

32 - How English Learners Develop Language

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Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley Speaker: Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald Speaker: Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to try.

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Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Today, we have with us Laurie Tess. She is a K-4 reading interventionist who works with students to develop skills and strategies to become successful readers and writers.

The majority of students she works with are English language learners whose home language is Spanish. What a fun job, Laurie. Thank you so much for being here with us today.

Laurie Tess Speaker: Well, thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Laurie we are really excited to hear what you have to tell us about how English learners develop language. And really, we start these podcasts off by just figuring out why this is a passion for our speakers.

So why is this a passion for you?

Laurie Tess Speaker: Well, when I first started teaching, I taught in a small Catholic school in our town, and there was literally zero diversity. And then while I was there, I got my master's as a reading specialist and then ended up getting a position as a reading specialist in the public schools in our district.

And I went from zero diversity to a very diverse school.

The school I was at had the highest poverty level, the highest special needs, and the highest DL population. And intervention was kind of new then. And so, in the beginning, I pushed into the classrooms.

And for whatever reason, the majority of the students I worked with were the English language learners, and I really knew nothing about them. I noticed, though, as I was doing things like running records with them, noticing how much lower their reading levels were than their English-speaking peers, even though these students did speak English. And what I started to notice, though, was some commonalities among those heirs and how they answered questions.

And I also noticed that they brought a lot of background knowledge, even though it wasn't maybe something that we're familiar with. It was based on their culture. They still had a lot of background knowledge.

And I started to notice also that they were being mislabeled and over-referred for special education. And so, I made it my passion to learn as much as I could about these diverse learners and the ways in which I could help them be successful. So that's kind of where that stems from.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: What are some of the challenges that you see that these students face whose home language is something other than English?

Laurie Tess Speaker: Well, we're kind of talking about two different groups of students here. The first one are those students who are newcomers in which both the student and his or her family have recently arrived from another country and typically don't speak English. And newcomers are becoming more and more prevalent in our schools.

The challenges for these students are much greater. Not only do they not have the language yet that allows them to communicate with teachers or peers, very often these students come from very limited or interrupted schooling in their native country. And unfortunately, a lot of them come to our country in ways that have caused severe trauma.

They may be separated from their families on their journey here, or they've seen war, poverty and violence. And so, all of these things alone or in combination can prevent them from achieving success academically. They're just really fighting to survive.

And then we have the group of students who have been born in this country and have been in our school system maybe since the beginning. And many of these students speak English at school and then they speak their native language at home. And so, the challenges that these students face is that they're always transitioning back and forth between language, often acting as interpreters for their parents.

So, there's a lot of transfer going on. And this is where you see a lot of errors and confusions. Eventually, however, being bilingual will help them succeed.

And I tell my students all the time that being bilingual is a gift, but they do have some challenges.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Laurie, I just think it's a great point that you have spoken to the fact that our kiddos in our classrooms really are diverse populations. And as teachers, we really need to be mindful and aware as we are working with them.

So, do you have any advice for our ECE teachers to be aware of when working with the diverse populations?

Laurie Tess Speaker: Yeah, I think one of the most important things for us to understand as educators that all of our students, EL or not, have a story. And we don't always know what those stories are. We don't know the trauma they've been through, their poverty level, their home life.

And our EL students can have some of the same stories, but now you add to it that they may have just moved to this country, don't speak the language. And I think what we have to remember is these students just need a little extra from us. They need to feel safe and secure.

And so, anyway we can make our environment more comforting and inviting and the more we can show them kindness and empathy. And these are things that we can do without even speaking the language. And then I think the second thing we need to be aware of is these students have a lot of background knowledge that can help them be successful.

You know, it's based in their own culture, and we need to acknowledge and respect and encourage that and encourage them to share.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: These are such great tips for everyone listening. So, we have lots of different listeners out here, but what are some simple classroom strategies that all teachers can use to help those ELL students win their teaching lessons?

Laurie Tess Speaker: OK, well, I think there's a there's a lot of different strategies that can be used and there are a ton of resources, books, workshops, classes.

But I think if I were to choose, there would be three or four that I think would be the most important and effective strategies. One of them is using read alouds and that I use read alouds with all age groups. Students love it.

And what it does is it allows us to pre-teach vocabulary and set some background knowledge for our students, because I think a lot of times, we assume that they know some basic English vocabulary, but that's not always the case. I think it's also very important to provide a print rich environment and whenever possible, include pictures and labels that are in English as well as the student's native language and to provide books in all languages that show diversity so those students can make connections. A third strategy that works really well is to use videos, realia, manipulatives that can give students a hands-on and visual of things.

For example, if you're trying to explain to students the names of different foods, having plastic or even real foods to show or for an older student, if you're trying to explain what a nature preserve is, show them a video. And then finally, one that I've had success with, and you can do this even with newcomers who have zero English is to let them draw and then later eventually dictate. Writing is difficult.

So, encouraging them to verbalize in their native language as well as they start to develop English, also in English. So, for example, I had a student who was a newcomer, spoke zero English. I had minimal Spanish and my table we worked at was a whiteboard table and he saw the wipe off markers.

He grabbed one. He wasn't able to explain to me what he was trying to say. And so, he took that marker and just started drawing.

And so, we were able to communicate that way. And eventually, as he developed language, he dictated to me and I wrote it down word for word, read it back to him and then encouraged him to read. So, there's a lot of things out there.

But those four strategies can go a long way toward helping our English language learners.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: That's a really cool story, Laurie, and it really kind of does illustrate the fact that our children, our youngest learners are really going through the stages of language development. And it's something that, again, we have to be mindful of.

Do you have any advice for someone working with young children about, you know, knowing about these stages of language development?

Laurie Tess Speaker: Yes, I think it's important to know that. Depending on the background of our EL students, they might go through stages differently than their English-speaking peers. You might even encounter, as I did, a fourth grader who came to this country in a very traumatic way, who had zero English and didn't even want to communicate in Spanish because of her trauma.

So, they might revert back to a silent, silent stage. I think it's really important for educators to know the difference between BICS and CALP. BICS is that basic interpersonal communication skills.

It's really informal. It includes slang, informal grammar, and it's what we use socially. And this is a lot easier for students to pick up.

And it can be acquired fairly quickly in two to three years. So, a lot of this happens on the playground or in the lunchroom. And the reason it's easier for them to pick up is because it is face to face.

And there's a lot of visual clues like body language and facial expressions.

CALP stands for Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency. And this can actually take five to seven years or longer to develop.

And that's because it's the language of the classroom. There's fewer nonverbal cues and the language is more abstract and demanding. And so, I think one of the things teachers need to be aware of is that time frame for developing that.

And secondly, and really important, is that a lot of times teachers see or hear students having social conversations that BICS and assume that students have a good grasp of the English language. But we need to remember that even though they might be proficient in that, they may need support often for a long time in developing that academic language.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Thank you so much for sharing all of those great things.

You're spot on. As we leave, what are three takeaways for the listeners that you would like them to remember and maybe even try as they move forward?

Laurie Tess Speaker: I think one thing that's important to remember is regardless of who is in your classroom, English language learners or English-speaking students, we need to honor diversity. That's first and foremost.

We need to respect the background and cultures of all of our students. Second, I think it is really important that we include families. We're not just working with our students.

We're working with families who often come from some traumatic backgrounds, who don't speak the language, who feel intimidated by our school system. And so, we need to make them feel comfortable as well. And finally, I think it's vital for school districts to provide ongoing professional development for their teachers because most undergraduate programs don't spend a lot of time on EL strategies.

And the numbers of ELs are growing in our classrooms. And I think we all need to have the professional development to be able to work with those students successfully.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: These are definitely key points that we have to consider for growth and movement forward.

So that's great. Miss Laurie, as we leave, can you give our readers one challenge?

Laurie Tess Speaker: I would challenge your readers to take the time to get to know your students as people first and know that they have backgrounds and stories that we're not always aware of. And yes, academics are important and that will come and with time, but you need to establish that trust first.

And that comes from being empathetic and being good listeners and being there for your students.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Thank you so much for all of this. This was an amazing session because I think that we can all advocate for these things, and we just need a little reminder.

So, Laurie, thank you so much for being here. We appreciate you. And I just can't wait for our listeners to hear this.

Laurie Tess Speaker: Well, thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Thank you.