MYTHS AND REALITIES

BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

SECOND EDITION

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HEINEMANN • PORTSMOUTH, NH
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<tr>
<th>Myth #</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Teachers in English-medium classrooms should not allow students to use their native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>language as this will retard their English language development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Bilingual education is a luxury we cannot afford.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>When English language learners speak in their native language in English-medium classes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>they are likely to be off-task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>The native language of children who come from Spanish-speaking countries, like Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Guatemala, is obviously Spanish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>Many ELLs don’t speak either English or the native language well. They just don’t have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>much language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth #</th>
<th>Myth</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Learning a second language is an entirely different proposition from learning one’s own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>native language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Younger children are more effective language learners than older learners.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>Once second language learners are able to speak reasonably fluently, their problems are</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>likely to be over in school.</td>
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<td>#4</td>
<td>Learning academic English is equally challenging for all second language learners.</td>
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<td>#5</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth #</th>
<th>Myth</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Because literacy is so important these days, we need to spend as much time as it takes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>during the regular school day teaching English literacy, even if it means holding off on</td>
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<td></td>
<td>content area instruction.</td>
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Demographic Myths

DEMOGRAPHIC MYTH #1: The number of students who don’t speak English is decreasing.

REALITY: Language minority students, including English language learners (ELLs), are the fastest growing group of students in the United States today.

BACKGROUND/OVERVIEW

Enrollment figures for ELLs, as reported by State Education Agencies (SEAs) in the United States and territories, have reflected an upward trend over the last several years. The most recent figures available for the 2003–2004 school year indicate a 65 percent increase over the 1993–1994 school year. More than 5 million ELLs were enrolled in public or nonpublic elementary or secondary schools during the 2003–2004 school year, representing an increase of approximately 2 million ELLs over the past decade (NCELA 2005).

The three states with the largest numbers of ELL students in 2003–2004 were California (1,598,535), Texas (660,707), and Florida (282,066). However, the states that have shown the highest rates of growth are unexpected and worth noting. A cluster of states in the Southeast showed dramatic growth over the decade—with South Carolina posting a 521 percent increase in ELL students; North Carolina, a 470 percent increase; Tennessee, a 471 percent increase; and Georgia, a 397 percent increase.
Also worth noting is that during the 1990s, growth in the number of immigrant children was substantially faster in secondary schools than elementary schools (72 percent versus 39 percent) (Capps et al. 2005).

Spanish is the native language of approximately 76 percent of ELLs. The next highest language group is Vietnamese—spoken by 2.4 percent of ELLs, followed by Hmong (1.8 percent), and Korean and Arabic (1.2 percent each) (NCELA 2002).

A further confirmation of this upward trend in the number of language minority students is that as of July 1, 1998, the number of Hispanic children in the United States outnumbered African American children, making Hispanics the largest minority group among children younger than eighteen (Jacobson 1998).

**USEFUL RESOURCES FOR DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**


**DEMOGRAPHIC MYTH #2:** Most English language learners were born outside of the United States; most ELL students are recent arrivals to the United States.

**REALITY:** Most English language learners were born in the United States. According to an analysis of 2000 Census Bureau data, nearly three-fourths of the school-age children of immigrants were born in the United States. The rest were foreign-born. Of those children born outside the United States, 38 percent were from Mexico and 25 percent from Asian countries. The rest were from Latin America, Europe, and other parts of the world.

**BACKGROUND/OVERVIEW**

All ELL students are not immigrants or recent arrivals. The majority of students who are English language learners were born in the United States. These students are children of immigrants. Those children who are foreign-born tend to be concentrated
in the higher grades, and may present special challenges for secondary schools since foreign-born children tend to enter U.S. schools with limited English proficiency or with relatively few years of formal schooling in their home countries, often due to civil unrest, economic hardship (in other countries, students are often required to pay for schooling), or war (Capps et al. 2005).

As Fleischman and Hopstock demonstrated in 1993 (Table 1–1), the percentage of ELL students born in the United States was highest in elementary school (almost 41 percent). But overall, the percentage of ELL students born in the United States is about one-third of the total number of ELL students. Most of these students were born into families where languages other than English are regularly (and sometimes exclusively) spoken in the home (Fleischman and Hopstock 1993). This trend continues today with 16 percent of all children in grades Pre-K–5 being second-generation U.S.-born citizens in 2000 and only 3 percent first-generation immigrants. In the higher grades (six to twelve), 12 percent of all children in 2000 were second-generation and 7 percent were first-generation immigrants (Capps et al. 2005).

**DEMOGRAPHIC MYTH #3:** Students who do not speak English are found only in large, urban areas.

**REALITY:** Students who do not speak English are found in many districts in the United States.
BACKGROUND/OVERVIEW

A large-scale study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and published in 2003 found that approximately 6,400 of the 15,000 school districts in the country had ELL students enrolled, with the number varying from one to 321,000 in the Los Angeles Unified School District (Zehler et al. 2003). Approximately 50 percent of the 91,000 public schools in the United States enrolled at least one ELL.

In 2001–2002, 2.6 percent of districts with ELLs enrolled five thousand or more ELL students. Together these districts accounted for more than half the ELLs in grades K–12. In contrast, 60 percent of districts with ELLs enrolled ninety-nine or fewer ELL students. These districts combined accounted for a total of only 2.8 percent of the total ELL student population (Zehler et al. 2003).

The highest concentrations of ELLs and language minority students can generally be found in urban areas (NCELA 2005b). Table 1–2 shows the school districts with the top ten ELL enrollments. Notice that the percent of ELL enrollment varies dramatically as a proportion of the district’s total student enrollment.

The vast majority of immigrants settle in large urban areas, but their numbers are increasing dramatically in rural areas, where 57 percent of immigrants (up from 48 percent in the 1980s) are of Mexican origin (Huang 1999). Agriculture, poultry processing plants, and meat packing firms are attracting immigrants to rural areas in record numbers.

The growing numbers of ELLs in rural settings presents a different set of challenges. As Wrigley (2000) reports, “Rural communities do not generally have much experience with ‘outsiders’ of any sort. There are many rural areas where a majority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>ELL Enrollment</th>
<th>Percent ELL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>321,149</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
<td>129,286</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>82,849</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Houston, TX</td>
<td>69,881</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Miami-Dade, FL</td>
<td>67,211</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>52,271</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Clark County, NV</td>
<td>46,183</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>San Diego, CA</td>
<td>40,818</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Santa Ana, CA</td>
<td>37,016</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Long Beach, CA</td>
<td>32,080</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NCELA (2005b)
of the local residents have had little to no experience with people from other cultures. This can lead to fear and misunderstanding when immigrants begin to settle in an isolated community. In addition, small school districts tend to have less access to resources and bilingual people—both of which are essential to meeting the needs of the newly arrived language minority students and their families.”

**DEMOGRAPHIC MYTH #4:** Only teachers in urban areas can expect to teach ELL students.

**REALITY:** About 50 percent of teachers—one out of two—can expect to teach English language learners sometime during their teaching careers.

### BACKGROUND/OVERVIEW

As early as 1980–1981, the Teachers Language Skills Survey (a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education) showed that an estimated one-half of all public school teachers in the United States reported that they were currently teaching or had previously taught ELL students (O’Malley and Waggoner 1984). Given the dramatic rise in the numbers of language minority and English language learners since that time, one can only assume that percentage will increase. In fact, in 2003, almost 43 percent of all teachers K–12 reported that they were currently teaching an English language learner (Zehler et al. 2003).

Although many English language learners spend most of their day in a regular classroom, regular classroom teachers often are unprepared to work with ELL students effectively. Early on, Penfield (1987) explored the attitudes and perceptions of 162 regular classroom teachers regarding ELL students, English as a second language (ESL), and the role of ESL teachers. Analysis of the responses showed that many teachers felt unprepared to teach ELL students effectively and had little knowledge of how to integrate content teaching and English language development. In fact, the regular teachers felt it was the job of the ESL teacher to teach both academic subject matter and ESL—believing that ESL teachers spoke the native language of each student and even taught in this language.

Today, the situation has changed somewhat. In some states, such as Florida, all teachers must have some training that prepares them to work with ELL students (although what that training consists of is quite variable—from a single course, up to eighteen hours of course work depending on how many ELL students the district generally serves). Many teacher preparation programs (especially those that are accredited by the National Council of the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE]) require graduating teachers to have some course work that speaks to the needs of English language learners. However, given the dramatic growth in the population of language minority students, it is difficult to tell if these measures will be enough in the years to come.
A recent large-scale study of teachers of English language learners in California (Gándara et al. 2003) showed that many teachers had little or no professional development designed to help them teach their ELL students and that the quality of training when provided was uneven.

**Scenario**

*It is mid-April. Three preservice teachers, Deidre, Alva, and Michael, are having lunch together in the twenty-five minutes available between late afternoon and evening classes. They are talking about their heavy class load:*

**Deidre:** This program is just about killing me. I’m learning a lot, but I have no time for myself. Although what we’re learning in our second language acquisition class is interesting, it’s not at all useful to me. A couple of kids in my placement have Chinese names, but there’s not a single ELL kid. What good is this second language acquisition class to me right now? Or in the future? My principal has already told me that they have a job for me, and that’s where I’d like to work. I wish I could drop this class, just so I could have a bit more time for myself.

**Alva:** I know what you mean, because I’m teaching a class of African American kids. One hundred percent of them are African American. It just doesn’t make sense to require that we all take this class.

**Michael:** I’m not sure I agree with you. Maybe that’s because there are a few ESOL kids in my class, so it seems more relevant. But, how do you know you’ll always teach English-speaking kids? I’m not sure any district is immune to immigration.

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*Mid-April one year later: Deidre, Alva, and Michael are completing their first year as teachers. They see each other at a new teacher staff development day sponsored by the county office of education. Again, the conversation turns to nonnative English-speaking students:*

**Michael:** Do you remember last year how we talked about whether we needed our second language acquisition course? I’ve been wondering about you both. How’s it going?

**Alva:** Well, I knew that being a first-year teacher would be difficult, but I wasn’t expecting to be teaching ELL kids, also. Over the summer, my district decided to mix up the ethnic groups, I guess in some kind of a bid to get rid of
segregation. So now I’ve got about a third of the class who speak a whole bunch of languages like Vietnamese, Portuguese, Croatian, and Farsi. It’s been hard and now I wish that I’d paid more attention to that course.

Michael: I have kids who speak nine different languages and if it weren’t for our ESOL teacher, I think I’d be in desperate shape. But, she comes into my class every day and helps me out. I’ve gone back to our course reader over and over again. I’d have been lost completely without that course.

Deidre: It’s still the same for me. Only English speakers. Though there’s talk of some families from Central America moving into the district. I heard that a local nursery has been hiring men from Central America and now they’re bringing in their families. But I don’t think that it’ll affect me as my school is in a pretty high-income area.

Mid-April two years later: It is a Saturday and Deidre, Alva, and Michael are chatting together over coffee at a one-day institute on science and second language learners sponsored by a local technical assistance center:

Alva: What on earth are you doing here, Deidre? I thought your school was an English-only school.

Deidre: It was, but not any more. A lot of kids from El Salvador and Guatemala have moved into the district and our school has been designated as the site for the newcomer students. They spend half the day in a class for just newcomers, but then they spend the rest of the day with the rest of us. Plus, a local church is sponsoring refugees from Eastern Europe, Bosnia, I think.

Michael: So does everyone have ESOL kids?

Deidre: Just about everyone, though the upper-grade teachers don’t have as many right now. The irony is that my principal was thrilled that I had taken those second language acquisition courses and had the supplemental credential. I didn’t like to disappoint him and tell him that I hadn’t paid much attention. To be honest, though, a lot of what we learned in the program is coming back, so maybe I wasn’t so zoned out as I thought! It’s hard, though, particularly as I haven’t seen any good teachers who have experience working with second language learners. I’m lucky though because my principal is really supportive of us and we get materials and as much staff development as we want. And to think I had it all figured out!
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