Factors That Influence Learning by English Language Learners (ELLs)

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Abstract

Current research with English language learners (ELLs) indicates that there are a number of factors that influence students' success in learning English as an additional language. Teachers and parents both have different roles in educating and supporting students on their voyage to learning another language.

Many factors contribute to students' achieving academic success while learning a new language. For the majority of English language learners (ELLs), a new language is just one component of adapting and integrating into an educational system within a new society and country. Not only do they have to learn quickly to survive in their daily lives, but they also have to adjust to life in a school environment wherein their native language is not spoken. Some of the challenges include different behavioural and academic expectations, new social customs, and different cultural values. Teachers and parents influence various parts of a student's life, and therefore success is attributable to different factors. Parents have an important role in terms of motivation and educational expectations, as well as socio-economic status. However, it is teachers who create positive teacher-student relationships in classrooms that are culturally inclusive, collaborate with other mainstream educators, and differentiate instruction and assessment to meet student needs. Ultimately, in order for ELLs to have academic success, it is important that parents, teachers, and students work together to create an optimum learning environment and opportunities for student achievement.

Parents have critical roles in terms of motivating their children to learn and to want to improve their language skills and proficiency. While extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are important for children's success, motivation from parents is a separate form of motivation that has a more direct and positive influence on student achievement (Butler, 2014). If parents make it clear that education is important and that language skills and proficiency are desired, children are more likely to be motivated to achieve these goals. Parents' beliefs about their children's abilities and strengths significantly affect children's motivation and their own beliefs about what they are capable of academically (Butler, 2014). If parents support their children's language learning at school and also at home by facilitating language learning opportunities, children are more likely to achieve success sooner. These activities could be in English or in their native language, because strengthening one language benefits the development of all other languages by strengthening core language proficiency (Aro & Mikkila-Erdmann, 2014). Parents' expectations and their abilities to motivate their children are important for language learning, but parents' socio-economic status also influences students' ability to learn.

Socio-economic status can influence academic expectations, school resources, and societal stereotypes. Families that have a higher socio-economic status tend to have higher academic expectations in regards to college and university for their children, which can affect students' attitudes toward their own abilities and future (Aro & Mikkila-Erdmann, 2014). They can also provide their children with resources and opportunities that families from a lower socio-economic status may not be able to afford. Many students of lower socio-economic status have lower self-esteem and confidence when it comes to education, because they fear that they will not have the same opportunities for success in the future. Typically, students from lower socio-economic status also attend low-income schools that may be old and run-down, lack extra-curricular activities and resources, or exude a negative climate (Chu, 2011). Due to the lower socio-economic status, some EL families are more transient because they move due to changes in jobs, different housing options, or opportunities to be closer to family; however, their transience causes interruptions in education and, hence, learning gaps (Rance-Roney, 2009).

These learning gaps affect not only students' academic performances but also their feelings of confidence, capabilities, and attitudes toward learning. Therefore, while parents are critical factors in their children's learning with respect to motivation, academic expectations, and socio-economic status, teachers determine what takes place in the classroom.

It is critical that teachers create positive teacher-student relationships because many ELLs depend more on their teachers for academic support than on their parents (Sung, 2014). In some circumstances, parents value education but lack the academic background or language skills to help their children with the content or assignments (Chu, 2011). Not only are EL teachers responsible for language acquisition and skills, but they are also instrumental in helping students to adjust to the differences in culture and social behaviours. Cultural expectations and beliefs about teachers and students vary, and teachers need to be cognizant of these so that they can bridge the gaps. If students feel safe because they trust their teacher, they will share opinions and ideas, ask questions, and learn new concepts more readily. Positive relationships with teachers improve students' confidence, self-efficacy, and engagement in learning. If students perceive teachers to be encouraging, supportive, and interested in the content being taught, students are more likely to become engaged and motivated to strengthen their language skills independently (Fukuda & Yoshida, 2013). Although creating positive teacher-student relationships is the cornerstone of learning, teachers are also responsible for ensuring that ELLs feel comfortable and supported by their peers.

Teachers need to create classroom climates that are culturally inclusive and supportive, so that ELLs will take risks with the language and not be afraid of making mistakes. A culturally inclusive classroom affects ELLs' progress and skill development because students must feel accepted before they will engage socially. If students are not comfortable, they are more likely to lose interest and to become disengaged in their learning (Talandis & Stout, 2015). In classrooms wherein students feel safe, comfortable, and valued, they openly share ideas and become accountable for their learning. Vygotsky's belief that learning occurs when there is social interaction between more and less knowledgeable people (Yoon, 2012) applies to ELLs who feel comfortable with their peers. Encouraging ELLs to share their experiences, cultural perspectives, beliefs, and values motivates students to learn from each other and brings them closer together in supportive and meaningful ways. Teachers need to foster social interaction between ELLs and their native English speaking peers because ELLs acquire more language skills, more linguistic patterns, and also more social and academic knowledge from those peers (Sung, 2014). In culturally inclusive classrooms and positive learning communities, students perform better academically, increase self-esteem, and develop positive interpersonal relationships with students from all cultural and racial groups (Chu, 2011).

While positive teacher-student relationships are essential, EL teachers also need to collaborate with mainstream teachers, in order to ensure that ELLs' needs are met in all of their classes. Mainstream teachers often have limited training in teaching language learners and benefit from extra support and instruction on how to integrate language instruction effectively in the classroom (Coelho, 2012). Many mainstream teachers also lack the training, knowledge, and experience to teach specific reading and literacy skills, which leads to inadequate literacy instruction and lower ELLs' reading achievements (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Open communication between mainstream and EL teachers produces timely diagnosis and strategic interventions (Garcia & Kim, 2014). EL teachers need to train mainstream teachers how to address language development and skills as they relate to curricular outcomes and content knowledge (Freeman, Katz, Gomez, & Burns, 2015). Collaboration between these teachers fosters cultures of inclusion, which broaden and develop engaging, relevant, effective, and supportive structures that meet the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of ELLs (Russell, 2014).

Working with mainstream teachers enables EL teachers to identify the supportive structures that ELLs need for intervention and timely additional support. Other factors that impede ELLs' success are inappropriate instruction and invalid assessments of their skills and needs (Drame & Xu, 2008). Response to Intervention (RTI) is a potential alternative for assessing ELLs;

however, it needs to be used appropriately and cautiously. RTI centres on literacy and focuses on intervening in students' academic careers as early as possible through a multi-tiered system wherein the intensity of the interventions increases with each level (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Because RTI focuses on literacy levels and skills, the ELLs' literacy levels and linguistic proficiency in their native language must be taken into consideration, in order to ensure that interventions and instructions are appropriate. RTI requires working with reading recovery specialists, guidance counsellors, speech therapists and literacy specialists, in order to ensure that appropriate scaffolding is in place. RTI promotes collaboration among teachers and educators, since teachers work together to plan, problem solve, and adapt material to meet the individual needs of students (Drame & Xu, 2008). This approach changes how teachers diagnose and assess students, as well as how they plan and deliver lessons, because teachers have more knowledge and greater access to resources. ELLs benefit directly when EL teachers intervene and plan with mainstream teachers to tailor instruction and assessments to meet individual ELLs' needs and develop their skills and linguistic proficiency.

Teachers need to differentiate instruction and assessment because each ELL requires individual planning. There are significant differences in terms of immigration status, previous educational background, literacy in first language, culture, and socio-economic status (Rance-Roney, 2009). When teachers differentiate instruction and plan activities that engage students not only academically but also socially with native English speaking peers, students are more motivated and even more engaged in their own learning. Teachers also need to be mindful of cultural differences and background experiences as they plan lessons to ensure that all students feel welcome and comfortable. If teachers focus on skill-development and student-centered lessons, students are more accountable, more invested in the content, and more interested in their peers (Drame & Xu, 2008). Second language learner students have the same needs as students in mainstream classes, but they also need extra support for decoding, expanding vocabulary, and developing strong reading skills (Sasson, 2014).

It is inappropriate for teachers to assess ELLs on the curriculum writing and reading strands at grade level before adequately preparing learners to perform at grade level. Part of ensuring progression of learning requires that teachers assess students regularly, both informally and formally, in order to monitor student development. By continually gathering information about their students' skills, teachers can adjust planning and instruction to meet students' needs as they progress. For example, effective teachers lower the language barrier, provide scaffolding, give adequate time, and adapt literacy assessments until students' skills are at grade level (Coelho, 2012). These strategies enable teachers to differentiate instruction and assessments, and to match activities with skills being taught in class; thus, ELLs experience success and see progression of their skills. The more information teachers have about the language skills of their ELLs, the more efficient and effective the teachers' instruction and assessment will be.

In conclusion, many factors contribute to students' achieving academic success while learning a new language. Not only are students responsible for studying, participating in class, interacting with others, and asking questions, but parents and teachers also have vital roles in supporting students. Parents affect motivation, educational expectations, and socio-economic status. Socio-economic status affects students' self-perceptions, but healthy relationships between students and parents can offset these obstacles. The more involved and supportive parents are in their children's learning, the more engaged students are in school because they want to please their parents. Students also want to please their teachers, since they rely on their EL teachers for academic and social support. EL teachers are responsible for creating positive relationships and fostering culturally inclusive classrooms. By collaborating with mainstream teachers and ensuring that appropriate academic supports and interventions (such as RTI) are in place, EL teachers enable students to optimize opportunities and resources. Effective teachers differentiate instruction and assessments to meet ELLs' needs with specific and individualized education. Thus, if teachers understand the factors that influence and affect ELLs' learning, academic success and linguistic proficiency are possible for all language learners.

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