

Myths and Misconceptions about Second Language Acquisition

True or False?

KEY TERMS:

LEP=Limited English Proficient; **L1**= First Language; **L2**=Second Language;
ELL=English Language Learner; **SLA**= Second Language Acquisition; **BICS**= Basic
Interpersonal Communicative Skills; **CALP**= Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

1. Young children learn a second language quickly and easily.

T & F: It is a common belief but a broad generalization to assume this. As with *all* learners, many variables (including affective, socioeconomic, educational/literacy, cultural, and learning style) impact on SLA.
2. LEP children who are encouraged to speak English at home as well as in school acquire English faster due to greater exposure to L2.

F: Research shows that L1 skills transfer to the second language; what is critical is for the student to be immersed in a language-rich environment, regardless of the language. When LEP parents are asked to speak English to their children, they frequently provide incomplete language models and limited language exposure. *"It is better for José to speak good Spanish than broken English."*
3. The younger the child is exposed to English, the faster he/she will perform well in school.

T & F: In general, and based on many individual variables (see #1 above), young children acquire "social" language (BICS) with relative ease. However, research shows that students who enter the U.S. with established literacy skills in L1 acquire English academic language (CALP) more quickly and efficiently. Thus, older children who have been instructed in L1 ultimately perform cognitively demanding tasks better and faster than younger children who have not yet gained L1 literacy skills. This is a primary and valid argument for dual language programs.
4. ELL's who still do not speak in class after two or three months in the U.S. should be referred for consideration to special education.

F: The "Silent Period," a common, initial stage in the SLA process, may last for six months or longer after the student enters an English-only classroom environment. During this time, ELL's are actively acquiring receptive language and processing comprehensible input; thus, teachers must include them in all activities, although expectations for oral production must be adapted.
5. Once children are speaking English fluently, they can be expected to "catch up" academically quickly.

F: Research on SLA shows that although ELL's may acquire oral proficiency and relative fluency in English within 3 years (BICS), they require at least 5–7 years to obtain the academic language (CALP) needed to perform cognitively challenging academic tasks at the top of Bloom's Taxonomy. Some studies even indicate that acquiring CALP may take up to 10 years.
6. It is better for children not to speak L1 in class; doing so slows down the process of learning English.

T & F: It is essential for students to practice their English and ultimately answer questions, participate in discussions, and perform in English. However, allowing students with common languages to speak to each other in L1 is an effective way to ensure understanding. Many teachers set up occasional "mini" L1 groups to allow students to process recently taught concepts while still requiring written and class-wide oral responses to be provided in English.