

# Language and Literacy for English Language Learners

## Background and Criteria

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Language and Literacy for English Language Learners (ELLs) consists of three functional areas: Listening, Phonological Awareness, and Speaking. These areas contain performance indicators such as gains meaning by listening, follows directions, developing awareness of the sounds of English, speaks in social situations, and communicates for a variety of purposes using expanded vocabulary. As with all other performance indicators, there are three ratings, although grade level expectations of mastery for ELLs are not given since children can come to school at different ages with varying levels of English language acquisition.

### A. Listening for English Language Learners

#### 1. Gains meaning by listening. (Preschool-4 to Kindergarten)

English Language Learners (ELLs) develop an understanding of language, vocabulary, and the sounds of language through listening. Some language forms will be formulaic and part of the daily class activities (such as greetings and classroom routines), and students will become familiar with those through repetition (Zainuddin, Yahya, Morales-Jones, & Ariza, 2007). For other types of listening, however, beginning level ELLs will need support to help them make sense of the language they hear. Teachers provide ELLs support by using pictures, realia, gestures, and other cues when introducing new concepts. The notion of providing support to beginning speakers, termed comprehensible input, is an important step in language acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 1985; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Beginning language learners experience a silent period, a time when they are making sense of language but not yet speaking (Ellis, 1994; Saville-Troike, 1988). Teachers need to allow for this time by providing lots of supported listening activities. Silent students can demonstrate understanding of language by pointing to pictures or items in the classroom or through actions, a technique referred to as TPR, or Total Physical Response (Asher, 1966, 1969, 2000; Haynes, n.d.a; Littlebear, 1992). Also, “listen and do” tasks allow the student to demonstrate an understanding of language they cannot yet express (Hinkle, 2006). Listening also allows students to develop receptive vocabulary, an important aspect of developing language proficiency (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006), so listening should be an important part of every lesson. The development of a large receptive vocabulary will form the basis for literacy later on (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Ordóñez, Carlo, Snow, & McLaughlin, 2002; Snow & Kim, 2007; Erdemir, 2012). As ELLs move through stages of language acquisition (pre-production to early production to speech emergence to intermediate fluency), they will begin to respond to listening activities that require short oral responses, such as yes/no responses, either/or choices, or one-word answers or short sentences (Deussen, Autio, Miller, Lockwood, & Stewart, 2008; Haynes, n.d.b; Hill & Bjork, 2008; Zainuddin et al., 2007).

#### 2. Follows directions. (Preschool-3 to Third Grade)

Since so many classroom routines depend on listening and understanding, ELLs must also learn to listen to classroom directions (Zainuddin et al., 2007). Following written and oral directions is

critical in helping ELLs develop the skills needed to participate in classroom and social activities. ELLs in the pre-production and early production stages can understand more than they can say. They can listen for short periods and demonstrate their understanding non-verbally (Hill & Bjork 2008). ELLs can do this by acting out directions if the directions are modeled several times (Grognet, Jameson, Franco, & Derrick-Mescua, 2000). As students progress in understanding, they can begin to follow more complex directions. Students should be able to follow both implicit and explicit oral (and eventually written) directions. Teachers help ELLs by helping them to formulate questions on what they do not understand and encouraging them to ask for clarification. Also, students at the intermediate stage of language acquisition can provide short explanations of how things work or the process involved in some activity. They should be able to identify specific content vocabulary, such as the words “add,” “subtract,” or “compare/contrast.” An important point for teachers to remember is the notion of “wait time” (Wright, 2010). In other words, ELLs may need more time to process directions and questions. Allowing students wait time before expecting them to act or respond orally encourages the students to participate. The use of listening centers is especially beneficial to ELLs. Students can listen to materials placed there related to class instruction. For example, if a teacher has read a book or provided some specific information, the teacher can tape it and allow ELLs to listen again in the center. Repetition of a listening activity is beneficial for comprehension (Wright, 2010).

## **B. Phonological Awareness**

### **1. Develops awareness of the sounds of English. (Preschool-3 to Third Grade)**

Phonological awareness is the ability of students to identify units of oral language, including syllables or parts of words. Phonemic awareness relates very strongly to success in learning to read (Adams, 1990). The ability extends to ELLs also (Carlisle, Beeman, Davis, & Sparim, 1999; Ehri, Nunes, Willows, Schuster, Yahgoub-Zadeh, & Shanahan, 2001). ELLs demonstrate the ability in a number of ways, including being able to detect and identify rhyming words or a single sound difference in a list of words. For example, an ELL who says that the words *pat* and *pan* have the same beginning sound but *bat* and *pat* do not has demonstrated phonological awareness. Both phonological awareness and its subset, phonemic awareness, require that ELLs attend to the sounds of English. In fact, there is evidence that developing phonological awareness in the first language supports phonological awareness in a second language, making it a common underlying ability (Genesee et al., 2006). This suggests that students can transfer their understanding of phonological awareness in the *Not Yet* rating to the *In Process* rating, which makes a strong case for encouraging parents to speak to and read to their children at home in the dominant language of the household. The skills that demonstrate phonemic awareness include rhyme/alliteration, oddity tasks, the identification of similar beginning, ending, or medial sounds, oral blending, oral segmentation, and phonemic manipulation, among others (Grognet et al., 2000; Genesee et al., 2006; Wright, 2010).

## **C. Speaking for English Language Learners**

### **1. Speaks in social situations. (Preschool-3 to Third Grade)**

ELLs at beginning levels will generally not speak until they have had enough comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985). When they do begin speaking English, they will go through a developmental sequence of speaking: home-language use, nonverbal period, telegraphic and formulaic use, and finally, productive use (Tabors, 2008). Students may continue to speak in their first language both at home and at school, especially if there are other speakers of the language in class. They listen but do not speak for a time, something some researchers term the Silent Period (Ellis, 1994; Saville-Troike, 1988). However, they will eventually begin to use

formulaic speech— unanalyzed “chunks” of language they have observed others use, such as “Good morning,” “Thank you,” “Gimme that,” or “Okay.” They may also learn names of items by watching a teacher ask, “What is this?” and then listening to the answer, whether it’s from another child or from the teacher. Eventually, the student begins using a chunk of language such as “What this?” in to order to learn the names of items. As teachers or others respond, the ELLs may imitate the word or use it when needed. In the next stage, the ELLs will move to two- and three-word utterances that begin to approximate English sentences. They may also substitute a word of their first language into an English phrase in what is termed “code-switching” (Poplack, 1981). In fact, some researchers find that code-switching may be helpful in the speaker’s development of syntax (Levelt, Roelofs, & Meyer, 1999). Finally, young language learners will use short sentences and integrate the vocabulary they have been exposed to, a stage known as the productive stage (Tabors, 2008). At first, the students will grow in social language use. That takes about a year or so. Eventually, they will use the social language as a basis of developing an academic language. A feature of the social language is that it is contextualized, whereas academic language may not have as much context and may be learned through reading as well as listening (Cummins, 1979, 1980).

## **2. Communicates for a variety of purposes, using expanded vocabulary. (First Grade to Third Grade)**

ELLs at beginning levels will begin to use words in context, including in the immediate environment, realia, or even pictures. Effective teachers do not force students to respond at the beginning, but support their instruction with gestures or actions, employ repetition, focus on the “here and now,” and expand upon what the child does say by repeating and adding more detail (Tabors, 2008). Eventually, ELLs need words to express the various functions of language, and they require less context. They must communicate needs, feelings, and ideas in various situations. Although they may come to school with functional use of their native language, being able to transfer that skill into a new language will take time (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013; Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Halliday, 1977). At first, ELLs may have a limited vocabulary or use the wrong words. They may have to restate something, as they lack the vocabulary to express their ideas (Wright, 2010). As they acquire language and use it, they begin to find other purposes for it that go beyond the social. For example, they may use language to inform, to tell jokes, to gather information, or to imagine. Those who began learning English at age three or four may be able to keep up with their native speaking peers by the end of third grade. Their vocabulary develops rapidly, especially in classes where they are encouraged to express themselves in speaking and writing and are exposed to lots of vocabulary. In understanding the meaning of words, they may at first define words through simple definitions, or informal, definitions, e.g., dog: “We have one at home. He barks a lot.” Later, they progress to more detailed explanation, or more formal, definitions ,e.g., dog: “A dog is an animal that is a pet and is related to the wolf.” (Genessee et al. 2006).

ELLs in first through third grades who have been in school where English has been the language of instruction since pre-kindergarten should have developed an intermediate to advanced level of spoken, social English. If so, these students have a social language that supports their learning to read, write, and talk about the world (Peregoy & Boyle 2013). They should be able to identify words that express feelings and emotions and have a means of identifying their needs. They should respond to requests from teachers and others, and they should also be able to make requests and ask questions. With guidance and modeling, they should be able to verbalize their reactions to things they experience or read. In responding to events or classroom activities, they should be able to use details or examples. Teachers support oral language development through a

variety of ways, including using games, podcasts, songs, Internet sources, drama, and “show and tell,” among other things (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). Effective use of graphic organizers and cooperative learning activities also supports a student’s language development (Hill & Flynn, 2006).

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