



*Learning Today*

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# Learning Today Smart Tutor Supports English Language Learners

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## Introduction

Across the nation, the numbers of students with limited English proficiency has escalated in the last decade. In fact, the number of English Language Learners (ELLs) entering schools has doubled in the last 15 years and continues to rise. These children often struggle with the academic demands of school, especially when they do not acquire an adequate level of English proficiency. Because so much is at stake for children with limited English proficiency, emotions have intensified over how to best address the language instruction needs of this population. Many have debated the philosophical, pedagogical, and methodological principles which would best-serve the language development of ELLs. This white paper will briefly review some of the difficulties ELL students face in learning English language proficiency in schools, some instructional approaches which help ELLs, and how Learning Today's Smart Tutor program assists the English language acquisition of ELL students.

## Difficulties for English Language Learners

Students with limited English proficiency may struggle with learning English for a number of reasons. A major factor which contributes to this struggle is the extent of the differences between English and a child's native language. For example, a native Japanese speaker might have a more difficult time learning English than a native German speaker because Japanese is less closely related to English than German. As such, differences in syntax, phonology, orthography, and even

cultural cues associated with language pose significant challenges for the English language learner, especially when their primary language is significantly different from English.

However, differences in language features and structures are not the only difficulties ELL students face in schools. Because language is culturally situated, ELLs also face difficulties which arise from cultural cues embedded and expressed in language. For example, even though correct syntax might be used and vocabulary understood, what might be perceived as correct or wrong for one culture may not be perceived the same way in another language. Communication can quickly break down over differences in physical gestures, intonation, voice inflection, and social classes.

Moreover, ELLs often encounter deficit perspectives in the classroom - where teachers approach learners as individuals lacking experiences. Some may even hold the belief that ELLs are not as intelligent or skillful as their native English language counterparts. All these socially and culturally constructed challenges often affect the quality of English language instruction children receive.

### **What helps English Language Learners?**

While many debate the best way for children to acquire English language proficiency, there are a number of widely held instructional principles which support ELLs. An important principle when approaching children learning English – or other subject areas for that matter – is activating prior knowledge in an effort

to access the child's resources: their cognitive resources, personal experiences, and linguistic knowledge. While many individuals are opposed to utilizing a child's primary language during English language instruction, elucidating connections between English language structures and a child's first language (i.e., making connections between English cognates of Spanish words), this often supports English language development and helps in the prevention of a phenomenon called subtractive bilingualism: where a child's first language is lost at the expense of learning the new language (which is often not acquired proficiently before proficiency in the first language is lost).

In addition to tapping into each child's individual resources, engaging children in quality *English as a Second Language* (ESL) programs and sheltered English programs like *SDAIE* (*Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English*) also help develop the appropriate acquisition of conversational and academic English. These programs often have a number of features in common including:

- Providing opportunities for learners to practice speaking
- Frequently utilizing a child's ideas and requesting elaboration
- Providing positive and corrective feedback
- Scaffolding meaning-making with physical gestures
- Utilizing graphic organizers and manipulatives to support language development
- Opportunities to learn English phonology and vocabulary in the context of meaningful text and activities

When students are engaged in instruction which taps into their linguistic and schematic resources and appropriately integrates the features listed above, those children with limited English proficiency often retain fluency in their first language while acquiring English language proficiency. Some research indicates that children who acquire English Language proficiency and continue to develop language proficiency in their first language often do better academically than children who only know how to speak English.

### **How does Smart Tutor help English Language Learners?**

The Smart Tutor program developed by Learning Today works well with many ESL and English language development programs (ELD) to support ELL students. Smart Tutor first does this by assessing each child's instructional level and working within his/her comfort zone. Each individualized lesson builds on what students know about the English language while Smart Tutor gradually increases the difficulty of the program as children master a skill. Children work in their zone of proximal development – where the items are not so easy that they are not learning new concepts, and not too difficult that they become frustrated and shut down. Additionally, the interface and lesson environment are safe and engaging: visual and graphic support include animated virtual characters that facilitate the child through each lesson, buttons, hyperlinks, and audio/visual support to ensure that students understand the content and oral directions delivered by each character. In many lessons, characters within each lesson are

animated to use physical gestures and manipulatives to demonstrate important concepts. Quizzes at the end of every lesson assess how successful children are at learning each concept and provide immediate, positive and encouraging feedback with an opportunity for children to repeat lessons to reach mastery.

Smart Tutor's Reading curriculum offers instruction in vocabulary, phonics, phonemic awareness, sight words, and reading comprehension. Vocabulary instruction covers everyday words and subject-specific words while passages and activities cover a wide array of subject areas encountered in school (e.g., science and history). Phonics instruction, including letter sounds, word patterns and word chunks, increases rapid word recognition and allows students to make meaning from word chunks through syllabification, compound words, prefixes, and suffixes all in the context of sentences, stories, letters, and expository paragraphs. Phonemic awareness instruction covers isolation, blending, segmentation, addition, deletion, substitution, categorizing, identifying, and rhyming activities. These activities help students learn how sounds work in English words and in speech. Due to the irregular spellings of many English words, the effectiveness of phonics analysis is limited and reliance on one method of word identification can impair reading efficiency. As such, sight word instruction including words from both the Dolch and Fry word lists serve to increase reading fluency. Reading comprehension instruction includes various comprehension skills such as comparing and contrasting, distinguishing fact from opinion, prediction, and more. The use of graphic organizers, concept maps and flow charts aid in the explicit instruction of main ideas and details, story elements,

sequencing, and determining cause and effect. These comprehension activities help ELL students actively construct meaning when reading both narrative and expository text.

Smart Tutor's lesson library of over 1500 resources and activities addresses the direct English instruction needs of ELL students. While Smart Tutor does not attempt to supplant English language instruction, it works well as a supplement in classrooms that engage students in quality ESL and bilingual programs. Smart Tutor helps ELL students retain their first language, develop proficiency in English, and master key reading and math skills and concepts necessary for success in the content areas by engaging students in individualized and interactive instruction which scaffolds every lesson, differentiates each learning experience based on students strengths and weaknesses, taps into students prerequisite skills, knowledge, and experiences and appropriately integrates many of the features of successful ELL programs and sheltered English instruction programs.