Language Learning Information for Families

Most of our international students receive good academic language instruction in English; however, there are usually few opportunities for them to have oral practice with native English speakers prior to coming to the United States.

Most schools conduct foreign language classes geared to the development of reading and writing skills, with emphasis on basic grammatical instruction. Students generally perform well in the reading and writing areas, but need improvement in the oral skill which is so important in their adjustment process.

Students may feel very inadequate, frustrated and/or shy because they cannot communicate at their age level, and exchange ideas as soon as they arrive. As families and a university community, we want to welcome them and provide them with the best experience possible. Here are some general thoughts about how we can help these students more rapidly improve their oral English skills.

It is useful to work with students in an informal manner, using the following strategies:

1. Slow down, rephrase, and enunciate clearly (not loudly) when it is evident that the student does not understand, i.e. if he/she nods and smiles all the time! He/she may understand English but may not be used to a specific accent or regionalism.

2. Keep your questions and answers short and clear so that the student doesn’t have to try to follow a long train of speech.

3. To help a student become familiar with idioms and expressions, prepare a list of 10 (or more if you think of them) that are commonly used in our area and try to explain them. Most students are accustomed to Standard English and are unaware of idioms or slang. If you tell a student, “Don’t pull my leg,” he/she may understand exactly what you said and take it literally. They will probably think to themselves, “Those weird Americans! Why would I want to pull their leg?”
4. Gestures and hand signs are very significant in many cultures and are an active part of oral communication. A demonstration of when and how to use the most common gestures is helpful.

5. During the first two to three weeks in your home, the student could greatly improve his/her communication ability with some structured daily work. For example, a family member could work with the student on a subject that covers basic, everyday vocabulary and facilitates interactions at home and school. Here are some suggested subjects:
   - How to ask for help and directions
   - How to introduce him/herself and terms for expressing gratitude or emotion
   - How to explain that he/she is hungry, thirsty, lost, tired, or sick
   - How to ask and answer comparative questions about their home, country, family, interests, or hobbies
   - How to call the police and fire department
   - How to ask and answer questions that begin with: What, Where, Why, When, How, and Do
   - Keep in mind nouns and verbs that are used constantly and reinforce their meaning and usage
   - Try to learn some phrases in the student’s language so the student has a chance to teach

Additional Helpful Hints

- Treat language limitations with humor. It is normal to make a mistake; it is more important to get the idea across than it is to be grammatically perfect. Language is important, but the language of caring is more important than perfect diction or grammar.
- Recognize that a student’s inability to follow conversations and to communicate can be depressing, lonely and tiring. It can also result in temporary frustration for the family, or possible distancing by family members who tire of giving language assistance. A supportive attitude and encouraging smile will help the student gain the confidence they need to succeed.
- There may be periods when the student’s progress in learning English seems to reach an immovable plateau and may even regress. This is normal and will be overcome with time and patience.
- Relax, have fun and enjoy the adventure of having a language learner in your home and as a friend.
Conversation Ice Breakers

Families and students can be quite nervous when first meeting! Families may be at a loss when they try to pick a conversation topic. For students, it may be their very first time when they must use English in a conversation with a native English speaker. In general, students are able to discuss simple topics such as family, likes and dislikes, hobbies, customs, culture, food and their daily life. Also, beginning sentences with the word “please” instead of forming a question when you want the student to do something is sometimes easier for the student to understand. For example:

How do you say your name? Please say your name.
Can you carry this for me? Please carry this.

Photos are a great way for families to introduce themselves and initiate a conversation. Reviewing state and area maps and materials (such as picture books, pamphlets, and tourism magazines) are another great way to show the student their new community and where they may be going. The student will understand more of the conversation if he/she has a photo to look at while you are talking.

International Program Staff are only a phone call or e-mail away. Don’t hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns may arise!

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