

English Learners 101

What are the worst mistakes schools make in serving English Language Learner (ELL) students?

Three common responses can be summed up as denial, delegating, and remediation. None of them is beneficial to ELLs.

Denial means ignoring the language barrier and offering students little or no special help in accessing the curriculum. Students simply receive the same instruction as English-proficient students. Sometimes described as “sink or swim,” this approach is destined to fail. It’s also illegal under civil-rights law; nevertheless, it persists in some areas.

Delegating is what happens when administrators acknowledge there’s a “problem” and turn it over to specialists — bilingual or ESL teachers — rather than involving the entire school in addressing the needs of these children. Sometimes a single, itinerant ESL specialist is given responsibility for students at several schools, a recipe for futility.

Remediation reflects an impulse to “cure” ELLs’ “language disability” rather than recognizing-and, if possible, developing-the native language as a resource to support English acquisition. It also treats students as if they have a learning problem, a none-too-subtle message that tends to be self-fulfilling. Remediation is increasingly a response to the pressures of high-stakes testing that stresses mastery of discrete skills in English. It often takes the form of skill building, or the direct teaching of grammar and vocabulary, instead of more effective forms of ESL.

Do ELLs need to be taught English phonics?

Phonics are the rules that enable us to read aloud merely by looking at letters, with no consideration of meaning. For example, we know that in English the letters b-a-t are pronounced bat, regardless of whether we have any familiarity with baseball or with nocturnal creatures that fly around.

A common assumption is that phonics must be learned and taught “directly,” so that students will have conscious knowledge of the rules. This view asserts that we learn to read by applying these rules while we sound out or read aloud. A conflicting hypothesis is that our knowledge of phonics is acquired, or subconsciously absorbed, through reading. In other words, it regards phonics as the result of reading, not the cause.

Evidence from bilingual education lends support to the second hypothesis. Research has shown that knowledge of phonics gained in the native language is available for reading in the second language,

provided that the writing systems are similar. Phonics in Spanish, whose punctuation happens to be much more regular than that of English, seem to be all that most children need to acquire literacy in English.

It should be noted that teaching children the most straightforward rules, or “basic phonics,” can be useful. This is especially true for ELLs who have not learned to read in the native language. A conscious knowledge of some simple rules can help make texts more comprehensible. But drilling students in the complex and irregular rules of English phonics can be unproductive and even counterproductive.

Don’t some studies show that immersion is better than bilingual education?

A few researchers say yes. But on closer inspection, the “immersion” success stories they cite are primarily foreign-language programs designed to teach French to English-speaking students in Canada. These are not alternatives to bilingual education. In fact, they are varieties of bilingual (and sometimes trilingual) education, which are designed to serve the language-acquisition needs of socially and economically “advantaged” members of Canada’s majority ethnic groups. French immersion programs have been very successful, but they have little to do with structured immersion for language-minority children in the United States—programs whose value remains unsupported by research.

The contrast between Canadian-style French immersion and all-English structured immersion has been summed up as an additive versus subtractive bilingualism. The first model, like developmental bilingual education, helps students acquire a new language while also supporting their native-language development. The second model essentially seeks to replace the native language with English. The difference between additive and subtractive bilingualism has major effects on minority children’s cultural adjustment and their academic and cognitive development.

Even if English-language achievement tests are inadequate for ELLs, what’s the harm in using them?

Invalid and unreliable tests are worse than useless. They are frustrating and humiliating for children who find them incomprehensible. They are demoralizing to teachers who know their students are being judged unfairly. What’s more, they generate misinformation. Using inac-

*James Crawford and Stephen Krashen provide us with excerpts from their new book, *English Learners in American Classrooms* which lays out the facts of the English learning debate in the U.S.*

curate data to make high-stakes decisions about schools is not only pointless but potentially damaging to programs that are working well. Yet this is precisely what NCLB requires in the name of “accountability.”

If all students, or even one of eight subgroups including ELLs, fail to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) as measured by a single test of language arts or math, their school will face labels, sanctions, and “corrective action” that escalate over time. Ultimately, these may include transformation into a charter school, takeover by state officials or private companies, and replacement of school staff. High stakes indeed.

Educators recognize that their careers are at risk, and adapt accordingly. Teaching to the test is a common response. Since achievement tests are overwhelmingly in English, it’s not hard to imagine the impact on native-language instruction. As schools seek ways to boost ELL’s scores, they are abandoning bilingual education—often over the protests of parents and communities. Since 2002-03, when NCLB took effect, bilingual enrollments have fallen by 31 percent in California and 22 percent in New York City.

Weren’t earlier immigrants more eager to join the melting pot and assimilate, as compared with those arriving in recent years from Asia and Latin America?

This is a racial stereotype that is unsupported by factual evidence. The same unfair charge was made against the so-called “new immigrants” — Italians, Jews, Greeks, and Slavs—who arrived at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1911, for example, a federal commission accused these groups of failing to learn English as rapidly as the “old immigrants” — Germans, Irish, and Scandinavians.

In fact, German Americans, from Colonial times until the early twentieth century, were more aggressive and more successful in maintaining their language and culture than most other groups. Pursuit of *Deutschtum* (German “identity politics”) was combined with loyalty to an American nation-state based on democratic and egalitarian values, not cultural conformity. These aspirations were quite similar to those of multiculturalism today.

By contrast, the melting pot, as popularized by a play that opened on Broadway in 1908, espoused the goal of eliminating ethnic identities: “America is God’s Crucible...where all the races of Europe are

melting and re-forming!” Some immigrants were enthusiastic at the time, but others resented the paternalistic and coercive “Americanization” efforts sponsored by government and industry. In any case, ethnic differences survived. As the sociologists Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan reported in 1963, “the point about the melting pot is that it did not happen.”

It is fair to say, however, that German and other immigrant languages would have remained viable longer if not for the xenophobic restrictions adopted during and after World War I. Coercive and repressive policies succeeded in making the country less diverse.

Would it speed up English acquisition if government eliminated bilingual assistance programs?

Some people assume that if non-English speakers can read Social Security pamphlets or take driver’s tests in their native language, they will have no incentive to learn English. Bilingual assistance programs supposedly convey the false notion that it’s okay to live in the United States as monolingual speakers of Spanish or Chinese. Or they encourage immigrants to be lazy when it comes to language learning. In fact, no real evidence has ever been mustered to support such claims—only personal anecdotes and ethnic stereotypes.

Bilingual accommodations are rare in any case. A 1995 study by the Government Accountability Office could locate only 265 out of 400,000 federal publications—less than one tenth of one percent—that were printed in languages other than English.

English Learners in American Classrooms is now available from Scholastic. ❧

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