

Overview

The Importance of Language

Learning is a complex process of discovery, collaboration, and inquiry facilitated by language. Composed of interrelated and rule-governed symbol systems, language is a social and uniquely human way of representing, exploring, and communicating meaning. As well as being a defining feature of culture, language is an unmistakable mark of personal identity, and is essential for forming interpersonal relationships, understanding social situations, extending experience, and reflecting on thought and action. Language is the primary basis of all communication and the primary instrument of thought.

Language learning is an active process that begins at birth and continues throughout life. In their early years, children develop language informally. Long before they understand explicit language rules and conventions, they reproduce and use language for a variety of purposes. Later, language learning occurs in specific contexts for specific purposes such as learning about a particular topic, participating in the community, and pursuing work and leisure activities.

Language development is a continuous and often recursive process. Students enhance language by using what they have previously learned in new, more complex contexts and with increasing sophistication. They reflect on and use what they have learned to extend and enhance their learning and cognitive development. By reflecting on their learning and by incorporating new language structures into their repertoire and using them in a variety of contexts, students develop language fluency and proficiency.

Underlying Beliefs about Language Learning

The ELA Framework is based on the following understanding about language learning:

- All students can be successful learners.
- Language learning is a responsibility shared by students, parents and guardians, educators, and the community. Together they provide environments where students learn language functions, skills, and strategies to reach personal, social, and academic goals.
- Language learning is the responsibility of all educators across the curriculum. Subject area teachers teach specialized language and text forms within the context of their disciplines.
- English language arts teachers focus on language appreciation and how language works. They help students to develop and apply strategies for anticipating, comprehending, composing, and responding to a variety of texts (including books), and situations.
- The development of communication skills is essential to building common goals, appreciating linguistic and cultural diversity, and strengthening a sense of community.

Recent Developments in Understanding Language Learning

The ELA Framework reflects an expanded understanding of how students develop language. The Framework

- incorporates viewing and representing as language arts, in addition to listening, speaking, reading, and writing
- reflects and stresses the integrated nature of the six language arts: listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing

- acknowledges the important and unique nature of early literacy, a concept recognizing that children begin to develop literacy long before they enter school and that their experiences continue to influence language learning
- incorporates research on “best teaching practices,” which provides guidance to educators as they facilitate learning
- promotes the importance of inquiry and critical thinking in the development of reflective learners
- emphasizes that metacognition (self-awareness of one’s own thinking and learning) enables learners to plan, monitor progress, and evaluate personal learning
- promotes active, resource-based learning that draws on a broad range of human, technological, and other resources from within and beyond the school
- promotes “the gradual release of responsibility” (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983) from the teacher to the learner, especially in interactive settings
- reflects an understanding of the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978), a concept that encourages interactions between the teacher and learner, allowing the learner to complete difficult tasks with support before undertaking them independently
- emphasizes the impact of technological advances on teaching and language learning
- recognizes the impact of media on students in extending learning within and beyond the traditional boundaries of school

Language Learning and the Learning Environment

The classroom learning environment influences the effectiveness of instructional strategies and learning experiences. Schools can create optimal conditions for language development at all levels by ensuring that

- students have opportunities to be immersed in language and language-based activities
- students use language for authentic, real-life purposes, and have many opportunities to use a variety of language forms for personal, social, and academic needs
- students assume increasing responsibility for their own learning
- all students are expected to learn to communicate
- risk taking and approximations are encouraged as steps in the language learning process
- learners receive and provide ongoing feedback and reflect on their growth in language learning

Language Learning Processes, Skills, and Strategies

Competence in a variety of observable and measurable skills, strategies, and interactive processes fosters student learning. The classroom provides a continuum of learning experiences ranging from highly structured, concrete, and supported activities to open, abstract, and complex activities. Through these experiences, students engage in learning tasks and interact effectively with others in a variety of learning environments. (Refer to Appendix A: Supporting Development of Interactive Processes.)

Different learning tasks require learners to use particular combinations of skills and strategies. Students who understand their own mental processes and the nature, purpose, and context of learning tasks select and apply appropriate skills and strategies. Students’ development of metacognition—the awareness and knowledge of their own mental processes—enables them to monitor, regulate, and direct these processes to achieve particular learning goals.

For example, a student may consciously learn the strategy of reading to the end of the sentence using context clues to identify unfamiliar words. With sufficient instruction and practice, this strategy becomes a skill that the student uses automatically; it becomes an unconscious mental process. However, the skill may also continue to be used as a strategy. When experiencing difficulty comprehending a passage, a student may review or consider his or her repertoire of skills, consciously select the skill of reading to the end of the sentence using context clues, and use it as a strategy for making meaning of a particular passage. In this way a strategy becomes a skill, and a skill is used as a strategy. (Refer to Appendix B: The Dynamic Relationship Between Learning Skills and Strategies.)

The English Language Arts

The English language arts enable each student to understand and appreciate language. Language proficiency generates confidence and competence in communicating in a variety of situations, as well as facilitating personal satisfaction and learning.

Students become confident and competent users of all six language arts through many opportunities to listen, speak, read, write, view, and represent in a variety of combinations and relevant contexts using a variety of texts. In the ELA Framework, the term “texts” refers to the great variety of communication. (Refer to Appendix C: Forms and Genres.) There are oral, visual, and written texts, and various combinations of these. For example, media texts and technological texts frequently include oral, written, and visual components simultaneously. As listeners, speakers, readers, writers, viewers, and representers, students are actively involved in making meaning. All the language arts are interrelated and interdependent.

Listening and Speaking

Oral language* is the primary foundation of literacy. Through listening and speaking, people communicate thoughts, feelings, experiences, information, and opinions, and learn to understand themselves and others. Oral language carries a community’s stories, values, and beliefs.

Listening and speaking enable students to explore ideas and concepts as well as to understand and organize their experiences and knowledge. They use oral language to learn, identify, and solve problems and reach goals. To become discerning, lifelong learners, students at all grades need to develop fluency and confidence in their oral language abilities. They benefit from many opportunities to listen and speak both informally and formally for a variety of purposes.

Oral texts are used in a wide range of situations, casual and formal, immediate and distant. These texts are often communicated through electronic media and technology.

Speakers and listeners use oral texts for a variety of purposes, ranging from functional to aesthetic. They create and respond to a variety of functional and aesthetic texts, obtain and communicate information, and build relationships with others.

Reading and Writing

Written language is a powerful means of communicating and learning. Reading and writing enable students to extend their knowledge and use of language, increase their understanding of themselves and others, and experience enjoyment and personal satisfaction.

* Oral language and listening and speaking are defined in their broadest sense to include signing systems (such as American Sign Language, Signing Exact English, and Bliss Symbols) for communication.

Reading and writing provide students with means of accessing ideas, views, and experiences. By using effective reading strategies with materials (including books) at appropriate instructional levels, students construct meaning and develop thoughtful and critical interpretations of a variety of texts (including books). Writing enables students to explore, shape, and clarify their thoughts, and to communicate them to others. By using reading and writing strategies, they discover and refine ideas.

Written texts, those generated by students and others, serve a variety of purposes ranging from informational to aesthetic. Students read literary and informational texts for pleasure and knowledge. They write texts to communicate ideas clearly, artistically, and with integrity. They come to appreciate the ways in which literary language affects imagination and conveys human experiences. Students write a variety of texts to make sense of and convey information, to express their own and others' experiences, and to provide enjoyment for themselves and others. Both as writers and readers, students need to experience a wide range of texts and use them for a variety of purposes.

Viewing and Representing

Visual language is an integral part of contemporary life. Viewing and representing allow students to understand the ways in which images and language may be used to convey ideas, values, and beliefs.

Representing enables students to communicate their ideas visually through a variety of media, including charts, posters, diagrams, scribbles, photographs, video presentations, visual art, drama, and mime. Viewing enables students to acquire information and to appreciate ideas and experiences visually conveyed by others.

Visual texts, like their auditory and print counterparts, have a variety of purposes and audiences and occur in a wide range of contexts. They are often communicated through technology. Students need opportunities to create and respond to a range of visual texts. They need to recognize, analyze, and respond to ways in which media texts reconstruct reality and influence their perceptions of themselves and others.

Balanced Instruction in English Language Arts

Balanced instruction in the English language arts is facilitated through

- consistent and systematic efforts to incorporate a range of “best teaching practices”
- instruction and practice in the use of skills and strategies to enhance comprehension and develop the use of all cueing systems (semantic, syntactic, graphophonic, and textual cues) to create meaning
- full integration of the six language arts to encourage language use for a variety of purposes and audiences in a variety of contexts to achieve student learning outcomes
- ongoing use of a variety of oral, literary, and media texts to develop fluency and flexibility in learners
- direct and indirect teaching to reflect and address the varying needs of students
- comprehensive assessment practices that evaluate both processes and products and include informal and formal measures such as performance assessment, portfolio assessment, observation, testing, peer monitoring, and self-evaluation
- application of standards of performance to assist students in developing appropriate levels of language development