

The Natural Approach: Stages of Second Language Development

Becoming proficient in English, and even more so in academic English, is a long process. Learners go through a fairly regular sequence, regardless of their native languages. For learners from certain first language backgrounds, there may be substages within the sequence, and some learners may progress at slower or faster rates based on a variety of factors, including native language, age, affective issues, and so on.

A good first step in understanding how to help ELLs learn is becoming familiar with the stages of second language acquisition (SLA). There are many models of the process of SLA, but one simple model based on the teaching approach called the Natural Approach (Krashen, S.D. & Terrell, T.D., 1983) has been very useful to content area teachers who work with ELLs. It is important to note that this model varies according to learner characteristics and that the stages are fluid and not discrete.

The Natural Approach segments the complex process of SLA into four basic levels or stages and details student and teacher behaviors at each one. Knowing the characteristics of each level equips teachers to communicate effectively with ELLs and to select appropriate teaching strategies. A brief description of each level follows, including an abbreviated matrix of the levels for categorizing your ELL students accordingly.

Level 1—Preproduction

Students at this stage have anywhere from 10 hours to 6 months of exposure to English and are just beginning to learn the language. In class they may be shy and

will mainly listen and respond non-verbally. Many teachers mistakenly push these students to speak English before they are ready. For most ELLs at this level, it is very important for them to have time to listen and absorb the language before they are required to speak it. This is sometimes referred to as the “Silent Period” (Asher, 2000). As they move through this level, their vocabulary includes approximately 500 receptive words (word they can understand but don’t use yet), and they are beginning to develop what SLA theorist Jim Cummins (1979) terms Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), which is language used for social communication. At this level, the teacher should be doing about 90% or more of the talking, and the ELL students should listen and respond non-verbally. In order for the teacher’s speech to be comprehensible, it should include lots of pantomime, body language, facial expressions, and gestures. In addition, the teacher should model rather than just verbally explain tasks and skills, and use lots of pictures and real objects. The teacher’s speech should be simplified, slow, and clear. ELL students at this level can be involved in lessons if the teacher checks their comprehension through asking them to respond non-verbally. For example, they can point to an item, nod to answer simple yes/no questions, and carry out simple commands (e.g., put the globe on the table).

Level 2—Early Production

At this level, students have had anywhere from 3 months to a year of English. They can now begin to produce some language, in the form of 1 to 2 word responses along with the same type of non-verbal responses that they depended on in level 1. About 1,000 words form their receptive vocabulary, and as at any other level, about

10% of their vocabulary is expressive (words they regularly use). The types of questions that students can answer at this level are yes/no, “what” questions that elicit 1 to 2 word responses (what is this?), “who” questions (who is standing next to the equator on the floor map?), “either/or questions” (is this an ocean or a sea?) and “where” questions that require a simple phrase response (where is the Matterhorn?—In Switzerland.). Formulaic chunks of language are emerging as well, with most of the elements of the chunks remaining unanalyzed. For example, they may be able to use the phrase, “How ya doin’?” but they may not be able to understand the function of each word and how the words should form a sentence. Teachers must be careful to ask students questions that are appropriate for their level and to use simplified language, avoiding idioms and uncommon vocabulary. Using the reproducible master to categorize students into appropriate levels will help you to remember which questions and strategies you should use for each ELL in your class.

Because students develop expressive skills in English at the early production stage, they can communicate in a simple manner with their classmates in pairs and small groups. Interacting with peers to solve problems, develop projects, discuss class topics, etc., provides better opportunities for ELLs to understand the content as well as develop their language than many whole-class, teacher-directed activities. In whole-class activities, ELLs are usually reluctant to ask questions if they don’t understand the lesson, but in a pair or small group activity, they may be less intimidated to ask for help. Also, in small group and pair activities ELLs have greater opportunities to practice speaking (each person can speak versus having the teacher ask the class a question and only one person responds), and both partners can

negotiate meaning, which means that if the native speaker doesn't understand the ELL, s/he can ask for clarification or verification, and vice versa. Negotiation of meaning can't be achieved unless ELLs can participate in conversation, and research has shown that the focus on accurately conveying meaning through two-way negotiation is a very crucial condition for language development.

Once students have developed rudimentary vocabulary and syntax in English, their progress begins to expand rapidly. This limited vocabulary and syntax forms the basis on which to build their proficiency, and by understanding and using a few words and phrases, ELLs can increase their receptive and expressive abilities in English more independently.

Level 3—Speech Emergence

At this point, somewhere between one and three years of exposure to English, ELL students' development of proficiency increases exponentially. They use phrases and sentences, and their receptive vocabulary grows to nearly 7,000 words. Questions they are now able to answer include "how" and "why," which require fairly complex responses. Because they can understand a great deal and can express themselves fairly effectively, albeit with grammatical simplicity and developmental errors, ELLs at the Speech Emergence stage can participate in a variety of teaching strategies. General student-centered practices such as scaffolding and expansion, poetry, songs, chants, prediction, comparing/contrasting, describing, cooperative learning, problem solving, charting, and graphing are appropriate for ELLs, but the classroom teacher must remember to provide them with additional support. This includes: 1) analyzing the degree of what Jim Cummins (1982) terms cognitive

complexity (the difficulty of a given task) and contextual support (i.e., nonverbal input, such as pictures, and experiences such as hands-on activities) and increasing the context appropriately; 2) being mindful of one's own oral and written communication, including the use of complex language structures (e.g., subordinate and relative clauses, the passive voice), idioms (e.g., using the term "brush up on" rather than "review/practice"), unusual vocabulary (e.g., "wheedle" versus "convince"), the rate of speech, the degree of redundancy and paraphrasing, and the frequency of comprehension checks to determine whether the ELL is actually following and understanding; and 4) increasing the number of non-verbal cues, such as showing short video snippets, providing diagrams such as concept maps and other graphic organizers. At every stage, whenever communication breaks down, the teacher should employ the same strategies as those used in the beginning stages, such as showing a picture, consulting a bilingual dictionary, gesturing and acting out, etc.

Level 4—Intermediate Fluency

A shift occurs at this level, after about 3 to 4 years of exposure to English, because ELLs begin to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency in English (the ability to understand and use English for academic purposes, through texts and discourse). Having mastered the knowledge and skills required for social language (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills), ELLs have accumulated approximately 12,000 receptive words. They have gone beyond speaking in phrases and simple sentences to being able to engage in extended discourse. They can answer complex questions that require them to synthesize and evaluate information because they possess adequate academic language proficiency to do so in English. This means that

they can participate in essay writing, complex problem solving, researching and supporting their positions, and critiquing and analyzing literature. Although it may seem that they are able to perform the same activities as native speakers, they continue to need special support until their CALP in English is fully developed and they have closed any gaps in their understanding of the subject due to concepts and skills that were taught prior to their developing adequate proficiency to master them. These lapses can accumulate and cause students to fall farther and farther behind. Care must be taken to provide sufficient contextual support as well as to assess and build background knowledge required for learning any new topic. In addition, cultural and linguistic biases are a factor in assessing ELL students at this an all levels of proficiency. If the ability to compare and contrast political systems is measured by a test question that requires a grammatically correct essay response, then the objective is not truly being assessed. In many cases, alternative assessments that allow ELLs at this level to demonstrate achievement of a learning objective through creating diagrams, bulleted lists, and other less language dependent means can improve validity and fairness. The important point to remember is that students at this level are still in the process of learning academic English and when they experience difficulty or fail to achieve at minimum levels, they require language support.

References

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