Processes of second-language acquisition and strategies to support the learning of students for whom English is not their first language.

The process of second-language acquisition is related to and built upon another language earlier accomplished by the individual. Schooling requires particular kinds of language proficiency. If a second-language learner has been in school and used a first language to learn he/she will translate many academic processes when learning the second language. The first-language academic environment/culture may have been profoundly different from American school environments. If an individual has not used a first language in school he/she will need to acquire both the second language and the school related processes.

Language is systematic and organized to convey meaning. The purpose of language is to communicate, thus perfection in a language is not the first goal but rather it is a means to learn ideas and concepts.

In terms of language learning progress it is the ideas related to communication that must be remembered. The first type of language learning that occurs is Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). Second language learners learn BIC skills in one or two years. The second language learner may talk about social events and understand how to interact in a typical everyday situation. These language skills are learned first because there is so much contextual support. To learn concepts and processes in school, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills (CALPS) are needed. These skills are much more complex because there is much less contextual support. Many words and ideas are abstract and have few experiential connections; thus they are much more difficult to learn and connect together. Learners should be given many opportunities to talk and discuss ideas in class and connect to actual experiences as much as possible.

Teachers should talk with second language learners to learn what the second language learner knows, the words they understand, and how ideas are becoming organized in their minds. Sequence and signal words (“then”, “such as . . .”, “consequently”, “defined by . . .”) are particularly important when learning academic concepts. Diagrams, pictures, simulations and actual experiences are powerful tools to assist learners in gathering the main ideas of academic concepts and processes.

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When working with second language learners it is important to remember that constant correction does not encourage continued academic communication, it may suppress it. Even adults lose motivation when constantly corrected. When learning a new language one takes significant risks (some people are less willing to take these risks) and thus it is important to provide a very supportive and warm environment so that the learner is comfortable in taking risks while learning the new language.

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