



FOUNDATION *for*  
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**Challenging  
Common Myths About  
Young English  
Language Learners**

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## Summary

This review of research from a variety of disciplines about dual language development and the impact of different educational approaches for children ages three to eight runs counter to much conventional thinking.

Scientific studies suggest that young ELL children are quite capable of learning subject matter in two languages. In fact, they may benefit cognitively from learning more than one language. Transitioning from their first language to English before they have a firm grasp of their first language, usually by the end of Third Grade, may be detrimental in the long run. Early literacy skills learned in the home language do transfer to English. The children who were taught in English-only classrooms or transitioned to English instruction before they demonstrated well-established oral language abilities in their own language frequently never achieved high levels of

English fluency and did not fare as well as those who had the opportunity to learn in two languages. All children can benefit cognitively, linguistically, and culturally, from learning more than one language.<sup>32</sup>

There are significant differences among children who are becoming fluent in English that will influence how they learn English. These include the language spoken at home, the socioeconomic circumstances of the family, the age of the child and extent of exposure to English, fluency in the home language, circumstances surrounding the family's immigration to the U.S., and the particular values and customs of the family.

Each of these factors may require programs to adapt, because no ELL model will fit all populations and contexts. In addition to differences among ELLs, programs also will differ with respect to the expertise of their staff, their resources and capacity, and community priorities.



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## **Challenging Common Myths About Young English Language Learners**

**W**ith the increasing demands for accountability and high academic achievement for all students, educational policymakers are increasing their attention to young children (ages three to eight) from non-English speaking backgrounds. Children who speak a language other than English in the home and are not fully fluent in English are designated as English Language Learners (ELLs).

The rate of growth of ELLs in the school systems has been dramatic over the past decade, with some Southern states experiencing 300 to 400 percent increases. In some parts of the country, more than 50 percent of the preschool population comes from non-English-speaking homes.<sup>(1)</sup> As a group, ELL students have struggled to become fluent in English, lagged well behind in terms of academic achievement, and had school dropout rates almost twice those of native English speakers.<sup>2</sup>

The confluence of these factors has created an urgent need to design and implement instructional approaches and school structures that will ensure that ELL students thrive and achieve at high levels. The issue of how to best educate our non-English speaking students to full English fluency and high academic standards has often been clouded by deeply held beliefs and myths that are not informed by current research.

Fortunately, in the past two decades there have been advances in neuroscience, rigorous research on dual language development, early childhood program evaluations, and international research on multilingual development that can provide useful guidance on best policies and practices for young ELL children .

When carefully analyzed, this new research often contradicts commonly held beliefs and myths that have influenced the instruction, assessment practices, and organizational structure of educational programs that serve ELL children ages three to eight.

The new research shows that a consistent, coherent approach to education that provides continuous, enhanced learning opportunities from Prekindergarten through Third Grade (PK-3) offers the best chance for improved academic performance. ELL children in PK-3 programs would have the advantage of six years of continuous education with a curriculum integrating standards, consistent instructional methods, and ongoing assessments of their progress.

The PK-3 approach gives ELL children more time both to master the essential elements of the English language and to learn challenging academic content. Academic success at the end of Third Grade will increase the likelihood that ELL children will do well during the rest of their academic careers.

This brief highlights six commonly held beliefs about the development and learning of young children who are learning English as their second language and presents research evidence that can better guide educational policies.

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**MYTH 1: Learning two languages during the early childhood years will overwhelm, confuse, and/or delay a child's acquisition of English.**

When preschoolers insert Spanish into their English sentences or school-age children alternate between the two languages while socializing with their peers, conventional wisdom concludes that they are confusing the two languages. Because language learning is such a monumental and challenging task during the first years of life, it is also logical to believe that expecting young children to learn not one, but two languages as they are just beginning to speak may delay overall language fluency.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the opposite holds true. Most young children throughout the world successfully learn more than one language from their earliest years. Exciting new research from neuroscientists and psycholinguists on the impact of learning two languages during the infant-toddler years has highlighted the human brain's extensive capacity to learn multiple languages, as well as the infant's ability to separate out each language and to interpret contextual cues to know which language is appropriate in a given context.<sup>4</sup>

There is wide scientific consensus that bilingual infants develop two separate but connected linguistic systems during the first year of life.<sup>5</sup> We now know that infants have the innate capacity to learn two languages from birth and that this early dual language exposure does not delay development in either language.

Recent research suggests that the development of two languages benefits the brain through the development of greater brain tissue density in areas related to language, memory, and attention.<sup>6</sup> Young children learning two languages also have more neural activity in the parts of the brain associated with language processing.<sup>7</sup> This increased brain activity and neural density may have long-term positive effects on specific types of cognitive abilities, such as those that require focusing on the details of a task and knowing how language is structured and used.<sup>8</sup>

These studies have also demonstrated that knowing more than one language does not delay the acquisition of English or impede academic achievement in English when both languages are supported. Research on children who learn English after their home language has been established — usually around age three — has also shown that most young children are capable of adding a second language during the PK-3 years and that this dual language ability confers long-term cognitive, cultural, and economic advantages.<sup>9, 10, 11</sup>

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**MYTH 2: Total English immersion from Prekindergarten through Third Grade is the best way for a young English Language Learner to acquire English.**

Common sense suggests that the more time children spend listening to and speaking English, the faster they will master the fundamentals of the English language. For adults and older children who have a well-established first language, this may be the case. It also is true that children need sufficient input in a language to gain fluency. In addition, many educators are concerned that if young children are not instructed in English-only programs from the very beginning, the children will be confused and their acquisition of English fluency and literacy skills will be delayed.

Research on the effects of early English immersion programs for ELL students contradicts this belief. The evidence suggests that children in these preschool programs tend to lose their ability to communicate in their first language, start to prefer the English language, frequently develop communication problems with their extended families, and experience depressed academic achievement in English.<sup>12</sup>

For young children who are actively processing and have not yet mastered the elements of their first language, completely shifting from their first language to a new, unfamiliar language too early may have a negative effect on English fluency and academic achievement during the PK-3 years and beyond. While English can be successfully introduced during the preschool years, if it replaces the home language, and children do not have the opportunity to continue to learn in the language they know, their future linguistic, conceptual, and academic development in English is at risk.

Systematic, deliberate exposure to English during early childhood combined with ongoing opportunities to learn important concepts in the home language results in the highest achievement in both the home language and English by the end of Third Grade and beyond.<sup>13</sup>

The most recent evidence suggests that intensive support for the home language during the preschool years will help, not hurt, long-term attainment in English. Young children can learn nursery rhymes, songs, extended vocabulary, and early literacy skills in English and their home language with adult support. ELL children who receive systematic learning opportunities in their home language from ages three to eight consistently outperform those who attend English-only programs on measures of academic achievement in English during the middle and high school years.<sup>14, 15, 16</sup>

These dual language learning opportunities can occur during designated classroom instructional time throughout the day in each language, in addition to extended activities conducted in the home by family members in the child's first language. Encouraging ELL children's families to continue to talk with, read to, and sing to the child and to use the home language in everyday activities will promote continuous development of the child's first language while the child also is acquiring English.<sup>17, 18</sup>

**MYTH 3: Because schools don't have the capacity to provide instruction in all of the languages represented by the children, they should provide English-only instruction.**

Early education programs throughout the country are reporting not only more ELL children, but also more different languages represented among their children and families. In Los Angeles County, more than 55 percent of the five-year-olds entering kindergarten in 2004-2005 were children whose primary home language is not English, with 88 percent coming from Spanish-speaking homes.<sup>19</sup> Head Start has documented more than 140 different languages among their families enrolled. At the same time, less than 10 percent of our teachers are fluent in more than one language, and few teachers certified in early childhood education have any training in cultural and linguistic diversity.<sup>20</sup>

Because school administrators cannot meet the needs of all linguistic groups, they argue that it makes sense to adopt English-only approaches. While it may make sense from a narrow staffing perspective, this would be a misguided conclusion. From the preceding discussion, it is clear that in order to thrive academically, socially, and cognitively, young ELL children need systematic support for their home language while they are acquiring English.

Even when teachers do not speak the child's first language, there are many specific teaching practices that will support native language development.<sup>21</sup> Teachers and ancillary staff can support children's home language throughout the day in all kinds of learning situations; they also can train parents, community members, and volunteers to work with ELL children in their home language. Ideally, educators will provide home language support through the elementary grades.

It is possible for all PK-3 teachers to introduce young ELL children to English while also supporting development of the child's first language — even when the teacher has no experience with the language. While this is a challenging goal, it should be a high priority for classrooms in which children speak many languages.



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**MYTH 4: Native English speakers will experience academic and language delays if they are enrolled in dual language programs.**

Conventional wisdom holds that parents and educators may be reluctant to enroll native English-speaking children in programs where much of their academic instruction is in a language the children have not mastered. They fear that their children may “lose ground” over the PK-3 years compared with their monolingual English-speaking peers. Because all important achievement testing is conducted in English, there also is the fear that the students will be disadvantaged by the amount of instructional time spent learning a second language.

In fact, recent evaluations show that the dual language approach is effective for both ELL students and for native English speakers. Dual language programs educate all children in two languages. The goal is to promote bilingualism and biculturalism for all students. In these classrooms, all students experience the benefits and challenges associated with learning a second language during the early childhood years as well as the richness of being introduced to many cultures and social customs.

The dual language approach is one of the few instructional methods that can fully close the achievement gap for ELL students while not adversely affecting non-ELL students. All students seem to benefit, as measured by standardized achievement testing and positive reports from parents, teachers, and administrators.<sup>22, 23</sup>



**MYTH 5: Spanish-speaking Latinos show social as well as academic delays when entering Kindergarten.**

The academic achievement gap for young Latino ELLs is significant at Kindergarten entry and persists throughout the school years. In a large national study, low-income Hispanic children scored more than half a standard deviation below the national average in math and reading achievement at kindergarten entry.<sup>24</sup>

These achievement disparities persist as children who are not native English speakers continue to have substantially lower levels of educational achievement, including high school completion and college enrollment rates, than their peers from English-only backgrounds.<sup>25, 26</sup>

Although these academic discrepancies are well documented and well known among the educational community, almost no attention has been paid to the social competencies of young ELL children.<sup>27</sup>

The emotional and social competence of young ELL children is important to their school adjustment and academic achievement. Young children must be able to regulate their emotions, follow directions, form positive social bonds, and express their feelings appropriately to succeed in school. According to multiple measures of family risk factors, e.g., poverty, immigrant status, English language fluency, and access to mental and physical health services, Latino ELL children would appear to be at greater risk than their white and non-Hispanic peers for poor mental health.

However, recent research has found that children from Mexican immigrant families had lower levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms than both their white and African-American peers.<sup>28</sup> Teachers rated the children of Mexican immigrant families at Kindergarten entry as more socially and emotionally competent than their peers from similar backgrounds. The finding that these children were rated as having a “mental health advantage” is noteworthy, given the multiple risk factors associated with Mexican immigrant families.

These unrecognized social-emotional strengths among a population often viewed only through the “at-risk” lens offers a potential source of resilience that school personnel should recognize, support, and enhance. Because young Mexican immigrant children are judged to be at least as intra- and inter-personally competent as their peers, if not more so, than their peers, Hispanic child-rearing practices have likely promoted their children’s ability to control their emotions and get along with others at school entry — two highly prized social competencies for school success.



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**MYTH 6: Latino English language learners are less likely to be enrolled in Prekindergarten programs, because of their families' cultural values.**

Research documents that Latino families enroll their children in early educational programs at much lower rates than their African-American, White, and Asian counterparts. Close to half of children in California ages three to five across all racial/ethnic groups are enrolled in preschool/child care (47 percent), while only 37 percent of Latino children ages three to five are similarly enrolled.<sup>29</sup> When Latino preschoolers live in a household where no one over the age of 14 speaks English fluently (linguistically isolated), the enrollment rate drops to 32 percent. In contrast, about 50 percent of Asian children in California attend preschool/child care irrespective of the ability of people over the age of 14 to speak English fluently.

The conventional wisdom holds that this low attendance for Latino children, despite the well-known benefits of high-quality early education, is based on their families' cultural values and beliefs. Because the Latino culture has a strong emphasis on “la familia” and tends to turn to the family for economic and instrumental support, many have inferred that Spanish-speaking mothers choose to keep their young children in the home rather than enrolling them in early education programs.

Recent studies cast doubt on this assumption. They suggest that Latino children attend out-of-home center-based programs at lower rates because of financial constraints and lack of access, not because of any cultural reluctance.<sup>30, 31</sup> In fact, Latina mothers have consistently placed a high value on quality early childhood programs, but often cannot find affordable programs in their neighborhoods.



## **Conclusions**

The following conclusions rest on the current research and practice.

1. All young children are capable of learning two languages. Becoming bilingual has long-term cognitive, academic, social, cultural, and economic benefits. Bilingualism is an asset.
2. Young ELL students require systematic support for the continued development of their home language.
3. Loss of the home language has potential negative long-term consequences for the ELL child's academic, social, and emotional development, as well as for the family dynamics.
4. Teachers and programs can adopt effective strategies to support home language development even when the teachers are monolingual English speakers.
5. Dual language programs are an effective approach to improving academic achievement for ELL children while also providing benefits to native English speakers.
6. Hispanic Spanish-speaking children enter Kindergarten with many social strengths that are the result of positive parenting practices that need to be acknowledged and enhanced.
7. Hispanic parents value high-quality early education and will enroll their young children if programs are affordable and accessible.

Finally, recognizing the period from ages three to eight as critical for language development is necessary for providing the continuity and extended time for children to fully benefit from these programs. The PK-3 years are critical years for developing mastery of the sounds, structure, and functions of language, and thus are an ideal time to expose children to the benefits of two languages.<sup>7, 22, 25</sup>

With regular and continued application of these findings, we can improve the educational outcomes for ELL children as well as the social and economic strength of our diverse communities. However, doing so will require that we all abandon outdated misconceptions and diligently inform our practices with current scientific findings.

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