

Four Essential Features of English Language Development Instruction for Newcomer Students

BY JEFF ZWIERS, Ed.D

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Effective second language development instruction to develop the beginning levels of English proficiency requires four essential features. While each feature is distinct, they are united in their recognition of the many variables relating to each student's unique circumstances. Some newcomer students who come to the United States from other countries are multilingual learners,* proficient in one or more languages other than English. Others have had interrupted formal schooling in their country of origin. Many have left family and friends behind and are experiencing culture shock, including the culture of their new school. Although personal factors play a role in every student's education, the nuances of a newcomer student's journey are often amplified due to the environmental factors surrounding their transition.

In order to equip newcomer students with the foundational “building blocks” they need to succeed in school and have a fulfilling life, the following instructional elements are essential:

1. *Valuing Students*
2. *Communication-Based Curriculum and Instruction*
3. *Modeling and Scaffolding of Language Use*
4. *Observation, Feedback, and Adaptation*

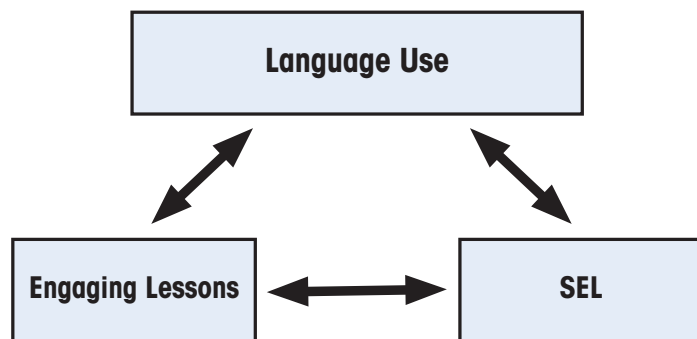
In many classrooms around the country, students feel undervalued. They feel that school is being done to them. They often feel this way because instruction can be consumed with a focus on test scores, which often end up highlighting what they can't do rather than what they can do. Lessons tend to focus on disconnected vocabulary and grammar exercises that students try to memorize and get “right,” rather than using language for meaningful purposes. For newcomers entering these types of environments, the impact of these factors is magnified.

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*The term *multilingual learners* values students' first languages and backgrounds, rather than using a term that focuses on what they need to learn (e.g., English), which can foster deficit-based thinking and pedagogies. This term *multilingual learners* (as opposed the more commonly used term *English learners*) tends to value students' multilingual abilities and potential, rather focus on what they lack.

For a variety of reasons, large numbers of newcomers disengage from learning in school. Research indicates that academic engagement is strongly linked to social and emotional (SEL) health (Fredericks, et al., 2004; Weissberg, et al., 2015). In the social sphere, one of the biggest desires of newcomers is to make new friends. They are new to the school and often feel lonely and disconnected. Curriculum and its instruction should prioritize and support SEL goals. The more socially skilled and comfortable students are, especially in oral interactions with others, the more they will tend to enjoy academic tasks, build relationships, and adopt a positive attitude toward the new challenges they face. As Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, and Martin (2009) argue, “Social relations provide a variety of protective functions—a sense of belonging, emotional support, tangible assistance and information, cognitive guidance, and positive feedback” (p. 717).

As a result of high-quality social and emotional efforts, students tend to feel safe and more motivated to use more language for authentic purposes. Indeed, the links between SEL, academic engagement, and language growth are reciprocal, as represented by Figure 1.



Educators must work hard to meet newcomers’ social and emotional needs, provide highly engaging lessons, and promote authentic uses of language—especially in the first months of school. This is a crucial time when students’ foundational ideas of who they are as learners and how they learn in this new context are being shaped in major ways.

Another vital component of effective newcomer curriculums is orienting students to the United States and its school system (Short & Boyson, 2012). This includes helping students understand the variety of rich cultures and subcultures in the United States., particularly those aspects of culture that facilitate learning in school and participation in the community.

Curriculums often lack sufficiently robust connections to students’ families. On the surface, this means effective translation services and access (print and digital) to information. But at a deeper level, these connections foster a positive relationship between school and home. Academic connections include involving families in homework and projects (e.g., interviewing family members, having them serve as audiences for oral presentations, asking them for suggestions). This means valuing the “funds of knowledge” that family members can access and offer as key contributors to their students’ success in school and life (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Social connections include involving family members in events, planning committees, advisory boards, and parent organizations. Each connection is an opportunity to build lasting relationships in which everyone learns from one another, and students feel well supported in their highly challenging circumstances.



A newcomer curriculum that values students, their range of socioemotional needs, and their families could begin by helping students make new friends, asking appropriate questions, and prompting the sharing of personal information regarding family members and interests. Students should learn how to express their uniqueness, connect with the community, and describe key interests and emotions in their own lives. The activities in each lesson may provide motivation and support for engaging in authentic communication.

Feature 2: Communication-Based Curriculum and Instruction

The main reason to learn language—and the reason it was invented in the first place—is to communicate. Language learning happens most effectively when it stems from *authentic* communication (Zwiers, 2019). In newcomer language learning contexts, authentic communication consists of three core elements: purpose, information gaps, and interaction.

Purpose – As students are learning, they should be motivated to use and refine their language to accomplish a meaningful purpose. Communication, particularly in classroom settings, should center on one or more of the following purposes:

5. *to get things done (e.g., asking for items, asking and giving directions, making friends, listening to teacher instructions)*
6. *to build up ideas (e.g., understand and explain a scientific process, organize written compositions)*
7. *to argue and make decisions (e.g., support an opinion with evidence, write an argumentation essay, decide whether or not to spend time on a cause, choose the best way to solve a problem, convince others of a course of action)*

Effective newcomer programs should focus more heavily on the first purpose, especially initially, but it must also include the other two in order to prepare students for the rigors of using English across disciplines in school. Language teaching should frame interesting and important ideas that motivate students to use new language in increasingly complex and extended discourse over time (Council of Great City Schools, 2017).

Notice that doing well on isolated vocabulary and grammar quizzes was not in the above list of purposes. While knowledge of vocabulary and grammar tends to be easier to teach and assess, the language proficiency that results from this knowledge is usually not worth the time spent on them. This is akin to teaching a student who wants to learn to drive all about how the engine works without ever letting her get behind the wheel and go places. Developing vocabulary and grammar is important and helpful when taught in the context of authentic reading and writing experiences—when it helps students communicate.

More than any other group of students, newcomers need extra patience and support for making meaning from the ambiguous sets of language “pieces” and clues that they use for a variety of school tasks and texts (U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2016). An effective curriculum helps the teacher foresee and address a variety of ambiguous situations and address them so that students feel successful despite their use of “incomplete” and “imperfect” language.

“Language learning happens most effectively when it stems from authentic communication.”

—Zwiers, Author and Researcher



Information Gaps – One reason that language was invented was to bridge information gaps between people. Bridging information gaps means that a person gives information to another person who wants or needs it—or vice versa. For example, if I already know that you like soccer and the teacher has me ask you if you like soccer, there isn't a need to ask or answer the question. But if I don't know what you like, and I ask you, then you bridge an information gap by answering. The more that students feel that they are bridging information gaps to accomplish interesting purposes, the more language they use and retain.

Interaction – A third element of authentic communication that is especially important for newcomers is oral interaction (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). Face-to-face interaction that bridges information gaps to accomplish a meaningful purpose helps students acquire language and culture (Brown, 2007; Garcia & Hamayan, 2006). When students talk to one another, they push themselves to put their thoughts into words for real others who can give them immediate feedback that they can use to revise or reinforce their language (Zwiers, 2019). When listening, they use the words of others to make meaning and can give feedback (e.g., What does...mean?) to push the talker to clarify the idea. Newcomers tend to be highly oriented toward collaboration and learning in peer group settings (Gándara, 2016). Educators need to consider these orientations as assets rather than deficits.

Newcomer curriculums often lack sufficient quantities and qualities of purposeful language use, information gap activities, and peer interaction. An effective newcomer program should prioritize these three elements to maximize communication-based language development. For example, students can work on a project (e.g., poster, diorama, mobile, etc.) that provides a motivational purpose for which to use new language. They can also organize their thoughts through interaction with others, sharing unique ideas and interests with one another while celebrating their individuality each week.

Feature 3: Modeling and Scaffolding of Language Use

Modeling means showing students how language is used in a situation. It can be explicit (e.g., “Right now I will model for you how to...”) or, more often, it takes the form of understandable input that students want or need (e.g., an engaging YouTube video, the teacher acting out key terms when explaining what to do).

Modeling is an essential method of demonstrating the vocabulary, grammar, prosody, and nonverbal cues that are needed for effective communication (Crookes & Chaudron, 2001). For example, a teacher and a student volunteer might model the language commonly used to make friends (e.g., Where are you from? I am from Cambodia. What do you like to do? I like to paint pictures. What do you want to be? I want to be a doctor., etc.)

A newcomer curriculum should provide plenty of modeled language and motivate students to use it to accomplish the purposes identified in Feature 2. For example, a strong curriculum might provide graphic novel vignettes with consistent characters who model new language in common life situations. The images help students visualize what is happening in order to better comprehend the new words and grammar that they will use in subsequent activities that week. Video and drama activities would further model and clarify these concepts throughout the course of the program.

“An effective newcomer program should prioritize these three elements to maximize communication based language development.”

—Zwiers, Author and Researcher

Scaffolding means providing just enough support for student language use so that they successfully accomplish whatever purpose or task they are trying to do (Kayi-Aydar, H., 2013). Effective scaffolding is particularly vital in newcomer instruction because the chances are higher that students will not completely comprehend task directions and the new language needed for them. Scaffolding usually entails one or more of the following:

- *Providing more support in the beginning and taking it away as students develop independence (also called gradual release of responsibility). For example, a teacher will typically use more visuals and gestures early on in a unit, and then reduce their use over time as students' comprehension increases.*
- *Breaking down a complex task into manageable components and prompting students along the way. For example, a teacher might break down the process of constructing a paragraph or engaging in a collaborative conversation.*
- *Providing lots of opportunities to talk with others, even though the interactions might not be "perfect" or "controlled" by the teacher. Conversing immerses students' brains in many "small but mighty" chances to understand meaningful input from real others and to produce meaningful output for them (Zwiers, 2019).*

Some language programs either over- or under-scaffold, which hinders a student's ability to build independence using language or overwhelms the student through support. "Just right" scaffolding can take many forms and builds in flexible options. One approach could employ pictures to introduce key vocabulary at the beginning of instruction. Subsequent instruction would gradually decrease the use of pictures as students become better able to use the words to accomplish more complex tasks later on in the week. Strategic use of sentence frames and starters, another type of scaffolding, can also help students authentically speak and write using increasingly advanced language.

Too many language curriculums are based on "sink or swim," noncollaborative, and memorization models of learning. These models often either overwhelm students, isolate them, or bore them. Young minds prefer to learn by building and exploring ideas, and language is the principal set of tools for doing this. Therefore, curriculum and instruction must not only provide the tools and teach how to use them, but also provide engaging, inspiring, and relevant things to build.

“Scaffolding means providing just enough support for student language use so that they successfully accomplish whatever purpose or task they are trying to do.”

—Kayi-Aydar, H.,

Teacher Educator and Associate Professor of TESOL



Feature 4: Observation, Feedback, and Adaptation

Because each student is unique in many ways, language instruction must be highly flexible, adaptive, and creative. Language teachers need to have extra-honed observation skills during all learning activities. Teachers must watch, listen, and read to learn how students are using language in order to inform changes to upcoming lessons and assessment. For example, as students are in conversation lines and sharing information about where they are from, the teacher observes for use of words, grammar, prosody, and nonverbal cues. The teacher might also observe for students' motivation, interest, and social skills. These "look-fors" are all components of the larger look for of communication.

And when there is a lack of communication for any reason, the teacher needs to consider the possible source and provide timely feedback to help students clarify their messages to and from others (Kerr, 2020). Newcomers can benefit from feedback that:

- *Is immediate and helpful for communicating in the current and similar tasks.*
- *Is safe, supportive, and encouraging, rather than stressful and focused on mistakes.*
- *Emphasizes what students are doing effectively.*
- *Nudges students toward autonomy and agency.*

Students should also learn to provide helpful and respectful feedback to their peers so that, when interacting with one another, they inform peers of what they are doing well and what they might need to repeat, revise, or clarify. For example, teachers can model for students how to respond positively when listening to each other share in a pair-share (e.g., "I liked how you smiled and used your hands. And it helped when you explained what social media is. I also wanted to know more about...").

In addition to providing feedback on language, content, and socioemotional development, teachers assess to make necessary adaptations, adjustments, and even overhauls to upcoming lessons. These changes include providing extra modeling, more or less scaffolding, more time, different topics, different assessments, etc. An effective newcomer curriculum supports teaching coupled with assessment through explicit learning targets and formative assessment questions that zoom in on communicative competence.

Conclusion

The first months of school must form a supportive linguistic, academic, social, and emotional foundation for students at beginning levels of English. Educators must value who students are, what they bring to each lesson, and how they learn. Tasks and texts must, as much as possible, motivate students to authentically communicate, not just to "play school" with bare minimum uses of language. As students seek to accomplish relevant purposes and build ideas with language, teachers must provide modeling and scaffolding of new language to help students clarify, strengthen, and communicate their ideas. As students use language, teachers use well-honed formative assessment practices, provide timely feedback, and adjust instruction. By strengthening these features, newcomer language programs will maximize students' opportunities to develop their abilities to communicate in a wide variety of contexts.



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