of the rules in the acquisition of a second language is: “Concentrate on big things first. Leave the details for later.” If you can grasp the basic meaning of what your student is saying, then ignore the grammatical errors.

2. Child’s comprehension exceeds his/her ability to produce language. Often we place more emphasis on what the child is producing than what he or she is comprehending. The child may use the appropriate content words, but not in the appropriate form. For example, a child may be observing an experiment with ice in a freezer and say: “water frozen.”

3. Child’s language may use grammatical forms that are literal translations from his/her first language. A child for whom Spanish is the first language and who is used to the fact that in his/her language most objects have a gender assigned to them, may say:
   “Where is my pencil? I put him there.”

4. Child tries to make the most of the vocabulary s/he has learned. For example: “My sleeves are big.” instead of “long.” Here, the child is generalizing the meaning of “big” to include anything that goes beyond a particular dimension.

Other things to keep in mind when working with your EBL student:

- Because children can acquire native-like pronunciation in a second language, it is easy to assume that they know a lot more of that language than they actually do. Be sure that your student understands what you read or discuss with him or her. Encourage your student to ask for definitions of words or concepts and provide a model for this. For example, tell your student that he or she can say: “I don’t understand” whenever something is not clear. In this way he or she will know how to ask for help.
- Children will experiment more with a new language when with peers than when with adults. If possible, observe your student interacting with peers. This will give you information about the extent of his or her vocabulary and fluency in an informal setting.
Reading Instructions for Emergent Bilingual Learners

Emphasize oral language development before you begin to teach reading.

Children cannot be expected to learn to read a language before they have an understanding of that language as it is spoken. Much of our reading skill depends on how we expect a sentence to flow, or a string of words to make sense. If we do not have an understanding of the language, then we do not have a framework for understanding what we are reading. As language learners, we all learn to speak before reading and writing, this pattern must be followed for new language learners at any age. Reading aloud to children (from books that are age and content appropriate) is an excellent way to familiarize children with a new language. It is impossible to read and comprehend what you read unless you already know most of the vocabulary included in the reading.

Be sure that students understand the vocabulary you are using, and that is used in the reading material you have selected.

Find out if the child already knows the rudiments of reading and writing in his or her first language.

Does your child know that letters make up words? That words are read in sentences beginning at one end and ending at another? You child may have experience with reading and writing in his or her first language that may be very different than our own. For example, many languages use other orthographic symbols or characters rather than words composed of letters. Some cultures read their text from top to bottom or right to left rather than left to right. Try to find out about your student’s first language either through a conversation with the student, or her or his teacher or a family member.

Children who have not received instruction in their first language may be very young, however… it is not unusual to find children who are old enough to be in second or third grade, but who have never attended school.

Working with Children who have had No Formal Reading Instruction in their First Language

If the child has not had any formal reading instruction in his/her first language, there are several ways in which you can proceed:

Always try to communicate meaning to your student

- As much as possible use objects (or pictures of objects) to teach initial vocabulary.
- Use gestures and body movements to teach actions. Use objects or make the movements yourself.
- Use dramatic facial expressions to get your message across.
Select books with pictures and repetition

- Use picture books at the beginning just as you would with an English-speaking child. However, keep in mind that the ELL child may not be able to give you labels for objects or actions.
- Look at the book ahead of time and familiarize the child with names of objects, characters, actions, etc., before you present the book.
- Use books that have repetition incorporated into the text.

Use a variety of ways to convey a story line:

Dramatize the plot of the book using cut outs that you have prepared in advance, or have the child make the characters and have him/her paste them on cardboard so that they can stand and can be moved around according to the action described in the book.

Have the child draw the objects or characters that you’ll be reading about. This will reinforce the new vocabulary.

Introduce written labels for words after the child understands and produces the label orally. Label objects even if the child cannot read the words yet.

Keep in mind:

Even though the child may be able to understand the topic of the story, he/she will not be able to verbalize predictions about the story.

Words that are very common in English such as “mat” or “pan” or vocabulary that is mostly home-related, may not be part of the child’s vocabulary. Make sure that the child recognizes the meaning of any words before asking him or her to read those words.

Depending on the child’s native language, it may be difficult for him/her to hear some of the sounds in English.

For example: Children for whom Spanish is the first language may have a great deal of difficulty distinguishing between the vowel sounds of “bet” and “bit” or “pat” and “pet.” If a child’s first language is Japanese, s/he may not hear the difference between “l” and “r” because in Japanese, those two sounds are considered indistinguishable. These differences are learned over time after a fair amount of practice.

Do not expect child to be able to give you rhyming words or words that begin with a particular sound. You will have to provide the different pairs of words that rhyme or those words that begin with the same sound.
Try these activities to reinforce some basic reading skills:

To emphasize initial sounds, you should group objects whose labels begin with a specific sound and a group of objects that begin with a different sound. Make sure that the sounds you choose initially, are very different from one another.

Example: ” book, boot, baby, bag, ball” as compared to “fist, fan, father, foot.”

Introduce the letter that corresponds to the sound, stick the letter to a paper bag or box, and play game of placing the objects, or pictures in the bag that has the initial letter of that object or picture.

To reinforce the learning of the two sounds, use the same pictures to play concentration.

Working with Children who have had Formal Reading Instruction in their First Language

What you need to know if your student has had some reading and/or writing instruction in his or her first language.

Children who have had reading and/or writing instruction in their first language will probably be in second or third grade. They may come to the reading process having already “broken the code,” or they may still be learning to read in their own language. These children know what reading is all about. They understand that texts convey information, that words are made up of individual letters which represent sounds, and that there is a relationship between spoken and written words. The task for these students will be to transfer their skills and knowledge into English. Here are suggestions for working with these students:

You can be the learner too

- Try to gauge your students’ reading level in his or her first language. (You can ask his or her teacher or parent or other relative, or you can bring a variety of reading materials such as different books, magazines, newspapers, or packaging from food or toys that are often printed in a variety of languages and allow the student to look over what you have brought.) Find two or three books in the child’s native language and at his or her approximate reading level. If the child feels comfortable, s/he may want to read them to you. Listen even if you don’t understand what the child is reading. Try to learn some of the vocabulary in the child’s first language and play the role of the learner for a while.
Stress oral language first:

Before, during and after reading book model how you would talk about the story. For example, you might say: “I think this book is going to be about a caterpillar who eats and eats and eats.”

After reading a few pages of the story you might say: “I wonder why he is eating so many things?”

And at the end of the story you might say: “Oh, look, he turned into a butterfly!”

Encourage communication:

- Write your own name down and ask the child to write his or her name. This is a skill that most children learn in school very early on regardless of their native language, and this can be a very nice beginning activity.
- Label everyday objects that you use together or that you see, such as pencil, paper, window, and book.
- Encourage the child to label common objects in his/her first language as well as in English.

Model good word solving skills:

- Bring a variety of alphabet books to help students learn about the relationship between first letter sound and word, and whole word and pictures, and categories of words such as alphabet books about animals, or food.
- Once the child has mastered some oral vocabulary, you may begin to introduce initial and final sounds or words. For example, you may point out that the word “Window” begins with a “w” sound, and a “w” sound is represented by the letter “W.”
- Use a range of different games that can help to reinforce whatever you and have been working on with a child such as: initial sounds of words, word families, or labels for common objects.

Download the Games document for more suggestions.

Keep in mind:

- Expect that the child will use what she or he knows about his/her first language in order to learn the second language. For example, some languages do not pronounce “th” as we do, and students who see this letter combination will pronounce it as they have been taught in their own language. Be aware that a students’ incorrect pronunciation or grammar in English, may reflect correct pronunciation or grammar in the students’ first language.
• Your student will make pronunciation mistakes when learning a new alphabet. Do not correct these mistakes, rather, model the correct pronunciation.
• Be patient and don’t expect your student to remember too much early on. Memorization may be difficult depending on how comfortably the child can begin to deal with two different language systems.
• Create games for you and your student to play. Games offer many learning opportunities including: learning about rules, learning informal language that accompanies game playing, learning within a context that can be fun and encourages verbal exchanges, learning that can include other students and can help ELL students feel more comfortable with peers. Game ideas include: Concentration: pairing a picture of an object with the English label for that object. (Begin with only a few objects and then build up as your student becomes more confident and has a larger vocabulary.) Go Fish: using letters of the alphabet, or using words and concentrating on their initial sounds (for example: Cat, Hat, Mat, Rat, Fat).

Strategies for Working with Emergent Bilingual Learners

Working with students who are Emergent Bilingual Learners (EBLs) can be highly rewarding and also challenging. These students are sometimes the most fragile members of a school’s community, and the contact they have with a tutor can be invaluable as they struggle to make sense of a new language, a new school, and new surroundings. As a tutor, you have a unique opportunity to help these young people develop some basic skills and a confidence in their ability to learn, that will serve them well throughout their lives. The information provided in this section will help you to plan and prepare for your role as a tutor to EBL students.

View the Literacy Guide Helpful Features for more information on these topics:

• The Tutor’s attitude
• Contact with Teacher and Caregivers
• Communicating with the child: Things you can do to make the process easier
• Your first tutoring session
• For the rest of the tutoring sessions

Sample First Lesson: Session with Emergent Bilingual Learners

Your first tutoring session: a check-list of things to bring and to do:

What to bring:

• Bring a box or bag with familiar school-related objects or pictures of objects that you think the child may know.
• Bring pencils, crayons and paper with and without lines.
• Bring shapes in different colors and sizes cut out of paper, or use materials from the classroom if possible (such as pattern blocks or puzzle pieces).
• Bring finger puppets, or other small items such as animals or dolls.

What to find out:

• Find out if child knows names of body parts such as head, ears, nose, mouth, hand.
• Find out if the child can count in English and up to what number.
• Find out if the child can write his/her own name. Write your name down for him or her.
• Can the student name different objects around the room? Make a game in which you name an object of your choice and the child follows suit. This will give you an idea of the labels she or he has and doesn't have. Take note of what you find out.

First activities you can do:

• Introduce a puppet (the puppet’s name can be written on it’s shirt or hat) so that you can have dialogues to model questions and answers for the child. For example: ask you puppet: “What is your name?” Your puppet can answer: “My name is Joe!” and he can point to the word “Joe” printed clearly on a piece of paper.
• Plan to extend the child’s vocabulary by adding adjectives to the objects whose names she or he already knows. For example: “Joe is Short” or “the room is Big.”
• Show your student the shapes or other objects you have brought and offer the English word for one of them. See if your student knows the same word in his or her own language.
• Use drawings to help communicate. Draw a picture of your home, or of your pet and encourage the student to do the same. All of these activities help you to establish a relationship with your student while also providing an informal assessment of what your student already knows about the English language. This information can inform your choices about the next steps you can take as a tutor.

Subsequent Sessions with Emergent Bilingual Learners

Suggestions for tutoring sessions: after the first meeting.

Establish a routine for your sessions that includes naming of objects, phrases and/or sentences that the student has to use every time you meet, etc.

It’s good for the child to have an idea of what to expect every time you meet. Even a “surprise time.” Create a tutoring schedule that the student can look at.
Learning a new language takes a great deal of mental effort. Make sure that your tutoring sessions include one or two breaks. During these times the student can draw a picture (something related to the lesson) or cut and paste to make a collage using things that you have prepared in advance. Or, bring a tape with a simple song that the child can listen to. Choose an activity that is recreational and gives the student a brief rest.

It is not easy to memorize things in a new language. Don’t expect instant memorization from your student. In order to learn a new word, the student has to hear it used in many different contexts, many, many times. Be sure to incorporate repetition in your tutoring activities, and in your spoken language. And, be sure that you and your student have fun!

Games can be a great way to help your student in learning new words and patterns.