4 Factors to Develop Language Proficiency FAST

by Baburhan Uzum and Alma Contreras-Vanegas

This article, for K–12 teachers and teacher educators at elementary levels, presents four critical factors to consider while addressing English learners' (ELs') language difficulties and helping them develop their language proficiency. The four factors—family, administrators, students, and teachers—create the acronym FAST. (Our use of *family* instead of *parents* is purposeful and intended to be more inclusive of diverse kinds of families with caretakers and guardians who may not be students' parents.)

The proposed strategy is inspired by our experiences with ELs in U.S. public schools. We believe it is best to bring all stakeholders together to create sustainable solutions in addressing ELs' challenges, monitoring their progress in class, and helping them build their language proficiency. ELs in U.S. public schools are often placed in content area classrooms with native-English-speaking students. There are a variety of programs, such as bilingual, immersion, pull-out, after school tutoring, content-based ESL, and sheltered instruction, to help ELs develop language proficiency and content knowledge at the same time. Though it may look like the success of these programs stems from the schools or teachers, there are other factors in place determining their effectiveness, such as those listed in the FAST framework.

FAST Factors in English Learners' Learning

Family

The benefits of family involvement in children's lives are well documented (e.g., Barger et al., 2019; Titiz & Tokel, 2015). There are positive outcomes when families are involved in their children's education across all socioeconomic levels, ethnicities, and ages. Barger et al. (2019) defined two forms of family involvement: school-based and home-based.

The school-based involvement includes families participating at the school for parent-teacher conferences, volunteering for events, or being a part of the parent-teacher association. The home-based involvement includes parents encouraging children to do well in their academics, helping with homework, and/or providing resources at home to assist their children to practice their skills. It is important to note that the value a parent places on education also counts as involvement (Barger et al., 2019).

In Practice
- Families should monitor students' learning through close communication with teachers and administrators.
- Families should be involved in setting goals, and they should evaluate students' progress toward these goals.
- Families should encourage students and praise their work, using "effort praise" (e.g., "Wow. You spelled all the words right. You must have worked so hard") as opposed to "ability praise" (e.g., "You wrote them all right. You are so smart."), because the latter discourages taking on challenges and making mistakes with the fear of losing that label (Dweck, 2006).

Administrators

Administrators must be flexible when working with families because those families may have inflexible work schedules that may prevent them from participating in school events (Titiz & Tokel, 2015; Zambrana et al., 2019). Families may have trouble leaving work, finding babysitters, or finding transportation to get to the school. Administrators and teachers should work together to create a friendly cultural environment to help all families feel welcome when entering the school (Titiz & Tokel, 2015).

In Practice
- Francis et al. (2017) suggested teachers use virtual environments, like FaceTime or Zoom, to meet with parents to help deal with scheduling conflicts.
- To make families feel welcome, administrators can put up posters and flyers with information in different languages around the school and in the main office.
- Schools are required to have a translator available during teacher-parent conferences to facilitate communication (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).
- Titiz and Tokel (2015) found that parents desired schools to create activities that attracted families to participate, such as a reading night that offers read-alouds in different languages or cultural activities.

Students

Students must learn to follow instructions and hold themselves responsible for completing the assigned tasks. They need to work toward the goals they agreed on with their families and teachers and self-monitor their progress using a variety of strategies provided by their teachers. Working together with their families and teachers, students should develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) through which they can accept mistakes as growth opportunities, develop a love of learning, and build resilience working toward their goals.

In Practice
- Students should freely ask questions and seek clarifications in class or at home.
- Students should review and practice what they learned, making connections between the text and the world around them (e.g., text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world).
- Students should evaluate their progress using "I can" statements (e.g., "I can write four CVC words") and share with their families and teachers.

Teachers

Teachers (and administrators) need to be aware of the cultural background of their students. For example, Latinx parents may be supportive of their children's education, but may not be involved as much for various reasons; Zambrana et al. (2019) noted that Latinx parents desire to be a part of their children's education, but feel that it is the school's responsibility to teach them and may feel they are not capable of helping their children academically. A student's culture plays a large role in learning style and family interactions. It is also important for teachers to invite parents into their classroom and remind them that it takes a team to help children succeed.

Teachers also have the responsibility to maintain up-to-date training with the best strategies to assist their ELs—strategies such as using visuals, hands on manipulatives, realia, cognates, activating background knowledge, sentence stems, and scaffolding. The TESOL International Association organization and website offers up-to-date research in best practices as well as resources and professional development opportunities.

> *In Practice*
> - To make families feel welcome, teachers can put up posters and flyers with information in different languages around their classrooms.
> - Sometimes, parents need an invitation and reminder that they are a valuable resource and they have something to offer, regardless of their educational background. An invitation can be an email, a note taken home by a student, a friendly phone call, or a personal invitation as parents pick up their children from school.
> - Apply strategies when teaching ELs appropriate to their English proficiency and grade level.
> - Identify learners' proficiency level and differentiate instruction addressing their language and content needs.
> - Seek and identify professional development opportunities that offer the latest research in best practices for teaching ELs.

Addressing all FAST Factors

Though teachers are only responsible for addressing one of the factors (T) in this strategy, they can help ensure that all four factors are met and that everyone is engaged and successful by

- keeping in contact with families (through, e.g., a parent-teacher log),
- having students work on their part during class time for practice, and
- meeting regularly with administrators to keep them accountable for providing training and resources.

Teachers can prepare for full engagement by planning ahead and using a table to list and detail the FAST factors (see Table 1). Teachers first identify a language difficulty that ELs experience (e.g., limited background knowledge, idioms, mismatch in pronunciation and spelling). This is done by doing informal assessments of what the students are struggling with or using the annual goals set by the school district. Then, teachers should list actionable tasks under each of the FAST factors: What can families, administration, students, and teachers do?

Table 1. Addressing FAST Factors

EL Challenge	Families	Administrators	Students	Teachers
Difficulty with spelling, especially homonyms	Families can be involved in ELs' homework or make spelling fun at home with games. They can read with their children.	Administrators can facilitate in-service training to teachers to introduce engaging activities with students and community events with parents, showing parent-child reading activities.	Students can keep a four-corner vocabulary journal to write out and remember difficult words.	Teachers can introduce a variety of strategies for students to watch for these differences and check their spelling.
Fear of speaking up in class and making mistakes	Families can encourage their children to share or practice what they learned at school and reinforce that it is okay to make mistakes.	Administrators can create an environment for teachers and students in which mistakes are perceived in a constructive manner.	Students can take risks and try out their newly learned material.	Teachers can create a forgiving and comfortable classroom environment where mistakes are seen as growth opportunities.
Difficulty following fast-paced conversations	Families can create social opportunities where children can interact in English in social environments (e.g., sports, hobbies, peer groups).	Administrators can offer extracurricular events for ELs so that they can practice with social conversations.	Students can make an effort to listen more carefully and ask questions when they stop following a conversation.	Teachers can make an effort to slow down their speech, but also create conversation activities in class where students engage in social and academic conversations.
Missing home culture and seeking belonging	Families can do activities at home to sustain their home culture.	Administrators can organize intercultural events and invite parents to share their cultural heritage, affirming students' various cultures.	Students can look for ways to connect their home culture and their new experiences.	Teachers can create a multicultural classroom in which students feel that they belong.

Examples of the FAST Framework in Use

Example 1

Ms. Soliz, a pre-K teacher, is currently using the FAST framework model to support and track her students' progress on their prekindergarten guidelines.

Family: Ms. Soliz has put together a binder that contains student goals. During the parent-teacher conference, she goes over all the goals with the parents and teaches them how to use this binder at home. Every Friday, she sends the binder home for parents to work on these goals with their child. A note is included in the binder for parents to sign, indicating they have worked with their children on the specific goals at home. Parents are also able to write any questions or comments within the binder for the teacher.

Administrators: The school administrator was able to see how she kept up-to-date records on the progress of each student by simply looking at the binder. The administrator was so pleased with how this method was informally assessing students' progress on a regular basis and involved the family that she implemented this strategy for the whole school. The administrator held a workshop in which Ms. Soliz demonstrated how she organized the binder, how she taught the parents how to use the binder at home, and how to work with the children during school hours.

Students: During the week, Ms. Soliz works with the students on reaching their goals to master all guidelines set by her district.

Teacher: Each student binder Ms. Soliz creates includes important and specific goals for each student, addressing the students' weaknesses and issues directly. She includes sections on different topics relevant to the class and to the student, specifically. Ms. Soliz tracks all students' progress with the binders, ensuring each FAST factor is addressed.

Example 2

Mr. Fan's students are struggling with fluency. Using a four-corner matrix (Figure 1), Mr. Fan plans how he will approach each component of the FAST framework.

Family: Mr. Fan will meet with parents/guardians, either during a parent-teacher conference or by inviting the families to visit the classroom one evening, and talk about how they can support their child at home. During the meetings, he will explain that students will have books that are appropriate for their reading level and are encouraged to read as many times as they wish to become fluent.

Administrators: Mr. Fan plans to approach his administrator for additional books that students may be able to use at home and keep for a while to practice with their family. His administrators will need to be supportive of inviting families over to the school to provide training.

Students: Mr. Fan will teach students what they should be doing while reading for fluency.

Teacher: During class sessions, Mr. Fan will conduct read-aloud sessions to model reading fluently; asking questions while reading; making connections between the text and personal experiences; making guesses of difficult vocabulary using context; and creating mental images of people, places, and actions.
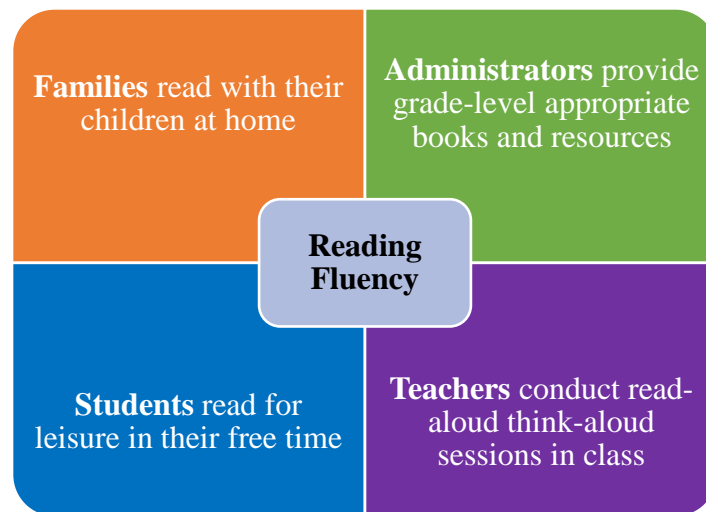

Figure 1. Four-corner matrix for reading fluency.

The FAST framework helps teachers and teacher educators look for ways in which families, administrators, students, and teachers can work collaboratively to address a challenge or difficulty an EL is experiencing or track their progress. In such challenges, a solution is often only possible after all four FAST factors come into alignment and work together.

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