PART ONE

Supporting Multilingual Learners

How Students Learn Languages

iStock.com/AJ_Watt

In this chapter, we focus on two facets of teaching multi-lingual students. First, we look at a continuum of language acquisition. Doing so helps us have a mental model of the stages in our minds as we teach and observe students during small-group instruction and beyond. Second, we look at the import of these stages through a cognitive and social-emotional lens and consider the implications for teaching. What are the stresses of acquiring English amidst twenty or more peers? What are these children's self-perceptions? What are the teaching methods that will align with research on building on students' strengths? I'm excited to share this information because it draws on recent studies from a range of disciplines, including neuroscience, linguistics, cognitive psychology, and popular psychology.

17

A CONTINUUM: DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Students acquire language in a predictable flow. The flow is more of a continuum than a sequential "march" through discrete stages. Although your local or state assessments might label students as being at a particular "stage" of language acquisition at a given time, being able to envision it as a continuum is beneficial. Why? Because it reminds you that not every skill develops at the same pace and all children progress at different paces as well. In later chapters, I will detail how to leverage this fluidity to plan and deliver spot-on lessons.
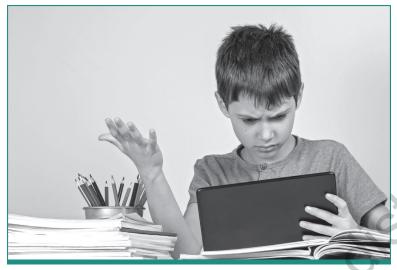
Students move along the continuum of language acquisition from speaking their heritage language(s), to emerging as a multilingual student by adding one or more languages, and then becoming more and more fluent in both languages (Gottlieb, 2016; Wright, 2019). The stages along this continuum include the following: entering, emerging, developing, expanding, bridging, or reaching stages (Kohnert & Pham, 2010; Wright, 2019). The labels for the stages may vary slightly in different places; these are the labels used most by current researchers.

This continuum integrates the four domains of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The four domains, also known as modes, do not develop at the same rate (Gibbons, 2015). Listening and reading are receptive modes, and speaking and writing are productive modes (in other words, students are producing language when they are speaking and writing). For instance, a student will understand more of what is said than what she can say, and a student will be able to say more than he can read or write, until they reach fluency in all four modes. Students are in different places on the continuum of development of each language mode at any given time. Now, let's look at the characteristics of each stage.

> This continuum integrates the four domains of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Entering

Students at the entering phase have minimal comprehension of what is being said. Students will not be speaking much or often. Their receptive modes are still developing. However, they can communicate through pointing, gestures, and drawing. They might demonstrate their comprehension abilities in the classroom, including the following: They can find or point

iStock.com/vejaa

to familiar objects, items, or people that are named orally for them. They can repeat simple phrases and words in unison with others. They can orally name objects they see—such as furniture in the classroom. They can also state personal likes and dislikes using pictures to help them.

Emerging

iStock.com/SDI Productions

Students at the emerging stage are beginning to use language—in particular, their listening and speaking abilities. Students at this level typically progress very quickly, learning to use English

for immediate, interpersonal use and beginning to understand and use academic language that has been explained and contextualized. They may move through this stage in a few months to a year. They do have limited comprehension of what is said—however, they can speak in one- to two-word phrases, respond with familiar phrases, and use key words. They will form sentences using present-tense verbs. They can restate some language associated with texts and short stories. They can categorize and label. They can also connect oral language to print, state their preferences, describe uses of familiar objects, and participate in social interactions with peers.

Developing

iStock.com/FG Trade

Students developing language proficiency will speak in short sentences and begin to communicate more often socially. They will be able to follow sequential directions one step at a time, begin to write using sentence starters and drawings, and show relationships between ideas and objects. They can respond orally to show agreement or disagreement and state personal opinions. They will be able to communicate orally about content and give oral reports on content. They will be able to write statements about books read and connect ideas together. They will make frequent grammatical and pronunciation errors. Their use of verb tenses is expanding and they are beginning to learn irregular conjugations. They can identify details and key ideas in texts and make simple comparisons about text and story elements. They will be able to connect causal- or content-related relationships in texts together. For

example, they will be able to identify cause and effect in texts that they read. They will know that different words are used to express similar ideas, and they will expand in their vocabularies both socially and with academic language.

Expanding

iStock.com/Courtney Hale

At the expanding stage, students' language proficiency is expanding beyond social language use, and they are beginning to use language for academic purposes more often. Students at this level need to be challenged to increase their English skills in more contexts and learn a greater variety of vocabulary and linguistic structures. They apply their language skills in more sophisticated ways and are able to produce statements about texts, convey their opinions, and explain information and ideas. You will notice students are now able to compare story elements and propose ideas to contribute to conversations. For example, they will be able to compare character actions to the development of the plot. They have good comprehension of social conversations, but they will not have complete comprehension of academic conversations. They will still make some errors in grammar and pronunciation. Academic conversations will need to be scaffolded. They will be able to use technical and specific vocabulary as well as identify multiple sources for ideas and information.

> There are two categories of language students learn as they progress along the continuum of language acquisition: basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), or conversational language, and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), or academic language (Cummins, 1999). Multilinguals may be more proficient in one or the other at a given time. Consider both as you teach, support, and assess.

Bridging

iStock.com/MesquitaFMS

Students at this level continue to learn and apply a range of higher-level English language skills in some variety of contexts, including comprehension of and production of academic texts. They continue to need contextualized academic tasks. They will be able to back up opinions and write arguments. They will also be able to evaluate texts and books, including story and text elements and other literary elements and nonfiction text topics. They will be able to describe how factors relate in texts and lead to outcomes. They will be able to understand and use increasingly difficult academic vocabulary as they read texts that are comprehensible through the use of diagrams, pictures, and rich descriptions. They will be able to support claims with evidence from various sources and use claims and evidence to argue and persuade. They will make fewer grammatical and pronunciation errors but will still need academic language and tasks to be scaffolded.

Reaching

Students at this level continue to learn and apply a range of high-level English language skills in a wide variety of contexts, including comprehension and production of highly technical texts. They need far less contextualization of texts and ideas. They need minimal scaffolding of texts and information to be

iStock.com/ijeab

able to read, write, and discuss texts. They will use technical language connected to specific content areas and a variety of sentence lengths and sentences of varying complexity. They will be able to extend oral and written discourse in both fiction and nonfiction. Their oral and written communication in English is comparable to peers who are proficient in English (Krashen, 1988; Scarcella, 2003; WIDA, 2019; Wright, 2019).

Throughout this book, I will reference these stages in relation to specific activities that are especially apt for a stage.

ASSET LENS

Students acquire language when they are at ease, supported, and are invited to use language for purposeful classroom work. Remember to

- contextualize academic language by using pictures, diagrams, drawings, web-based videos, and so forth;

- discuss academic terms and content before launching into a lesson to frontload information, vocabulary, and ideas before launching into the lesson; and

- provide students time for reading authentic and engaging materials.

How Students Acquire English

Generally speaking, students acquire English in two ways. One way is by studying how English works and another way is by being immersed in understandable English used for authentic purposes. What I mean by *English that is understandable* is that the English being used to teach the lesson is comprehensible to students at their current stage of language acquisition. The student can comprehend what is being said or read. When language is comprehensible, students can understand and begin to talk; they basically begin to "pick up" how to express themselves (Krashen, 1988).

Students Embrace Social Communication First

Students will acquire English for social communication first before they acquire academic language. In other words, students will be able to communicate with you and with friends about daily matters before they can have an academic discussion about what they are reading (Krashen, 1982).

. . . .

Students will acquire English for social communication first before they acquire academic language.

. . . .

The teaching take-away: Knowing that social communication comes before academic language is important, as throughout the day, we can motivate and encourage the peer talk that accelerates acquisition. However, at the reading table, our job is to focus on academics. Every child needs to learn the grade-level content and not be pandered to with "too-easy" texts. Instead, we accommodate multilingual learners (MLLs) by using interesting, relevant texts that have pictures, photos, and diagrams. We can also show additional pictures and videos that benefit all children learning to read. Pre-teaching vocabulary, as I'll detail in Chapter 7, is a highly effective tool. You can do this when introducing the book or at the point of the story when it's most appropriate.

Students Learn Language Best at the Edge of What They Know

Students acquire language when the language they are exposed to and working with is comprehensible. When something is comprehensible, it means that we can understand it. Krashen

(1982) studied language acquisition in multilingual learners and found that students best learn language when the language they are working with is just a little bit harder than what they can do on their own, without support.

I reference Stephen Krashen often in this book, as he is an American linguist and educational researcher whose work is central to teaching multilingual learners. His concept of using language that is "just a little bit harder" echoes Lev Vygotsky's learning theory, the zone of proximal development, or ZDP. The ZPD is the space between what a learner can do on their own, without assistance, and what they can do with assistance from adults or collaborating with peers (Billings & Walqui, n.d.). Every learner operates with the premise of *what I can do today with support, I can do tomorrow by myself.* So as teachers, we're always aiming to teach into a student's ZDP, ensuring what we are saying or asking isn't too easy or too hard but sufficiently challenging with our support. Krashen reminds us to use vocabulary that makes students work within a zone of optimum learning (Krashen, 1982).

The teaching take-away: Stretching students and using language with them that is just a little beyond their current level of comprehension ensures that we are expanding students' vocabulary and background knowledge. We want to avoid vocabulary that is so hard they shut down, but again, our job is to engage learners with new knowledge. For example, let's say you are reading a nonfiction text about photosynthesis. Before beginning the text, you could pull up a diagram or picture depicting photosynthesis on the web and add in arrows or point to the sun and then the plants and describe that this is how plants make food. You could highlight vocabulary in the text related to photosynthesis by opening the page to the book, pointing out the word, reading the sentence, and then discussing the word with the students to make sure they are grasping the idea or concept of the word. By showing pictures, locating vocabulary in context, and giving students time to think and talk through the concepts academic language represents, you will be making the vocabulary and the content comprehensible. With all you do, build on students' existing knowledge that they bring to the table—this knowledge is often referred to as "prior knowledge," and it's slightly different than the "content knowledge" associated with school.

iStock.com/Shutter2U

Students Progress Best With Highly Scaffolded Instruction

It makes intuitive sense that multilingual learners need high levels of support, especially at the first few stages of acquiring language. Even when they attain the reaching stage, you will continue to scaffold them at the reading table, assuring they continue to expand their vocabularies and other skills. It is for this reason that all the teaching ideas in this book fall under the umbrella of **sheltered instruction** (Echevarria & Graves, 2002), which is an approach that helps students who have some understanding of English develop academic skills and increase their English proficiency (Freeman & Freeman, 2014). Sheltered instruction focuses on the communication of ideas and helping students understand new learning even though they are still developing proficiency in English. This method includes the modification of grade-level content instruction. It highly scaffolds new learning so that students can understand the points that are being taught. Sheltered instruction depends heavily on using visuals to engage students while talking in English so that the students can understand what is being said.

In this book, I focus on teaching reading. This is not a book on teaching multilingual students English. I stress this point at the outset because designated ELD (English language development) instruction is strikingly different than teaching reading to multilingual students alongside students whose first language is English.

ASSET LENS

Speaking more slowly is a powerful strategy! Check to make sure you aren't talking too fast by inviting another teacher to watch a lesson or by videoing a lesson.

Students Learn Language When They Belong

Another important theory of Krashen (1982) is the idea that students acquire language when they are comfortable and supported. Called the *affective filter,* the premise of the theory is that when a student is emotionally distraught or socioemotionally not supported in the classroom and in their learning environments, it will be difficult to acquire language. The fear of making mistakes in front of peers impedes their ability to learn. It can be hard for students to take risks when speaking or writing in English.

By contrast, in low-anxiety learning settings, student motivation, esteem, and self-confidence remain high, making it more likely that students will be able to focus on the lesson and the language being used in the lesson (Peregoy & Boyle, 2016). Safety and security come first for students, and they need to feel safe and secure at the reading table as well. Admonishment or "holding students responsible" for some point in learning in a negative way will not help students acquire English.

The teaching take-away: In order to keep negative emotions low and positive emotions high, do an audit of your routines at the small group reading table. Following are some fairly simple solutions that ease students' anxiety and allow you to stay true to instructional goals.

Common triggers for negative emotions	Solutions to Ease Students' Anxiety
Composition of reading group	Have flexible grouping.
	Sometimes group students with other students who are language learners so that the focus can be on discussing and using language in ways that are comfortable for the multilingual learners.
	Always group students with buddies who make them feel comfortable or who can help them.
	Sometimes group students by reading acquisition level in order to support the reading level or reading strategy being worked with.
Pressure to speak	When students are beginning to learn English, keep pressure low.
	As students acquire language, encourage them to speak, but never demand that they speak. If they don't want to speak, find other ways that they can express themselves, perhaps whisper talking only with you or with a friend or writing their thinking down.
Pressure to read aloud	Focus on having them reading aloud only to themselves (when others are simultaneously reading aloud so the students realize no one will be listening to them), and/or invite them to read aloud to you or whisper read (perhaps using a whisper phone), or do not have them read aloud at all if they are becoming fairly fluent readers and need to work on pronunciation and vocabulary "in their head" before saying it out loud.
Errors	Be accepting of errors and encourage students to talk. They don't need to say things perfectly. Instead of correcting orally, model by restating what the student said, but say it the correct way. In writing one-on-one, pick one or two points and teach the correct way of writing the word or sentence, but don't pick on everything. Be positive about errors; the more students talk and write, the more their errors will naturally decrease!
Composition of the group at the table	Supportive groups are best. It doesn't matter if they are homogenous or heterogenous; what matters is you develop a classroom culture of respect of all students, not only students learning English.
Presentation of language	Focus on comprehension + just a little bit more. Use realia—pictures, diagrams, videos, and so forth, ensure language is understandable. Using hands-on manipulatives, whiteboards, virtual whiteboards, flashcards, sentence strips, writing journals, laptops (for multimedia), magnetic letters, magnetic word tiles, and other tactile tools supports students as they learn language.

Looking Ahead

In this chapter, I've explored what it means to "attend to stages" of language development. Probably the most important take-away is to recognize that teaching multilingual students at the reading table doesn't require an entirely new bag of tricks. In the next chapter, we move onto the second component, **apprenticeship learning**. Here is where you get to lean on a research-based teaching and learning model for small group work.

Do not copy, post, or distribute