

IDEAS for English Language Educators

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New Research Prompts Big Changes in ELD Instruction

by Connie Williams, Ed.D.

Educators involved in English language instruction agree on one overarching goal: English learners need instructional methods and materials that move them efficiently and effectively toward full English proficiency. Debate often ensues when the discussion turns to which methods and materials are best suited to meet this goal. For the past two decades, English language development (ELD) educators have tended to rely on the Natural Approach to English language instruction. However, new research is pointing to structured and focused language instruction as a critical part of the English language development curriculum.

The Natural Approach

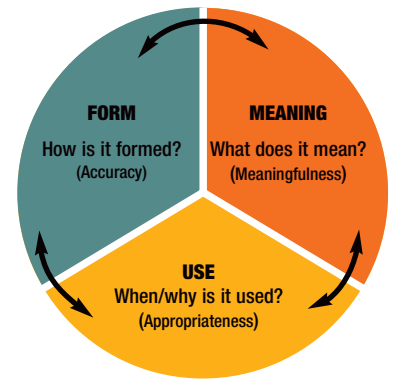
In the mid-1980s, Stephen Krashen revolutionized second language teaching. Krashen's research led him to the conclusion that you don't learn a second language by learning *about* it (1985). He observed that people acquire a second language when they learn "in" and "through" the language, not when they are learning the rules that govern its use. Krashen suggested that exposing students to meaningful language in a comfortable setting would enable them to acquire the language. This approach focused on authentic communication with minimal error correction. Krashen's assumption was that first and second languages are more or less acquired in the same way (Krashen and Terrell, 1983).

Triggering Change

Early on, Barry McLaughlin challenged Krashen's distinction between acquisition and learning and his hypothesis that acquisition is "where the action is" and that learning plays only a peripheral role in the process (McLaughlin, 1985). McLaughlin emphasized the importance of both learning and acquisition and argued that both play significant roles in internalizing language. He advocated a more comprehensive theory of language instruction, which incorporates both informal and formal language instruction.

Meanwhile, the ongoing research efforts of two key individuals in bilingual education, Jim Cummins and Kenji Hakuta, emphasized the critical need for academic language as the key for students to achieve high levels of English proficiency. Cummins made a distinction between everyday, conversational (or "social") language and academic language and consistently argued for a stronger emphasis on the teaching of academic language in English instruction (Cummins, 1984; Hakuta, Butler, and Witt, 2000). Knowing that social language would emerge through continuing exposure to the language, Cummins advocated teaching discrete language skills from the beginning as a bridge to the development of academic language.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's diagram illustrates the inter-relationship of meaning, accuracy, and appropriateness in language usage.



Source: Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. *The Grammar Book*, 1999.

Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman (1999) also influenced the shift toward a stronger emphasis on explicit language instruction by conveying the view that grammar has a communicative purpose. Their conceptualization of language acknowledges the interrelationship of language used meaningfully, appropriately, and accurately. While second language instruction had favored meaning over form and function (or purpose), their work and that of Scarcella (2003) pointed out the importance of recognizing the need for instruction in social language, academic language, and grammar if English learners are to develop communicative competence.



▲ *Carousel of IDEAS* is on the cutting edge of ELD research.

2007 Conference Calendar

Georgia TESOL
March 2–3
College Park, GA

Illinois TESOL/BE
March 9–10
Naperville, IL

TESOL
March 21–24
Seattle, WA

**Texas Region 1 Two-Way
Bilingual Conference**
May 10–11
South Padre
Island, TX

**California Council for
the Social Studies**
March 2–4
Oakland, CA

California ABE
March 14–17
Long Beach, CA

Massachusetts ABE/MATSOL
March 8–9
Leominster, MA

New Jersey TESOL/BE
May 22–23
Somerset, NJ

In 2000, Lily Wong Fillmore and Catherine Snow wrote an article entitled, “What Teachers Need to Know About Language.” This monograph focused on the multifaceted nature of language and questioned how much ELD teachers really know about the language they teach. The article was a call for teachers to become better versed in the English language, including understanding phonology (the study of sounds—phonemes), morphology (the study of words and parts of words—morphemes), syntax (the study of word order), and semantics (the study of word, phrase, and sentence meaning). Fillmore and Snow’s argument stressed the complexity of language while simultaneously advocating that ELD instruction become more explicit, thus underscoring the need for teachers to possess this knowledge of the English language. They urged that teacher training institutions and staff development incorporate the study of language (linguistics) as a prerequisite for teaching ELD.

Susana Dutro added further elucidation to the debate over implicit versus explicit language instruction. In “Rethinking English Language Instruction: An Architectural Approach” (Dutro and Moran, 2003), she called for a balance of teaching functions and forms in addition to meaning. When the *No Child Left Behind* Act (2001) required all states to develop English language proficiency (ELP) standards aligned to English language arts (ELA) standards, school districts began to require explicit English language instruction. States have adopted ELP standards that serve as a guide for helping students meet ELA standards while working toward full English proficiency.

A New Role for ELD Teachers

Over the last 20 years, many believed that the ELD teacher’s role was to be a *facilitator* of language rather than a *teacher* of language. The teacher facilitated English language acquisition by creating a comfortable learning environment and making language comprehensible to English learners. ELD teachers served as “guides on the side” and ignored grammatical errors that did not interfere with communication. This was consistent with prevailing theories which held that over time and through continued exposure, grammatical errors would dissolve and grammatically accurate English would emerge. However, the current research on language development suggests that the ELD teacher should play a very different role—the “sage on the stage.” Today’s ELD teachers must take charge of language instruction, pointing out, highlighting, and explaining how the English language works. In this newly defined role, ELD teachers are responsible for unlocking the mysteries of English.

Selecting an ELD Program

Current research is helping educators evaluate ELD instructional programs to ensure that they are consistent with the way in which English language instruction is most effectively and efficiently delivered. Well-designed instructional programs aid teachers in planning and implementing lessons that teach English explicitly. When reviewing any ELD program, it is important to determine whether the program meets the criteria outlined below. *Carousel of IDEAS*, 4th Edition (Ballard & Tighe, 2005) is an excellent example of a program that offers a balanced approach to English language instruction.

- Instruction is based on language proficiency level. English learners should be grouped by proficiency level as opposed to grade level for instruction in order to focus on the systematic delivery of language. *Carousel of IDEAS* is organized

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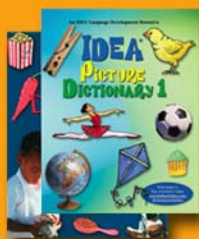
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around proficiency levels, introducing level-appropriate vocabulary and language forms and functions in each chapter. This focused and systematic approach allows for instruction to be delivered daily within a specific time frame (30-45 minutes).

✓ **There is an explicit focus on language forms.** English learners must master the grammatical forms of the language in order to carry out the specific functions of the language. For example, students cannot accurately describe people or objects unless they know how to use adjectives. *Carousel of IDEAS* incorporates target grammatical forms (e.g., nouns, prepositions, verbs, adjectives, conjunctions, and so forth) in each chapter.

✓ **There is a focus on specific language functions.** Students need to know how to use language in a variety of contexts and for specific purposes in order to communicate well. Students must understand grammatical forms and also recognize the purpose of using those forms (e.g., to describe a person, to request information, to summarize, to compare and contrast, and so forth). *Carousel of IDEAS* aids in lesson planning by outlining the language functions focused on in each chapter.

✓ **Students experience language orally in a meaningful context before engaging in practice activities that target language forms and functions.** Students must have ample opportunity for oral language usage in order to build a foundation that will support meaningful practice of forms and functions. In Unit 4, Chapter 4 of *Carousel of IDEAS*, for example, students are first engaged in listening and speaking activities to become familiar with animals and their habitats. Once they have some facility with the vocabulary and content, students practice the function of asking *why* questions (e.g., “Why do zebras spend all day eating grass?”).

✓ **The program emphasizes vocabulary development.** Most reading experts agree that building vocabulary improves comprehension (Gunning, 1992). This goes beyond developing concrete, topical vocabulary and includes more difficult and descriptive words (e.g., *fortunate* instead of *lucky* or *benevolent* instead of *kind*). *Carousel of IDEAS* introduces and then reinforces vocabulary in each lesson through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. In addition, *Carousel* incorporates both social (e.g., *hungry, boy, hello*) and academic (e.g., *habitat, paragraph, continent*) vocabulary to prepare students for success in mainstream classrooms.

“**Carousel introduces then reinforces vocabulary in each lesson.**”

✓ **Lessons identify academic objectives in addition to language objectives.** Although the primary function of an ELD class is language instruction, teachers should prepare students for mainstream classrooms by integrating academic content into the lessons. In *Carousel of IDEAS* Unit 2, Chapter 5, for example, food vocabulary is covered. The program integrates social studies content by having students read about and discuss the types of food the early Iroquois ate.

Activity Sheet 97A

Name: _____
Date: _____

The Iroquois Indians


Directions: Read the article below. Then answer the questions on Activity Sheet 97B.

The Iroquois Indians' Vegetables and Fruits


Many groups of American Indians lived in North America in the 1300s and 1400s. One of these groups was called the Iroquois (IR-uh-kwoy) Indians. The Iroquois Indians lived in the area we now call New York.

The Iroquois were farmers. They grew many vegetables. Corn was their most important crop. The area where the Iroquois Indians lived was filled with fruits that people could eat. During the summer, the women gathered grapes, cherries, strawberries, and plums. The Iroquois people ate dried fruit in the winter. Fruits and vegetables were an important part of the Iroquois' diet.

crop: a group of plants grown for food
diet: what a person eats and drinks daily
dried: having no moisture or wetness
farmer: a person who grows food
important: having much value



▲ The Iroquois ate fruits such as strawberries, cherries, plums, and grapes.



◀ The shaded area shows where the Iroquois Indians lived in the 1400s. The Iroquois ate many fruits and vegetables that grew in this area.

Unit 2: My Larger Community • Chapter 5: The Food We Eat

✓ The curriculum is comprehensive and focuses on the development of all language domains.

To close the achievement gap, English learners must acquire grade-level proficiency in all four language domains—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Oral language rehearsal provides the foundation necessary to support high-level literacy. Phonics activities, literature, and writing in various genres should be integrated with listening, speaking, and reading practice throughout English language instruction. *Carousel of IDEAS* follows a balanced approach to language learning, incorporating oral practice, structured reading and writing activities, and literature lessons in every chapter.

Conclusion

ELD curriculum and instruction must be rooted in educational research about what works. While many of Krashen's ideas regarding language acquisition continue to be relevant, current ELD research points to the efficacy of approaches that reflect a strong balance between comprehensible input and structured, explicit language instruction. Today's curriculum must engage students in meaningful language learning; however, at the same time, teachers must deliver lessons in a focused and systematic way in order to facilitate language acquisition and ensure that students develop English language proficiency.

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