

Working with English Language Learners

Learning a new language can be an empowering process. It is not only about learning vocabulary and grammar, but also learning strategies and life skills to participate and feel included in the community.

Each English-language learner (ELL) / English as a second language (ESL) learner is different. They come from different linguistic, cultural and geographic backgrounds. They may be Canadian born or have recently arrived from another country. Each of them bring a richness to groups they take part in because of their background and experiences. It is important to get to know each child and youth for who they are, their strengths and their needs.

English is as an addition to a child/youth's first language, rather than a substitution for it. When possible, respect for and use of the first language, should be supported because it helps build greater confidence, efficiency with respect to learning additional languages as well as having a positive effect on academic achievement, awareness of global issues, and problem-solving skills.

In addition to a child/youth having strong first language skills, there are other general factors that contribute to learning a new language. Getting to know the children/youth in your programs will help provide information about the following factors.

General factors that contribute to learning a new languageⁱ

- ✓ **The process of cultural adjustment:** Refugee and newcomer children/youth adjust to their new community in different ways and at different rates. The process of adjustment is more complex for children/youth who have experienced trauma.
- ✓ **Prior experience with English:** Some refugee and newcomers and Canadian-born ELL/ESL learners may have prior experience with English, but they may be reluctant to demonstrate their skills in a new setting.
- ✓ **Previous schooling:** Refugee and newcomers may have different experiences of school culture and environment. Some refugees and newcomers may have no interruption in their schooling, while others may have had gaps their schooling prior to coming to Canada.
- ✓ **Learning exceptionalities:** Refugee and newcomer children/youth are likely to have a similar range of learning exceptionalities (e.g., as Canadian-born children and youth. These exceptionalities will influence the ease with which they develop English language skills.
- ✓ **Personality factors:** Some children/youth will seek opportunities to speak English and take risks in experimenting with English, while others may prefer to wait until they know that they can "get it right."
- ✓ **Motivational factors:** Children/youth learn a language more easily if they identify with others who regularly use the new language. It is important to create a safe and welcoming environment for children/youth where they feel that it is okay to make mistakes and express who they are.

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Creating welcoming and inclusive spaces for ELL/ESL learnersⁱⁱ:

- Help develop a sense of belonging and identity by sharing information about ELL/ESL learners' own languages and cultures, as well as their experiences in their countries of origin and as refugees or newcomers to Canada.
- Create spaces that promote the full participation of ELL/ESL learners as community members
- Build knowledge about rights and responsibilities.
- Provide inclusive resources and materials that represent diverse cultures, backgrounds, experiences, and gender identities.
- Include bilingual/multilingual resources in program spaces, libraries, take-home materials, etc. Keep in mind the different levels of English language proficiency.
- Respect aspects of intercultural communication (e.g., in certain cultures refraining from making eye contact is a sign of respect for persons in positions of authority).
- Use international events as opportunities for spreading awareness about issues, but also recognize how these events may affect children and youth.
- Use inclusive and non-discriminatory language (e.g., letter carrier instead of mailman) in your everyday practice.

Tips and strategies to support multi-level ELL/ESL learners you work with:

- Speak slowly, clearly and choose simple straightforward words. Make sure to provide enough time to allow ELL/ESL learners to process what they are hearing before they respond.
- Make frequent use of a variety of concrete and visual supports and non-verbal cues (gestures and facial expression) when you communicate. For example, you can:
 - Create a daily schedule that includes pictures
 - Create a visual display that ELL/ESL learners can point to in order to indicate a need or emotion (e.g. I have to use the bathroom, I am hungry, I am sad)
 - Use models, toys, and other manipulatives (props) when you are explaining instructions
- Regularly check for understanding. For example, ask your group to show thumbs up or thumbs down if you are being clear. Tell them it's okay if they don't understand, but that you want to know so you can help out. This is also a good way of encouraging learners to monitor their own understanding and supports language development and critical thinking skills.
- Reduce the amount of written material you use and send home. Also don't assume that parents and guardians are literate in their home language. For example, some refugees and newcomers may have had limited formal education and have lower literacy skills in their home language. All of this may require extra explanation to make sure messages are communicated and understood.

ⁱToohey, K., 2000. *Learning English at School: Identity, Social Relations and Classroom Practice* as cited in Ontario Ministry of Education. 2008. *Supporting English Language Learners: A practical guide for Ontario educator*

ⁱⁱ Ontario Ministry of Education's publication "*Supporting English Language Learners: A practical guide for Ontario educators*" (2008, Queen's Printer for Ontario)