



SECRETARIAT  
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## Who are English language learners?

English language learners (ELLs) are students who are new to English, or to the kind of English used in schools, when they enter an English-language school environment. Although many ELLs in Ontario schools are newcomers from other countries, EQAO data show that most ELLs in the primary and junior divisions are Canadian-born.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a)

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## ELL Voices in the Classroom

### Oral Language Strategies for English Language Learners

Ontario has a long tradition of growth through immigration, intensified in recent years by globalization. As a result, English language learners (ELLs) are appearing in greater numbers in classrooms across the province and, as every teacher knows, this demographic change has prompted exciting changes in classroom practice. Helping ELLs learn the language while learning the curriculum has become the responsibility of the entire school team.

Oral language is the foundation of literacy. All children learn to talk long before they begin to learn to read and write, and early literacy instruction is based on what they already understand and can say. Most ELLs have obviously not had the same opportunities to acquire oral English at home as their age peers (although most arrive at school with age-appropriate oral language skills in their own language), so they need plenty of opportunities to develop oral language skills in English at school. A good language-learning environment enables ELLs to develop the oral language skills (listening and speaking) that will provide a foundation for the development of literacy.

### Negotiating Meaning

A language learner's early attempts at communication are often replete with typical "learner errors" – mispronunciation, inaccurate grammar or inappropriate word choice. Careful listeners (whether other students or the teacher) may repeat what they think they have heard with rising intonation, turning it into a question, prompting the language learner to rethink and self-correct. Often, the ELL will explicitly ask for help. In this way, language learners and other participants in the conversation jointly negotiate meaning. Such exchanges occur naturally in many Ontario classrooms and they provide essential scaffolding for ELLs. We now know that these informal exchanges can be deepened. Research from around the world suggests that oral language activities can be structured to provide maximally effective programs for English language learners in mainstream classrooms (e.g., Genesee et al., 1994).

## Connect to Real-World Interests

“A second language is acquired most effectively when it is used to achieve meaningful purposes, such as learning to play baseball, solving a mathematics word problem, creating a dramatic retelling of a story, planning a class outing, and working on a group project.”

(Coelho, 2007 [2004], p. 173)

## Comprehension Precedes Production

“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.”

(Krashen, 1981, pp. 6–7)

## A Research Snapshot of ELLs

- Many are newcomers from other countries, but most are Canadian born, often first-generation children of Canadian immigrants (Coelho, 2007).
- Most are making outstanding progress, but ELLs from some ethnocultural backgrounds are failing disproportionately (Brown & Sinay, 2008; Yau & O’Reilly, 2007; O’Reilly & Yau, 2009).
- Many who begin learning English before adolescence acquire everyday language skills (and an authentic Canadian accent) within a year or two, but most take five or more years to catch up to their peers in using English for academic tasks (Cummins, 2007; Garcia, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 2002).
- Many Canadian-born ELLs take at least as long as newcomers to acquire academic English (Worswick, 2004).

## Learning about the Linguistic Diversity in Your Classroom

You may wish to conduct an interactive language survey at the beginning of the year to learn first hand about the linguistic diversity in your classroom – and to give students opportunities for early conversations.

1. The teacher (with students) creates an alphabetical list of all the languages spoken by children in the class (including English).
2. The teacher organizes a short brainstorming session about the meanings of the terms *first*, *second* and *additional language*, and encourages students to generate questions such as *What is your first language? Where do you use this language? What is your second language? How did you learn it? Can you read and write in this language? Who speaks this language with you? Do you know any other languages?* The teacher writes the questions on the board as a way to model the interview task that follows.
3. The teacher creates a four-column chart with the following headings: Language; First; Second; Additional. Students are invited to use some of the questions to interview the teacher, who then places himself or herself on the class chart: for example, as a speaker of English who learned French as a second language and German and Spanish as additional languages.
4. In pairs, children interview each other about their languages. It is best if children interview students whose linguistic background is different from their own, although beginners could be partnered with a same-language peer.
5. Children contribute the information about their partners to the chart. ELLs may benefit from a model: e.g., “Adena speaks ...” or “Adena’s first language is ....” Each child’s name is listed for each of his or her languages.
6. The chart can be used in a number of ways: as an “audit” of linguistic diversity in the class, which will help the teacher identify those who are learning English as a second or additional language; as content for a data management activity related to graphing and percentages; or as content for an oral activity in which students make statements about the graph or chart they created, using language such as “more than half of,” “twice as many.”

## Adapting the Language Environment in Your Classroom

Students simply don't learn vocabulary such as "metaphor" or "sedimentary rock," or about various forms of writing, from day-to-day interaction. They need to be immersed in an academic language environment – an age-appropriate classroom – in order to learn academic English. However, the language environment needs to be adapted to enable ELLs to participate.

### Make room for first languages.

Students rely on their first language as a tool for thinking, at least until their English is sufficiently well-developed for conceptual tasks. The first language can be an asset in another way: students who continue to develop age-appropriate proficiency in their own language do better in school, and in learning English, than students who abandon their first language – and often do better than monolingual English-speaking students as well (CILT: National Centre for Languages, 2006; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Therefore, teachers need to make space in the classroom for students' languages – for example, assuming you have more than one student in your classroom who speaks the same language, you may wish to encourage them to discuss a mathematics problem in their own language before transferring to English.

### Respect the silent period.

Many ELLs pass through a silent period when they say very little, and what they do say may consist of memorized phrases. However, they are not passive during this period; most are absorbing language at an amazing rate and eventually will start to produce it when they feel they have figured out some of the rules of English. At all stages in the language acquisition process, learners' receptive competence (understanding oral language and written text) is considerably more developed than their productive competence (speaking and writing) (Krashen, 1981). Teachers can offer alternative ways for students to demonstrate their learning – for example, using graphic organizers to convey knowledge.

### Maximize co-operative learning strategies.

Co-operative learning strategies such as small group discussions, "real world" problem solving and literature circles have been found to be particularly beneficial for all students (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000). The increased opportunities for talk are especially beneficial to ELLs. Small group interaction in the classroom has also been shown to help students learn social skills such as helping, sharing or valuing other people's contributions and perspectives. Following are five suggestions on forming and managing groups so that all students, including ELLs, can enjoy maximum benefit from co-operative learning strategies:

1. Assign students to groups, and change groups periodically and/or for different subjects and activities. Make sure to balance the groups, as much as possible, taking into account such factors as gender, learning style, proficiency in English, expertise in the subject area, etc.
2. Provide ELLs with opportunities to work with more proficient speakers of English who can serve as language models and provide essential feedback. Occasionally, it may be more beneficial to group ELLs, especially beginners, so that they can work together on curriculum-related tasks adapted to their level of proficiency in English.

## Why oral language for ELLs?

"ELLs learn English primarily by listening to language in use around them, while using context to figure out what the spoken words mean. This language serves as the input or data that learners internalize and use to express their own meanings in their interactions with others."

(Thomas & Collier, 2002)

## Everyday vs Academic English

ELLs, particularly if they are Canadian born, may be fluent in everyday English but need continued support with academic English. Here are some examples of key differences between everyday and academic English:

- able to maintain face-to-face conversations vs understand content of a presentation
- able to talk, read and write about what is happening here and now vs talk, read and write about more abstract content
- able to use basic vocabulary and simple sentences vs low-frequency vocabulary (e.g., "observe/observation" vs "look") and more complex sentences

(Cummins, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Thomas & Collier, 2002)

## Some Tips for Managing Classroom Talk

- Model and teach appropriate voice volume for classroom talk.
- Establish and maintain a noise level that allows students to hear what others are saying.
- Teach and revisit the rules of engagement for classroom talk.
- Invite students to contribute to the rules and to problem-solve solutions to classroom issues.
- Provide relevant topics, questions and challenges that engage students' interests.
- Plan for wait time so that students have time to think.
- Ensure that students understand the focus and purpose of the talk in each learning activity.
- Use organizational aids to focus and track discussion (e.g., anchor charts, jot notes, and graphic organizers).

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b)

3. Keep the groups small in order to provide maximum opportunities for each student to participate in group discussion. Most experts recommend groups of three to five. Groups of four are very flexible, because they can easily be regrouped into pairs for some activities.
4. Emphasize the value of collaboration: e.g., "People who learn how to work well with others will be more effective in the workplace and community."
5. Establish clear routines, timelines and expectations for group work. It is a good idea to have an extra chair at every table so that the teacher can visit each group regularly.

### Develop conversational strategies.

To implement co-operative learning successfully, it is important to focus on the social skills required to manage disagreement, take turns or offer help. Here is a sample process for setting up a group discussion.

1. Explain to the class, "You may have some differences of opinion as you work on this task. That's okay; this is a topic that people often disagree about. But you do need to hear what everybody thinks; you may learn something that will cause you to think again about your own opinion. You might think of a good argument to support your opinion, or you might want to change it after listening to someone else. Let's talk about how you can disagree with someone without putting that person down."
2. Discuss in groups the following questions: "Is it always necessary for everyone to agree? How can you disagree with someone but keep the discussion going and show respect for their ideas?"
3. Members of each group are then invited to contribute to a class list of "expressions for disagreement." The teacher can take advantage of this opportunity to expand the students' repertoire by adding some expressions, especially the more formal ones. Teacher and students can then categorize the language, using a three-column chart (see below). It is important to explain that these distinctions are sometimes blurred and that meaning is always informed by context and audience. However, in the classroom setting, students should be encouraged to use expressions from the first two columns, attempting consciously to expand their language repertoire.
4. When the class moves on to the task itself, the teacher can remind them, "Express your ideas and listen carefully to each other. If you disagree, try using some of the language on the chart."

#### WHAT CAN YOU SAY WHEN ...

#### you disagree with someone's opinion?

Formal/polite	Informal	May be offensive
I have a different point of view. I don't agree with you. Let me explain my position. I don't agree. I disagree. I have another point of view. I'm not sure about that. Let's take a vote. Let's agree to disagree.	We're not on the same wavelength. I don't go along with that. I don't really see it that way. I don't see eye to eye with you on that. Look at it this way. My problem with that is, ... Do you really think so?	No way! That's a silly idea. That's so dumb. Where did you get that idea? You gotta be kidding! You're joking! Get outta here! Oh, come on!

5. When the task is complete, the teacher can share his or her observations of the group process, without singling out specific groups or individual students for criticism or praise, and review the desired behaviour and language, if necessary. At first, the students' use of these conversational strategies may be a little forced, but with practice and continued support, their use of this language will become more spontaneous and will contribute greatly to a satisfying learning experience for all students, including ELLs.

## Connecting to Prior Knowledge and Skills

Even after two or three years of immersion in an English-language school, ELLs can find the academic language environment of the classroom very challenging. Unless there is plenty of scaffolding to support comprehension, ELLs may spend large amounts of time sitting at their desks, with little understanding of what is happening around them.

### Activate prior knowledge.

Finding ways to help children connect new learning to prior knowledge and experience helps all students learn. With ELLs, the challenge is to connect new concepts and new vocabulary to knowledge and skills they already have in their own language.

*For example:* Imagine it is time for the math lesson and Manju is just beginning to acquire her first words. To access Manju's prior knowledge, the teacher could write down the numbers involved or group manipulatives to show the numbers. When Manju sees the printed numbers or groupings of manipulatives, she will be able to figure out the English names for the numbers. If she has an opportunity to watch and listen as someone solves a problem out loud, demonstrating with manipulatives before writing out the problem, she will also understand words and expressions that describe the process of addition: "eight plus two equals ten," etc. This foundational work in the basic vocabulary of mathematics will be reinforced through Manju's immersion in a lesson where everyone is talking mathematics in small groups.

### Be aware of your mode of speech.

Many children who are learning English need their teachers to modify their own mode of speech in order to help them understand. Here are five ways to do this:

1. Speak naturally, and only slightly more slowly than normal, pausing slightly after each phrase rather than between words. Face students, turn up the volume just a little and emphasize key words. Explicitly teach new vocabulary.
2. Simplify vocabulary – "Learn the new words." (pointing to the classroom word chart or to the child's vocabulary notebook) vs "Review the new vocabulary."
3. Simplify sentence structure – "You must finish the work and give it to me on Friday." vs "The project must be completed and handed in by Friday." Explicitly teach new sentence structures.
4. Use gestures, facial expressions, and mime to help learners get meaning from teacher talk (but keep in mind that the head movements for "Yes" and "No" differ in various countries, and the "OK" sign or thumbs-up may communicate something quite different from what was intended!)

## Some Tips for Managing Classroom Talk

- Use flexible seating arrangements that allow students to move seats to face each other, expand group size, or create a quiet space for small-group or partner learning.
- Use self-reflection, pairs, triads, and small groups to increase student participation.
- Teach students how to enter appropriately into free-flowing discussions and conversations.
- Teach students how to disagree respectfully, build on each other's ideas, and encourage all their group members to participate.
- Do not tolerate inappropriate comments.
- Aim for lively, respectful interactions.
- Don't expect perfection.
- Model, teach, and expect English-speaking students to engage with and support children learning English.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b)

## Some Classroom Conversation Strategies

By the end of the year, there should be lists of conversational strategies for a variety of purposes displayed on the classroom wall, such as:

What can you do or say when

- ... you want to help someone who is learning English?
- ... you want a turn?
- ... you want to stop someone who is talking too much (without hurting their feelings)?
- ... you want to bring the group back on topic?
- ... it's time to finish?
- ... you don't understand?
- ... you want to encourage someone who is too shy to speak?

5. Be careful with expressions such as "Let's brainstorm!" with students who are in the early stages of learning English. But keep in mind that ELLs beyond the beginning stages enjoy learning these expressions. You can rephrase or explain the idioms that arise naturally in class, or encourage other students to explain, and post a list of the week's figurative expressions on the bulletin board.

### Provide additional contextual support.

Here are five ways to provide additional scaffolding for comprehension:

1. Use models, toys, manipulatives, pictures, charts, flash cards, vocabulary lists, posters, banners, as well as demonstrations and hands-on activities, to provide additional visual support for ELLs to infer meaning from language that is just a little beyond their present level of understanding.
2. Select a few key words that will be used in the lesson and pre-teach them by providing a picture, using gesture or mime, using students' first languages, providing synonyms, using the word in a highly supported context or drawing an analogy. When introducing a new word, always say it several times, inviting children to chime in, while printing it on the board or pointing to it on a classroom chart.
3. Encourage oral rehearsal of key ideas or vocabulary. For example, at the beginning of a lesson, the teacher might say to the class, "Make sure everyone knows four things about \_\_\_\_\_." (key ideas from the previous lesson), or "Make sure everyone in the group understands these five words." (vocabulary items from the previous lesson). This technique is also useful for summarizing key ideas at the end of a lesson.
4. Give clear instructions. English language learners may not be able to process oral instructions quickly enough to understand fully, so it is helpful if they can review instructions in their groups before starting a task. A few random checks will help to make sure everyone participates in this short discussion, and that ELLs have an opportunity to confirm their understanding before starting the task. It is also important to provide simply-worded written instructions for tasks/projects.
5. Check often for comprehension. When asked, "Do you understand?" ELLs may say "Yes" in order to avoid embarrassment. It would be more helpful to check with students on a regular basis by saying, for example, "Show me the diameter of the circle. OK, say 'diameter.' Yes, diameter. Now show me the circumference."

### Model Language Use.

**Pronunciation.** Teachers need to model pronunciation of new words, and at times have students rehearse pronunciation. This is especially helpful when introducing academic words where the addition of a suffix or prefix changes the stressed syllable – for example, *probability* vs *probable*. Many languages do not use suffixes in this way, or even use them at all (as is the case in Chinese). Also, some sounds of English are especially challenging – for example, the two distinct sounds represented by *th* in *breath* and *breathe* are found in few other languages. Students may need some individual coaching (from the teacher or classroom partner).

**Syntax.** It is also important to model specific language patterns. For example, the style of language used in traditional stories often features a literary syntax (word order) that differs from the language of ordinary speech. It is helpful if teachers point out and model these kinds of linguistic features orally, and encourage students to incorporate them into their own oral retelling.

**Linking words.** Another feature of English that teachers need to model explicitly is the use of linking words and phrases that help to organize ideas in a coherent fashion, such as sequence (first, next, then, after that, finally), cause and effect (because, because of, as a result) or concession (although, even though, in spite of).

## Assessing Oral Language Development

### How should teachers use the information they gather?

The Ontario Ministry of Education identifies three ways that teachers should use assessment information to monitor English-language development among ELLs (2008a). These are assessment *for* learning, which enables teachers to identify each student’s needs and design effective instruction; assessment *as* learning, which provides guidance or feedback to students so that they can improve their performance; and assessment *of* learning, which enables teachers to report periodically on each student’s progress.

	What the teacher sees or hears	What the teacher does with this information
<b>Assessment for learning</b>	Student has difficulty with pronunciation of the sounds represented by “th” in “both” and “brother” (“Bot my broder and me go Arabic school.”) This causes some difficulty during the interview, so that the student’s partner has to ask for repetition several times.	Makes a note for future instruction.
<b>Assessment as learning</b>	In an individual conference, and after teacher modelling, student is able to produce standard pronunciation.	Arranges for a cross-grade tutor or volunteer to provide some individual coaching and practice with minimal pairs (e.g., <i>boat/both</i> ) and rehearsed sentences.  Continues to provide indirect feedback in classroom conversations by repeating a word or phrase with standard pronunciation as a model and a gentle reminder for the student.
<b>Assessment of learning</b>	Over a period of time, student’s clarity of pronunciation improves.	Eventually notes achievement of the Stage 2 description, “speak with sufficient clarity and accuracy for listener comprehension,” and shares this information with parents, through an interpreter, in a parent-teacher interview.

### Provide supportive feedback.

Teachers often do not notice the oral language errors of ELLs in classroom interaction, such as mispronunciation, inaccurate grammar or inappropriate word choice. This is because most teachers are good listeners and usually focus on the meaning of what the child is trying to say. While meaning is important, it is also necessary to pay attention to the language errors of ELLs and provide the kind of feedback that will help them to refine their oral language production and, ultimately, improve their writing. The best way to do this is not to point out errors overtly, especially in front of other students, because this can inhibit them from engaging in classroom discussion. Instead it is best to provide indirect feedback by modelling the correct form.

### How do we know ELLs are making progress?

Because language learning is developmental and involves experiment and approximation, it is important to use a variety of assessment tools to identify ELLs’ strengths and needs. The “Four Stages of Second-Language Acquisition and Literacy Development” include examples of oral language behaviours that can help teachers decide what to look and listen for in classroom conversations and discussions in order to assess the oral language skills.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001)

The Ontario Ministry of Education is developing a new assessment tool to help teachers observe and document the progress of ELLs in their acquisition of English. Scheduled for 2010.

## In Summary

Teachers can support language acquisition among ELLs, and conceptual understanding among all students, by paying attention to their own language use and by providing plentiful opportunities for structured small group interaction in the classroom. Today's effective classroom is one where there is

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a constant buzz of purposeful, task-focused talk among students, and where the teacher provides focused instruction on the sociolinguistic skills that will facilitate the group task. These sociolinguistic skills will benefit students not only in the classroom but in the wider community and eventually in the world of work.

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## Some Useful Websites

Cooperative Learning Center: <http://www.co-operation.org/>. Provides an overview of various CL techniques as well as information on research studies and relevant literature.

Literature Circles Resource Center: <http://www.litcircles.org/>. Practical advice and book suggestions for elementary teachers.

Literature Circles.com: [www.literaturecircles.com](http://www.literaturecircles.com). Research studies and teacher resources on student-led book discussion groups.

Teaching Diverse Learners: <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/index.shtml>. See especially the Oral Language section in Elementary Literacy.

The Jigsaw Classroom: <http://www.jigsaw.org/>. Background information on a cooperative learning technique that "reduces racial conflict among school children, promotes better learning, improves student motivation, and increases enjoyment of the learning experience."

TRIBES: <http://www.tribes.com/index.html>. Information about the Tribes approach to building an inclusive learning community in the classroom