Myths and Realities: Best Practices for ESL Students
10 Myths and the Realities about ESL Students
Myth #1

Learning a second language is an entirely different proposition from learning one’s native language.
Reality 1

• Learning the linguistic structures and rules of a second language occurs in much the same way as the first language developed.
• *However, learning a second language takes time and requires support.*
Myth #2

Teachers should discourage students from speaking their native language as this will hinder their English language development.
Reality 2

- Using their native language facilitates cognitive and academic growth.
- Speaking their native language with their parents is important and should be respected and encouraged.
- Bilingualism is an asset to the individual and the community and should be encouraged.
Myth #3

Younger children are more effective language learners than older learners.
Reality 3

• **While younger language learners may learn to pronounce a new language with little or no accent, older language learners are often much more efficient learners.**

• **Language expectations for younger learners are generally lower than for older students.**

• **School language is more complex and less contextualized at higher grades, making language acquisition challenging.**
Myth #4

Once students can speak with reasonable fluency, they can quickly pick up the academic work.
Reality 4

• Social language, called BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills), is generally acquired within 2 years of immersion.

• However, CALPS (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills) take many years to develop.
Myth #5

If the ESL teacher could take the student more often and just focus on teaching the English language to ESL students, learning in all areas would occur faster.
Reality 5

• *Language is a developmental process and it takes time; consistent, cognitive development in all subject areas is as important as hours of ESL instruction.*
• **Students can learn language and content simultaneously; classroom teachers providing comprehensible input is important to academic success and to language learning.**

• **The ESL teacher can provide an opportunity for the student to be immersed in language at the appropriate level and can help students develop language skills and language learning strategies efficiently.**
Myth #6

Students from some countries are better language learners than students from other countries.
Reality 6

- Students from all language and cultural backgrounds are equally capable of learning English; neither success in language learning nor academic success can be attributed to the student’s country of origin, but rather to a variety of social, emotional and cognitive factors, as well as first language literacy.
Myth #7

It is not possible to diagnose an ESL student for a learning disability; the standard tests would be invalid due to lack of English.
Reality 7

• Although some traditional tests may be invalid, there are a number of alternate ways to diagnose an ESL child.

• Some of these ways would be non-verbal testing, comparative studies, observation and input from all involved teachers, specialists and parents.
• *Like the regular stream, approximately 10% of the ESL population will need to avail of special services.*
Myth #8

Until students learn English, there is no point in trying to teach them content area subjects.
Reality 8

- *ESL students need to continue their content education.*
- *It is possible and desirable to teach ESL students various subject matter while they are acquiring English.*
- *One of the recognized ways to learn a language is to be taught content in the target language by teachers who use good teaching strategies.*
Myth # 9

Learners need a strong grasp of oral English before they are exposed to print.
Reality 9

- ESL learners should be exposed to a rich print environment from early on in their English learning.
- Students who are literate in their first language can use reading and writing as a means of learning English.
- Students who are not literate in their first language need oral language development along with reading and writing readiness skills.
Myth #10

Researchers cannot agree on the most effective programs for ESL students.
Reality 10

- Based on the literature, an effective ESL program:
  - values the cultural identity of the student
  - has high expectations for ESL students
  - integrates language and content
  - provides ongoing PD for ESL and content teachers
  - supports whole school inclusion
  - promotes collaboration among teachers
• Classroom instruction should:
  - be comprehensible to all learners
  - be interactive
  - connect school to students’ lives
  - promote cross-cultural understanding
  - develop language and literacy across the curriculum
  - help all students achieve learning outcomes
Questions? Comments?
The Department of Education thanks the working group that created the series of presentations on working with ESL and immigrant students:

Department of Education
- Elizabeth J. Noseworthy, ESL Program Development Specialist
- Jackie Fewer-Bennett, Inclusion Specialist
- Jill Howlett, Religious Studies Program Development Specialist

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- Susanne Drover, ESL Teacher
- Lourdes Macdonald, Classroom Teacher
- Suzanne McBride, ESL Teacher
- Tina Rowe, ESL Teacher
- Rick Walsh, ESL Teacher

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