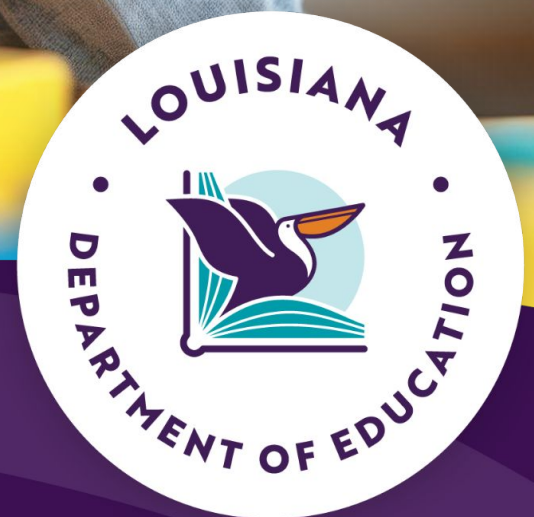




Supporting English Learners (ELs) In Early Childhood Classrooms

Strategies for Language Development

Fall 2026

English Learners (ELs) in Early Childhood Classrooms

About this Resource

This resource provides early childhood educators with guidance for supporting young English Learners (ELs) through play-based instruction and intentional language development. Early childhood classrooms are often the first structured learning environments children experience, and these settings play an important role in shaping children's early language, literacy, and development. For children who are acquiring English while also developing foundational academic skills, classroom experiences must be designed to support both language acquisition and overall developmental growth.

The strategies presented in this manual focus on embedding language development opportunities within everyday classroom routines and play experiences. Through conversation, exploration, and interaction, young learners can build vocabulary, strengthen communication skills, and develop confidence as participants in classroom learning. These strategies emphasize the use of visual supports, teacher modeling, peer interaction, and instructional practices that allow children to engage meaningfully with language.

Introduction

Early childhood educators play an important role in shaping the language and learning experiences of young ELs. During the early years, children develop foundational skills in language, literacy, mathematics, and development that influence their long-term academic success. For children who are acquiring English while also developing these foundational skills, classroom environments must provide intentional opportunities for language development throughout the school day.

Early childhood is a particularly important stage for language development because young children are actively building the vocabulary and communication skills that support future academic learning. Children who are learning English benefit from environments where language is consistently modeled, practiced, and connected to meaningful experiences.

Play-based learning provides a powerful context for supporting young ELs because it allows children to explore language through meaningful interaction and real-world experiences. When teachers design classroom environments that encourage conversation, collaboration, and exploration, children have opportunities to practice new vocabulary, build confidence in communication, and strengthen their understanding of academic concepts.

The strategies in this resource align closely with the CLASS® framework and support high-quality teacher-child interactions across the domains of Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. As educators implementing language-rich, play-based experiences for English Learners, they create opportunities for observable CLASS® indicators such as Teacher Sensitivity, Regard for Student Perspectives, Instructional Learning Formats, Concept Development, Quality of Feedback, and

Language Modeling. The CLASS® Connections included throughout this resource highlight how effective support for English Learners also strengthens the interactions associated with positive child outcomes.

Key Principles for Supporting Young ELs

Young ELs develop language most effectively in environments where communication, exploration, and meaningful interaction are embedded throughout the school day. Early childhood classrooms that intentionally support language development allow children to build vocabulary, strengthen comprehension, and participate confidently in learning experiences.

These environments are characterized by frequent opportunities for children to hear language modeled, interact with peers, and engage with materials that support communication and exploration. When teachers intentionally design instruction that incorporates these elements, children are more likely to develop confidence using language while building the foundational skills necessary for academic success.

Principle	What This Looks Like in Practice
Language develops through meaningful interaction	Teachers create opportunities for conversations during play, routines, and collaborative activities. Children hear language modeled, practice new vocabulary, and communicate with peers and adults throughout the day.
Play-based learning supports communication and exploration	Teachers intentionally participate in children's play, introduce new vocabulary, ask open-ended questions, and extend children's thinking while children interact with meaningful materials.
Visual supports strengthen comprehension	Teachers use photographs, picture cards, gestures, real objects, demonstrations, and environmental print to make language understandable and accessible.
Small group interaction encourages participation	Teachers provide intentional language support through guided conversations, scaffolding, and opportunities for children to interact with peers in low-risk settings.
Families are essential partners in language development	Teachers build relationships with families, incorporate home languages into instruction, and encourage ongoing communication between home and school.

Understanding ELs in Early Childhood

Early childhood learning environments play an essential role in developing the foundational skills that support long-term academic success. During these early years, children begin building language, early literacy, mathematics, executive functioning, and communication skills that prepare them for elementary school and beyond.

ELs, often referred to as Dual Language Learners in early childhood settings, are children who are developing proficiency in English while continuing to build skills in their home language. These children bring valuable linguistic knowledge into the classroom. When educators recognize and build upon these strengths, they create opportunities for children to develop language, confidence, and academic readiness.

Language development occurs throughout the school day as children participate in conversations, explore materials, engage in classroom activities, and interact with peers and teachers. Teachers play an essential role in guiding these interactions by modeling vocabulary, asking questions, and expanding children's responses in ways that support both comprehension and communication.

Integrating Language Instruction Throughout the Day

Supporting young ELs requires intentional planning so that language development occurs throughout the daily classroom schedule rather than during isolated language activities. Teachers can incorporate language development opportunities during classroom routines such as arrival, circle time, learning centers, read-alouds, and transitions. Each interaction provides an opportunity for children to hear language modeled and to practice using new vocabulary.

Teachers can intentionally plan for language development by identifying key vocabulary connected to classroom themes and integrating those words across activities. For example, vocabulary introduced during a read-aloud can be revisited during dramatic play, small group activities, or art projects. Repeated exposure to vocabulary across different classroom contexts helps children develop a deeper understanding and confidence in using new language.

Educators also support language development by modeling complete sentences, encouraging children to explain their ideas, and expanding children's responses during conversations. These instructional practices create consistent opportunities for language development while allowing children to participate actively in classroom learning.

How These Strategies Work Together in Instruction

The strategies presented in this resource are most effective when they are integrated throughout the daily routines of the early childhood classroom. Language development does not occur only during designated instructional time. Instead, children develop language through repeated opportunities to hear, use, and interact with language during play, conversation, and exploration.

Effective instruction for young ELs often combines several strategies at once. For example, a teacher might introduce new vocabulary during a read-aloud, reinforce those words using visuals and gestures, and then encourage children to use the vocabulary during dramatic play or small group activities.

When language instruction is embedded within meaningful classroom experiences, children gain repeated opportunities to hear vocabulary, practice communication, and build confidence as learners.

Language Development Throughout the Daily Schedule

Language development occurs during every part of the instructional day. Each classroom routine provides opportunities for children to hear language modeled, practice new vocabulary, engage in meaningful conversations, and develop confidence communicating with peers and adults. The examples below

illustrate how teachers can intentionally embed language supports throughout common early childhood routines.

Daily Routine	Opportunities for Language Development	Example Teacher Language
Arrival	Greet children, encourage conversation, and build social language	"Good morning, Maya! Tell me one thing you're excited about today."
Morning Meeting	Introduce new vocabulary, discuss classroom topics, and encourage whole-group participation	"What do you notice about today's weather? Tell me why you think that."
Learning Centers	Model vocabulary, ask open-ended questions, and extend conversations during play	"I see you're building a bridge. What could you add to make it stronger?"
Small Groups	Introduce new concepts, scaffold responses, and provide targeted language support	"Can you explain how you sorted these objects?"
Read Alouds	Build vocabulary, make predictions, connect stories to experiences	"Why do you think the character made that choice?"
Snack or Meals	Encourage conversation, describe food, compare experiences	"How does your apple taste? Is it crunchy or soft?"
Outdoor Learning	Introduce movement words, positional vocabulary, and observation language	"What do you notice about the leaves? How are they different?"
Transitions	Reinforce sequencing, directions, songs, and routines	"First, we clean up, then we line up. What comes next?"
Closing Circle	Review vocabulary, reflect on learning, and encourage oral language	"Tell your partner one new word you learned today."

Every classroom routine provides opportunities to strengthen teacher-child interactions. During arrival, centers, meals, outdoor play, and transitions, teachers can intentionally model language, encourage conversations, respond to children's ideas, and provide meaningful feedback. These interactions support English language development while strengthening the Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support domains of the CLASS framework.

Strategy 1: Supporting Home Language Development

Supporting children's home languages is an essential component of effective instruction for young ELs. Research consistently shows that skills developed in a child's first language support the development of additional languages. When educators recognize and incorporate children's home languages within classroom learning, they strengthen both language development and children's confidence as learners. A

child's home language provides a foundation for building vocabulary, developing conceptual understanding, and making connections between familiar knowledge and new learning.

Even when educators do not speak a child's home language, there are meaningful ways to incorporate language into classroom routines and activities. Teachers can create environments where children's languages are visible and valued by including bilingual books, labeling classroom materials in multiple languages, and encouraging children to share words and expressions from their home languages.

Because young children are still developing early literacy skills, labels should be supported with pictures or icons to help make meaning clear and accessible. It is also important that educators actively reference and interact with these labels during instruction and daily routines so that they become a meaningful part of the learning environment rather than static displays. While classroom labels often represent nouns, teachers can support language development for actions by pairing gestures with key verbs. Inviting children to share or label these actions in their home language, alongside the English word and gesture, can strengthen connections between languages. These practices help children see their linguistic background as an asset while building vocabulary across both languages.

Families are also important partners in supporting home language development. Educators can invite families to share songs, stories, and common phrases that are meaningful within their home environments. These contributions can be incorporated into classroom activities such as read-alouds, music time, or storytelling. When children hear familiar words or references in the classroom, they are more likely to feel comfortable participating in conversations and learning experiences.

Visual supports, gestures, and real objects can also help bridge communication when children are developing English proficiency. By pairing spoken language with visual cues and concrete materials, teachers provide multiple ways for children to understand meaning and participate in interactions. These strategies allow children to build new English vocabulary while continuing to rely on the knowledge they already possess in their home language.

In Practice

Visual supports, gestures, and real objects can also help bridge communication when children are developing English proficiency. By pairing spoken language with visual cues and concrete materials, teachers provide multiple ways for children to understand meaning and participate in interactions. Pairing visuals with written words further strengthens this support by helping children connect images, print, and meaning simultaneously. In centers or other independent learning settings where the teacher may not always be available to model vocabulary, additional support such as dual-language audio can extend access to language. When developmentally appropriate, tools such as talking buttons or simple recorded labels that say words in both languages can provide children with repeated exposure to vocabulary and an additional model of oral language. These supports allow children to hear, practice, and revisit language throughout the day. As a result, children are able to build new English vocabulary while continuing to rely on the knowledge they already possess in their home language.

Instructional Moves for Teachers

Teachers can intentionally incorporate home language support into daily classroom instruction through several practical strategies. Educators may begin by identifying key vocabulary related to current classroom themes and displaying those words in both English and the home languages represented in the

classroom. Visual labels placed around the classroom help children connect spoken language with written words while reinforcing language recognition.

Teachers can also create opportunities for children to share language experiences during classroom discussions. For example, children may be invited to share how a word or object is named in their home language. These conversations allow children to make connections between languages and help classmates develop awareness of linguistic diversity.

In addition, teachers can incorporate home language into classroom routines such as greeting students during arrival, singing songs that include multiple languages, or reading bilingual texts during shared reading. These instructional practices reinforce language connections while creating classroom environments where children's linguistic backgrounds are recognized and valued.

Connection to CLASS®

Creating a classroom environment that values and incorporates children's home languages and cultures strengthens both relationships and learning. Within the **Emotional Support** domain, children develop a stronger sense of belonging when teachers intentionally include their languages and cultural experiences in daily routines and learning opportunities. Encouraging children to share words, stories, and experiences from their home language promotes confidence, self-expression, and meaningful participation.

Within the **Instructional Support** domain, teachers foster language development by introducing vocabulary in multiple languages, engaging children in purposeful conversations about language, and expanding on children's responses. High-quality feedback supports learning by connecting new English vocabulary to children's existing knowledge and home language experiences. During classroom observations, evidence of these practices may include teachers greeting children using familiar words from their home languages, children sharing words or phrases from their home language during discussions, and teachers extending conversations by making connections between vocabulary across languages.

Strategy 2: Designing Engaging Play-Based Learning Experiences

Play-based learning is one of the most effective approaches for supporting young ELs and Dual Language Learners in early childhood classrooms. Through play, children participate in meaningful interactions that allow them to explore new vocabulary, practice communication, and build connections between language and real-world experiences. Play-based activities create opportunities for children to experiment with language in authentic and engaging contexts while also developing social, cognitive, and early academic skills.

Engaging children in shared activities that include relevant and meaningful materials can significantly support language development. Objects such as paintbrushes, puppets, spoons, toy animals, or dramatic play props provide a shared focus for interaction. When children can point to, manipulate, or act upon these objects, they are able to communicate ideas even when their English vocabulary is still developing. These shared experiences provide a natural starting point for conversation and allow children to connect words with actions and experiences.

Teachers play an important role in supporting language development during these play-based experiences. When educators actively participate in play alongside children, they can model language,

introduce new vocabulary, and extend conversations in ways that support learning. Participating in activities with children for extended periods of time allows teachers to respond to children's ideas, ask open-ended questions, and provide immediate language support as children explore new concepts.

These extended interactions allow language learning to occur within meaningful contexts. Instead of relying only on direct instruction, children learn language while engaging in activities that capture their curiosity and imagination. Through shared play, children hear new vocabulary repeatedly, observe how language is used in context, and gain opportunities to practice communication with both peers and teachers.

Language Routines During Play

Teachers can strengthen language development during play by using consistent language prompts and modeling vocabulary connected to the activity. During dramatic play or hands-on exploration, teachers may ask children to describe their actions, explain their ideas, or respond to questions about what they are doing.

Examples of teacher prompts include:

- What are you building?
- What do we need to help the animal feel better?
- Can you tell me what happens next?

These prompts encourage children to use language while actively participating in the activity.

In Practice

During a classroom unit focused on animals, the teacher transforms one of the classroom centers into a veterinarian clinic. The area includes stuffed animals representing different animals, toy medical kits with tools such as stethoscopes and bandages, clipboards, blankets, and pictures of animals labeled with their names. The teacher introduces vocabulary such as veterinarian, examine, sick, medicine, and bandage, modeling the words while demonstrating how the tools might be used.

Children take on roles such as veterinarians, animal owners, or helpers within the clinic. As they interact with the materials, the teacher joins the play and models language by asking questions and describing actions. For example, the teacher may ask a child what is wrong with the animal or suggest that the veterinarian examine the animal to see how it is feeling. Children respond using gestures, single words, or short phrases while the teacher expands their language by restating their ideas using complete sentences. These conversations create opportunities for children to practice vocabulary while engaging in collaborative and imaginative play.

Instructional Moves for Teachers

Teachers can strengthen play-based instruction by intentionally planning language opportunities within classroom centers. When setting up learning centers, educators may identify key vocabulary associated with the materials available in each center. For example, a dramatic play center focused on cooking might include vocabulary such as mix, pour, measure, and ingredients.

During play, teachers can support language development by describing children's actions and asking open-ended questions that encourage conversation. Statements such as "You are building a tall tower" or questions such as "What do you think will happen if we add another block?" allow children to hear language used in context while also encouraging them to respond.

Teachers may also model language structures by expanding children's statements. If a child says, "dog sick," the teacher might respond by saying, "Yes, the dog is sick. The veterinarian will help the dog feel better." This approach provides children with models of more complete language while reinforcing the meaning of their statements.

The teacher continues by asking, "What do you think made the puppy sick?" After children share their ideas, the teacher responds, "You think the puppy needs medicine because it has a hurt paw. Let's examine the puppy together." As children continue the conversation, the teacher expands their responses, introduces new vocabulary, and encourages children to explain their thinking.

Connection to CLASS®

Play provides meaningful opportunities for children to develop language, thinking skills, and social interactions while actively engaging in learning. Within the **Instructional Support** domain, teachers strengthen language development by engaging children in sustained conversations during play, introducing new vocabulary, and expanding on children's ideas. Teachers also promote higher-order thinking by asking open-ended questions that encourage children to predict, problem-solve, and explain their thinking. High-quality feedback extends conversations, prompts deeper understanding, and supports continued learning.

Within the **Emotional Support** and **Classroom Organization** domains, children thrive when they are given opportunities to lead their own play, make choices, and contribute their ideas. Play-based learning centers provide engaging, hands-on experiences that encourage active participation and collaboration. During classroom observations, evidence of these practices may include teachers asking questions such as, "What do you think will happen next?"; children leading dramatic play scenarios and making decisions about materials and roles; and teachers joining children's play to extend conversations and build on their ideas.

Strategy 3: Enhancing Communication Through Visual Supports and Scaffolding

Visual supports and instructional scaffolding are powerful strategies for supporting language development in early childhood classrooms. These approaches are especially beneficial for young ELs because they provide clear, concrete references that help children connect spoken language with meaning. When teachers incorporate visuals, gestures, and demonstrations into instruction, they create multiple pathways for children to understand new concepts and participate in classroom interactions.

Scaffolding refers to the intentional support educators provide to help children move from what they are currently able to do independently toward the next stage of learning. This process requires teachers to understand each child's current language abilities and provide the appropriate level of assistance to support continued growth. By breaking learning into manageable steps and offering structured guidance, teachers help children gradually develop greater independence in their communication and understanding.

Several types of scaffolds can support ELs in early childhood classrooms. Linguistic scaffolds help children develop language by providing sentence starters, vocabulary charts, or word walls that allow children to practice new words and phrases. Procedural scaffolds support learning through structured interactions, such as small group activities, peer collaboration, and role play. Instructional scaffolds may include graphic organizers, manipulatives, or simplified explanations that help children focus on key ideas without becoming overwhelmed by unfamiliar language.

Real objects, visuals, and demonstrations are particularly effective for supporting comprehension. When children are able to see and interact with objects connected to new vocabulary, they can make stronger connections between language and meaning. Teachers can also support understanding by providing clear step-by-step instructions, modeling actions during activities, and regularly checking for understanding through observation and conversation.

Technology can also serve as an additional support when used thoughtfully. Educational videos, interactive learning programs, and audiobooks can provide children with opportunities to hear language modeled while connecting spoken words to visual information. These tools can be especially helpful when paired with teacher guidance and opportunities for children to discuss what they see and hear.

Language Support Routines

Teachers can support comprehension by pairing spoken language with consistent visual supports. During instruction, teachers may point to objects while naming them, model actions connected to vocabulary words, and encourage children to repeat the words as they interact with materials.

For example, when introducing new vocabulary during a sorting activity, the teacher might model the sentence pattern:

“This is a carrot. The carrot goes here.”

Children then repeat the phrase while placing the item in the correct category.

In Practice

During a classroom activity focused on healthy foods, a teacher introduces several fruits and vegetables to the class. Instead of relying only on pictures, the teacher brings real items such as apples, carrots, and bananas for children to observe and handle. As the teacher introduces each item, the teacher models the vocabulary and encourages children to repeat the words while pointing to or holding the objects.

Children then participate in a small group activity where they sort the foods into categories such as fruits and vegetables. The teacher provides visual cards and models simple phrases such as “This is an apple” or “The carrot goes here.” Children who are still developing English proficiency may point to the items or repeat single words, while the teacher expands their responses into full sentences. The use of real objects, visuals, and guided language modeling helps children understand the new vocabulary while encouraging them to participate actively in the activity.

Instructional Moves for Teachers

Teachers can support comprehension by pairing spoken language with visuals and demonstrations. When introducing new concepts, educators may show real objects, display pictures, or model actions connected

to the vocabulary being introduced. These visual references help children connect language with meaning.

Teachers can also provide structured language support by modeling simple sentence patterns that children can repeat. For example, during a sorting activity, the teacher might model the sentence “This is a carrot” or “The carrot goes here.” Repeating these sentence patterns helps children practice vocabulary while developing early sentence structures.

Frequent checks for understanding are also important. Teachers may ask children to point to objects, demonstrate actions, or repeat vocabulary to confirm that they understand the new language being introduced.

Connection to CLASS®

Providing intentional language supports helps children access instruction while building confidence and independence. Within the **Instructional Support** domain, teachers scaffold learning by using visuals, gestures, sentence frames, modeling, and step-by-step guidance to make language more comprehensible. Teachers strengthen language development by pairing spoken language with visual supports and demonstrations while introducing new vocabulary. They also promote deeper understanding by helping children connect new language to concrete experiences, familiar objects, and everyday situations.

Within the **Emotional Support** domain, teacher sensitivity is demonstrated by recognizing when children need additional language support and adjusting instruction to meet individual needs. During classroom observations, evidence of these practices may include teachers modeling vocabulary while demonstrating actions, children using visual supports to participate successfully in learning activities, and teachers providing individualized assistance when language demands increase.

Strategy 4: Optimizing Small Group and Collaborative Learning

Small group and one-to-one learning opportunities are particularly valuable for supporting young ELs in early childhood classrooms. These instructional settings create a more comfortable environment for children who are still developing English proficiency. In smaller groups, children often feel less pressure to speak and are more willing to participate in conversations, ask questions, and experiment with new vocabulary.

While whole-group instruction can still play an important role in early childhood classrooms, limiting the amount of time spent in extended whole-group activities can help ensure that ELs have more opportunities to engage in meaningful language interactions. Shorter whole-group lessons followed by small-group activities allow teachers to provide targeted support and respond more effectively to the individual needs of children.

Small group learning also encourages peer interaction, which is an important component of language development. When children work together during play-based activities or collaborative tasks, they naturally engage in conversations, share ideas, and negotiate meaning with one another. These interactions provide authentic opportunities for children to hear language modeled by peers and practice using new words in context.

Teachers play an important role in guiding these interactions by responding thoughtfully to children's contributions. This includes recognizing both verbal and nonverbal communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, or puzzled looks. When teachers acknowledge and build upon children's ideas, they reinforce the value of each child's participation and encourage continued engagement.

One effective strategy for supporting language development during these interactions is recasting. Recasting occurs when a teacher restates a child's statement using correct grammar while preserving the original meaning. For example, if a child says, "I rolling round," the teacher might respond by saying, "Are you rolling it?" This approach allows children to hear accurate language structures while still feeling that their ideas have been understood and valued.

Through small-group collaboration and teacher interaction, children gain repeated opportunities to practice language in meaningful ways. These experiences help build confidence, strengthen communication skills, and support the gradual development of English proficiency.

Conversation Routines for Small Groups

Small group settings provide valuable opportunities for guided conversation. Teachers can encourage language development by prompting children to explain their thinking and respond to peers.

Examples of conversation prompts include:

- How did you build that?
- Where should this block go?
- Why do you think the tower fell?

Teachers can also model expanded language by restating children's responses in more complete sentences.

In Practice

During center time, a teacher works with a small group of children, building structures with blocks. As the children construct towers and roads, the teacher listens to their conversations and responds to their ideas. When one child says, "big tower fall," the teacher responds by saying, "Yes, the big tower fell down. Let's try to build it again." This response models correct language while encouraging the child to continue participating in the activity.

As children collaborate to rebuild the structure, they discuss where to place the blocks and how to keep the tower standing. The teacher continues to ask simple questions and model language, such as "Where should this block go?" or "Let's make the tower taller." These interactions allow children to practice new vocabulary and sentence structures while actively engaged in a hands-on activity.

Connection to CLASS®

Small-group instruction provides children with increased opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations, practice language skills, and receive individualized support. Within the **Instructional Support** domain, teachers promote language development by facilitating rich discussions, using recasting, follow-up questions, and feedback loops to extend children's thinking and language. Teachers

also encourage children to explain their ideas, solve problems, and collaborate with peers, helping them develop both language and critical thinking skills.

Within the **Emotional Support** domain, teachers demonstrate sensitivity by responding to children's verbal and nonverbal communication and providing individualized support when needed. A positive classroom climate is strengthened as collaborative learning encourages children to interact, share ideas, and work together. During classroom observations, evidence of these practices may include teachers restating children's responses using more complete language, children explaining their ideas to peers, and teachers asking follow-up questions that promote deeper thinking and extended conversations.

Strategy 5: Building Vocabulary Through Meaningful Interaction

Young ELs benefit from repeated exposure to vocabulary within meaningful classroom experiences. Vocabulary instruction in early childhood should connect language to actions, routines, and play rather than isolated word memorization.

Instructional Moves for Teachers

Teachers can strengthen vocabulary instruction by introducing new words before activities begin and then reinforcing those words throughout the day. Vocabulary may be introduced during shared reading, demonstrated during hands-on activities, and practiced again during play centers.

Repetition is particularly important for young ELs. Teachers may repeat new vocabulary several times during an activity while pairing the words with gestures or objects. For example, when introducing the word *plant*, the teacher might point to the soil, show the seed, and describe the process of planting while repeating the vocabulary.

Teachers can also encourage children to use vocabulary by asking questions that prompt responses. Questions such as "What do we need to help the plant grow?" or "Where should we put the seed?" encourage children to participate in conversations using the new words.

Vocabulary instruction is most effective when children encounter new words across multiple contexts. Teachers can intentionally revisit vocabulary during read-alouds, classroom conversations, learning centers, outdoor exploration, and daily routines. Repeated exposure allows children to hear, practice, and apply language in meaningful ways while building conceptual understanding.

In Practice

During a gardening unit, the teacher introduces the words **seed**, **soil**, **plant**, **grow**, and **water** before children begin planting seeds. As children fill their containers with soil, the teacher models the vocabulary by describing each step and asking questions such as, "*What do you think the seed needs to grow?*" and "*What do you notice about the soil?*" When a child says, "*Plant get big,*" the teacher responds, "*Yes, the plant will grow taller as it gets water and sunlight.*"

Over the next several days, the teacher intentionally revisits the vocabulary during read-alouds, science observations, and classroom conversations. By hearing and using the same words in multiple contexts,

children strengthen their understanding of new vocabulary while developing confidence communicating about their observations.

Connection to CLASS®

Intentional vocabulary instruction is most effective when children encounter and use new words during meaningful, authentic experiences. Within the **Instructional Support** domain, teachers repeatedly introduce and expand vocabulary throughout the day, provide specific feedback that encourages children to use new words in conversation, and connect vocabulary to real-world experiences and classroom investigations. These strategies help children develop a deeper understanding of language while strengthening comprehension and communication skills.

Within the **Classroom Organization** domain, engaging instructional learning formats provide children with hands-on, meaningful experiences that increase participation and support language development. During classroom observations, evidence of these practices may include teachers introducing vocabulary before activities and revisiting it throughout the day, children using newly learned words while interacting with materials, and teachers encouraging children to explain their observations, ideas, and experiences using new vocabulary.

Strategy 6: Partnering with Families to Support Language Development

Families play an essential role in children's language development, and many of the strategies used in the classroom can be naturally incorporated into everyday routines at home. Encourage families to continue speaking, reading, singing, and telling stories in their home language while using photographs, picture books, labels, drawings, and everyday objects to help children connect language to meaning.

Every day experiences provide meaningful opportunities for language learning. Whether children are cooking, building with blocks, pretending during dramatic play, shopping, gardening, taking a walk, or helping with household tasks, families can strengthen language development by engaging them in conversation, asking open-ended questions, introducing new vocabulary, and encouraging children to explain their thinking. Visual supports, meaningful conversations, and repeated exposure to new words help children build vocabulary and communication skills in both their home language and English.

Strong partnerships between families and educators further support children's success. Encouraging families to share favorite books, songs, interests, cultural traditions, and language experiences helps teachers build meaningful connections between home and classroom learning while creating learning experiences that reflect each child's unique strengths and background.

In Practice

During a unit on families and community, the teacher invites families to share favorite songs, greetings, or simple words from their home language. These contributions are incorporated into morning meetings, read-alouds, and classroom routines, so children regularly hear and use language that reflects their home experiences.

Throughout the unit, the teacher encourages children to make connections between classroom learning and their lives outside of school by asking questions such as, *"Does your family cook something like this at*

home?" or "What do you call this in your home?" These conversations help children see their languages and experiences as valued classroom resources while strengthening meaningful partnerships between home and school.

Connection to CLASS®

Strong partnerships with families create meaningful connections between home and school while supporting children's language development and learning. Within the **Emotional Support** domain, teachers build positive relationships by honoring children's cultures, languages, and lived experiences through ongoing family engagement. Teachers demonstrate sensitivity by using information shared by families to better understand and respond to each child's individual needs. Inviting family contributions also helps create classroom experiences that reflect children's interests, backgrounds, and identities.

Within the **Instructional Support** domain, teachers strengthen learning by connecting new concepts to children's home and community experiences and using family stories, songs, traditions, and experiences as meaningful contexts for language development. During classroom observations, evidence of these practices may include family contributions reflected in classroom activities and materials, teachers connecting learning to children's experiences outside of school, and children sharing stories, traditions, or vocabulary from home.

Teacher Moves That Support Language Development

Teacher Move	What It Might Sound Like	Why It Helps
Model Vocabulary	"You're carefully pouring the water into the cup."	Connects vocabulary to meaningful experiences.
Expand children's responses	"Yes, the dog is running very fast"	Develops expressive language and sentence complexity
Ask open-ended questions	"Why do you think that happened?"	Encourages reasoning and oral language development
Provide specific feedback	"I noticed you used our new word 'measure' correctly."	Reinforces vocabulary and builds
Follow children's interests	"Tell me more about what you're building."	Encourages authentic conversation and engagement

Instructional Language Routines for Early Childhood Classrooms

Teachers can strengthen language development by incorporating consistent language routines into everyday classroom instruction. Language routines provide structured opportunities for children to hear, practice, and apply new vocabulary in meaningful contexts. These routines can be integrated into classroom activities such as read-alouds, play centers, and small group instruction.

Interactive Read Aloud Conversations

Interactive read-alouds provide rich opportunities for language development. During read-alouds, teachers can pause to introduce new vocabulary, ask children to predict what might happen next, and encourage children to describe what they see in the illustrations. Teachers may also invite children to repeat key phrases or vocabulary words that appear in the story.

Example teacher prompts may include:

- What do you think will happen next in the story?
- Can you describe what the character is doing?
- What do you notice in this picture?

Play-Based Language Expansion

During play-based activities, teachers can expand children's language by describing their actions and introducing new vocabulary related to the materials being used. When a child builds a structure or interacts with objects, the teacher may describe what is happening and encourage the child to explain their ideas.

For example, during block play, a teacher might say:

“You are building a tall tower. What do you think will happen if we add another block?”

This approach models language while encouraging children to participate in conversation.

Small Group Vocabulary Practice

Small group instruction provides opportunities for focused language practice. Teachers can introduce key vocabulary connected to classroom themes and encourage children to repeat or use the words during hands-on activities.

During a science activity, for example, a teacher may introduce vocabulary such as plant, soil, and grow while children plant seeds. As children interact with the materials, the teacher continues modeling the vocabulary and asking questions that prompt children to use the new words.

These routines provide repeated opportunities for children to hear and practice language in meaningful contexts.

Supporting Language Development and Long-Term Success

Supporting young ELs requires a comprehensive approach that addresses language development, engagement, and children's overall well-being. Early childhood educators play an important role in creating learning environments where children feel safe experimenting with language, asking questions, and participating in classroom activities. When classrooms are structured in ways that encourage curiosity, exploration, and interaction, children are more likely to take risks with language and develop confidence as communicators.

Building background knowledge is an important part of supporting ELs in early childhood classrooms. Children develop language more effectively when they have opportunities to connect new vocabulary with meaningful experiences. Teachers can expand children's background knowledge by introducing family traditions, organizing hands-on experiences, and providing opportunities for children to explore new topics through classroom activities. Experiences such as nature walks, themed classroom centers, visits from community members, or interactive demonstrations help children build conceptual understanding that supports both language and academic learning.

Play-based centers can also be adapted to reflect classroom themes or units of study. For example, a dramatic play center may be transformed into a pet store, grocery store, or restaurant, depending on the current topic being explored in class. These environments encourage children to engage in conversations, negotiate roles, and practice vocabulary in authentic situations. As children interact with materials and peers, teachers can model language and introduce new words that connect directly to the activity.

Collaboration with families is another critical component of supporting ELs. Families provide valuable insight into children's language experiences, backgrounds, and interests. Establishing strong partnerships with families helps educators better understand how to support children's learning and development. Teachers can communicate with families through a variety of methods, including written notes, phone calls, in-person meetings, and digital communication tools. Whenever possible, communication should occur in a language that families understand.

Schools should ensure that families receive important information about programs, services, and school activities in their preferred language. Qualified interpreters and translators should be used to support communication with families who have limited English proficiency. Students, siblings, or untrained staff should not be used as interpreters for important school communication. Providing families with clear and accessible information helps strengthen relationships and encourages meaningful participation in their children's education.

When educators actively engage families and create welcoming classroom environments that recognize various linguistic backgrounds, children are more likely to feel valued and supported. These partnerships contribute to stronger language development, increased confidence, and improved educational outcomes for young ELs.

In Practice

During a classroom unit focused on community helpers, a teacher invites a family member who works as a chef to speak with the class about preparing food. The guest shares simple cooking vocabulary and demonstrates how ingredients are used in a recipe. The teacher encourages children to repeat the new words and discuss the ingredients they recognize.

Following the visit, the teacher transforms the dramatic play center into a restaurant where children can take on roles such as cooks, servers, and customers. Menus include pictures and labels for common foods. As children play, the teacher models vocabulary related to cooking and encourages conversations among the children. This experience allows children to connect new language to a meaningful activity while also building background knowledge about the community.

Daily Instructional Practices that Support Language Development

Effective instruction for young ELs includes intentional language support throughout the daily schedule. Teachers can strengthen language development by describing actions during activities, encouraging children to explain their thinking, and providing opportunities for peer conversations.

Interactive read-alouds are particularly valuable opportunities for language development. During read-alouds, teachers can pause to explain unfamiliar vocabulary, ask children to predict what might happen next, and encourage children to describe characters or events from the story.

Small group activities also provide opportunities for targeted language instruction. Teachers can introduce new vocabulary, model sentence structures, and provide individualized feedback that helps children expand their language.

By embedding these instructional practices into everyday classroom routines, teachers create learning environments where language development occurs naturally and consistently.

Key Considerations for Educations

Supporting young ELs requires consistent opportunities for language development throughout the school day. Educators can strengthen language learning by modeling vocabulary, encouraging conversation during classroom activities, and providing visual supports that connect language with meaning.

Creating welcoming classroom environments that recognize children's home languages and backgrounds helps children feel confident and motivated to participate. When educators intentionally design classroom experiences that support communication and interaction, young ELs are better able to develop the language skills necessary for future academic success.

Effective instruction for young ELs is built upon intentional interactions that occur throughout the instructional day. Language development is supported when teachers consistently model vocabulary, encourage conversation, ask meaningful questions, and provide feedback that extends children's thinking.

Positive Teacher Interactions Support

Teachers foster positive relationships by valuing children's home languages, encouraging participation, and responding to children's ideas with warmth and encouragement.

Classroom Organization

Predictable routines, engaging classroom centers, and well-planned transitions maximize opportunities for children to communicate and participate in learning.

Instructional Support

Teachers strengthen language development by introducing rich vocabulary, asking open-ended questions, expanding children's responses, connecting learning to children's experiences, and providing meaningful feedback throughout classroom interactions.

References

- Boone, B. J., Cunningham, P. D., Bachman, H. F., & Wellman, M. E. *Partnering with Families for Early Language and Literacy: Research-Based Strategies for Early Childhood Educators*.
- Breiseth, L., Robertson, K., & Lafond, S. (2011). *A Guide for Engaging ELL Families: Twenty Strategies for School Leaders*.
- Calderón, M., Slavin, R., and Sánchez, M. (2011). Effective instruction for English learners. *The Future of Children*, 21(1), 103 to 127.
- Castro, D. C., Espinosa, L. M., and Páez, M. M. (2011). Defining and measuring quality in early childhood practices that promote dual language learners' development and learning. In Reynolds, A. J., Rolnick, A., Englund, M. M., and Temple, J. A. (Eds.), *Childhood programs and practices in the first decade of life*. Cambridge University Press.
- Colorín Colorado. Strategies for teaching English language learners. WETA Public Broadcasting.
<https://www.colorincolorado.org>
- Espinosa, L. M. (2013). *PreK to third grade: Challenging common myths about dual language learners*. Foundation for Child Development.
- López, L. M., and Páez, M. M. (2018). *Teaching dual language learners: What early childhood educators need to know*. Brookes Publishing.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). *Advancing equity in early childhood education: A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children*. Washington, DC.
- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. (2015). *English learner tool kit for state and local education agencies*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition.
<https://ncela.ed.gov>

