

English Language Learners: Questions and Concerns

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Q1: Should we speak to a child using their mother tongue when we are trying to teach them a second language?

This question always sparks a debate amongst those who believe the answer is yes and those who believe the answer is no. It is not my intention to convince you otherwise. But my experience has led me to believe...it depends. When working with preschool children, who arrive in our classrooms at the very early phases of second language development, they are completely dependent on their mother tongue. They have no English vocabulary or comprehension. The transition into Kindergarten can be a scary time for most children, imagine the stress a child can feel when they don't understand the language or feel that they cannot be understood. My goal is to first help those children, feel secure within their learning environment. Secondly, I want to develop a personal relationship with the children and finally, I want them to learn English as quickly as possible.

When young children are completely dependent on their mother tongue, they have no second language vocabulary or comprehension. Some research suggests that using the child's mother tongue as a hook to anchor the second language can be effective in helping young children develop vocabulary and comprehension. (Hall, 2002; Sousa, 2011).

The reason for this can be explained through Barcroft's research (2002). He suggests that when the mother tongue is used to explain the meaning of a word, the brain uses up less energy trying to make sense of the word and can channel its energy focusing on the word itself. (Sousa, 2011).

For instance, I may ask a child in English: go get your glue...glue. When it is obvious that they do not understand what I am saying, I will repeat in French: *Va chercher ta colle*. I may even further explain to the child that: *colle en anglais c'est glue*.

However, once children are beginning to use simple words and/or formulaic phrases, there is less need to use the mother tongue. And by this point in time, the children are secure in their learning environment and a trusting student-teacher relationship has been established.