

# Your New ELL Student

Understanding the Language Learning  
Process; teaching tips and strategies.

## Pre-production and the Silent Period

Adapted from Judie Haynes

*If your new English language learner is not speaking, don't worry. Most newcomers go through a stage during which they do not produce language. This doesn't mean they are not learning.*

According to Stephen Krashen, most new learners of English will go through a "silent period" which is an interval of time during which they are unable or unwilling to communicate orally in the new language. The silent period may last for a few days or a year depending on a variety of factors. It occurs before ELLs are ready to produce oral language and is generally referred to as the "Pre-production" stage of language learning. ELLs should not be forced to speak before they are ready and we don't want to embarrass students by putting them on the spot.

ELLs need time to listen to others talk, to digest what they hear, to develop receptive vocabulary, and to observe their classmates' interactions. When they do speak, we want the speech to be real and purposeful instead of contrived. This does not mean your students are not learning. They may understand what is being said, but they are not yet ready to talk about it.

*What determines the length of the "silent period?"* There are several factors involved. First, personality plays a key role. A normally shy and quiet youngster in native language is usually going to take longer before they feel comfortable speaking. Native culture will also play a role. In many cultures, for example, girls are not expected to speak out. They play a more passive role in family and classroom dynamics.

Teacher instruction is also an important factor in the length of the silent period. If the teacher provides "hands-on" activities and has students

interact in small groups, ELLs will be able to participate in the life of the classroom a lot sooner. They will feel more confident in risking oral language. It should not be assumed that young learners of English do not feel embarrassment or shyness when attempting to speak in a second language.

*All new learners of English progress through the same stages to acquire language. However, the length of time each student spends at a particular stage may vary greatly.*

### **Stage I: Pre-production (LAU A1)**

This is the silent period. English language learners may have up to 500 words in their receptive vocabulary but they are not yet speaking. Some students will, however, repeat every thing you say. They are not really producing language but are parroting.

These new learners of English will listen attentively and they may even be able to copy words from the board. They will be able to respond to pictures and other visuals. They can understand and duplicate gestures and movements to show comprehension. Total Physical Response methods will work well with them. Teachers should focus attention on listening comprehension activities and on building a receptive vocabulary.

English language learners at this stage will need much repetition of English. They will benefit from a "buddy" who speaks their language. Remember that the school day is exhausting for these newcomers as they are overwhelmed with listening to English language all day long.

## **Stage II: Early Production (LAU A2-B1)**

This stage may last up to six months and students will develop a receptive and active vocabulary of about 1000 words. During this stage, students can usually speak in one- or two-word phrases. They can use short language chunks that have been memorized although these chunks may not always be used correctly.

Here are some suggestions for working with students in this stage of English language learning:

- Ask yes/no and either/or questions.
- Accept one or two word responses.
- Give students the opportunity to participate in some of the whole class activities.
- Use pictures and realia to support questions.
- Modify content information to the language level of ELLs.
- Build vocabulary using pictures.
- Provide listening activities.
- Simplify the content materials to be used. Focus on key vocabulary and concepts.
- When teaching elementary age ELLs, use simple books with predictable text.
- Support learning with graphic organizers, charts and graphs. Begin to foster writing in English through labeling and short sentences. Use a frame to scaffold writing.

### **Stage III: Speech emergence (LAU B2)**

Students have developed a vocabulary of about 3,000 words and can communicate with simple phrases and sentences. They will ask simple questions, that may or may not be grammatically correct, such as " May I go to bathroom? " ELLs will also initiate short conversations with classmates. They will understand easy stories read in class with the support of pictures. They will also be able to do some content work with teacher support. Here are some simple tasks they can complete:

- Sound out stories phonetically.
- Read short, modified texts in content area subjects.
- Complete graphic organizers with word banks.
- Understand and answer questions about charts and graphs.
- Match vocabulary words to definitions.
- Study flashcards with content area vocabulary.
- Participate in duet, pair and choral reading activities.
- Write and illustrate riddles.
- Understand teacher explanations and two-step directions.
- Compose brief stories based on personal experience.
- Write in dialogue journals.

Dialogue journals are a conversation between the teacher and the student.

They are especially helpful with English language learners. Students can write about topics that interest them and proceed at their own level and pace. They have a place to express their thoughts and ideas.

#### **Stage IV: Intermediate fluency (LAU C1)**

English language learners at the intermediate fluency stage have a vocabulary of 6000 active words. They are beginning to use more complex sentences when speaking and writing and are willing to express opinions and share their thoughts. They will ask questions to clarify what they are learning in class. These English language learners will be able to work in grade level math and science classes with some teacher support. Comprehension of English literature and social studies content is increasing. At this stage, students will use strategies from their native language to learn content in English.

Student writing at this stage will have many errors as ELLs try to master the complexity of English grammar and sentence structure. Many students may be translating written assignments from native language. They should be expected to synthesize what they have learned and to make inferences from that learning. This is the time for teachers to focus on learning strategies. Students in this stage will also be able to understand more complex concepts.

#### **Stage V: Advanced Fluency (LAU C2)**

It takes students from 4-9 years to achieve cognitive academic language proficiency in a second language. Students at this stage will be near-native in their ability to perform in content area learning. Most ELLs at this stage have been exited from ESL and other support programs. At the beginning of this stage, however, they will need continued support from classroom teachers especially in content areas such as history/social studies and in writing.

## Comprehensible Input and Output

Adapted from Judie Haynes

*How do newcomers learn English? Can they soak up language by sitting in the mainstream classroom? Learn how Comprehensible Input and Output are important to the acquisition of a second language.*

### Comprehensible Input

Language is not "soaked up." The learner must understand the message that is conveyed. *Comprehensible input* is a hypothesis first proposed by Stephen Krashen (Krashen, 1981). He purports that ELLs acquire language by hearing and understanding messages that are slightly above their current English language level. (Comprehensible Input +1)

Imagine that you and your family were sent to Japan for a year. Would you be able to learn Japanese by simply sitting in a Japanese classroom? You wouldn't unless the teacher made an effort to make the Japanese you were hearing comprehensible.

### Comprehensible Output

According to research, learners need opportunities to practice language at their level of English language competency. This practice with English-speaking peers is called *Comprehensible Output*. Many researchers feel that comprehensible output is nearly as important as input. Cooperative learning groups are one way for new learners of English to receive plenty of understandable input and output. Here are some reasons why.

- A small group setting allows for more comprehensible input because the teacher or classmates modify or adapt the message to the listener's needs.

- Speakers can more easily check on the understanding of the listener.
- There is more opportunity for oral practice and for repetition of content information as peers help new learners of English negotiate meaning.
- Student talk in this small group is centered on what is actually happening at the moment as the task is completed.
- Feedback and correction are non-judgmental and immediate.



## Explaining BICS and CALP

by Judie Haynes

*Classroom teachers need to understand the difference between social language and academic language acquisition. Here is a simple description of BICS and CALP as theorized by Jim Cummins.*

### **Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills**

Experts such as Jim Cummins differentiate between social and academic language acquisition. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are language skills needed in social situations. It is the day-to-day language needed to interact socially with other people. English language learners (ELLs) employ BIC skills when they are on the playground, in the lunch room, on the school bus, at parties, playing sports and talking on the telephone. Social interactions are usually context embedded. They occur in a meaningful social context. They are not very demanding cognitively. The language required is not specialized. These language skills usually develop within six months to two years after arrival in the U.S.

Problems arise when teachers and administrators think that a child is proficient in a language when they demonstrate good social English.

### **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency**

CALP refers to formal academic learning. This includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material. This level of language learning is essential for students to succeed in school. Students need time and support to become proficient in academic areas. This usually takes from five to seven years. Recent research (Thomas & Collier, 1995) has shown that if a child has no prior schooling or has no support in native language development, it may take seven to ten years for ELLs to catch up to their peers.

Academic language acquisition isn't just the understanding of content area vocabulary. It includes skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring. Academic language tasks are context reduced. Information is read from a textbook or presented by the teacher. As a student gets older the context of academic tasks becomes more and more reduced.

The language also becomes more cognitively demanding. New ideas, concepts and language are presented to the students at the same time.

Jim Cummins also advances the theory that there is a common underlying proficiency (CUP) between two languages. Skills, ideas and concepts students learns in their first language will be transferred to the second language.

## How Culture Shock Affects Newcomers

by Judie Haynes

*Don't underestimate the results of culture shock. The emotional upheaval of moving can be devastating to any child. These symptoms are compounded when the child comes from a different culture and does not speak English.*

### What is Culture Shock?

Newcomers who act out in the classroom are probably suffering from culture shock. This is a term used to describe the feelings people have when they move to an unfamiliar culture. Immigrant children may become withdrawn and passive or they may be aggressive. The more different the new culture is from their own, the greater the shock. Newcomers have left behind family members, friends, teachers, and pets. They have lost their language and culture. Often they do not have the support of their parents who are in shock too.

### Four Stages of Culture Shock

It must be emphasized that every child reacts differently to moving to a new place. New arrivals usually go through four stages of culture shock.

#### 1. Euphoric or Honeymoon Stage

During this stage newcomers are excited about their new lives. Everything is wonderful and they are having a great time learning about their environment.

#### 2. Culture Shock Stage.

The differences between the new and the native cultures becomes more apparent. Students feel overwhelmed at this stage. There is so much they do not understand about their new surroundings. They are frustrated because they can not communicate and are bombarded with unfamiliar surroundings,

unreadable social signals and an unrelenting barrage of new sounds. Students suffering from culture shock may seem sleepy, irritable, disinterested or depressed. Some students may become aggressive and act out their frustrations.

Newcomers in this stage of culture shock need time and patience from their teachers.

### **3. Integration Stage.**

Newcomers start to deal with the differences between the old culture and new. They learn to integrate their own beliefs with those of the new culture. Some newcomers will start to replace the old values with new ones. Others will begin to find ways to exist with both cultures. Many immigrant parents start to become alarmed at this stage. They do not want their children to lose their language and culture.

### **4. Acceptance Stage.**

Newcomers are now able to enter and prosper in the mainstream culture. They accept both cultures and combine them into their lives. Some students will adopt the mainstream culture at school and follow the values of the home culture outside of school. During this stage many immigrant parents make it clear to their children that they do not want them to adopt the mainstream culture. This is because many immigrant students forget their native language and reject their culture,

Would you like more information, ideas for lesson plans and modifications, teaching tips and resources? Check out:

[www.everythingsesl.com](http://www.everythingsesl.com)

An award-winning site maintained by Judie Haynes an ESL teacher

<http://www.mrshurleysesl.com/>

Mrs. Hurley's ESL page - a model program resource center