Myths of Second Language Acquisition

Answer each of the following statements with true or false.

1. Middle and high school students learn second languages more quickly and easily than primary children . T F

2. According to research, students in ESL-only programs, with no schooling in their native language, take 7-10 years to reach grade level norms. T F

3. A lot of immigrant children have learning disabilities, not language problems. They speak English just fine but they are still failing academically. T F

4. Older generations of immigrants learned without all the special language programs that immigrant children receive now. It was "sink or swim" and they did just fine! T F

5. Second language learners will acquire academic English faster if their parents speak English at home. T F

6. The more time students spend soaking up English in the mainstream classroom, the more they quickly they will learn the language. T F

7. Once students can speak English, they are ready to undertake the academic tasks of the mainstream classroom. T F

8. Cognitive and academic development in native language has an important and positive effect on second language acquisition. T F

9. The culture of students doesn't affect how long it takes them to acquire English. All students learn language the same way. T F

10. Students should be strongly encouraged to speak English right from the first day. T F

Judie Haynes, everythingESL.net , 2002

Responses to Myths of Second Language Acquisition

1. Middle school students learn second languages more easily than young primary age children. True.
This question is more complex than it seems. In controlled research where children have been compared to young adults and in second language learning, it was found that the young adults and learned a second language more readily. Yes, children do outperform adults in the area of pronunciation. Children appear to acquire social language more easily. There is an old myth around that says that children are superior to adults in language learning because their brains are more flexible. This hypothesis has been much disputed. The differences in ability to learn languages may be social rather than biological. The child may have more occasion to interact socially with others . Their requirements for communication are much lower. They have much less to learn in order to interact in the school setting with their peers. Young adults have acquired language learning strategies.

2. According to research, students in ESL-only programs, with no schooling in their native language, take 7-10 years to reach grade level norms. True. In the Collier/Thomas studies it was found that in U.S. schools where all instruction is given through the second language (English), non-native speakers of English with no schooling in their first language take 7-10 years or more to reach age and grade-level norms of their native English-speaking peers. Immigrant students who have had 2-3 years of first language schooling in their home country before they come to the U.S. take at least 5-7 years to reach typical native-speaker performance. This pattern exists across many student groups, regardless of the particular home language that students speak, country of origin, socioeconomic status, and other student background variables.

3. A lot of immigrant children have learning disabilities, not language problems. They speak English just fine but they are still failing academically. False. We often see children on the playground who appear to speak English with no problem. Yet when they are in a classroom situation, they just don't seem to grasp the concepts. Many people fail to realize that there are different levels of language proficiency. The language needed for face-to-face communication takes less time to master than the language needed to perform in cognitively demanding situations such as classes and lectures. It takes a child about 2 years to develop the ability to communicate in a second language on the playground, but it takes 5-7 years to develop age-appropriate academic language. Many immigrant children have been misdiagnosed in the past as "learning disabled," when in fact the problem was that people misunderstood their fluency on the playground, thinking that it meant they should be able to perform in class as well. Actually, they still needed time and assistance to develop their academic English skills (Cummins, 1994).

4. Older generations of immigrants learned without all the special language programs that immigrant children receive now. It was "sink or swim" and they did just fine! False. Like present-day immigrants, many earlier immigrants had trouble in school. In 1911, the U.S. Immigration Service found that 77% of Italian, 60% of Russian, and 51% of German immigrant children were one or more grade levels behind in school compared to 28% of American born children. Also, the level of education needed to get a job has changed. When immigrants came to this country in the earlier part of this century, they were able to get industrial jobs with relatively little education and not much English. Currently, the job market holds little promise for those without a college education. Low skilled jobs are being done by machines and computers, or moved to other countries, and jobs in the service industry and high tech communications are expanding. A final point to keep in mind is that earlier immigrants came mainly from Europe. They came from cultures that were similar in many ways to mainstream U.S. culture. It was easier for them to assimilate into American society because, once they abandoned their home language, they looked like any other "American." Today, many immigrants come from Asia, Latin America, and other non-European countries. They have clear physical attributes that mark them as different from white Americans. Long after they have learned English and acquired jobs in this country, they are still subject to discrimination.

5. Second language learners will acquire academic English faster if their parents speak English at home. False. Research shows that it is much better for parents to speak in native language to their children. This language will be richer and more complex. It doesn't matter in what language basic concepts are developed. Children will eventually translate that learning to English. So if a child is being read to in native language, parents will spend more time discussing the story, and asking questions. I encourage parents to read in both languages if they can. Never instruct a parent to speak only English at home. If you were in Japan, would you be able to speak only Japanese to your own children after a few months?

6. The more time students spend soaking up English in the mainstream classroom, the more quickly they will learn the language. False. Children need comprehensible input. Imagine that you are sitting in a room of Japanese speakers. You have no idea what they are talking about. You could sit there for a long time and learn very little unless someone helped make that input comprehensible. Language is not "soaked up."

7. Once students can speak English, they are ready to undertake the academic tasks of the mainstream classroom. False. Children can speak and socialize way before they can use language for academic purposes. BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) are acquired first. This is social language such as the language needed to interact on the playground and in the classroom.

It usually takes students from 1-3 years to completely develop this social language. Then children will develop CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) skills. This is the language needed to undertake academic tasks in the mainstream classroom. It includes content-specific vocabulary. It usually takes students from 3 to 7 years or longer to develop CALP.

8. Cognitive and academic development in native language has an important and positive effect on second language acquisition. True. In the Collier/Thomas examination of large data sets across many different research sites, they found that the most significant student background variable is the amount of formal schooling students have received in their first language. Across all program treatments, we have found that non-native speakers being schooled in a second language for part or all of the school day typically do reasonably well in the early years of schooling (kindergarten through second or third grade). But from fourth grade on through middle school and high school, when the academic and cognitive demands of the curriculum increase rapidly with each succeeding year, students with little or no academic and cognitive development in their first language do less and less well as they move into the upper grades.

9. The culture of students doesn't affect how long it takes them to acquire English. All students learn language the same way. False. Culture can affect how long it takes children learn English. Do your students come from a modern industrialized country or a rural agricultural society? Do your students come from language backgrounds using a different writing system? These factors will affect how long it takes them to learn English. Previous schooling and school expectations will also affect language learning. Also, the more culture shock experienced by the child, the longer it will take him/her to learn a new language.

10. Students should be strongly encouraged to speak English right from the first day. False. All students go through a "silent period" of varying lengths. A silent period is a time in which students observe, gather and absorb information without speaking. They are developing their listening comprehension skills and sorting out structures in the language.