

## Myths About Second Language Acquisition

Answer each of the following statements with true or false.

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|---|---|---|
| 1. Adults learn second languages more quickly and easily than young children .  | T | F |
| 2. Language learning and language acquisition are the same thing.   | T | F |
| 3. Second language learners normally learn to speak first.  | T | F |
| 4. Children often know more language than they can demonstrate.   | 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. The culture of students doesn't affect how long it takes them to acquire English. All students learn language the same way.      | T | F |

## **Myths of Second Language Acquisition**

### **1. Adults learn second languages more easily than young children. T**

This question is more complex than it seems. In controlled research where children have been compared to adults and teenagers in second language learning, it was found that the adults and teenagers learned a second language more readily. Yes, children do outperform adults in the area of pronunciation and 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. Teenagers and adults have acquired language learning strategies.

### **2. Language acquisition and language learning are the same thing. F**

Language learning is the formal study of rules and grammar of a language. It is the method through which many of us here learned a foreign language. It is rote memory drills and memorized lists of vocabulary.

Language acquisition is the ability to use language in a much more sophisticated manner: to advance content area knowledge, to study a subject. A child who has acquired a language does not need to translate back to his own language. He or she can generate their own sentences.

### **3. Second language learners normally learn to speak first. F**

The ability to speak is a productive skill. It requires a lot more from the second language learner than listening or reading. There is a phenomenon in language learning called the "silent period." This silent period can last from 1 day to more than a year. Remember, however, that students who speak after one day are mere parroting what they hear around them. This is not really "speaking."

### **4. Children often know a lot more language than they demonstrate. T**

The first skills that children acquire are receptive skills - listening and, if they are literate in their own language, reading. Often children will understand the language that is spoken around them but will not wish to produce language. Do not think, however, that a child who has been here a month or two can understand everything you are saying. I often here teachers say, "He really knows what I am saying. He is just being uncooperative." Although the child may understand much of what you are saying, he/she may not necessarily be ready to speak or write.

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

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. 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. F**

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. F**

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

Culture can affect how long it takes children learn English. Do your students come from a modern industrialized countries or a rural agricultural societies? 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.

**Judie Haynes, 2001**