

***Parenting for Academic Success:
A Curriculum for Families Learning English
Research Base***

Prepared by the Center for Applied Linguistics

Principle 1: Language teaching is most effective when instruction is provided in a context that is meaningful to students' lives. This is especially true for adult learners, who bring years of experience to the classroom. Best practices in English as a second language (ESL) education integrate language and content instruction.

English language instruction is most effective when new language concepts are presented to students within a meaningful context. Research in second language acquisition (SLA) supports a focus-on-form approach to language teaching in which teachers draw students' attention to grammatical forms in the context of meaningful activities, rather than teaching grammar in isolation (Long, 2000). Likewise, research on teaching low-level ESL students has shown that teachers should provide opportunities for students to connect what they are learning in the classroom to the outside world (Brod, 1999; Condelli & Wrigley, 2004; Florez & Terrill, 2003; Holt, 1995). One way of providing a meaningful context for students is to combine language and content instruction. Adult ESL instruction frequently blends these domains; for example, civics teachers often teach language concepts through lessons that focus on U.S. history and government (Terrill, 2000). This integration of language and content instruction represents best practice in ESL instruction and is used in K-12 as well as adult education settings (Short, 1991).

Parenting for Academic Success is comprised of units that present grammar and vocabulary points within the context of family literacy strategies and students' personal backgrounds. Units contain activities that encourage students to think, talk, and write about their personal experiences with literacy as adults, their childhood experiences with literacy, and their daily experiences as parents. Language points are built into the content-based units, so that students acquire language skills as they talk about their experiences and as they learn how to increase their family literacy strategies.

Principle 2: Language learners need to have opportunities to practice the structures, vocabulary, and strategies they are learning.

Successful second language acquisition depends on learners' ability to practice using grammar and vocabulary in meaningful contexts (Florez & Burt, 2001). SLA theories hold that language learners cannot achieve proficiency unless they move beyond a concentrated focus on grammar and start to use language to accomplish communication tasks. When learners have sufficient time to practice communication, they are able to monitor their speech for correctness (Brown, 2001; Lightbown, 2000). Similarly, research on vocabulary acquisition suggests that teachers should provide learners with multiple and varied opportunities to use new vocabulary in the classroom, in addition to encouraging their students to practice vocabulary outside the classroom (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003). The units in *Parenting for Academic Success* provide students with various opportunities to practice form and vocabulary. Each unit has key vocabulary that is presented at the beginning and reinforced through a variety of activities throughout the unit. Grammar is presented as part of the family literacy content, and activities are provided for students to practice the forms they have learned.

In addition to grammar and vocabulary, successful language instruction should provide students with learning strategies that they can use to further their own growth as students (Chamot et. al., 1999). Learning strategies enable students to reflect on their own thinking and learning and to take control of their learning experiences. The *Parenting for Academic Success* curriculum provides students with strategies they can use to further their family's literacy development. Students are encouraged to practice the family literacy strategies they learn through take-home activities that they complete with their children. Each lesson begins with a review of the previous take-home activity to further reinforce the strategies.

Principle 3: All parents play a critical role in supporting their children’s language, literacy, and cognitive development. Parents learning English should recognize that second language learning and literacy are built upon a strong foundation of first language (L1) and culture, which should be explored and celebrated in the home.

By being allowed to develop their L1, children learning English will have a basis of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and language features that they will be able to build upon when learning the second language (L2). As Cummins (n.d.) explains, when children develop their L1, they are

learning concepts and intellectual skills that are equally relevant to their ability to function in the majority language. Pupils who know how to tell the time in their mother tongue understand the concept of telling time. In order to tell time in the second language (e.g. the majority language), they do not need to re-learn the concept of telling time; they simply need to acquire new labels or "surface structures" for an intellectual skill they have already learned.

A strong L1 foundation facilitates both literacy development and family interaction. Young children’s language of communication with their parents, families, and communities is most often the L1, which helps them “learn to interact in socially appropriate ways, receive nurturing, and develop self esteem” (Coltrane, 2003). When children do not develop a solid ability to speak and communicate with their families and communities in the L1, they are put at risk for ruptured relationships, alienation from their own home culture, loss of identity, and lack of initiative in classroom interactions (Cummins, n.d.).

The *Parenting for Academic Success* series features two units that specifically focus on the value of home language and culture in children’s acquisition of English language and literacy: Unit #2, “Home Language and Culture” and Unit #3, “Family Stories.” The activities and objectives used in these units provide opportunities for parents to incorporate their home language and culture into their children’s literacy development and acquisition. Lessons about cooking, family recipes, family traditions, family trees, and family stories are designed to incorporate familiar topics into vocabulary and grammatical structures in English, while building pride and self-esteem in students’ heritage and native language. In addition, each unit gives students the opportunity to translate new words into their home language. Home activities are presented in both English and Spanish, so that students can complete the activities in the language they feel most comfortable using. Family literacy materials that value and encourage parents’ home contributions to their children’s literacy development help prepare children for academic success (Darling, 2005; Dever, 2001). Parents need to be aware of the value of their own cultural assets that can be applied in their children’s literacy learning, such as “storytelling, songs, rhymes, table conversations, family legends, cultural traditions, and family history” (Burningham & Dever, 2005, p. 88).

Principle 4: All parents should share books with their children. Parents and other family members should read to and with their children in whatever language they feel most comfortable using. Literacy in two languages is an academic advantage.

Research shows that children who live in homes with many books and who receive exposure and opportunities to manipulate and discuss these books have increased reading skills and background literacy knowledge upon entering kindergarten (Cook-Cottone, 2004; Livingston & Wirt, 2003). One study showed that reading scores of children in grades 3-5 who had high levels of early parental interaction and involvement in literacy practices were 50% higher than the scores of those who had fewer instances of parental interaction and involvement (Darling 2005). Frequent book readings encourage children to read and provide them with the literacy skills they will need later on, such as phonological and phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, comprehension, and motivation to read (Darling, 2005; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002). Parents who use “think aloud” techniques when reading with their children or doing daily routines, regardless of the language used, expose them to thought processes, problem-solving, and personal expression (Burningham & Dever, 2005).

Parenting for Academic Success features six units that highlight the reading and literacy practices that ELL parents can use at home: Unit #6, “Talking with your child;” #7, “Literacy in everyday family activities;” #8, “Playing with language;” #9, “Fun with letters and sounds;” #10, “Reading for meaning;” and #11, “Reading aloud to your child.” These strategy- and activity-filled units are informed by current research on home literacy practices that parents should conduct with their children. Many parents learning English come from cultures where storybook reading and other literacy activities are not practiced in the home, and they believe that school is the place for those types of activities with qualified teachers (Brock & Dodd, 1994; Handel, 1999; Meier, 2003). Family literacy programs and activities should focus on modeling and supporting the parent-child reading process, so that home literacy practices can support and provide a base for academic success. This process is especially critical for parents of students learning English and needs structured introduction. Key components of family literacy curricula include training on how to read aloud, act out stories, choose books from a variety of genres, discuss illustrations, ask questions, use materials found in the home for reading (e.g., grocery store advertisements and sales flyers), create “All About Me” books, limit television watching, increase reading and talking time, and identify literacy resources in the community (Burningham & Dever, 2005; Darling, 2005). Information about how to create and use these materials is provided in *Parenting for Academic Success*.

Three key elements for literacy development of students learning English -- phonological processing, reading in the L1, and development of L2 vocabulary -- are explored in various activities and lessons of the *Parenting for Academic Success* series. Phonological awareness, which is an understanding of the speech sound system, is a fundamental skill that parents can develop through everyday family literacy activities and language play. Research shows

that performance on measures of L1 phonological awareness in early childhood predicts later success in L1 reading (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004). For students learning English, phonological awareness in the L1 actually predicts phonological awareness in the L2. One study found that the strongest predictors of English word reading ability among Spanish-speaking first graders were L1 and L2 phonological processing, L1 reading, and L2 vocabulary (August & Hakuta, 1997; Gottardo, 2002). The closer the L1 and L2 phonologies are, the greater the chance that positive transfer of skills will occur, since children are skilled at manipulating the sounds in their own language (Bialystok, 2002).

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