

The Home/School Connection:
Collaborating to Promote Best Practice in World Language Education
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Using the Target Language in the Second Language Classroom

Dear Parents,

Some parents are surprised when they discover that their child's early language teacher speaks only in the target language. This is often very different from the language experiences of many parents. In this edition of Home/School Connection we will focus on why early language teachers strive to use only the target language during class.

Using the Target Language

For many children the only time to hear and learn another language is in the second language class. This class may meet as little as an hour a week, making it important that the early language teacher use the limited class time available to immerse the learners in the target language. By speaking only in that language, the teacher attempts to create a language rich environment where the children learn the second language the same way they learned their first language.

The early language teacher strives to create a class where children are comfortable listening to and speaking the target language. Teachers create this environment by presenting information with simple language and vocabulary that is familiar to the learners. Directions are broken down into small steps and there is on-going teacher modeling. The use of gesturing,

pictures, and words that are similar to English help the teacher convey his/her meaning. Routines, games, songs, rhymes, crafts, stories, and partner/group work help the teacher create a class where children are comfortable learning another language without the aid of English. When the teacher uses only the target language, the learners have the opportunity to construct meanings and experience situations that will make the new language meaningful.

The Role of English

Most early language teachers use the target language 95 to 100 percent of the time. This leaves very little time for speaking English. Any time safety is involved, your child's teacher will likely choose to speak in English. There may be other times when the teacher has decided the discussion in English is so important that s/he is willing to sacrifice time in the target language to speak English.

When switching between the target language and English, many teachers use a visual cue to signal the change. This may be a sign on the wall with English on one side and the target language on the other or a nametag the teacher is wearing. A quick turn of the sign or nametag will indicate a switch to English or back to the target language.

The goal of second language instruction is not to translate into English what the children are learning in the second language. “Evidence from bilingual education shows that students in classes in which the languages are kept separate end up with much greater language proficiency than those in classes that do not maintain such careful separation. Mixing languages, and translating from one language to the other, can cause confusion and tends to be counterproductive for early language learners” (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004, p. 34).

Parents’ Role

To encourage your child’s second language learning and help him/her feel more comfortable in the second language class you can:

- remind your child that their understanding of the language will improve throughout the year.
- use the tools the teacher provides. This may include a newsletter with vocabulary to learn and practice with your child. By learning the language, you send the message

that second language learning is worthwhile.

- enhance your child’s excitement about speaking the second language by looking for opportunities to use the language outside of class.
- remind your child that it is very important to watch the teacher as they talk. Watching will help your child pick up the visual cues the teacher is providing that aid in comprehension.

Conclusion

Because the time to learn a second language is often very limited, it is important that the early language teacher create a language rich environment that does not use English. Parents can help maximize the language class time by supporting their child’s language learning outside of class. This combined effort will help children be successful in today’s second language class.

Curtain, H. & Dahlberg, C.A. (2004). *Languages and Children: Making the Match*. Boston: Pearson.

NNELL can assist teachers, parents and administrators with learning and advocacy efforts. Contact your State Representative today. We would love to hear from you!

The Home/School Connection flier is full of tips and resources that can be found at www.nnell.org. Teachers may reproduce it and send it home in their students’ backpacks. Send suggestions/comments to Tammy Dann, Political Action and Advocacy Chair: trdann@juno.com