

Understanding the Role of Native Language in Second-Language Acquisition

The Role of Native Language

Second-language learners, especially those at the beginning stages of proficiency, will rely on knowledge of their first language to make hypotheses about how the second language works. Teachers can use their knowledge of the first language to anticipate their students' mistakes and to create explicit lessons to address students' common errors.

Research has demonstrated that learners proceed through similar developmental sequences when learning English, regardless of their first language. However, the first language does play a role in some prominent ways. For example, learners whose native languages do not have grammatical equivalents for definite and indefinite articles (e.g., *a*, *the*, and *some*) experience considerable difficulty in learning these forms in English. Not all English learners' difficulties are predicted by their native language; even so, the more teachers know about their students' native languages, the more effectively they can identify the source of their errors and help students move past them.

It is useful for students to develop awareness of their own language (known as "metalinguistic awareness") and its relationship to English. Teachers can help develop metalinguistic awareness through lessons that explicitly discuss the similarities and differences in the structures of English and students' native languages. While it may be impossible for teachers of diverse classrooms to have a thorough knowledge of all of their students' home languages, they should be aware of the key features in students' languages that may have an impact on their English acquisition.

Strong Native Language Proficiency Leads to Stronger Second-Language Proficiency

Fluency and literacy in the native language can lead to a transfer of skills to the second language. Therefore, the more literate a student is in his/her first language, the easier it is for the student to transfer skills from the first language to the second language with the appropriate support and instruction. This is where the interdependence and relationship between the first and second language can be seen clearly. The student's level of proficiency in the native language, including oral language and literacy, metalinguistic development, and training in academic features

of language use, affects acquisition of a second language. The more academically sophisticated the student's native language knowledge and abilities, the easier it will be for that student to learn a second language.

For more information on the many aspects of native language and culture that can affect the learning process of English language learners, see the following article:

- Walqui, A. (2000). *Contextual factors in second language acquisition*. Retrieved from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0005contextual.html>