



# Breaking Through the



## MYTH 1

### CHILDREN LEARN SECOND LANGUAGES QUICKLY AND EASILY

People think there may be a biological reason why children can learn a new language quicker and easier than adults, while others think there may be psychological and social factors that favor child learners. For example, children may be more motivated than adults to learn the second language, and there is probably more incentive for the child on the playground and in school to communicate in the second language than there is for the adult on the job. It frequently happens that children are placed in more situations where they are forced to speak the second language than are adults.

However, there have been experiments that prove that adolescents and adults perform better than young children under controlled conditions. Even when the method of teaching appears to favor learning in children, they perform less well than do adolescents and adults. One exception is in the area of pronunciation, although even here some studies show better results for older learners. Similarly, research comparing children and adults learning second languages as immigrants does

not support the notion that younger children are more efficient at second language learning.

However, people continue to believe that children learn languages faster than adults. Due to many factors, the illusion has been created that the child learns more quickly than the adult, whereas when controlled research is conducted, in both formal and informal learning situations, results typically indicate that adult (and adolescent) learners perform better than young children.

This research indicates that people should not expect miraculous results from children who are learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in the classroom context. At the very least, they should expect that learning a second language is as difficult for a child as it is for adults. In fact, it may be more difficult, as young children do not have access to the memory techniques and other strategies that more experienced learners can use in acquiring vocabulary and in learning the grammatical rules of the language.

Furthermore, children are likely to be shyer and more embarrassed before their peers than are more mature adults. Children from some cultural backgrounds are extremely anxious when singled out and called upon to perform in a language they are in the process of learning.



## MYTH 2

### **THE YOUNGER THE CHILD, THE MORE SKILLED HE OR SHE WILL BE IN LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE**

Another myth concerns the best time to start language instruction. Of course the best way to learn a second language is to begin at birth and learn two languages at the same time. But, when should a young child who already knows a first language begin to learn a second? Some researchers take a younger-is-better position and argue that the earlier children begin to learn a second language, the better. Research shows that this may not be the case when it comes to the school setting.

A study of children learning French in school showed that after five years of instruction, children who started at age eleven performed better on tests of second language proficiency than children who had begun at age eight. This was the largest single study of children learning a second language in a formal classroom setting and the researchers concluded that older children are better second language learners than are younger ones. Similar results have been found in other studies.

ESL children in American schools need to master English as quickly as possible while at the same time learn subject-matter content. This suggests that in the American context early exposure to English is called for. However, because second language acquisition takes time, children will continue to need the support of their first language, where this is possible, so as not to fall behind in content-area learning.



## MYTH 3

### **THE MORE TIME STUDENTS SPEND IN A SECOND LANGUAGE CONTEXT, THE QUICKER THEY LEARN THE LANGUAGE**

Many people believe that the most straightforward way for children from non-English-speaking backgrounds to learn English is for them to be constantly exposed to English. However, studies have shown that children in bilingual classes, where there is exposure to the home

language and to English, have been found to learn English language skills equivalent to children who have been in English-only programs. This would not be case if the amount of time students spent in an “English-only” environment was the most important factor in language learning.

Many researchers caution against removing support of the home language too soon. Giving language minority children the support of their home language, where this is possible, is not doing them a disservice. The use of the home language in bilingual classrooms enables the child to avoid falling behind in school work, and it also provides a mutually reinforcing bond between the home and the school. In fact, the home language acts as a bridge for children, enabling them to participate more effectively in school activities while they are learning English. In the long run, children in bilingual programs will acquire as much English as children who have more exposure from an earlier age. Furthermore, if the child gains or maintains skills in the first language, as an adult he or she be bilingual and have an advantage in his or her career.



## MYTH 4

### **CHILDREN HAVE ACQUIRED A SECOND LANGUAGE ONCE THEY CAN SPEAK IT**

For school-aged children, there is much more to learning a second language than learning how to speak it.

A child who is proficient in face-to-face communication may not know the “academic language” needed to participate in classroom activities, especially in the later grades. For example, the child needs to learn what nouns and verbs are and what synonyms and antonyms are. Such activities require the child to separate language from the context of actual experience, and to learn to deal with abstract meanings.

Letting a child leave an ESL program too soon, particularly if not ready for the all-English classroom, may be harmful to the child’s academic success. A child who is receiving his or her school lessons in a second language may be having language problems in reading and writing that might not show up if the child’s speaking abilities are

used to determine his or her English proficiency.

Some theorize that the problems that ESL children have in reading and writing stem from limitations in vocabulary and syntax in the second language. Even children who are skilled orally can have these gaps; learning a second language is not finished in a year or two.



### MYTH 5

#### **ALL CHILDREN LEARN A SECOND LANGUAGE IN THE SAME WAY**

Research shows that mainstream American families and the families of many children from minority cultural backgrounds have different ways of talking. American schools emphasize the language and styles of talk that are found most often in mainstream families. Language is used to communicate meaning, to convey information, to control social behavior, and to solve problems. In the upper grades, especially, the style of talk is analytic and deductive. Children are rewarded for clear and logical thinking, so it is no wonder that children experience tension and frustration when they come to school and use language differently from what is expected.

Furthermore, there are social class differences. In urban centers of literate, technologically advanced societies, middle-class parents teach their children through language. Instructions are given verbally from a very early age. This is different from the experience of immigrant children from less technologically advanced, non-urbanized societies because traditionally, teaching in such cultures is carried out primarily through nonverbal means. Technical skills, such as cooking, driving a car, or building a house, are learned through observation, supervised participation, and repetition. There is none of the processes that characterize the teaching-learning process in urban and suburban middle-class homes.

In addition, some children in some cultures are more accustomed to learning from peers than from adults. They may be cared for and taught by older siblings or cousins. They learned to be quiet in the presence of adults and had little experience in interacting with them. When they enter school, they are more likely to pay attention to what

their peers are doing than to what the teacher is saying. At this point, the other children are more important to them than adults.

We must be aware of cultural and individual differences of ESL students, as well as social norms that differ from those that govern the mainstream American classroom. Because of their cultural background, some children may be less able to adapt to the interpersonal setting of the school. Children from culturally diverse backgrounds require a variety of instructional activities – small group work, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, individualized instruction, and other strategies that take the children's diversity of experience into account. We must also be aware of how the child's experiences in the home and in the home culture affect values, language use, and interpersonal style. Effective education of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds affirms the values of the home culture and develops in children a positive emotional attitude toward their background.



### MYTH 6

#### **THE WESTERVILLE SCHOOLS ESL PROGRAM DOES NOT TEACH ENGLISH TO STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THESE CLASSES**

The reason for the ESL Program is to teach English to students who do not read, write or speak English. English is the common language for students and teachers, and it is the language students must learn to be successful in school. Westerville Schools' ESL teachers use English in the classrooms, and all instruction is taught in English. In order to "graduate" from the ESL program, students must demonstrate a high level of proficiency in reading, writing, listening and speaking English. Our program takes into account many of the findings from previously shared myths and has been carefully developed to help our growing ESL population adapt to their new surroundings, both in school and in the community.

Second language learning by school-aged children takes longer, is harder, and involves a great deal more than many people have been led to believe. As a result, we need rethink our expectations. Too often one hears of

the “problem” of cultural and linguistic diversity in our country’s schools, rather than the “opportunity” that diversity provides. Children from diverse backgrounds enrich our schools and our other students. Student diversity challenges the educational system, but the educational innovations and instructional strategies that are effective with diverse students can benefit all students.

In fact, many of the findings from research directed at children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds also apply to mainstream students. The challenge of educating diverse students can lead to effective educational reform at all levels and for all students.



## MYTH 7

**STUDENTS, INCLUDING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS, ARE LIMITED TO ONE TYPE OF INTERVENTION.**

English Language Learners (ELL) are to have equal access to all programs including special education, Title I, gifted and talented programs, and nonacademic and extracurricular activities.

Under the modified eligibility requirements for Title I services, limited-English-proficient students are eligible for services under that program on the same basis as other students.



## MYTH 8

**IF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS ARE FAILING IN GENERAL EDUCATION, THERE IS NO HARM IN PLACING THEM IN SPECIAL EDUCATION WHERE THEY WILL RECEIVE INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION.**

The dropout rates for English Language Learners (ELL) are 15-20% higher than the overall rate for non-ELLs. This lack of academic success is also the cause for referrals of ELLs to special education.

Research shows that ELLs are typically either over-represented or under-represented in special education programs across the country. The ELL population percentages are disproportionate when compared to their English-speaking peer populations’ percentages.

Research demonstrates that ELLs with the least amount of language support are most likely to be referred to special education. ELLs receiving all of their instruction in English were almost three times as likely to be in special education as those receiving some native language support.

Research further suggests that ELLs with learning disabilities in special education classes demonstrate lower verbal and full-scale IQ scores after placement in special education than at their initial evaluations. This suggests that even in special education, ELLs, in general, do not receive the type of instruction they need due to the lack of ESL instructional methodology and other professional development for special education professionals.

### Westerville City Schools: English as a Second Language Statistics

#### November, 2010

Enrollment:.....	1,263 (8.4%)
Number of languages:.....	70
Number of Represented Countries:.....	56
Percent of ESL students born in the U.S.: .....	61%
Percent of ESL students either immigrant or refugee:.....	39%

Westerville City Schools offers English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for students with limited English proficiency. Students, upon enrolling in WCS, will be evaluated to determine whether the student will be transferred to a building with an ESL Resource Room Program.

The district’s ESL program and services are consistent with the Ohio State Department of Education Standards and the Civil Rights Office and congruent with the policies of the Westerville Board of Education.

For information on the Westerville City Schools ESL program, please call (614) 797-7111 or go online to [www.wcsos.org](http://www.wcsos.org), click Enrolling, and choose ESL Services.

*Much of the content within this document was adapted from “Myths and Misconceptions about Second Language Learning: What Every Teacher Needs to Unlearn,” a publication of the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.*