

## Communication, Pattern, and Variability

### A Second Language Literacy Framework for Mainstream Teachers (Part A)

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When teachers promote literacy development, they are actually and ultimately promoting students' academic development. While all teachers are not literacy teachers per se, all teachers do play a central role in supporting literacy development within their particular disciplines. In fact, any time a teacher puts a text in front of students to read or to produce, the teacher is responsible for supporting students' comprehension and performance as needed. Although more complex, the same teacher responsibility extends to second language (SL) learners who are mainstreamed into regular, often English-only, classrooms. One of the greatest challenges for ESOL professionals is to provide elementary and secondary educators with the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to promote literacy development among their SL learners.

This article provides mainstream educators with a framework for attending to SL literacy development in the regular classroom. This framework has two parts. First, it asks teachers to consider three SL literacy concepts: Communication, Pattern, and Variability. Each concept is defined by two accompanying principles, which in turn are defined and described in terms of examples of student work and teacher work. Second, the framework delineates five curriculum guidelines that help mainstream educators create a sound SL literacy focus in their classes. This two-part framework, taken as a whole, summarizes what every content-area teacher needs to know and do to use SL literacy development to support content learning.

### Concept 1: Communication

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are important literacy skills, but communication is the *raison d'être* of their existence. Beyond a threshold level of basic skill-building, literacy is about being able to comprehend, think, and communicate about information, ideas, and feelings. For SL students, learning to communicate in a new language requires access to rich input (listening/reading) and multiple and varied opportunities for interaction (speaking/writing). The principles of Input and Interaction define the concept of Communication. Table 1 defines and gives examples of what students and teachers can do to build literacy skills for communication purposes.

#### Principle 1: Input

When teachers attend to input in their instruction, they focus on the oral and written texts that students are exposed to in the process of instruction. For such input to be of use to a SL learner, it must be only slightly beyond the learner's current language abilities (Krashen, 1982) or within the learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

For the principle of input, student work is to read a lot—for aesthetics, pleasure, exploration, as well as for information, learning, and reasoning—and to write a lot—for entertaining, sharing, explaining, as well as for arguing, persuading, and reporting. As students develop their general language skills and academic vocabulary, their ability to process input becomes more efficient, automatic, and fluent.

Correspondingly, the most important teacher work is to help learners to read, analyze, discuss, and write a lot. This is done by identifying and using appropriate expository and narrative texts, by motivating learners to want to read and write, and by scaffolding their reading (e.g., previewing texts, using headings, pictures) of accessible texts with grade-appropriate content.

## Principle 2: Interaction

In addition to input, learners must also have multiple and varied opportunities for interaction. When SL learners work to make themselves comprehensible to another person in the process of communicating (i.e., produce pushed output), language acquisition is fostered (Swain, 1995). Authentic interaction for formal and informal purposes gets SL learners to use literacy skills to communicate and connect texts to themselves, to others, and to the world. Such student work develops students' cognitive flexibility.

Teacher work, therefore, is creating daily opportunities for authentic communication. When teachers establish a literate environment where reading, writing, collaborating, and discussing are a valued part of everyday learning, then SL learners develop important literacy skills, including attending to audience, purpose, voice, organization, idea development, fluency, word choice, and mechanics.

In summary, the concept of communication asks teachers to analyze the types of input their SL learners are exposed to, what opportunities for interaction are available to students, and how they can scaffold student engagement with such input and interaction. What the teacher does to attend to input and interaction are pedagogical decisions fully in the teacher's immediate control and are based in teacher assessment of students' developmental needs.

**Table 1**

*The Concept of Communication*

	Student Work	Teacher Work
	Develop flexibility in cognitive/academic skills	Plan for variety in pedagogy
<b>Principle 1: Input</b>  Second language acquisition requires access to comprehensible input; that is, written and oral input that is slightly beyond a learner's current ability level for language acquisition to take place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activate and develop language and literacy skills and general, cultural, and content knowledge</li> <li>• Read frequently from various texts</li> <li>• Understand and use language forms, meanings, and cueing systems</li> <li>• Learn academic and social language and vocabulary</li> <li>• Develop flexible comprehension strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize and build on students' language and literacy skills and general, cultural, and content knowledge while avoiding oversimplification</li> <li>• Promote frequent reading to, with, and by students</li> <li>• Respond to student development and interests in text selections</li> <li>• Scaffold tasks and texts to build understanding of language forms, meanings, and cueing systems</li> <li>• Build metalinguistic awareness</li> </ul>

- Teach needed language and vocabulary
- Model and teach comprehension strategies

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### Principle 2: Interaction

Second language acquisition requires interaction. Learners develop greater language proficiency through interaction with other people for authentic purposes when they communicate to meet personal, social, academic goals and needs in a sociocultural reality.

- Use literacy skills to communicate ideas
  - Connect texts to self, others, and the world
  - Use informal and formal opportunities to read and write
  - Read from the writer's perspective and write from the reader's perspective
  - Understand and use the writing process
  - Attend to audience, purpose, voice, organization, idea development, fluency, word choice, and mechanics in writing
  - Scaffold frequent reading and writing in various genres to communicate ideas
  - Engage students in discussing texts and the reading and writing processes
  - Promote and articulate connections to texts
  - Develop students' attention to audience, purpose, voice, organization, idea development, fluency, word choice, and mechanics in writing
  - Involve parents in reading and writing to and with their child in their language(s)
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*Note.* Adapted with permission from Teemant, A., Graham, C. R., & Pinnegar, S. (2003). Developing second language literacy: Instructional guide (p. 5:17). Provo, UT: Brigham Young University.

## Concept 2: Pattern

Much of the actual process of oral language acquisition occurs intuitively and below the learner's level of conscious control. Conversational English develops rather rapidly in SL learners and largely as a result of direct and multiple interactions with peers and teachers in rich social contexts (Cummins, 2000).

On the other hand, awareness of language as a code is at the very core of literacy development. Few people learn to read and write without explicit instruction in the nature of the code. Fluent reading and writing require simultaneous use of phonemic awareness, knowledge of sound-symbol relationships, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, cultural understanding, and relevant world knowledge. These sub-skills, as well as the ability to organize, coordinate, and understand audience and purpose, develop over time with explicit instruction.

The concept of pattern asks mainstream teachers across all grade levels to understand the general path to literacy and how that path may vary for SL learners. Pattern is defined by two principles: 1) Stages of Development and 2) Errors and Feedback. Table 2 defines these principles and describes examples of student work and teacher work in furthering literacy development.

## Principle 1: Stages of Development

In practical terms for the content-area teacher, there are two major stages of reading development: learning to read and reading to learn. For SL learners, the learning-to-read stage begins when the student starts developing skills and notions

of print in a second language. The shift to the reading-to-learn stage occurs when pre-reading efforts in schema building and vocabulary development position learners to comprehend the particular text chosen for them. The ultimate developmental goal is to support SL readers and writers in becoming active, flexible, selective, cognitively complex, and self-monitoring as well as capable of making critical judgments about what they read and write.

For SL learners, their work varies greatly depending on the native language and SL skills they already possess. Generally, they will need to develop phonemic awareness in the new language, increase vocabulary size, comprehend and produce increasingly complex texts in multiple genres, and transfer whatever native language literacy skills they have to the task of becoming a strategic and critical reader and writer of the new language. Students will accomplish these tasks if teachers have explicitly planned for and expected students to participate in a variety of language and literacy tasks.

Teacher work in promoting literacy development is to attend more carefully to selection of texts and to provide strategic support for text comprehension. To do this effectively, teachers must assess the cognitive, social, affective, and linguistic factors that may influence students' paths of development. For example bilingual students may be fully literate, orally fluent, or only receptively fluent in their native language; nevertheless, they approach English literacy with two language systems in their minds. Both language systems are activated each time they read or write. Students may have unpredictable gaps in their knowledge of vocabulary, culture, or the world across those languages. Second, a bilingual student may begin the stage of learning to read English as a preschooler, as a seventh-grader, or as an adult, which is not typical of our monolingual students. So the bilingual's timetable for English literacy development may be different when compared to what a teacher expects a monolingual to know and do at particular ages or grades.

Whether the assessment of SL learners is done by the teacher or a literacy specialist, mainstream teachers need access to the following types of information: 1) level of native language literacy; 2) formal educational background; 3) student understanding of text structures; 4) student interests and motivations; 5) level of phonemic awareness in SL; 6) reading level in the SL; and 7) reading level of content-area texts. This assessment information allows teachers to individualize learning goals and instruction and advocate for appropriate support.

## **Principle 2: Errors and Feedback**

Literacy development is patterned but not a linear process. As students learn more vocabulary, comprehend more, become more fluent, automatic, and efficient in their reading and writing, they are constantly restructuring their knowledge of English. Their progress is revealed in right word and grammar choices as well as wrong word and grammar choices. For the student, correcting low-level grammatical errors is not simply a matter of knowing the grammar rule underlying the error; instead, it is a matter of incorporating the correct grammatical pattern into the learner's language system. Students, as well as teachers, need to recognize and monitor which aspects of language are currently within the learner's potential to learn, correct, or master and which language aspects are currently impervious to direct instruction.

To make progress in literacy development, student work is to accept challenging assignments and seek assistance when needed. Learning strategies for monitoring and repairing misunderstandings and accepting and responding to feedback are essential for improving the quality of their assignments. Taking individual responsibility for setting learning goals and assessing progress is also key.

Teacher work is to respond to errors with appropriate feedback, learning opportunities, or services. If a second language learner lacks phonemic awareness and notions of print, a teacher should make certain that the student is placed in a developmental reading program. However, if students are simply reading below grade level, teachers should be prepared to provide other materials in addition to the grade-level text to support content learning. For example simplified texts with grade-level content, supportive texts in the native language, and visual representations (such as video, photography, and picture books) could all be useful supplements. Feedback should also be timely, meaningful, encouraging, focused on meaning first, and specific so that students can improve the quality of their products and performances.

A powerful strategy for supporting SL learners' fluency and accuracy with written language is the use of the writing process: prewrite, compose, rewrite, edit. Even when learners are unable to write error-free drafts during the composing process, editing the text allows them to access everything they know about grammar, vocabulary, and usage without also attending to composing text. The writing process also allows SL learners to develop social skills in getting and using feedback from peers. Even though this process takes longer, it enables students to produce better final drafts.

In summary, when teachers can appropriately interpret the individual learner against the typical pattern of literacy development, they are better positioned to provide appropriate feedback and make individual and curricular responses to student needs. Once teachers have assessed who their learners are and where they are in their development, teachers are prepared to appropriately plan instruction, using a variety of input and interaction opportunities as described through the concept of communication.

**Table 2**

*The Concept of Pattern*

	<b>Student Work</b>	<b>Teacher Work</b>
	Develop flexibility in language and literacy skills	Plan for variety in language and literacy skills
<b>Principle 1: Stages of Development</b>  Second language acquisition is a patterned and gradual process of development characterized by specific stages, orders, and sequences of development that predict what aspects of language are learned earlier than other aspects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop understanding of text structures</li> <li>• Discriminate between L1 and L2 sounds</li> <li>• Use L1 oral language and metalinguistic knowledge to develop L2 language and literacy</li> <li>• Comprehend and produce increasingly complex texts in multiple genres</li> <li>• Increase vocabulary complexity and flexibility</li> <li>• Become a strategic and critical reader/writer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess understanding of text structures</li> <li>• Assess phonemic awareness</li> <li>• Assess L1 and L2 proficiencies to individualize learning goals and instruction</li> <li>• Assess students' interests and motivations</li> <li>• Evaluate texts and \modify as appropriate</li> <li>• Identify cognitive, linguistic, and social factors affecting literacy development</li> <li>• Model and teach strategic and critical literacy</li> </ul>
<b>Principle 2: Errors and Feedback</b>  Second language acquisition is a patterned but nonlinear process. As new features of language are learned the learner's internal system is restructured, sometimes causing errors in production that look like backsliding or reveal a learner's testing of hypotheses. Errors and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept challenging tasks and seek assistance when needed</li> <li>• Accept and respond to feedback on errors</li> <li>• Monitor comprehension and repair misunderstandings</li> <li>• Focus on improving quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor students' reading fluency, word recognition, and comprehension</li> <li>• Teach strategies for self-monitoring comprehension and repairing misunderstandings</li> <li>• Provide timely, meaningful, and encouraging feedback matched to</li> </ul>

feedback are essential to this learning process.

- Set learning goals and develop skill in self-assessment
- Collaborate with others in literacy production and assessing performance quality

current development

- Provide feedback focused on meaning and then form
- Differentiate between text-based and knowledge-based misunderstandings
- Provide direct and specific feedback with guidance for improving quality
- Encourage revisions and quality improvements
- Provide assessment rubrics to improve performance quality and encourage and guide self-assessment

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## Concept 3: Variability

There is considerable individual variation in language and literacy development. These differences result from a number of individual variables, such as learner age, attitude, motivation, aptitude, preferred learning styles, as well as such personality variables as self-esteem, extroversion, tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to take risks, and propensity toward anxiety. It also includes variables particular to the environment in which SL students live and learn, such as societal, home, and classroom attitudes, support, and opportunities.

The concept of variability—or attending to the individual differences among learners—in literacy development is defined by two principles: 1) Types of Proficiencies and 2) Types of Performances. These principles focus on what students should know (competencies) and what they should be able to do (performances) as literate users of a new language. Although proficiency and performance are closely related, it is important to remember that proficiency always precedes performance. Table 3 defines these principles and describes examples of student work and teacher work related to these principles.

### Principle 1: Types of Proficiencies

Developing proficiency in SL students means developing skills to use language for a variety of purposes, in a variety of settings, and with a variety of people. Leading students to native-like literacy means moving beyond language typical of oral, conversational interaction to comprehending nuanced, specialized, and domain-specific vocabulary and text typical of academic language use.

Student work in developing a full range of literacy skills includes developing motivation, metacognitive awareness, and a variety of strategies for learning to use both formal and informal registers of language. It means recognizing how texts and text structures vary across cultures, various academic domains, and genres. Students must learn that different genres of written material are read for different purposes and that they must adjust strategies and fluency rates appropriately. Whenever possible students need to recognize when and how native language literacy skills can be used to further SL literacy skills. They must also cultivate a willingness to participate, motivate themselves to do the work of the class, achieve intended outcomes, and become ever more autonomous learners.

The most important teacher work is to analyze curriculum requirements to identify what reading and writing skills are necessary to successfully perform required learning tasks. This analysis leads to articulation of language and literacy learning goals specific to the discipline. This could include attending to formality and register, teaching text structures, conventions, and cultural expectations tied to academic texts or modeling effective literacy strategies for various purposes. Based on assessment of student willingness, motivation, and autonomy, teachers develop or adapt instruction to ensure greater success in meeting stated content and literacy goals.

## Principle 2: Types of Performances

For SL learners, learning is further solidified when they are asked to use the knowledge they have. Students use language and literacy skills differently, with different levels of proficiency, when the context, tasks, or language functions (e.g., complimenting, persuading, etc.) change. For example, a student may be more comfortable reading a persuasive essay than writing one or reading science rather than mathematics texts. Students benefit from being taught and encouraged to use appropriate forms of English discourse for stories, essays, reports, and research papers. The goal is to increase students' fluency and accuracy by asking them to use language or perform under different and varied conditions.

Student work for this principle focuses on reading and producing increasingly complex texts across disciplines, genres, contexts, tasks, and language functions with accuracy and fluency. Students must learn to appropriately adjust strategies and fluency rates to the task and increase their attention to quality.

Teacher work is to know when students need assistance and what students can do independently. In reading this means knowing when to provide alternative texts and when to provide necessary support in negotiating the original text. Teachers ought to create a community of readers and writers who engage in reading and writing often for many purposes and in genres relevant to the particular discipline. Teachers also plan for essential academic vocabulary to recur repeatedly in readings and meaningful classroom interactions.

In summary, when teachers adjust their curriculum to meet the needs of individual learners and hold learners to high expectations, they are supporting students to develop the types of proficiencies and performances needed for academic success. To succeed academically, SL students need more not less access to challenging texts, more not fewer opportunities for interaction, more not less flexibility, and more varied not less varied strategies. Teachers who regularly ask students to learn and then use literacy skills also promote content learning.

**Table 3**

*The Concept of Variability*

	Student Work	Teacher Work
	Develop flexibility in social/affective skills	Plan for variety in attending to individual differences
<b>Principle 1: Types of Proficiencies</b>		
Second language acquisition results in various levels of skill or proficiency with which a person can use language for a specific purpose, in a specific cultural or academic setting, with various individuals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop metacognitive awareness of strengths and weaknesses in language use</li> <li>• Differentiate between formal and informal language (registers)</li> <li>• Understand genres with a cross-cultural view</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyze curriculum requirements to identify language learning goals</li> <li>• Teach students to differentiate between formal and informal language (registers)</li> <li>• Teach structures and conventions of genres from a cross-cultural view</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize social and cultural appropriateness</li> <li>• Gain increasing depth and breadth in social and academic vocabulary</li> <li>• Develop willingness, motivation, and autonomy</li> <li>• Adjust strategies and fluency rates to tasks</li> <li>• Make connections between L1 and L2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model and teach social and cultural appropriateness</li> <li>• Assess and encourage willingness, motivation, and autonomy</li> <li>• Model and teach strategy and fluency rate adjustments appropriate to particular tasks</li> <li>• Encourage connections between L1 and L2</li> </ul>
<p><b>Principle 2: Types of Performances</b></p> <p>Second language acquisition is marked by variability in performance as well as patterns because the very context, tasks, or language function (e.g., complimenting, requesting help) can impact the learner's ability to produce language with fluency and accuracy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate quality language use across content, context, task, and language function</li> <li>• Demonstrate increasing depth and breadth in social and academic vocabulary</li> <li>• Read and write with increasing quality in various genres</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess unassisted and assisted performances (ZPD)</li> <li>• Adjust instruction to match students' ZPDs</li> <li>• Provide varied opportunities for language use across content, context, task, and language function</li> <li>• Provide varied opportunities for encountering and using social and academic vocabulary</li> <li>• Provide varied opportunities for reading and writing in genres relevant to particular content</li> <li>• Hold students accountable for learning with understanding</li> </ul>

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This part of the Second Language Literacy Framework for Mainstream Teachers focuses on three concepts—Communication, Pattern, and Variability—and six accompanying principles: Input, Interaction, Stages of Development, Errors and Feedback, Types of Proficiencies, and Types of Performances. Teachers who consider their pedagogical practices against these SL concepts and principles improve their attention to literacy development.

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