

Challenging Common Myths about Dual Language Learners (Summary)

Source: Espinosa, L.M. (2013). Pre-K-3rd: Challenging common myths about dual language learners. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development. (For the full text, go to: <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/MythsOfTeachingELLsEspinosa.pdf>)

Definition: Young children who speak a language other than English in the home and are not fully fluent in English have been identified as Dual Language Learners (DLLs), a term that has been adopted by the Office of Head Start and the U.S. Department of Education.

MYTH 1: Learning Two Languages During the Early Childhood Years Will Overwhelm, Confuse, and/or Delay Acquisition of English.

All young children are capable of learning two languages. Becoming bilingual has long-term cognitive, academic, social, cultural, and economic benefits—it is an asset. When both languages are supported, academic achievement in English is not impeded.

MYTH 2: The Language Development of Dual Language Learners Looks the Same as Monolingual Language Development.

Infants are able to perceive and process all sounds of all spoken languages, but between 8-10 months this speech perception begins to narrow. After seven years of age, the capacity to hear and process unfamiliar phonemes (the sounds of language) has dramatically decreased. This is one reason the PreK-3rd years are ideal for children to learn a second language.

Bilingualism develops across both brain hemispheres and is more dispersed. This leads to different skill sets than monolingual children acquire.

MYTH 3: Total English Immersion from Prekindergarten Through Third Grade Is the Best Way for a Young Dual Language Learner to Acquire English.

It is a commonly held belief that the more time children spend listening to and speaking English, the quicker they will master it. Research on the effects of early English immersion programs for DLL students contradicts this belief. Recent evidence reveals that young children are capable of learning academic content in two languages, and they benefit cognitively and socially from learning more than one language. Also, support for the home language during the PreKindergarten years will benefit, not hinder, long term English acquisition.

MYTH 4: Because Schools Don't Have the Capacity to Provide Instruction in all the

Languages Represented by DLL Children, Programs Should Provide Instruction in One Common Language—English.

Educators have the daunting task of working with children who speak many different languages, but using English-only instruction would be misguided. Teachers and ancillary staff can support children's home language through all kinds of learning situations; they can also train parents, community members and volunteers to work with DLL children in their home language. There are many long-term benefit of promoting skills in children's home language as well as English.

MYTH 5: Spanish-Speaking Latinos Show Social as Well As Academic Delays When Entering Kindergarten.

For Latino dual language learners, the academic achievement gap continues to be an issue at Kindergarten entry persists throughout the school years. Although their academic discrepancies are well documented, little attention has been paid to the social competencies of young DLL children. Children from low SES Mexican immigrant families tend to be more socially and emotionally competent than peers from similar SES backgrounds.

MYTH 6: Native English Speakers May Experience Academic and Language Delays in Dual Language Programs.

Information from recent studies shows that both DLLs and native English speakers benefit from a balanced dual language approach; these benefits are found cognitively, academically, and culturally. It is one of the few instructional approaches that can close the achievement gap.

MYTH 7: If the Instruction in Your Program is Delivered Primarily in English, You Do Not Need to Worry about DLL Children's Progress in Their Home Language.

It is often assumed that assessing DLL students' progress in English gives educators all the information they need in order to make appropriate educational decisions. The reality is that there are many important features of their abilities in their home language as well as facets of their early language learning contexts that directly affect DLLs' progress and achievement in English.

DLL students' ability can be more accurately assessed when done in English and the home language. Some knowledge is specific to a language. Home language is connected to English language development.

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.

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.