

How Can Teachers Help Second Language Learners Begin to Communicate?

Summary C

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One of the most difficult teaching situations is working with a student who has no or very little language in their second language. Teachers need to find ways to interact with students and get them to begin producing language. As you look over the following information, think about how teachers could engage students in learning content as part of learning the language when the students have minimal language. Consider the optimal expectations teachers might have for themselves and their students from using these ideas.

One to Three Months

Student Work:

- Learn to recognize sounds and new words.
- Represent understanding non-verbally (gestures, drawings, pictures, pointing, pantomime).
- Respond to commands. Indicate needs.
- Listen actively and begin to distinguish between sounds, words, and meaning.
- Risk using words. Focus on meaning.
- Use words and test reactions.
- Work on speech, writing, and literacy together.
- Transfer native language understanding and skill whenever possible.
- Have a desire to learn the language.

Teacher Work:

- Recognize students understand more than they can say. Create a safe environment.
- Allow students a period of silence. Encourage—don't force speech. Use repetition.
- Use non-verbals (gestures, visuals, drawings, pointing, and models) to teach meaning of new vocabulary.
- Plan and create experiences that help students notice features of language.
- Adjust teacher talk.
- Give students time and space to practice useful phrases and formulaic expressions.
- Use the students' first language and background.
- Support the student in continuing literacy development in the first language.
- Provide a rich linguistic environment. Use questions like the following:
 - Point to the _____.
 - Do you have the _____?
 - Is this a _____?

- Who wants _____?
- Find the _____.
- Put the _____ next to the _____.
- Who has _____?

Two to Six Months

Student Work:

- All tasks listed above AND
- Use formulaic speech patterns and memorized chunks of language (e.g., "I don't know").
- Use one or two-word utterances.
- Add vocabulary and more complex language forms.

Teacher Work:

- All tasks listed above AND
- Use the following questions:
 - Yes/no (e.g., "Are there 6?")
 - Either/or (e.g., "Is the fungi an animal or a plant?")
 - One word response (e.g., "What part of the frog is it?")
 - General questions that encourage lists (e.g., "What are the names of these plants?")
 - Two-word response (e.g., "Where did he go?")

Adapted with permission from:

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



Principles of Language Acquisition

Bohdana Allman



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