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English Proficiency / Fluent English Proficient Students

Susan R. Adams

K-12 students whose first language is not English are identified upon enrollment in U.S. schools through a home language survey and are immediately assessed to determine whether English as a second language (ESL) services are required. Students who do not pass this initial screening assessment are classified as English Language Learners (ELLs), or as limited English proficiency (LEP) students, and are identified to receive school-provided English language development (ELD) and accommodations. Students who pass the initial screener or who demonstrate English proficiency two years in a row on state-mandated annual assessments are deemed fluent or fully English proficient (FEP) students and are exited from ESL services. Students who exit ESL services must be monitored for two years to ensure that they continue to be academically successful without ESL services.

The United States has always been a polyglot nation of immigrants. Early American immigrants spoke German, French, Dutch, and Spanish. Some of the earliest American schools were German/English bilingual schools. In fact, German was so predominant that Benjamin Franklin, in a famous speech, harshly condemned German immigrants and despaired of their sheer numbers, claiming that he feared that English would be subsumed by German as the national language. In spite of these fears, following the first Great Wave of immigration in the 19th century, immigrants created schools, churches, clubs, neighborhoods, and societies based on ethnicity and language preference.

In American history, immigration and English acquisition have tended to follow fairly predictable patterns: The first generation of adults maintain their home language, struggling to survive perilous economic conditions, and are forced to work in substandard, often dangerous, manual labor requiring little or no communication in English. Much of American infrastructure and industry stand as a testament to the work of these immigrants. The second generation is often native-born Americans, who are raised speaking the parents' language at home, but who acquire basic levels of transactional English and who serve the family as intermediaries in public. Second generation immigrants who are able to attend school develop greater fluency and literacy in English, but maintain the home language among the family or in the neighborhood. The third generation adopts English as its preferred language, often losing the ability to communicate in the home language as English fluency and high levels of English literacy are obtained through schooling. As the first generation grows older and dies, community organizations and neighborhoods begin to wane and wither as subsequent generations see no need for them and are absorbed into mainstream American culture.

However, current first generation immigrants are encountering more challenging conditions as progressively more and more jobs require unprecedented levels of English and English literacy skills, even for unskilled laborers (e.g., custodians are expected to read complex sets of directions to mix dangerous cleansers; and increasing technology demands in many jobs require

the use of highly specialized English). Current economic tensions and high levels of unemployment following the economic crash of U.S. markets in 2008 spurred a political and legal backlash against undocumented workers, with increased surveillance and increasingly stringent laws prohibiting the employment of undocumented immigrants. A renewed nationwide political push for “English only” and the establishment of English as the official national language, although currently a failed venture, reflect increasing animosity toward immigrants in general and undocumented workers in particular.

From 1990 to 2005 there were huge waves of immigration, with large numbers of K-12 ELL students arriving in schools that had never before received ELLs. While states on the coasts have long enrolled newly arrived immigrants in their schools, states like Wisconsin, Indiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee saw sudden influxes of students arriving in their schools, often with little or no English, limited or no first language literacy, and interrupted formal schooling. Adolescent students with interrupted formal education (SIFEs) face particular challenges in middle schools and high schools, where they are sometimes overwhelmed by the content and literacy demands and are compelled to make up years of gaps in their learning while acquiring English. Some districts experienced an explosive 400 percent growth of ELLs between 1990 and 2005. Many states scrambled to provide training for both mainstream and for specially licensed ESL teachers in the wake of this explosion.

English Language Learners in U.S. Schools

In U.S. schools, ELLs have historically been underserved, often denied access to the basic school curriculum, and even punished for speaking their native languages in school. Several landmark lawsuits paved the way for significant reforms for ELLs, beginning in 1965 with the passing of Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was later called the Bilingual Educational Act when it was passed by Congress in 1968. The Bilingual Education Act created funding sources for bilingual education and ESL programs in K-12 schools. Schools inconsistently implemented these programs and sometimes created programs alongside the traditional curriculum while isolating ELLs from the mainstream. In the 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* case, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that “identical education does not constitute equal education under the Civil Rights Act,” in acknowledgment that students who do not speak English cannot access the academic skills and content learning necessary to make progress in school.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 replaced the Bilingual Education Act, providing Title III funding for specialized programs and staff, and simultaneously instituting the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act, making schools responsible for the annual standardized assessment performance of all students, including ELLs. Previously, students had generally declined to include ELLs (and other students deemed likely to fail) in annual standardized assessments; now, schools were mandated to demonstrate “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) for all subgroups of students (e.g., student categories broken down by race, gender, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency

[ELP], and special education identifiers). These annual state assessments require ELLs to demonstrate grade-level core subject skills, knowledge, and abilities in English, with few accommodations or exclusions permitted. Ironically, NCLB has provided both increased support for ELLs and improved access to mainstream curriculum while placing immense pressure on ELLs and schools to demonstrate English literacy mastery more rapidly than is feasible. Research indicates that ELLs need between five to seven years to develop academic language proficiency, whereas ELLs are currently required to begin taking standardized assessments within the first year of U.S. school enrollment. In addition, while many educators applaud the expanded attention and support provided to ELLs, schools suddenly became aware of how unprepared most K-12 educators and administrators were to meet the needs of ELLs, and have struggled to design programs that meet the needs of ELLs.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory

Stephen Krashen has defined the difference between language learning and language acquisition: language learning is similar to what happens in foreign language classrooms (where the emphasis is on imitating and practicing language patterns and structures in a formal setting, coupled with conscious attention to these processes), whereas second (or third) language acquisition is unconscious and more closely mimics the process that babies experience when they are learning their native languages (where one listens, experiments with new phrases, receives real-time feedback, experiences the pleasure of communication, and does not think of the act as “studying”). Language learning produces results similar to the long-term effects of formalized foreign language study; there is some value in learning these patterns, but they are limited to what is practiced, restricted to what the patterns make available. Acquisition tends to produce deeper, longer-lasting, and more immediately useful language production and reception skills. Both are useful under the right conditions; learning is easier to replicate within school settings than acquisition, but opportunities for acquisition are what ELLs need most.

One popular misconception is that younger children acquire new languages more readily than adults or older students. While young children have some advantages (have more time available, are perhaps less inhibited, and face reduced language demands), adults bring many strengths to the SLA process, including sophisticated structural and grammatical understandings of their first language (L1), literacy skills from the L1 that can be applied to the second language (L2), and strong intrinsic motivation. Researchers believe that those who learn new L2s after adolescence may never acquire an authentic, native-like accent, but otherwise there is no serious disadvantage for adults or older ELLs. ELL children who begin school in English before becoming literate in their L1 begin to struggle over time to keep up with grade mates on standardized assessments, often beginning to flounder after fourth grade. Paradoxically, it is older adolescents with no interrupted formal education and who demonstrate strong L1 literacy skills who transition more readily into English-speaking schools and graduate from high school at higher rates than ELLs who entered U.S. schools in primary grades. While it might seem that ELLs should be confined to specialized ESL classrooms until they can “catch up” and join the mainstream, this isolation does not speed up the SLA process and could actually prevent ELLs from gaining access to

grade-level skills and knowledge, as well as prevent them from becoming productive, functioning members of the school community. Participating in mainstream classes for much of the school day gives ELLs access to *comprehensible input*, or language production surrounded by context, visual clues, body language, and builds on students' prior knowledge, which can be grasped more readily by ELLs than normal language production.

Instruction of ELLs in K-12 Schools

Schools provide a variety of instructional ELD support services, depending upon local needs, available resources, and existing trained school personnel. ESL classes may be taught in a pull-out (ELLs leave the mainstream classroom for specialized ELD sessions with an ESL teacher), push-in (a licensed, trained ESL teacher comes into the mainstream classroom to co-teach), or self-contained (ELLs are taught together in a separate classroom using specialized curriculum to teach both ELD and content knowledge) models. Schools may offer short-term newcomer programs to newly arrived ELLs to help them adjust to U.S. schooling, or may provide sheltered instruction in which ELLs learn both English literacy skills and grade-level content knowledge in specialized classes. Some states provide bilingual (L1 and L2) education or dual language instruction, in which the goal is for ELLs to develop strong bilingual and biliteracy skills through academic content taught in both languages.

ELD teachers are licensed and certified in several ways; each of these certifications requires a thorough understanding of SLA. K-12 teachers often add an ESL license to their existing teaching certificate by taking additional, specialized university courses. Some states offer a bilingual education license in which the applicant must demonstrate academic language proficiency in two target languages. Others become certified through completion of certificate programs through organizations such as Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

Further Readings

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