



What's "Normal" for English Learners (EL)

Interference

EL children may manifest interference or transfer from their first language (L1) to English (L2). This means that a child may make an English error due to the direct influence of an L1 structure. For example, in Spanish, “esta casa es más grande” means “this house is bigger.” However, a literal translation would be “this house is more bigger.” A Spanish-speaking child who said “this house is more bigger” would be manifesting transfer from Spanish to English. This is a normal phenomenon—a sign of a language difference, not a language disorder.

Silent Period

Children may also manifest a common second-language acquisition phenomenon called the silent period. When children are first exposed to a second language, frequently they focus on listening and comprehension. These children are often very quiet, speaking little as they focus on understanding the new language—much, in fact, as adults do when traveling in foreign countries. The younger the child, the longer the silent period tends to last. Older children may remain in the silent period for a few weeks or a few months, whereas preschoolers may be relatively silent for a year or more.

Codeswitching

Many children who are ELs also engage in a behavior known as codeswitching. This involves changing languages over phrases or sentences. For example, a Spanish speaker might say, “Me gustaría manejar, I’ll take the car!” (“I’d like to drive, I’ll take the car”). Or, a Filipino speaker might say, “With my teacher, I have *utang ng loob* [debt of gratitude] because she has been so good to me.” Again, this is a normal phenomenon engaged in by many fluent bilingual speakers worldwide.

Language Loss

Some children who are ELs undergo the phenomenon of language loss. As they learn English, they lose skills and fluency in L1 if their L1 is not reinforced and maintained. This is called subtractive bilingualism, and it can be cognitively and linguistically very detrimental to children’s learning and to their family lives (especially if the parents speak only the L1 and no English). Ideally, children should experience additive bilingualism, where they learn English while their first language and culture are maintained and reinforced.