

Teaching English Language Learners

Pre-Conversational Stage

What the Student Might be Able to Do:

The pre-conversational stage describes students who are newly arrived to English-speaking contexts. Students at this stage may be experiencing what Stephen Krashen calls a “silent period” (a period during which an English language learner may not produce any utterances in English for a period of days to months). Students at the pre-conversational stage may even have developed enough of a vocabulary to speak in one- or two-word sentences. They are not, however, at the point where they are able to carry on a conversation. Their comprehension of English develops before their ability to speak, read, or write. They are often able to understand more than they are able to communicate.

Teachers should encourage parents to speak and read to their children in their primary language. Research indicates that this experience and practice encourages English language development. “If your English learners are literate in their primary language, they may bring knowledge, skills, and attitudes about reading and writing that transfer to the task of English reading. In fact, research and theory consistently support the benefits of teaching children to read and write in their primary language first, not only because it is easier to read and write a language you already know, but also because literacy skills transfer from the primary language to English as English language proficiency develops” (Peregoy and Boyle *in Reading, Writing and Learning in ESL*, 1997, p.140).

On using proper English:

Have you ever tried to learn a new language and had someone correct most of what you said? The result is often a “clamming up” rather than a confidence to try harder. English Language Learners will make grammatical errors. This is a normal part of language development. It is also an opportunity for you, the teacher, to model correct grammar. The following dialogue provides a simple example of how a teacher might indirectly model correct grammar for students.

Mei Mei: Big flag.

Teacher: Yes, the flag is big.

Mei Mei: *Big big*.

Teacher: Yes, the flag is very big.

Students at the pre-conversational stage are often able to understand more than they are able to communicate.

Grammatical errors are a normal part of language development.

Teaching Strategies for the Pre-Conversational Stage

Honoring the silent period: Allow students a time to simply listen and develop a basic feel for the English language. Evidence suggests that students who are allowed a silent period end up acquiring English faster and better than those who are forced to speak before they are ready (Stephen Krashen, 1982-Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition).

Total Physical Response (TPR): Allow students to show comprehension using nonverbal means using a technique called Total Physical Response or TPR (popularized by James Asher). Students can gesture, point to objects or pictures, and demonstrate comprehension of commands by using physical movement.

Use realia, visuals, and comprehensible input: Lessons at this stage should include a great deal of realia (real objects) and visuals in order to help develop students' understanding of the English language. Lessons should include what Stephen Krashen calls "comprehensible input" (English that is made easy to understand).

Read to the students: Teachers can develop students' English comprehension even more by reading to students with the help of picture books for younger students, and pictures on overhead transparencies for older students.

Modify speech: People tend to speak very fast in their native language. By slowing down our speech, stressing key words, using gestures, and repeating or rephrasing things, we make it possible for our students to understand us and develop their own vocabulary base.

Jazz chants: Jazz chants provide real language samples in chunks. With jazz chants, students are able to pick up complex language structures by practicing them in repetitious and rhythmic chunks.

What Conversations Might Sound Like at the Pre-Conversational Stage

Early pre-conversational:

Teacher: Did you see the dog?

Student: Yes

Teacher: Was the dog big?

Student: No.

Teacher: Oh. The dog was little.

Student: (nods)



At the pre-conversational stage, the student may also be entirely nonverbal.

Pre-conversational:

Student: Girl cry.

Teacher: Yes, the girl is crying.

Student: Girl sad?

Teacher: Yes, the girl is sad, because she lost her puppy.

Student: Puppy is where?

Teacher: The puppy is *gone*. He is *missing*. I don't know *where* the puppy is. (emphasis on italics)

Pre-conversational middle-high school:

Teacher: Tell me a little bit about the war.

Student: (unable to answer, unable to comprehend question)

We realize that this is an inappropriate question to be asked at this stage. This example is included only as a basis of comparison with other examples given for more advanced levels.

Beginning Conversational Stage

What the Student Might be Able to Do:

At this stage a student is able to understand the gist of what is read from fictional chapter books when they are read with support such as inflection, occasional pictures, and questions for clarification. While students will not be able to read and understand chapter books on their own, they are able to pick up the main points as they are being read to. Students' listening comprehension at this stage far surpasses their ability to explain what they know verbally or in writing. This is a very frustrating stage for students as they try to express their deep understanding of concepts, but are hindered by a small vocabulary bank. See *What Conversations Might Sound Like at the Beginning Conversational Stage*.

Because listening is an active process of translation from their first language, the student's attention may drift to unrelated things. Students will not be able to listen to long decontextualized speech. Students greatly benefit from what Jim Cummins calls "context embedded instruction".

Teaching Strategies for the Beginning Conversational Stage

Introduce reading: Make connections between print and meaning. Have students illustrate poems, stories, and songs. Frequently write what is said so that students can make connections between print and what has just been stated, sung, or chanted.

Use guided reading techniques: Give students a great deal of practice reading books and materials that are at their reading levels. Use guided reading strategies for young learners (Guided Reading by Fountas and Pinnell, 1996).

Use comprehensible input: Lessons should include what Stephen Krashen calls "comprehensible input". (English that is made easy to understand through the use of context clues).

Read chapter books to students: Read to them from fictional chapter books that are beyond their reading ability. While students won't be able to read these on their own, their comprehension of English can greatly benefit from hearing stories read to them. In addition to affective benefits and an overall understanding of the elements of a story, students get an understanding that reading comprehension entails seeing mental pictures. Have them retell, or do quick draws on some of the main points. Frequent questioning for clarification and understanding is important.

At the beginning conversational stage, listening is an active process of translation from the first language.

Stress key points of lessons: Emphasize and repeat key points by instructing the students to draw or rephrase them.

Quick-draws: Read to the students and have them quickly illustrate what they understand.

Quick-writes: As students move into higher stages, assign quick-writes. At intervals throughout the lesson, have the students write a short reflection or summary of what they learned.

High frequency word list: Teachers can introduce and frequently assess the students on their ability to read the high frequency sight words (included in this packet). These words are often not phonetic, and, if not known, can interfere with reading fluency.

Rationale for using high frequency words:

- “A child who knows a number of words as whole words can better understand, see and hear similarities among these known words and new words. Having a large sight vocabulary is invaluable in helping identify other words.
- When words are recognized instantly, analysis is minimal. The reader can focus on reading for meaning.
- Numerous high frequency words (e.g., *was*, *the*, and *those*) should be learned as wholes simply because they contribute significantly to using syntax as a means of getting meaning from reading.”

(Principles and Practices of Teaching Reading, by Heilman, Blair & Rupley, 1998 p.152)

- ❖ “It is estimated that approximately 50 percent of text is accounted for by 100 frequent words.”

(Fry, Fountoukidis, and Polk, 1985 cited in Phonics They Use, Patricia Cunningham,1995)



What Conversations Might Sound Like at the Beginning Conversational Stage

Beginning conversational — elementary grades:

Teacher: Tell me what happened on the playground.

Student: eh... Johnny, he hitting

Teacher: Did you hit Johnny?

Student: Yes... (*reverts to first language when frustrated*) Pues seguro que si.

Teacher: Who hit whom first?

Student: O.K., Johnny...eh... (*first language*) Yo le pegué porque el me pegó a mi.

Teacher: Tell me what started the fight.

Student: He saying bad thing... eh... my father.

Teacher: What did he say?

Student: eh... (*throws hands up in the air*) He say it!

(Though he understands the question he settles for an uncomplicated answer, since what he wants to say is beyond his vocabulary bank)

Teacher: And then what happened?

Student: (*angrily responds*) I say to him too!

Beginning conversational — middle-high school:

Teacher: Tell me a little bit about the war.

Student: The war... very bad... eh... very difficult.

Teacher: Why was it bad or difficult? What caused the war?

Student: Ah... (*first language*) *La cultura*... eh... yes, the culture.

The people feel... eh feeling bad.

Teacher: So how did this result in a war?

Student: (*laughs*) O.K., eh... the fight for... (*first language*) *como se dice- su dignidad*...eh... the dignity.

Analysis of conversation examples: In both examples the students clearly understand the questions being asked. In moments of anxiety and high frustration they even go on to answer the questions in their first language, proving that they understand the question. Though the students' speech is simplistic, they have a much deeper understanding of the events that occurred. This only adds to their frustration, possibly making matters worse by causing them to be tense and forget some of the English vocabulary that they have at their disposal. At this point they do not have the vocabulary bank to express what they know.

Teachers should beware equating intelligence with language proficiency and provide nonverbal ways of expressing their understanding of concepts, such as using pictures and graphic organizers. The students use many first and second-language discourse markers (ah... eh...) to help them collect their thoughts. The first language provides a necessary foundation as the students actively go through a translation process, thinking first in their native language and then translating key words that are similar or known in English.

Though the students' speech is simplistic, they have a much deeper understanding of the events that occurred.

Intermediate Conversational Stage and Beyond

Students at the Intermediate Conversational Stage and Beyond:

Knowledge of what goes on at these stages is probably the most important for teachers to know. These stages are the most misunderstood stages of language development. Because conversational language is not as difficult for students at the intermediate conversational stage, it may appear to teachers that the student has acquired enough English fluency to succeed in school. Minor grammatical errors are easily overlooked when students are speaking within the context of a conversation. Students at this stage appear to have acquired English, because their verbal English, at first glance, seems to be comparable to that of native English speakers. It is at these stages that students are often referred for special education services, when in fact, developing academic fluency is the area of development that must be addressed. For the most part, a student will not be able to succeed in school without academic fluency. Academic fluency is the language of standardized tests and the type of language that is found in textbooks, worksheets, and school related exercises. Because it is often not addressed, teacher frustration and student failure are high at these stages.

Though the students seem to communicate well with others, upon careful analysis of their oral and written language, it becomes clearer that the students often speak and write in fragments, as opposed to paragraphs. While conversational language differs from written language, even for native English speakers, fluid conversation is dependent on context for students at this stage. When asked an open-ended question, the students seem to need a great deal of prompting to explain themselves. A third party's understanding of the student's answers is highly dependent on hearing the question. Students at the intermediate and advanced conversational stages have difficulty understanding academic texts. They lack the comprehension of sophisticated textbook language. Students who are at this stage are often seen as being talkative and disruptive.

At the intermediate and advanced conversational stages, many students are exited from programs that offer needed linguistic support and are left to struggle in contexts that rely on academic language, which takes much longer to acquire (5-10 years) than conversational language (1-2 years). These students are often seen as the slower learners and are often retained or end up dropping out of school as a whole.

The following stages are the most misunderstood stages of language development.

At these stages, it may *appear* to teachers that the student is no longer in need of support in English.

Developing Academic Language at the Intermediate Conversational Stage and Beyond:

It goes without saying that success in English speaking schools is difficult, if not impossible to attain without having acquired advanced fluency in the English language. National trends indicate that Latino students are more than twice as likely as black students to drop out of school before completing high school. They are over three times more likely than their white peers to drop out of school. Much of this may be due to the inability to succeed in environments that require academic language. Academic language is much more complex than conversational language and can take between five and 10 years to acquire (Virginia P. Collier, 1989, TESOL Quarterly 23 (3), 509-531). If we want to provide tools for success to English language learners, it means developing students' academic language. Academic language determines success in school. Getting students to acquire academic language means giving them bridges to untangling the complicated vocabulary and sentence structures that make up academic texts. In other words, helping them read the *hard stuff*.

Because the growth beyond the intermediate conversational stage is less noticeable than at previous stages, students are often seen as having acquired as much language as they are going to acquire. However, the truth is that developing academic fluency requires deliberate and intentional teaching and learning strategies that will most likely only be taught within the context of the classroom. At this stage, as in previous stages, students should be asked to explain their thinking. They can be told that explaining their thinking is an exercise in developing skills in articulating what they know, and is very valuable for success in school. Students don't always have to be called on individually. Explaining one's thinking can be done through quick-writes, sharing with their neighbor or journaling.

Practice in reading is also a critical step toward developing academic fluency. The academic language necessary to succeed in school is only plentiful in books. It is not likely that teachers and students will use it in their daily speech. Providing ways for the students to remain focused and accountable for what they are reading is an important ingredient in developing academic fluency. Graphic organizers provide an opportunity for students to actively process what they read. It is not as reliant on good-writing skills and allows reading comprehension to become the focus of the activity. Graphic organizers also offer a quick assessment tool for teachers, and a stepping-stone for students to explain themselves. Making the students aware of the learning strategies that work best for them is also an important ingredient in developing academic fluency. Silent reading times also provide excellent exposure to formal writing. Teachers can keep students

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focused and accountable during silent reading times by having them share what they read aloud or in journals and having them discuss their books in literary circles. An excellent teacher resource on the benefits of silent reading for language minority students is Stephen Krashen's book The Power of Reading. An excellent teacher resource on the topic of developing academic language through learning strategies is Michael J. O'Malley and Anna Uhl Chamot's book The CALLA Handbook.

What Conversations Might Sound Like at the Intermediate Conversational Stage:

Intermediate conversational — elementary-middle grades

Teacher: Tell me what happened on the playground.
Student: Johnny hit to me.
Teacher: Did you hit Johnny?
Student: Yes.
Teacher: Who hit whom first?
Student: Johnny.
Teacher: Tell me what started the fight.
Student: Johnny say something bad to me.
Teacher: What did he say?
Student: His father could beat up to my father.
Teacher: And then what happened?
Student: I tell him his father was ugly.
Teacher: And then?
Student: He hit me.

Intermediate conversational — middle-high school

Teacher: Tell me a little bit about the war.
Student: It was about culture.
Teacher: What about culture?
Student: They want to keep it.
Teacher: So why did they have to fight over that?
Student: Because the rulers want, wanted to, like, I don't know, change them.

Analysis of conversation examples:

- The student's answers are easy to understand, and grammatical errors are easy to overlook when one does not see them in writing. Grammatical errors are present, but do not necessarily interfere with understanding the message that the student is trying to convey.
- This is still conversational language. The student's answers could not be understood alone. If a third party were to catch pieces of this conversation, they would have to hear the question in order to fully understand the student's answers.



At the intermediate conversational level, conversations are highly dependent on contextual supports and teacher prompting.

- At this stage, the conversation is highly dependent on contextual supports, such as teacher prompting (note that the student needs to be prompted at every step). The student will understand more than what is evident in their explanation. The students settle for a simple uncomplicated way of explaining complex concepts. This fact is not as obvious as it was for the students at the beginning conversational stage, who reverted to their first language, and it is easier to overlook at this stage.
- The student will speak in fragments (much more than a native speaker) and have not yet developed a sophisticated level of vocabulary, although their vocabulary is growing.
- At this stage the student needs a great deal of practice reading fiction and non-fiction in order to see and process academic language as well as conversational language.

What Conversations Might Sound Like at the Advanced Conversational Stage:

Advanced conversational — elementary-middle grades

Teacher: Tell me what happened on the playground.

Student: Johnny hit me.

Teacher: Did you hit Johnny?

Student: Yes, because he hit me first.

Teacher: Tell me what started the fight.

Student: Johnny said his father could beat up my father.

Teacher: And then what happened?

Student: I said his father was ugly. That's when he hit me.

Advanced conversational — middle-high school

Teacher: Tell me a little bit about the war.

Student: Well, the people wanted to keep their, uh..., beliefs and culture.

Teacher: Go on.

Student: The rulers were trying to change their culture.

Teacher: Go on

Student: They didn't like that.

Teacher: Go on

Student: So, they had a war.

Analysis of conversation examples:

- Grammatical errors still occur but they are minimal and do not interfere with the meaning conveyed.

At advanced conversational fluency, students still need continual prompting when asked to explain themselves.

- Note that the student has a large vocabulary bank but needs to be prompted to somewhat collect his thoughts. Speech is still kept simple.
- This is still conversational language. The student’s answers could not be understood alone. If a third party were to catch pieces of this conversation, they would have to hear the question in order to fully understand the student’s answer.
- At this stage, the conversation is highly dependent on contextual supports, such as teacher prompting (note that the student needs to be prompted at every step).
- The student speaks in fragments (more so than a native speaker) and has not yet developed a sophisticated level of vocabulary, although his vocabulary is growing.
- At this stage, the student needs a great deal of practice reading fiction and non-fiction in order to see and process academic language as well as conversational language.

What Conversations Might Sound Like at the Approaching Academic Fluency Stage:

Approaching academic fluency — elementary-middle grades

Teacher: Tell me what happened on the playground.
 Student: Well, Johnny said that his father could beat up my father, so I told him off. Then he hit me...and, you know, I kind of hit him too.

Approaching academic fluency — high school

Teacher: Tell me a little bit about the war.
 Student: The war was really about people’s sense of identity. Well, it was about land too, but much more was at stake, when you think about all that they had to lose in terms of, you know, their culture and stuff like that.

Analysis of conversation examples: In the high school example, note the sophisticated vocabulary and idioms such as: *sense of identity*, *at stake* and *in terms of*. In the playground example, the student is able to soften his answer and manipulate speech to downplay or accentuate events that occurred. Also note that the students speak in longer, more compacted sentences and paragraphs and they need only a minimal prompt to explain themselves. The students understand that open-ended questions should be answered with details, and they are able to

Students are able to speak in longer “paragraphs” with minimal prompts. They also use more sophisticated vocabulary.

do so without much hesitation. The students' answers can be understood alone. If a third party were to catch pieces of this conversation, they would not have to hear the question in order to understand the students' answer. This is the type of language that allows students to be successful in school settings.

Using High Frequency Word Lists and Word Walls with students at the Beginning Conversational Stages and Beyond

How to Generate a High Frequency Word List:

There are numerous pre-packaged high frequency word lists that are available for purchase at teacher supply stores. Two of the more popular word lists are Edward Fry's and Edward Dolch's word lists. Packages often come with pre-made checklists and cards. Several lists are also available free on the Internet. Another way of getting a list of high frequency words that is personally meaningful to the child is by generating your own word wall. Teachers can create their own word wall by providing an area where each letter of the alphabet is displayed along with space for placing words that the students ask about as they have trouble reading or writing the word. Students can have their own journals that keep track of the new words as they are added. Eventually, teachers will find that many of the words that are listed on their word walls are the same as those that are listed in the pre-packaged sets available for purchase.

Rationale for using High Frequency Words:

- ✓ A child who knows a number of words as whole words can better understand, see and hear similarities among these known words and new words. Having a large sight vocabulary is invaluable in helping identify other words (Heilman, Blair & Rupley*).
- ✓ When words are recognized instantly, analysis is minimal. The reader can focus on reading for meaning (Heilman, Blair & Rupley*).
- ✓ Numerous high frequency words (e.g., *was*, *the*, and *those*) should be learned as wholes simply because they contribute significantly to using syntax as a means of getting meaning from reading. (**Principles and Practices of Teaching Reading*, by Heilman, Blair & Rupley, 1998 p.152)
- ✓ "It is estimated that approximately 50 percent of text is accounted for by 100 frequent words (Fry, Fountoukidis, and Polk, 1985 cited in *Phonics They Use*, Patricia Cunningham, 1995)."

Using high frequency words allows students to focus on reading for meaning by improving reading fluency.

Teachers Can Assess Students Word Lists by using the Following Suggestions:

1. Provide a quick assessment of those words the child already knows by asking the child to read from a student copy of the list. Teachers can create their own copy of the word list where they are able to place a checkmark on the words that the child can already read or by circling the words that the child misses.
2. If the child is struggling after just a few words, then **stop the testing**. The point is not to frustrate the child but to get a feel for how well the child can read the sight words.
3. For the missed words, focus on words in chunks of five or 10 in contexts of games, stories, poems or meaningful texts.
4. Every two weeks or so, teachers or teachers' aides can reassess to see if the child has picked up any new words. Check the words that are circled (previously missed). If the child can read them, place a check and the date near the word. Continue with new words.