Critical Learning Domains

Unique Characteristics of English Learners

There are many factors that contribute to diversity among English learners. English learners also have unique characteristics. As teachers, it is helpful to consider both individual and collective strengths and needs in these three critical learning domains: cognitive, linguistic, and social/affective.

Review the English learners' unique characteristics in the three critical learning domains below: *Cognitive Strengths*, Linguistic Strengths, and *Social/Affective Strengths*. Can you see how these characteristics may be specific strengths of individual students?

Review the table below each domain titled: *English learners benefit from teachers who know and...*

What do these suggestions mean to you? Begin to think about specific needs that your English learners might have in each domain. How could you support them as their teacher?

Cognitive Strengths

English Learners:

- Have native language skills that will help in second language learning
- Rely on intuition and context to understand
- Are motivated to interact with peers
- Can demonstrate content learning partially, within constraints of current second language skills
- Will learn when content is meaningful and challenging

English Learners Benefit From Teachers Who Know and...

- Use "Here and Now", visually-supported, hands-on activities to support language and content learning
- Encourage peer interaction
- Model and preview
- Use authentic, context-embedded materials
- Move from the linguistically concrete to abstract
- Teach cognitive academic skills
- Be explicit in expectations
- Help understand culturally different ways of interpreting learning
- Remember that language proficiency does not equate with academic abilities
- Insist on mastery of concepts and vocabulary
- Encourage students to transfer previous learning and language to the academic task at hand

Linguistic Strengths

English Learners:

- Have native language proficiency
- May know concepts in first language but not have the second language cover term
- Have strong social motivation to communicate with peers
- Are active processors of language and school system knowledge
- Respond well to routines, modeling, hands-on activities, and visual aides
- Respond well to meaningful language use and interaction

English Learners Benefit From Teachers Who Know and...

- Understand that developing and maintaining native language competence is important
- Recognize that second language proficiency depends on the level of proficiency obtained an a child's first language
- Understand that a minimum level of English proficiency is required before a student benefit from English as the language of instruction in school
- Recognize that biliteracy, bilingualism, and biculturalism should be supported
- Understand that students are acquiring a second culture in addition to their native language and culture
- Recognize that proficiency includes from and social uses of language
- Remember that productive skills lag behind comprehension skills
- Realize that the silent period is common
- Understand that social language skills emerge faster (1 year) than academic language skills (5 to 7 years)
- Realize that older children are more efficient language learners but younger children reach higher overall communicative fluency

Social/Affective Strengths

English Learners:

- Have multiple sources into identity
- Have the ability to move between language and cultural groups
- Interact with peers and take risks to communicate
- Typically are respectful of the role of teacher and adult
- Value cooperation over competition

English Learners Benefit From Teachers Who Know and...

- Understand that students may suffer from language shock and culture shock
- Recognize that students may participate actively in non-English social environments
- Understand that students' desires to assimilate or integrate vary
- Understand that native culture values may be in conflict
- Recognize minority status and intended length of residency impact schooling experience
- Realize that parental support may vary widely

Adapted with permission from:

Teemant, A. & Pinnegar, S. (2007). *Understanding Langauge Acquisition Instructional Guide.* Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership.

Allman, B. (2019). *Principles of Language Acquisition*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from https://edtechbooks.org/language_acquisition