

## **Early Childhood Learning Services English Acquisition Plan**

As the number of linguistically and culturally diverse students entering American schools increases, more and more teachers are faced with the challenge of educating children with limited English skills. Today in the United States, one in five children speaks a language other than English at home. The number is even higher in early intervention programs like Head Start and Even Start. Approximately one in every four children speaks another language at home. These children have an opportunity that is too valuable to pass up. Being bilingual is an asset! A review of the research (August & Hakuta, 1997) indicates that the advantages to being bilingual are:

- bilingual children often have higher levels of cognitive achievement than monolingual children;
- bilingual individuals handle tasks involving multiple variables more easily than those who speak only one language;
- bilingual individuals tolerate ambiguity better and are more cognitively flexible; and
- bilingual individuals can effectively communicate with more people.

Research summarized in *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) stresses the importance of supporting children's continued learning in their primary language while at the same time, fostering their ability to learn to speak English. Learning English is additive, meaning that the new language should expand the child's overall linguistic capabilities. By valuing young English language learners' native languages and ensuring that learning English is an additive process - not one that results in the loss of the native language - programs can provide a nurturing, supportive environment for children, which can lead to improved self-esteem and help foster positive relationships with parents and communities.

All over the world children acquire their home language in basically the same way. They learn language in a fairly unconscious way as they listen and speak to communicate meaning. During recurrent or repeated situations such as eating, bathing, playing and dressing they hear language and associate it with these contexts and activities. Oral language emerges as young children interact with others to socialize, to convey needs and have them met, to share ideas and learn about the ideas of others, and to entertain or to be entertained through play (Wells, 1986).

### **Language Acquisition Principles**

Barry McLaughlin (1995) outlines eight principles drawn from theory and research on second language acquisition and culturally sensitive instruction to guide educators working with linguistically diverse students and to help them recognize that bilingualism is a process that occurs in stages.

**Principle #1: *Bilingualism is an asset and should be fostered.*** Research increasingly shows the cognitive, cultural and economic advantages of bilingualism (Hakuta & Pease-Alvarez, 1992). Children who have the opportunity to speak two languages should be encouraged to maintain both so they can enjoy the benefits that may accompany bilingual status. Helping children

maintain and build their home language while promoting English fluency is especially important so that children retain their primary cultural identity, continue to stay closely attached to the customs and traditions of their families and progress toward becoming fully bilingual (Espinosa, 2004)

**Principle #2: *There is an ebb and flow to children's bilingualism.*** It is rare for both languages to be perfectly balanced. Children showing a lack of proficiency in both languages are undergoing a developmental phase in which limited use causes proficiency in the home language to decline while the second language has not reached an age-appropriate level. This should be viewed as a period of temporary language imbalance and considered healthy and normal. It is rare for bilinguals to have both languages in balance.

**Principle #3: *There are different cultural patterns in language use.*** Children from different cultural backgrounds may experience cultural conflict in school because their ways of learning and communicating are different from the routines of the classroom. By validating the student's cultures and using communication patterns familiar to them, teachers provide a much richer and more effective approach to culturally sensitive instruction than by focusing on occasional celebration of the history and traditions of different ethnic groups.

**Principle #4: *For some bilingual children, code-switching is a normal language phenomenon.*** While some children acquiring a second language appear at first to confuse the two languages, code-switching is, in fact, a normal aspect of second language acquisition. Young children tend to insert single items from one language into the other (McClure, 1977), primarily to resolve ambiguities and clarify statements. Teachers should not hesitate to switch languages to accommodate the language and culture of their students. The goal must always be to communicate, rather than adhere to rigid rules about which language should be used at a given time.

**Principle #5: *Children come to learn second languages in many different ways.*** There are four types of bilingualism:

**Type 1: Simultaneous Bilingualism** refers to children who have early exposure to both languages and have ample opportunity to practice it.

**Type 2: Receptive Bilingualism** refers to children who have high exposure to a second language but have little opportunity to practice.

**Type 3: Rapid Successive Bilingualism** refers to children who have had little exposure to a second language before entering school but have ample opportunity to practice it once they enter.

**Type 4: Slow Successive Bilingualism** refers to children who have had little exposure to a second language and have few opportunities or low motivation to use it.

**Principle #6: *Language is used to communicate meaning.*** Children will internalize a second language more readily if they are asked to engage in meaningful activities that require using the language. Wong Fillmore (1985) recommends a number of steps that teachers can use to engage their students:

- Use demonstrations, modeling, role-playing
- Present new information in the context of known information.

- Paraphrase often.
- Use simple structures, avoid complex structures.
- Repeat the same sentence patterns and routines.
- Tailor questions for different levels of language competence and participation.

**Principle #7: *Language flourishes best in a language-rich environment.*** Teachers need to be good models of language use. They should encourage children to practice English as much as possible and provide reinforcement by expanding on the children's vocabulary repertoire and by speaking coherently. Children should be exposed to meaningful literacy activities.

**Principle #8: *Children should be encouraged to experiment with language.*** Learning a second language is similar to learning a first language in that the child needs to experiment and produce utterances that may be inaccurate yet reflect normal language development. In this way, the child is attempting to figure out the patterns and rules that govern the language. To assist children in speaking the language properly teachers should rephrase or expand on what the child has already said.

### **Goals**

As outlined by Ginger Rodriguez in *Meeting the Diverse Needs of Young Children (1998)* goals for teaching bilingual children in an early childhood classroom might look like this:

- Educators understand, respect, and validate the diverse needs of children entering the early childhood classroom.
- Educators develop a self-awareness of culture and the role it plays in their beliefs, attitudes, and expectations.
- Teachers and others work as a team to design developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction that not only meets the needs of individual children but also reflects the diversity of the group.
- Teachers have a repertoire of developmentally appropriate, research-based learning strategies that are known to be successful in working with children from a variety of cultures.
- The classroom environment reflects diversity in the selection of books and other learning materials.
- The classroom is set up to provide barrier-free access and to promote interaction among all students.
- Sustained professional development supports the educational team in developing self-awareness, a base of knowledge, and skill in working with diverse groups of students.
- Teachers are familiar with resources in the local and global community that can support efforts to meet children's diverse needs.
- Parents are involved in decision making at the school to ensure that programs are culturally sensitive and meet the needs of students and families.
- Children whose first language is not English are supported in use of their home language while learning English.
- Children respect and value the diversity in the classroom and in the local and global communities.

Tabors identified four stages of sequential acquisition of a new language for children over the age of 3.

Stage	What it Looks Like	Tips for Teachers
Home Language Use	Children only use their home language with other children and school staff. They often appear oblivious to the new language, perhaps because much of the language spoken by adults and other children is inaccessible or incomprehensible to them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strive to include all children in every activity.</li> <li>• Use concrete props and manipulatives along with activities that require movement.</li> <li>• Talk continuously about what children are seeing, doing, sensing or expecting.</li> <li>• Encourage children to repeat or echo what they hear.</li> <li>• Do not insist that children generate English spontaneously or individually.</li> <li>• Learn a few phrases in the child's home language that can be used to greet the child, ensure involvement in activities, check on comprehension, provide directives, check on comfort, and complement effort.</li> </ul>
Non-verbal Period	This stage begins when children start to realize that their primary language is not being understood. Children limit the use of their home language when they realize that their words are not understood by others. This period can last from a few months to one year. Gestures and pantomimes are not uncommon. In some instances children will signal the end of this stage by beginning to make sounds that are like those of the second language but may not be recognizable as English words.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use language tied to an experience to help children understand what is being said.</li> <li>• Explain procedures and use concrete referents in activities and lessons.</li> <li>• Allow children to rehearse before saying anything in public.</li> <li>• Provide a starter language to help children formulate a message.</li> <li>• Elaborate on a child's limited communication.</li> <li>• Use props or appropriate actions that will help promote comprehension.</li> <li>• Use linguistic structures such as: "Look at this..... Hold this..... Give me the..... Watch me do..... This is a .... "</li> <li>• Remember that the length of time a child is in the nonverbal period varies, depending on many factors including the personality of the child and characteristics of the particular setting.</li> </ul>
Telegraphic and Formulaic Speech	Children begin to use one-and two-word phrases in English and name objects. They may use groups of words but may not use them appropriately. (shut up, stop it, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage children in conversations constantly. If they don't understand, say it another way.</li> <li>• Listen to a child's communicative intent, rather than judging whether they are speaking correctly or not.</li> <li>• Simplify English when speaking to children by using simpler sentences.</li> <li>• Accept all attempts at communication even if it involves a mixing of English and the child's home language.</li> <li>• Expand a child's language by continuing with the next logical step in the conversation.</li> <li>• Encourage new English speakers to play and work with more English proficient children.</li> <li>• Vary situations where either the home language or English might be heard and spoken.</li> <li>• Introduce new conversation topics and model different purposes for language use.</li> <li>• Listen intently to a child without interrupting.</li> </ul>
Productive Language	Children will use simple sentences in English like the ones they hear in their environment. They begin to form their own sentences using words that they have learned.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow children to talk in both their home and program languages</li> <li>• Encourage children to tell stories, share information make requests, and persuade.</li> <li>• Involve children in active experiences.</li> </ul>

## Individual Influences

Not all children acquire a second language at the same rate. Tabors, P. (1997) identifies four major factors that influence a child's progress in developing second language skills:

- **Motivation:** A desire may be the best predictor of success in learning a second language.
- **Exposure:** How much time a child spends in contact with the new language.
- **Age:** Younger children, such as 2-4 years olds, may move more slowly through the states of second language acquisition than older preschoolers and school aged children.
- **Personality:** Children that are more outgoing and risk-takers have an easier time learning a second language than shy and reserved children.

## Strategies for Teachers

Teachers can take the following steps to implement an effective early childhood program that takes into account the diverse needs of children (Rodriquez, 1998):

- Develop an awareness of culture and an understanding that culture influences all humans.
- Believe that all children are capable of learning. Set high standards and maintain high expectations for all students while understanding that children have natural developmental differences as they grow.
- Participate in instructional teaming and collaboration with bilingual resource specialists to ensure that appropriate educational strategies are used for children with diverse needs.
- Using a transdisciplinary approach, consult with other professionals both inside and outside the school building to develop reachable goals for each child.
- Structure the physical environment--including physical space, toys, and materials--to promote play, engagement, and learning for all the students in the classroom.
- Use naturalistic teaching strategies to respond to individual students within the context of naturally occurring classroom activities. Such strategies are helpful for enabling children to reach individual goals and for challenging insensitive behavior when it occurs.
- Use flexible assessment strategies to build on each child's strengths. The assessment plan must note any accommodation or support the child needs to be successful in the classroom. Keep in mind the major purposes of assessment in programs for young children: instructional planning, needs identification, program evaluation, and communication with parents.
- Become aware of various cultural influences and social conventions that affect how children and their parents and families communicate and interact. Children may differ in their cultural patterns in perception or communication styles, such as wait time for responses, eye contact in answering, and style of interacting with adults. Teachers should adjust instruction accordingly.
- Learn about the various cultural traditions and languages of school families to understand and respect cultural differences.
- Develop and implement an early childhood curriculum that is culturally responsive and anti-bias to help children learn the value of human diversity.

- Realize that bilingualism is an asset, not a deficit. Learn to become comfortable with children speaking their native language. Foster bilingual acquisition in preschool children. Try to promote the home languages of children while they are learning English.
- Develop strategies for supporting home-language use at school.
- Provide classroom books, displays, props, and materials that reflect the diversity of society.
- Eliminate stereotypical and inaccurate materials from the classroom.
- Use multicultural resources in the classroom: family stories, children's literature, parent storytelling, music and drama, and field trips.
- Take advantage of ongoing professional development opportunities.

### **Involving Parents**

Authentic involvement of parents as active and empowered members of the school community will link school staff with the diverse learners (Sanchez, Li. and Nuttall, 1995). Parents are the first educators of all young children and parental involvement in early education programs is a common denominator in school success (Nissani, 1993) When educators involve parents from minority groups as partners in their children's education, the parents appear to develop a sense of efficacy that communicates itself to their children and has positive academic consequences (Cummins, 1991).

Teachers can foster this collaboration by:

- Assuring families that their home languages and cultures are valued.
- Ask parents to assist with planning activities for the classroom.
- Send books home for family members to read to children in their home language.
- Use parents as resource people by asking them to share cultural recipes, stories or artifacts.
- Invite families to contribute food containers labeled in their home language as well as calendars and menus to be used as play props.
- Use parents as resource people and involve them in specific curriculum activities in the classroom.
- Regularly share information and goals with parents through letters, newsletters, phone calls, and parent group meetings. Communicate using the home language of the parents.
- Gather information from families about areas of interest, traditions that are observed, what kind of literacy activities are enjoyed together and other areas of interest that can be incorporated in the classroom.

### **Professional Development**

It is essential to have well-prepared, qualified teachers in classrooms with children that are learning a second language. Teachers need to be able to understand children's linguistic and other needs, prepare effective lessons that will meet those needs, provide appropriate instruction and be able to assess how well students comprehend what has been taught (Echevarria, 1998). Staff should have formal training in child development, language acquisition, appropriate instructional and assessment techniques, curricular development, parent involvement, and cultural sensitivity (Southern Regional Education Board, 1994).

## Implementation Pitfalls

Fully accounting for diversity in the early childhood classroom raises numerous potential problems. Among the most important are these (Rodriquez, 1998):

- **The "Fix-It" Paradigm.** Some educators subscribe to the "fix-it" paradigm; they believe that special needs arising from diversity can and should be "fixed," and that only educational professionals can do so. These educators take a deficit viewpoint, which stresses what students lack, rather than accepting that all students are able to learn and determining how best to accomplish that goal. In this viewpoint, for example, a student who speaks a language other than English is seen as having a problem to be remedied by teaching the child English rather than as having an advantage to be maintained. To remedy this viewpoint, teachers need to acknowledge and value children's differences and to build on their strengths.
- **Pigeonholing.** Well-meaning staff members may attempt to include information about diverse people in the curriculum, but by focusing on the differences between groups they actually perpetuate stereotypes and a "we versus them" mentality. For example, a teacher who introduces information and materials about Asian Americans may ignore the vast differences within the various Asian cultures in socioeconomic status, country of origin, and the nature and timing of their immigration to the United States. As a result, the teacher may present a stereotypical viewpoint. Knowledge and appreciation of various cultures as well as an emphasis on human similarities are essential in eliminating such pigeonholing in teachers' thoughts.
- **Tourist Curriculum.** A related pitfall for well-meaning teachers is implementing a "tourist" curriculum to meet multicultural and multiethnic goals. This approach is marked by *trivializing*, organizing activities only around holidays or food; *tokenism*, providing only one ethnic image in an otherwise white classroom culture; *stereotyping*, using images of other ethnic groups in the past and in traditional dress; and *misrepresenting* American ethnic groups by concentrating on life in foreign countries. This curriculum disconnects cultural diversity from daily classroom life by bringing it up only on special occasions, then having nothing further to do with the culture (Derman-Sparks & Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force, 1989).
- **Self-Fulfilling Prophecies.** If teachers anticipate that students who do not speak English as their first language will not be able to keep up with other children, it is likely that their attitude toward and the way they treat such children in the classroom will make that expectation come true. To eliminate such self-fulfilling prophecies, teachers should demonstrate high expectations for all students.
- **Misconceptions About Language Acquisition.** Teachers who have misconceptions about language acquisition--believing that children learn a new language more easily, that all students use the same process to acquire language, or that children and adults go through the same stages in language acquisition--will not be able to accurately assess a

child's development. Provision of professional development will enable teachers to keep abreast of current research in language acquisition.

- **Quick Fix.** Schools will be unsuccessful if they attempt to address issues of diversity on a one-time or quick-fix basis. Instead, working with culturally and linguistically diverse families, children, and communities is a dynamic, ongoing process of learning and interacting that requires time, planning, and continued effort.

If a diverse classroom offers numerous challenges, it also affords great opportunities. It helps children to develop positive attitudes toward others who are different from themselves and to enable children with diverse needs to achieve all they are capable of achieving. As we have learned more about language acquisition our research based knowledge shapes our current practices in guiding the development of a first and second language. Young children will acquire English when the new language is expected, nurtured and used with purpose.

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