English Language Learners

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Abstract

The following analysis of the studies is focused on the theory of learning English as a second language, and the six phases of language acquisition. The first part of this research talks about how an individual's native language, culture, and/or familial backgrounds interact with the individual's ability to learn secondary languages, and to master that language to the point where the individual can communicate in that new language in an academic context. Furthermore, the second part of this research discusses seven strategies for teaching a second language: preview/review, vocabulary role-play, repeated reading, the use of technology, the use of an individual's native language for support, the use of story and drama, and creating visual pictures to increase understanding. The third and final part of the research discusses the six stages of language acquisition and the amount of time per each developmental stage or phase of language acquisition.

According to August, D., Carlo, M., Dressler, C., & Snow, C. (2005) English language learners (ELL) are students who have more difficulty in acquiring and building vocabulary in English compared to their native-speaking peers. ELL students may also have difficulty in writing text, and as a result, can sometimes be classified as students with learning disabilities. ELL students have a native language other than English, and they may face difficulties in reading, writing, speaking, and communicating with others (Meyer, D., Madden, D., & McGrath, D. J.).

Concerning the cultural aspect of second language acquisition, the articles mainly concentrate on the following categories: family background, culture, and the target language variations. Therefore, according to Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (1995), comprehension of accent is one of the most important aspects of learning and receiving instruction in a second language. Differences in dialect between regions in the United States, and variations in pronunciation of words between states, can cause difficulty for English as second language learners. Differences among styles and methods of writing and communicating between different languages can make the process of learning a second language harder, causing difficulty where the innate aspects of each language conflict. For example, in Mandarin Chinese, the alphabet is completely different from English, so the Chinese student learning English must not only master all of the various rules of English, but must begin studying with the absolute basics of the alphabet (Levitan, M., Mathison, C., & Billings, E. S. 2010).

Moreover, according to Capell (2011), cultural differences affect the learning process in the classroom; learning styles may reflect cultural experiences of students, and may also reflect the role of parents in the educational process. The cultural background of the students' parents is very important in supporting the learning process. The expectations of the students and their families of what should be taught can greatly affect what is learned. In order to maximize the effectiveness of learning for students, regardless of their native language and cultural backgrounds, successful educators might follow these eight strategies for teaching English as a second language.

Furthermore, the way of thinking, speaking and writing differ from one culture to another. The ways messages are conveyed in speech and writing varies greatly from culture to culture and language to language. For example, in English, main ideas are usually expressed directly in the beginning and at the end of speech or any writing samples (Swan & Smith, 2001).Additionally, customs, traditions, and religious background may affect language learning (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). Since language is a product of culture, language is considered one of the tools of cultural expression. It cannot exist without culture, which means that language and culture are complementary to each other (Swan & Smith, 2001).

In addition, English language learners come to the classroom with unique knowledge and experiences built in their first language and culture. Cultural differences can often be subtle; however, they do impact students' learning. For example, learners from different cultures can have different views on classroom behavior, such as student-teacher interaction, as well as different views on the value of education. Cultural differences can also affect how students understand content. If the students' native culture differs significantly from their host culture, some concepts might not be presented in their culture, which impedes their understanding of concepts/ideas in a new culture (Swan & Smith, 2001).

The same holds true for language. Language is a part of culture, and culture guides how people think in that language. Thus, native language is a powerful component that affects the way ELL students learn English. However, culture is not something that cannot be added to or changed. Like any evolving phenomenon, cultures can be created and passed on. Therefore, ELL students are quite capable of acquiring a new language and a new culture with it (Swan & Smith, 2001).Education is influenced by the culture and social structure of any society; however, it also affects the surrounding culture in the society. Universities and other educational institutions directly reflect the norms of the society that created them ("English Learners in 21st-Century Classrooms,"n.d.).

Cultures of learners and teachers in the classroom and the school differ for each other. Many of the students came from international locations and diverse cultural backgrounds. Most international students face problems in coping with other students because of the different culture, customs and traditions. It is very important for new language learners to know the customs, culture and traditions of other students (Trumbull, Rothstein- Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000).

Another important factor in second language acquisition is the social status of the students and their family. Specifically, the research shows that there is a significant correlation between poverty levels and educational achievement of ELL students. In other words, if an ELL student comes from a lower socio-economic background, he is more likely to experience difficulties in adjusting to the new culture or language (Martinez, Y. G., & Velazquez, J. A. (2000).

Some cultures and social practices encourage children and young people to interact with adults, while some cultures consider that interaction to have certain limits. For example, keep a distance between the speaker and the listener, looking down when the adult speaks, and not looking in adults' eyes when they speak. All of these behaviors affect the new language learner, so there is a collision between learners' culture and the new reality (Salazar, 2009).

The first strategy for teaching English, as a second language is "preview/ review." Preview/ review is an effective and very important strategy in the education of language for the student. Before the lesson actually begins, the student is given a preview of what he or she will learn. The lesson continues with the main section and teaching, followed by a review where the student is asked to review what has been learned from the lesson (Herrell, A. L., & Jordan, M. 2000). Preview/Review can be used in any general education classroom, with a group or on an individual basis, and is suitable for all ages (Pucci, S. L. and Ulanoff, S. H. 2001). The first step of this strategy is to construct a lesson plan containing all materials related to the lesson, such as images, files, definitions, and key concepts. The second step of the lesson is to introduce the key concepts of the lesson to the students. The supporting images, files, definitions, and key concepts can be used and referred to throughout the lesson to aid in student comprehension. Additional practice to enhance and strengthen the basic concepts of vocabulary should be provided to students as well throughout the learning process. The final step of the lesson is to work on the assessment of each individual student's progress, and to verify that the student has understood the lesson (Herrell, A. L., & Jordan, M. 2000).

The second strategy is known as "vocabulary role-play." This strategy is used to support learners in connecting their previous experiences with learning English as a secondary language, and to give them new vocabulary previously unfamiliar to them. Students are given new vocabulary and have the opportunity to discuss and use the new vocabulary in the context of basic conversation through role-play with peers. Through vocabulary role-play, students are given the ability to understand words more broadly and learn practical uses for new vocabulary (Herrell, 1998).

The strategy of vocabulary role-play begins with identifying key vocabulary, or selecting and defining vocabulary that will be used in a lesson or reading time, and to place the chosen vocabulary on cards for students to continually use and learn from. The students are then taught a lesson or read a book, which includes the new vocabulary, so the students can hear the words read aloud. The lesson then continues with a class-wide discussion of the vocabulary so the students will understand the meaning, context, and uses of the vocabulary very well. After reading the vocabulary aloud and giving the students ways to contextualize their vocabulary in a class-wide discussion, students practice the pronunciation and vocabulary by themselves. For the final step of this strategy, the students should have demonstrated knowledge of multiple meanings for each vocabulary word (Herrell, A. L., & Jordan, M. 2000). A study done in 2004 in a fifth grade classroom showed that directly teaching vocabulary to the students greatly increases their vocabulary level. This study also showed that teaching vocabulary in multiple ways, such as the strategy talked about above, most effective way to teach vocabulary(Carlo et al., 2004).

The third strategy is known as "repeated reading," which is one of the most important and powerful ways to support the students in developing their abilities in language comprehension and fluency. For repeated reading, the teacher will place the students into a large group and have them share written scripts from reader's theater together. After sharing individually, the students will read scripts from reader's theater as a team (Tompkins, 2006). The teacher will choose a book, which can be of interest for the students and for the teacher as well. The book should be appropriate for the students' ages and levels. The teacher selects the book and will need to read the book aloud to the students. This strategy should conclude with the students engaging with each other and with the teacher in a group discussion of the reading (Herrell, A. L., & Jordan, M. 2000).

Use of technology is the fourth strategy in teaching English as a second language. Computers, smartphones, and tablets represent a new era in technology, which is widely available and utilized in American culture today. For this strategy to be effective, it is very important that the teacher be familiar with, and has knowledge of, these modern devices. Teachers can use technology to assist in the achievement of objectives for student education, whether the technology is used in the classroom or outside the classroom for student homework (Roblyer, 2006). A study done by Elsa S. Billings and Carla Mathiesonin 2011 showed that using technology with English language learners could help them be more engaged in a topic and students learn more when they are engaged in the lesson. This study was done with 240 students in 4th grade level (Billings& Mathieson, 2012).

The fifth strategy is to support students' primary language while they are learning English as a second language, this is considered one of the most important in teaching or explaining a lesson. This strategy is the use of the individual's native language for support. A teacher can use another student, teacher, or community volunteer who knows the student's native language to communicate and help translate lesson plans for the student. With the help of someone to better communicate with an English language learner, the teacher and school can coordinate together at regular intervals to most effectively explain lessons to the students in a language they fully understand, until English comes more naturally to them (Rook, B. 2008). In the past twenty- five years, there have been five studies that have shown that using the student's native language makes them more successful in learning English. All five studies compared students who were taught English with no native language support to students who were taught with native language support. Also all five studies showed that students taught with native language support learned more English and learned English more quickly(Goldenberg, C. 2010).

The sixth strategy is to use story and drama to connect students with their new language without necessarily even realizing that they are learning. The teacher can bring fun and exciting stories to the students, allowing the students to learn their new language and be forced to grow in their comprehension, without the task being boring or too mentally strenuous. Afterwards, students can discuss the story with each other and with the teacher for greater comprehension (Chang, L. Y. S., & Winston, J. 2011).

Engaging in and actively learning from stories and dramas helps the students to develop their communication skills in speech and writing in the English language. This strategy also helps students understand the entire meanings of words, and to understand that words often tolerate more than one meaning (Allen, 2000). This strategy again requires that the teacher determine the vocabulary, but the unique factor is that students come to understand any unknown words through stories that are fun for them to study. After the story or drama is finished, the teacher can then have students write down any words that they did not understand from the story. The students can then research the meanings of unknown words and write them on a sheet of paper, and then learn and explain to their peers the meanings of vocabulary words previously unknown to them (Herrell, A. L., & Jordan, M. 2000).

The seventh and final strategy is to create visual pictures to support understanding for students studying a language unfamiliar to them. The purpose of creating visual images for students is to help them make the connection between an idea in the student's mind, and a picture of a given vocabulary at hand. This strategy is to help students remember vocabulary given to them, and to help in connecting the picture in the student's mind with the information given to them (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). To implement this strategy, the teacher will choose a set of vocabulary and then give students an image for each new word so that the student can connect in their minds the word with the image. All eight of these strategies together help with the two major aspects of language acquisition, which researchers have identified (Herrell, A. L., & Jordan, M. 2000). A study done by Roberts and Neal in 2004 showed using visual pictures to help English language learners learn vocabulary is important because low level English language learners (ELLs) don't have enough English vocabulary to understand an oral definition of new words. This study was done in a preschool classroom with Spanish speaking students (Roberts & Neal, 2004).

There are two levels of development of a second language. The first type is Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), and it refers to the important skills in the process of communication in society in everyday life. It generally takes two to three years for the development of this type of. The second type is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which refers to the process of academic language proficiency, and it normally takes five to seven years for this evolution ("Academics and English Language Acquisition," 2003.)

The first aspect of language acquisition that researchers have identified is that language acquisition is a universal process, regardless of the native language. Children acquire languages by listening to sounds around them and imitating the sounds they hear until eventually they can produce the sounds and words they hear. The second aspect of language acquisition is associated with the first phase, and this is where the child begins to learn language elements such as vocabulary, tone, grammar, and sequence. For a child to acquire a language, the child must pass through six stages, which encompass both aspects of language acquisition (Dutro& Moran, 2003).

The first stage of language acquisition is known as "pre-production" which occurs in the first six months of a child's life. This first stage is also called the period of silence, and is where a student begins to learn the new language, but is still incapable of speaking the language (Hill, J., & Flynn, K. (2006).Initially called silent, this depends on modeling and visual aids. At this stage, children begin speaking simple words (Dutro & Moran, 2003).

The second phase is an early production stage, which is between six months to one year. The second phase begins with the individual or student using words and short sentences. In this period the student focuses on listening and accommodating the basics of the new language; the student usually suffers a great deal of mistakes at this stage of language acquisition (Hill, J., & Flynn, K. (2006). At this stage, students begin to use words and short expressions, but the student at this stage could not fully understand the meaning. It is advisable at this stage that teachers use short stories and songs (Dutro & Moran, 2003).

The third phase of language acquisition is known as "speech emergent," (which is between one to three years) and is where speech becomes more frequent and continuous. The student's sentences become longer and better thought-out, but vocabulary and communication in this phase still largely depend on topics that are familiar to the student (Hill, J., & Flynn, K. (2006).Learners acquire the language at this stage well, socially, but they still face difficulty in linguistic structures, rules and the academic curriculum(Dutro & Moran, 2003).

The fourth phase of language acquisition is known as "beginning fluency" (which is between three to five years). In this phase, the student begins to speak fluently to a large extent, with a little linguistic error. The student may face at this stage the challenges of their emerging new language, including difficulty in self-expression because of a shortage and poverty of vocabulary and general comprehension of language structure (Hill, J., & Flynn, K. (2006).Students' use of the language at this stage is more complicated, and they face fewer errors in the speech process. At this stage, it is difficult for students to understand the academic words (Dutro & Moran, 2003).

The fifth phase is called "intermediate fluency" (which is between three to five years). By the phase of intermediate fluency, the student can communicate in the new language fluently for the greater part. The student is also capable by this phase of writing almost fluently in a social or academic capacity. The student will likely face small linguistic errors in communicating at this stage of mastery, but these minor errors are mostly overcome without much effort.

At this stage, the student becomes capable of demonstrating higher-order thinking skills through the newly-acquired language, such as participating in the discourse of analyzing and solving a problem that requires complex thought and interpersonal communication to solve(Hill, J., & Flynn, K. (2006).

The sixth and last phase of language acquisition is known as "advanced fluency" (which is between five to seven years). In this phase, the student speaks fluently at a high level, and can overcome learning nearly any language problem or lack of understanding of the English language that still persists. In this phase, the individual has acquired and learned to use tone and idiomatic expressions for maximum communication ability (Hill, J., & Flynn, K. (2006). The research and studies say that the stages of language development take six years and more(Thomas & Collier, 2002).

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