

Building fluency in primary ELLs

Kathleen Kampa and **Charles Vilina** describe how they help children develop language skills through inquiry-based learning and 21st century skills.

In our conversations with teachers of primary ELLs (English Language Learners), we find that many of us share the same successes and challenges in the classroom. On the positive side, children are enthusiastic and natural learners. They enjoy music, movement, games, and hands-on activities. Their young minds quickly absorb new language. On the negative side, teachers are often burdened with too little time, too many students in each class, and high-paced curriculums that emphasize vocabulary and grammar – both carefully tested and measured – at the expense of real opportunities for communication.

As a result, too many primary ELLs share a common deficit. Despite passing the required standards, many lack the fluency to carry on a meaningful conversation. English continues to be perceived as an academic subject, not a lifelong skill. Students focus on strategies for passing tests, not on strategies for productive communication.

Fortunately, a number of current trends in public and private education offer the opportunity to break this impasse and provide real change. These trends have emerged as leading educators consider what students need to be successful in our new global information age. We'd

like to focus on two areas that have the potential to create a sea change in primary ELL education: inquiry-based learning and the development of 21st century skills.

Inquiry-based learning

The benefits of inquiry-based learning have been well established. The global IB Primary Years Program (PYP) has demonstrated great success with this methodology. In short, inquiry-based learning views students as 'inquirers' who develop lifelong learning skills. Students are encouraged to *wonder* about the world around them, which motivates



them to seek, discover and learn. In the ELL classroom, inquiry-based learning creates real opportunities for students to produce language and build fluency. Students normally begin the inquiry process by exploring a ‘big question’. This question should be open-ended, offering many possible answers. Big questions should also come from a broad range of curricular subjects, each with its own opportunities for new vocabulary, grammar and literacy development. Examples of big questions from our new inquiry-based ELT primary series *Oxford Discover* include:

Why do people move to new places?
Where are we in the universe?
How do our bodies work?
Why do we need plants?

Consider the question, ‘Why do we need plants?’. Students begin the inquiry process by focusing on the world of plants. Visual support such as videos and photographs about plants can encourage this process. Students then go on to discuss their ‘prior knowledge’ – what they already know about plants. This is normally done with students working in pairs or small groups.

If young learners have limited vocabulary, they can draw pictures of fruits or vegetables that they may enjoy eating. Students with higher abilities can label these pictures, write short phrases and eventually write whole sentences to communicate what they know. As students draw or write, they discuss their personal experiences with their partners or group members. Some students may need to use their native language to explain their knowledge in greater detail, while the teacher moves around the room and offers words and phrases in English to support them.

As students are invited to talk to each other about what they know, a change takes place in the classroom. Students are no longer passive learners, but active participants. Because they are invited to talk about their personal opinions and experiences, there is a strong motivation to communicate. As they begin this process by speaking

directly to each other, they are able to practise words and phrases together. Eventually, when the teacher invites classmates to share what they have discussed, they are more confident about what they can say.

After a topic is introduced and prior knowledge is ‘activated’ among the students, an effective progression for developing productive speaking in the classroom often follows this pattern:

1. Students write or draw individually.
2. Students discuss in pairs.
3. Students discuss in small groups of three or four.
4. Teacher and students discuss as a ‘whole class’.

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As students explore what they know, the teacher is able to assess the existing level of vocabulary and grammar the students are able to use effectively within the topic.

Next, students are invited to ask questions, or ‘wonder’ about the topic. The teacher can encourage this by wondering out loud with her or his own questions, such as, ‘What plants from the ocean do people eat?’. As the teacher models curiosity, the students begin to ask their own questions. Again, this can be done individually, then

shared in pairs, then in small groups, then with the entire class.

Later, as students discover new knowledge and build understanding through non-fictional and fictional content, they should be given additional vocabulary and grammar support along the way. Inquiry-based learning gives students an opportunity to incorporate these new English words and structures into productive speech and writing at the earliest opportunity. Finally, as students discover more about the topic, they discuss what they have learned, using the new language in meaningful and productive ways.

The development of 21st century skills

- critical thinking
- creativity
- collaboration
- communication

Much has been written about 21st century skills. Many educators believe it is essential for students to develop these skills in order to achieve success in our rapidly changing world. Let’s look at each skill separately, and explore how language fluency can be achieved through its development.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking requires students to move beyond simple comprehension and memorization, and to ‘think deeply’ about what is being taught. Students of English may use critical thinking to explore new information in a variety of ways, including the following:

1. connecting the information to the student’s prior knowledge and experience
2. prioritizing the information in order of importance or relevance
3. classifying and categorizing the information
4. comparing and contrasting the information to determine relationships
5. determining facts from opinions
6. making inferences and predictions

Let's begin with basic vocabulary acquisition. Students first need a general understanding of how a word is formed, what it means and how it is used. Comprehension is encouraged through illustrations or in the context of a sentence. Students use their receptive skills of listening and reading to build their vocabulary in this way. However, the leap to productive use of these new words often takes much more time and effort.

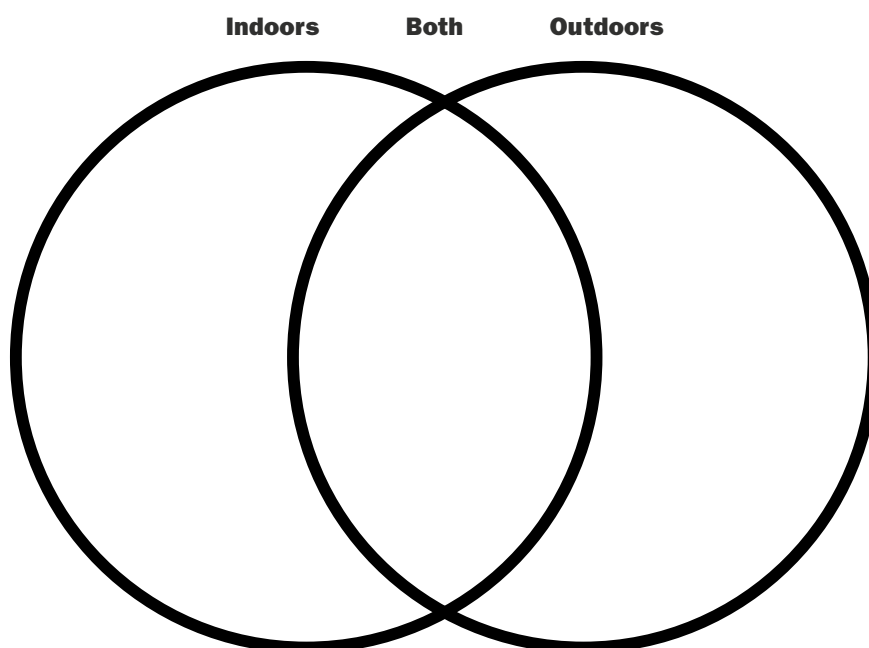
One way to speed up the transition from receptive to productive English is to employ some of the critical thinking activities listed on the previous page. Using an example from a unit from *Oxford Discover (Student Book 3)*, the following lexical set focuses on activities associated with moving to a new location, in this case to a colder climate.

- *packing*
- *moving*
- *meeting neighbors*
- *shopping*
- *ice skating*
- *fishing*
- *raking leaves*
- *dancing*
- *throwing snowballs*
- *sledding*

These activities are not difficult for students to comprehend. In many cases they have experienced them, or at least observed them through books or films. Learning the English terms for these activities is a relatively simple next step. However, to encourage students to actually talk about these activities, we created a compare and contrast activity using a Venn diagram (see above).

Students can begin this activity by working alone, where they have to rely on their own personal experience and knowledge to complete the diagram. They are then asked to share and discuss their choices with a partner. This can

Where do you usually do the above activities?



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then move on to a small group activity, where 3–4 students discuss their choices.

Are students speaking English throughout this entire process? Perhaps not. However, what is important is that students are engaged, are on task and are encouraged to use English as much as possible. The teacher can facilitate this by walking around the room and

guiding students. Because the activity will eventually move back to a whole-class discussion, students are motivated to find ways to explain their choices in English while working in pairs or small groups. Writing down their explanations in simple English, in itself a productive skill, will aid in this process.

As a summary to the activity, students can be asked to collaborate within their groups, working together to arrive at one final diagram that all members agree with. This ‘give and take’ of views offers additional opportunities for productive practice.

As students revisit this vocabulary through fictional or non-fictional content, they now have a foundation upon which to build more fluency. Additional critical thinking questions can also be asked, such as:

*Why is it good to move to a new place?
What are some reasons that people move?
How might your feelings change when you move?*

As students continue to reach into their personal experiences, using the vocabulary they are learning, fluency continues to grow.

Creativity

In Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, creativity is considered to be the highest-order thinking skill. Creativity allows students to use what they have learned to make changes, solve problems and express themselves in new ways. While creativity is sometimes viewed as a personal skill, it can be nourished in small-group activities where students collaborate while they create. In these group activities, opportunities for productive language abound.

In *Oxford Discover*, students use the vocabulary, grammar and knowledge they have acquired to create together. In one unit on energy use, students form groups of four that must determine ways to save energy in their schools, homes and communities. Each group is required to brainstorm ideas, and then choose four of the best ideas. Each student in the group then presents one of the ideas to the entire class, explaining its benefits.

In another creative project, student groups learn the concept of a time capsule, where items from the present time are buried for a long period, such as fifty or one hundred years, before being unearthed and studied. Student groups brainstorm and choose four small items that could be placed into such a time capsule. They present these items and their reasons to the entire class. To ensure that every student within the group has a chance to contribute his or her ideas throughout the activity, students can first brainstorm individually, then move into pairs to discuss ideas, then move into whole-group discussion. During the class presentation, each student should speak about one item.

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By working on creative projects individually, then sharing what they've created, students have the opportunity to build fluency. Consider the following activity. Students are asked to complete the line below to create something related to the topic or target language, such as a rainforest animal, insect or invention. They can then label the item, write a sentence about it and share their idea with a partner.

As there is often a strong motivation to share what we create, this simple project offers a perfect opportunity for students to share, explain and comment in English.

Collaboration and Communication

As the above activities demonstrate, the 21st century skills of collaboration

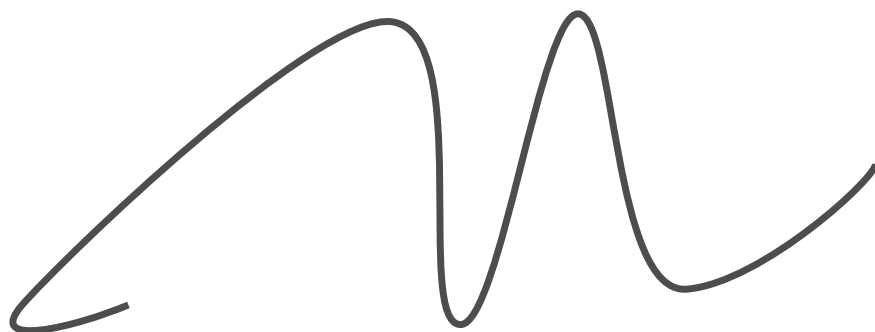
and communication can play an essential role in language fluency when paired with critical thinking and creative activities. As students are invited to think deeply and to create together, there is a strong motivation to communicate ideas and opinions. Communication is not forced, or defined by specific grammar structures, but rather is a natural outcome of engaged learners working together.

Conclusion

Productive English that leads to fluency is often a result of personal motivation and necessity. Students who are immersed in a second language through homestay or student exchange programs often build their productive skills quickly because levels of motivation and necessity are high. In our own ELL classrooms, building 21st century skills in an inquiry-based learning environment can increase those attributes of motivation and necessity. By encouraging students to think more deeply about a topic while working in pairs or small groups and tapping into their own experiences, many opportunities for productive English occur. As students receive regular practice in these productive activities, language fluency grows.



Kathleen Kampa and **Charles Vilina** are American ELT authors and teacher-trainers who have taught young learners in Japan for over 25 years. They are co-authors of *Oxford Discover*, *Everybody Up* and *Magic Time*, courses for young learners published by Oxford University Press. Kathleen and Charles are active teachers who promote an inquiry-based approach to learning, where students develop English language fluency as they discover the world around them.



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