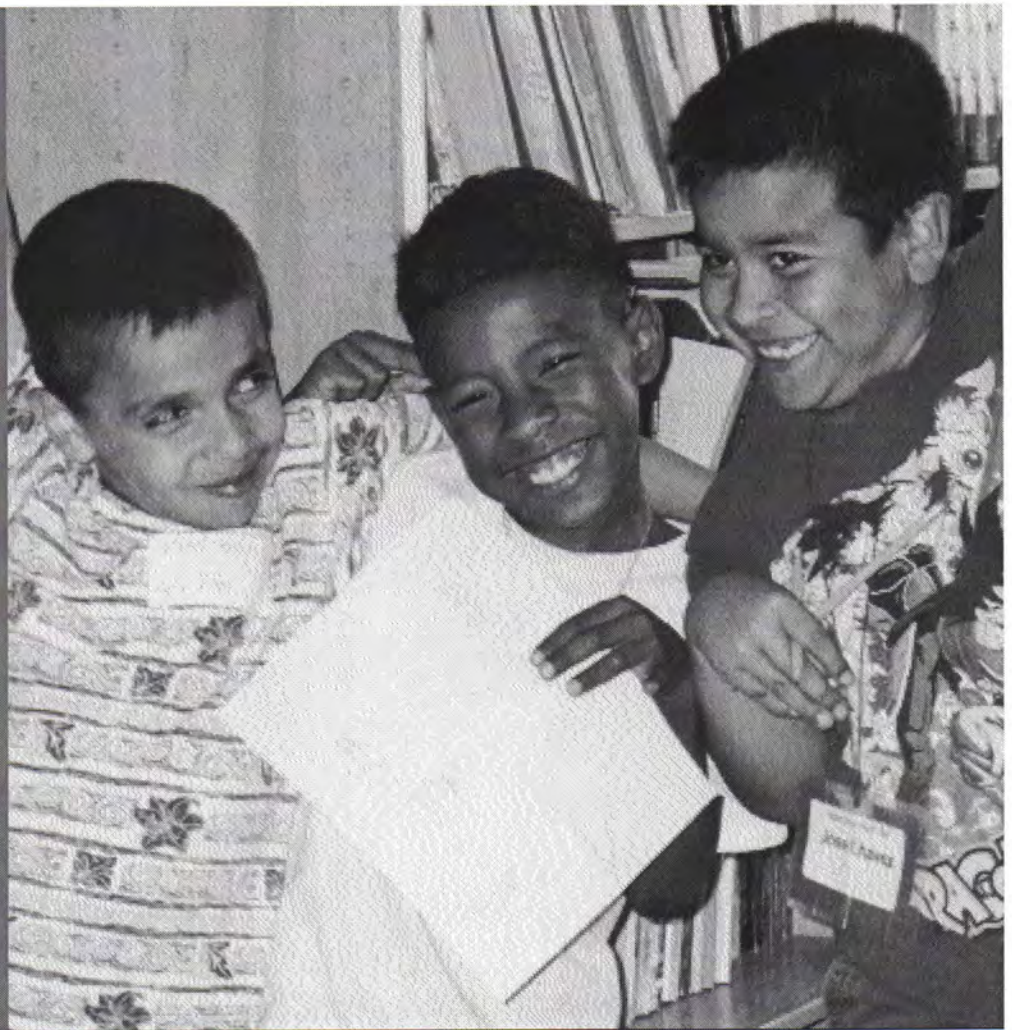


Asusu Oyibo
Mara M'ma

Bhasa Bahut
Jaruri Hai

Language
Matters

Supporting English
Language Learners in
After School and
Youth Programs



PASADENA, CA. PHOTO: MONA SHAH

More than eight million school-age youth with limited English proficiency now live in the United States, representing about one sixth of the nation's 5-17 year olds. Some of these "English Language Learners" (ELL) speak no English at all; others speak some English, yet lack the mastery of the language required to participate successfully and independently in English-only academic programs.

In the United States, because of civil rights laws protecting language minority students' access to education, schools test the English

language fluency of students when they enroll in school. Students who are determined to be ELL (also known as "Limited English Proficient" or LEP, in some states) are entitled to receive special support services.

In the past decade, the number of English Language Learners in U.S. schools has increased almost three times as quickly as overall school enrollment. The growth is predicted to continue into the next decade. It is not surprising, then, that after school programs across the country are experiencing increased enrollment of young people

whose home languages are not English and who themselves are not fluent in English. In California Tomorrow's recent national survey of after school programs (see page 18), the majority of programs reported serving language diverse populations, one fourth of which include English Language Learners. However, very few program directors reported that staff members are trained to effectively serve children and youth with limited English skills. In addition, few programs currently support young people in overcoming the language barriers they face; almost none provide home language

support, and only a few report having staff members who speak the languages (other than English) of their enrolled youth and families.

ELL youth have three major language needs to which after school staff must pay attention. The first is support in learning English. The second is help in understanding what is going on around them when they lack sufficient English. The third is support for maintaining and developing their home languages.¹

Fortunately, a great deal is known about how to support acquisition of a second language and about how to make things comprehensible across a language barrier. There is also good research on what it takes to prevent the common pattern of young people abandoning and losing their home languages because they have absorbed negative attitudes about their heritage.

Unfortunately, there is little related training available to after school program staff and few resources to assist in applying that knowledge to the after school context. This article offers some basic practical information and resources that may be helpful. We also refer you to the Resource List on page 103 for additional material.

1. Home language refers to one or more languages spoken at home.

BACKGROUND

Children and youth need to feel safe before they can use a new language.

If we want young people to learn English, we need to provide safe and supportive environments – ones where they can try using the language, feel okay about making mistakes, and be given encouragement to use English as much as they want in order to communicate.

Learning a second language requires active use of the language. Second language learning is always influenced by what linguist Stephen Krashen calls the “affective filter.” That means children and youth need to feel relaxed and emotionally safe in order to acquire English. If they fear being laughed at or are in an atmosphere where they get no help or support in learning English, it becomes very difficult for them to use, understand and develop English. An after school program with English Language Learners needs to be vigilant about intervening if these children and youth are subject to any negative comments or teasing.

The program staff should work hard to create an environment where children and youth who are still learning English are supported in using the language. It is not just teasing that makes learning harder;

frequent corrections can also be inhibiting. Young people naturally absorb and develop language. The most important thing in supporting their language development is to make language enjoyable, fun, useful, and a part of their life. Language is about communication, building relationships, playing games, and telling stories.

Children and youth learn a second language better when their home language is also developed.

Some people think that they should discourage a young person from using their home language as a way to encourage them to learn English. However, strong development of a child’s home language supports English language development, and programs should encourage its use. For example, if young people are trying to learn science and the language in which they are being taught is one they don’t understand, they have to struggle to figure out both the words being used and the concepts being taught. But if children and youth learn scientific concepts in a language they already know, it is then easier to acquire the English vocabulary for those concepts.

Research suggests that becoming bilingual has positive effects on language devel-



SAN DIEGO, CA. PHOTO: DEXTER DONG

by the time they reach adolescence.

Young people cannot develop bilingual and bicultural competence on their own – communities, parents, after school programs, and schools must all join together to build and support both English and home language skills.

opment in both languages. After school program staff should feel assured that research supports encouraging young people to use and hold onto their home languages. Not only do these languages have intrinsic value to them and their families, but home language maintenance also helps young people with English language development.

Children and youth will give up their home language unless they feel it is valued outside their home and they are given opportunities to use and develop it.

Language acquisition happens in a natural way during childhood. When adults present language as a desirable tool for communication and give positive feedback and encouragement, young people learn the language naturally. Unfor-

tunately, when language minority students receive negative messages about their home languages and lack opportunities to use them functionally (for learning or communication with peers and family), these languages are often lost.

In many parts of the world, it is natural for children and youth to speak two, three, or even four languages. In the United States, the emphasis is solely on learning English, with little attention to developing and maintaining other home languages. As a result, many children abandon their home language. While it used to take several generations for language loss to occur in immigrant families in the United States, young people now often give up their language in the first generation. In fact, many no longer share a language with their parents

In this country, we tend to assume that families can take care of home languages and cultures and that schools will take care of teaching English – but it doesn't really work that way. The reality for most language minority youth is that unless there are schools and community programs which also support and develop their home languages, a subtractive/replacement process takes place: gain English, lose the language of their families.

This nation is filled with young people who have little sense of belonging or connection to their heritage. Immigrant youth quickly find out that, to be accepted in this country, they are supposed to reject their home languages and cultures; as a result, they often face wrenching pressures to “choose” between belonging to their home communities and

joining the English speaking mass culture of the United States. Without the support of schools, after school programs, and other community organizations, families may struggle to hold together as children and youth lose their parents' languages, along with the ability to respect their elders and draw upon cultural wisdom. With coordinated efforts, however, young people can develop positive bilingual and bicultural skills, and they can learn to use to these skills to support both themselves and our society.

Playground English isn't sufficient for academic learning. English Language Learners need English as a Second Language (ESL) and home language support as part of their academic support programs.

There is a difference between social and academic language skills. Even if young people can engage socially in English, it does not mean they have sufficient English to do academic work. While a young person can learn basic "playground" English within a year, it takes an average of five or more years to develop sufficient proficiency to fully participate in academic work, instruction and discussions in English. During that time, the use of their native language for instruction is the most immediate way for young people to

learn academic subjects. For after school programs engaged in homework support, tutoring, or teaching a content area (science, math, etc.), some deliberate help with English language development and some support in their home language are important.

SOME SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

Determine which young people in your program are English Language Learners. If in doubt, ask their schools. For students who are ELL, try to ensure that any tutoring or teaching portions of your programs support them in doing academic work in their home languages.

If you don't have the staff or volunteers to provide home language support, consider using a "sheltered" approach – that means using lots of visual cues and graphics to help children and youth understand, amplifying what you mean by saying it in many different ways, and taking time to be sure students understand the academic vocabulary. It is also important to help students with English language development and provide ESL tutoring.

After school programs with ELL students should:

- Have materials available in young people's home languages.

- Encourage use of home languages.
- Hire bilingual staff and seek volunteers from the community who speak the languages of the participants.
- Use non-verbal signs and cues throughout the program.
- Be explicit about teaching vocabulary related to program activities: e.g., "collage" or "scissors" for art; "rotate" or "goal" for sports; "division" for math.
- Check for comprehension. Ask young people what they understand. Create openings for them to ask questions or request clarification.
- Deliberately seek to build bridges of friendship between English Language Learners and English-fluent youth – help them bridge the language barrier.
- Remember that children and youth who are immigrants and whose families may be new to this country might need access to basic information about the program, the local community, and ways of doing things in the United States.
- Provide many opportunities for youth to use their home languages – with peers, in learning, intergenerationally, and as a form of creative expression.

