

5. How young ESL students learn

What will be covered

- 5.1 Principles of language learning
- 5.2 The ESL learner
- 5.3 Factors that affect second language learning
- 5.4 ESL stages of learning in relation to mainstream learners
- 5.5 Recommendations for ESL support

5.1 Principles of language learning

Key understandings

- Learning English as a second language is complex and it will take many years for students to acquire the language needed for them to succeed at school.
- As many refugee background students have had disrupted schooling, it will take longer for them to acquire this language.

The principles of learning and support that were referred to earlier and the principles of language learning are closely linked. Table 5.1 compares them.

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Table 5.1: Comparing the principles of language learning and the principles of learning and support

Principles of language learning ³⁰	Principles of learning and support P-12
ESL students learn language best when they are treated as individuals with their own needs and interests	Students learn best when their needs, backgrounds, perspectives and interests are reflected in the learning program Students learn best when the learning environment is supportive and productive
ESL students learn language best when they are exposed to language which they can understand and which is relevant to their needs and interests	
ESL students learn language best when they are provided with opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities	Students learn best when learning reflects the way things are currently done in the community
ESL students learn language best when they are exposed to information about Australian society and culture while appropriate recognition is given to their own cultural backgrounds	
ESL students learn language best when they focus deliberately on language forms, skills and strategies to support their language development	Students learn best when they are challenged and supported to develop and apply their thinking
ESL students learn language best when they become aware of the role and nature of language and the way culture affects it	
ESL students learn language best when they are provided with appropriate feedback about their progress	Students learn best when their progress is monitored
ESL students learn best when they are provided with opportunities to manage their own learning	Students learn best when the learning environment promotes independence, cooperation and self-motivation

³⁰ Adapted from: Vale D, Scarino A & McKay P(1991), *Pocket All: A User's Guide to the Teaching of Language and ESL*, Curriculum Corporation, Carlton, Victoria, p.28.

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Activity 5.1

Reflect on the principles of language learning in table 5.1 and how we can use them to support refugee background students in OSHLSPs.

List the three principles you consider the most important and achievable for your work as a tutor.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Think of ways that you can apply these in your work.

For example, the principle 'ESL students learn language best when they are treated as individuals with their own needs and interests' could be applied thus: David is interested in planes, so I will encourage him to write sentences about flying.

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5.2 The ESL Learner

Key understanding

- Like all students for whom English is a second language, refugee background students are faced with the challenging tasks of:
 - learning English;
 - learning how English works; and
 - learning through English.

Activity 5.2

Watch the section of the DVD on Amal.

In pairs, discuss the implications of one of the three tasks – learning English, learning how English works or learning through English – for an ESL student like Amal. Write your ideas here.

Learning English	Learning how English works	Learning through English

5.3 Factors that affect second language learning

Key understanding

- It takes time to develop full control over a second language. Many factors will affect the rate of learning English as a second language.

The rate of ESL learning is influenced by a range of factors, including:

- age;
- previous education and literacy experiences;
- motivation;
- the programs available at the student's school;
- other support available;
- the contexts and situations in which students have the opportunity to use English;
- personality factors (e.g. willingness to take risks); and
- migration experiences, particularly for those who have had refugee or refugee-like experiences and who may have suffered trauma.³¹

Time is required for concept development and social learning. Often interpersonal skills cannot be expressed until sufficient English is learnt.

Students who missed out on schooling in their first language may have difficulty learning abstract terms, both in their first language and in English. While students in the right environment may learn to communicate in spoken English relatively quickly, it usually takes many years for them to develop the literacy skills needed to complete academic studies successfully at secondary or tertiary level. This is particularly so for students with highly disrupted educational backgrounds.³²

³¹ VCAA (2005), *ESL Companion to the VELS*, available at: http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/esl_companion.pdf, accessed 30 October 2006.

³² VSPC (2005), *Learning Pathways for Refugee Young People*, DIMIA, Melbourne.

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Activity 5.3

Examine diagram 5.1 and discuss it with a partner.

In pairs, use the following KWL chart to write what you understand about the diagram and what you would like to know about it (columns 1 and 2).

Know	Want to know	Learnt

Share your understandings and questions with the group and, after the presenter has summarised the key points, fill in the last column to reflect what you have learnt about the diagram.

The following case studies demonstrate how the stages work in practice.

Adam

Adam is 12 years old and was born in Australia. He speaks English at home. He is in Grade 6. He is working at Level 4 on the English standards at school.

Sara

Sara is also 12 years old. She was born in the Sudan and lived in Egypt for five years but had limited access to schooling there. She speaks Dinka and Arabic, although she can only write a little Arabic. She has been in Australia for 16 months and is in Grade 6 at a mainstream primary school.

Sara has learnt to speak simple English well but she is only beginning to learn to read and write in English.

If we were to place Sara on the ESL stages diagram, she would be:

- in the B stages, because she is in upper primary school;
- beyond the new arrivals stage because she has been here for more than a year; and
- more advanced in speaking and listening (late B2) than in reading and writing (early B2).

In terms of reading and writing, Sara has to move through B2 and B3 stages before she will be working at the same English standards level as Adam (level 4).

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Christine

Christine is 15 years old and was born in Australia. She speaks English at home. She is in Year 9. She is working at Level 6 on the English standards.

Yousef

Yousef is also 15 years old. He was born in Iraq and came to Australia via Greece. He speaks Assyrian at home. He also speaks Greek and a little Arabic. He attended school for three years in Greece and learnt to read and write simple Greek. He is in Year 9 and has been in Australia for over three years. He is making good progress at school. He still needs a lot of support, however, particularly with reading and writing, as well as with understanding and using vocabulary for many class topics.

Activity 5.4

Think, pair, share

Given this information, where would you place Yousef on the ESL stages diagram?

Discuss your estimates for listening, speaking, reading and writing with a partner.

Share your ideas with the whole group.

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5.5 Recommendations for ESL support

Key understanding

- ESL students in the early stages of English language learning require more intensive support than those in more advanced stages.

Table 5.2 is a useful guide for supporting ESL students at different stages of their language development.

Table 5.2: Supporting ESL language development³⁴

Area	Early or newly arrived stages	More advanced stages
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Concrete and ‘hands-on’ ✓ Within their experience ✓ A limited or reduced number of steps required in activity ✓ Simple, highly controlled language features (e.g. simple sentences) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Becoming more abstract ✓ Broadening and extending their experience ✓ Increasing number of steps ✓ Increasingly complex language features
Spoken and written texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Student/tutor-developed texts, shorter, more basic mainstream texts ✓ Texts using simple familiar subject matter ✓ Frequent use of non-language cues (e.g. pictures and gestures) ✓ Reduced speed and/or number of speakers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Accessible mainstream texts, more extended texts ✓ Texts using less familiar and more complex subject matter, including mainstream texts appropriate to the year level ✓ Less reliance on non-language cues ✓ Greater speed and/or number of speakers
Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Extensive support by the tutor ✓ Little time restriction placed on completion of activities ✓ Extensive preliminary work to introduce activities ✓ Extensive opportunity for reworking material produced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Reduced support by the tutor ✓ Time limits imposed on activities ✓ Reduced preliminary work ✓ Reduced opportunity for reworking

³⁴ Adapted from: VCAA (2005), *ESL Companion to the VELs*, available at: http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/esl_companion.pdf, accessed 9 November 2006.

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Area	Early or newly arrived stages	More advanced stages
Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Response short and simple ✓ Less concern with accuracy and fluency ✓ High acceptance of error ✓ High acceptance of attempt to communicate in English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Longer, more complex response expected ✓ Increased expectations of accuracy and fluency ✓ Less tolerance for error ✓ Increased demand for use of standard English

Activity 5.5

Think, pair, share

Think about the student/s you support or plan to support.

Are they newly arrived and in the early stages and in need of more support, or more advanced and would therefore benefit from less support?

How much introductory work might be needed for them to understand given tasks?

How much practise and how many drafts might they need to do to complete the task?

How much time might be appropriate for them to complete the task?

Share your reflections with a partner. Report back to the group.

All students benefit from a language-rich and relaxed environment, and from involvement in activities that require them to interact with others and to discuss the topics concerned. However, ESL students will benefit greatly from more:

- repetition and practise;
- explicit instruction;
- introduction of vocabulary and language;
- demonstration and modelling;
- thorough checking of existing knowledge;
- opportunities for focused interaction between tutors and students; and
- deliberate focusing on the rhythms and patterns of English.

These strategies are outlined in table 5.3. Activity 5.6 asks you to complete this table with your ideas of how you could implement them with your students.

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Table 5.3: Recommended ESL strategies

Strategy	Ideas of how you might do this
Repetition and practise	
Explicit instruction	
Introduction of vocabulary and language	
Demonstration and modelling	
Thorough checking of existing knowledge	
Opportunities for focused interaction between tutors and students	
Focusing on the rhythms and patterns of English	

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Activity 5.6

Read the suggestions listed below. (The ones marked with an asterisk are described in more detail in Appendix 2 – Glossary of Strategies.)

Decide where you would place them in table 5.3. For example, games provide opportunities for repetition and practise and for demonstration and modelling.

Brainstorming*

Buddy reading*

Checking prior knowledge

Cloze activities (e.g. cover some words in a text and students fill in the gaps)

Concept maps and mind maps*

Cutting up sentences into words and then reconstructing the sentences

Cutting up texts into sentences and reconstructing them

Demonstrating reading strategies (e.g. what to do if you don't know a word when reading)

Demonstrating how English grammar, punctuation, spelling or structure works

Explicit teaching of reading strategies such as how to read on and re-read

Find out what students know (K), want to know (W) and then at the end what they have learnt (L) (KWL).* (Activity 5.3 is an example of this.)

Games

Introducing key vocabulary

Making criteria explicit to students

Modelling handwriting

Modelling appropriate behaviours and routines

Modelling how to write for different purposes (e.g. a story, a letter and other types of writing)

Pair work (e.g. read and find the difference, read and draw, describe and arrange pictures in a particular sequence)

Peer support

Pre-teaching about a topic or a book

Pre-teaching vocabulary, concepts, language structures and features that the student will need to know

Re-reading texts

Reading texts together

Reading to and with students

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Referring to a simpler word when possible

Reinforcing vocabulary with word charts, topic charts, word walls

Songs and poems

Step by step demonstrations*

Talking books*

Teaching rules for turn taking

Turning instructions into a recount and focusing on the changes*

Use of visuals and gestures to support the instruction, demonstrating instructions

Using the same texts in different ways

Using visuals, picture dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, bilingual interpreters when available, bilingual or multilingual versions where possible

Activity 5.7

Reflect on the activities that helped you learn when you were young and add suggestions to table 5.3.

Share your suggestions with the group. Add any new suggestions from others.

