Shedding light on misconceptions: An act of advocacy

By Dr. Jamie Harrison
Department of Curriculum and Teaching
ESOL Education Program
Auburn University
jlh0069@auburn.edu

As the English learner population in U.S. schools continues to grow and accountability measures add further pressure to teachers in schools, the role of the ESOL teacher is increasingly becoming one of advocate. Misconceptions about immigration and documentation, learning and speaking English, and teachers and teaching have been documented and countered, and taking action as ESOL teachers about these misconceptions is an initial step of advocacy for ESOL teachers. Working in collaboration with mainstream teachers means ESOL teachers need to be aware of common misperceptions about English learners. Knowing the misconceptions and reality of many of these issues allows the ESOL teacher to take a proactive stance in collaborative relationships with teachers and professional development opportunities.

Keywords: English learner, misconceptions, advocacy

Introduction

English learners (EL) in American schools make up 9.3 percent of the total student

population, with seven states identified as having 10 percent or higher ELs enrolled in

public schools (U.S Department of Education, 2017). ELs attend public schools in both

urban and rural areas (U.S Department of Education, 2017), and ELs' academic progress lags behind their native-English speaking counterparts with over 75% of eighth grade ELs across the country scoring below basic on state mandated tests (Samson & Collins, 2012). Statistics suggest the EL population in the state of Georgia to be seven percent of total school enrollment, which is up from four percent in 2004 (Beaudette, 2014). However, the education of teachers about English learners has not kept pace with the continued growth of this student population (Samson & Collins, 2012). In addition to this paucity of training, continued perpetuation of misconceptions about English learners and language learning has the potential to affect teachers and students at the classroom level.

Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding and Cuthbert (1988) summarize definitions of belief as found in the literature to be a "proposition, or statement of relation among things accepted as true," (p. 53), and while beliefs about English learners may not always be congruent, they are the foundation for action in the classroom. Individual beliefs and values of teachers are essential in the shaping of objectives, goals, curriculum, and instructional methods (Yero, 2002). Conceptualizations, and in contrast, misconceptualizations are among the wide range of terms used in education belief research (Smith, Skarbeck, & Hurst, 2005) to explore the beliefs of teachers on topics ranging from curriculum, standards, and accountability to beliefs about teachers, students and learning (Borg, 2003).

Misconceptions about English learners continue to inform local, state, and even national policy discussions. Dispelling these misconceptions is now an act of advocacy by ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers for ELs and the National

Association of Educators includes organizing and educating others as one step in EL advocacy (National Association of Education, 2015). Educational reform embodied in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 and current political rhetoric (Valverde, 2016) continue to push English learners and immigrants into the spotlight of public debate. Identifying myths and misconceptions and uncovering the truth is only one step in this advocacy process, and there are lists already generated that inform us about common myths (Rusul Arubail, 2015; Fact Sheet No. 15 - 16, 2015). Additionally, research by Harper and de Jong (2004) outline common misconceptions held by teachers, and Reeves' (2006) research highlights key inaccurate beliefs held by teachers about ELs. The following list of misconceptions is derived from a variety of sources (Rusul Arubail, 2015; Fact Sheet No. 15 - 16, 2015; Harper & de Jong, 2004; Reeves, 2006) as well as personal experience talking and working with a variety of teachers over the years. The act of dispelling misconceptions is a crucial step of ESOL teacher advocacy for ELs. This article will outline common misconceptions, contextualize them within the current education and immigration climate, and offer practical guidance for taking action on behalf of ELs.

Misconceptions about Immigration and Documentation

Immigrants are All English Learners. Immigration permeates political discussions today with over 700,000 hits in a basic Google search for 'undocumented immigration news 2017,' and many of these discussions include issues related to immigrants in public schools. Yarborough (2017) reports on a ballot initiative in San Bernardino, California to ban undocumented immigrants from public schools. While this initiative was struck down, The Heritage Foundation, a leading conservative political

action group, publishes anti-immigration commentary (Wood, 2014) meant to exploit fear and misunderstanding about this marginalized group. Misconceptions about what qualifies a designated status of 'English learner' in public schools is one of a variety of complex misunderstandings about immigrants.

An English learner is defined by the U.S. Department of Education as someone who was not born in the United States or speaks a native language other than English, or whose home environment predominantly uses a language other than English (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). Roughly one in four students (12.5 million) enrolled in U.S. public schools are children of immigrants (Batlova & McHugh, 2010), yet only an estimated 9.3 percent of the U.S. public school population are classified as EL (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). These numbers suggest that many children who come from immigrant families either spoke English when they arrived, have learned English well enough to completely exit the ESOL program, or are unidentified. Whichever is the case, reminding administrators and teachers about the requirement and value of the Home Language Survey is an act of advocacy for ELs. The Home Language Survey is a tool for initial identification of ELs enrolling in school systems. Without this as a baseline, damaging assumptions about language ability based on skin color or ethnic background made by untrained school personnel may impede student academic success.

All English Learners are Immigrants. On the other hand, in spite of the U.S. Department of Education definition, many students classified as English learners were born in the United States, making them U.S. citizens. Zong and Batlova (2015) report that more than half of those designated English learner of ages 5 to 17 are U.S. born.

Nevertheless, being born in the United States does not ensure English is spoken in the home and one in five U. S. residents speak a language other than English at home (Ziegler & Camarota, 2014). Furthermore, of the nearly 62 million foreign-language speakers in the United States, 44 percent are U.S. born (Ziegler & Camarota, 2014).

Learning a language is complicated and many factors influence English acquisition even when the language of instruction and the surrounding society is English. Schumann's theory of social distance suggests that many factors contribute to acculturation and likewise, second language acquisition (Schumann, 1978). Teachers who make assumptions about a students' immigration status are violating that student's privacy and potentially creating obstacles for that student's successful navigation of the educational system. A strong 'English-only' movement in the United States is evident with H.R. 997 and S. 678, known as *The English Language Unity Act of 2017,* recently introduced in Congress (Chairman Mauro Mujica, 2017), and there is a history in the United States of conflating knowing English with citizenship (Schiffman, n.d.). Reminding teachers that citizens of the United States are not required to speak English can be an act of advocacy for ELs. Knowing English can make life easier and provide more economic opportunities for those living in the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2015), but assuming that all speakers of English as a second language are immigrants and not citizens does not assist in this process.

English Learner Immigrants are Undocumented. Legal status is included in most immigration debates with Attorney General Jeff Sessions insinuating a broad connection between undocumented immigrants and criminal activity (Galvan, 2017); yet many researchers have demonstrated that there is no connection (Ewing, Martinez,

Rumbaut (2015). There are an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States (Zhong & Batlova, 2017), and approximately 5.1 million children under the age of 18 lived with at least one undocumented parent during 2009 – 2013 (Zhong & Batlova, 2017). Of these children, 4.1 million were U.S. citizens (Zhong & Batlova, 2017).

Plyler v. Doe (1982) asserted that immigrant children have a right to a public education regardless of documentation status. This decision has held over thirty years that schools not only must provide an education to undocumented students, but are not permitted to request any proof of citizenship, thus in a sense providing a safe haven from deportation. Several states since then have taken action to circumvent this ruling by passing local and state policies regarding enrollment documentation requirements (American Immigration Council, 2012).   Ultimately, these measures were struck down at various levels with legal action.

The 2016 presidential election heralded a renewed zest among anti-immigration supporters regarding the notion of deporting undocumented immigrants, and President Donald Trump included immigration reform as part of his campaign platform (On the Issues, 2016). Teachers interested or in need of advocating for ELs on this topic can remind officials that schools are protected by Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws from divulging any information contained in school files that might provide evidence of documentation status (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). This allows the school personnel to continue with their charge of educating all children and keeps them from distractions that might waste academic time for students. Many other actions in support of undocumented students are outlined in *Immigrant and Refugee*

Children: A Guide for Educators and Support Staff published by the American Federation for Teachers (2016) which can be downloaded for free from https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICE-Raids-Educators-Guide-2016-06.pdf.

Misconceptions about Speaking and Learning English

Classroom Academic Success Requires Fluent English. English learners come to U.S. classrooms with a wide range of knowledge and abilities in their own native language, English, and other academic subjects. The range is a result of many factors including schooling experiences in home country, language(s) spoken at home, aptitude, and motivation. Many mainstream teachers insist that they will not be able to teach students who are not fluent in English; however, research suggests that ELs can be academically successful when content teachers apply seven basic principles of effective teaching (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2014). The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) includes English learners as a priority in system wide assessments, and states are given the freedom to enact local policy regarding assessment of school and student progress. It is not acceptable to relegate ELs, regardless of their language proficiency level, to English language instruction that is not adequately infused with rich, academic language and grade level content area exposure (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Furthermore, content area teachers must be equipped with appropriate knowledge, skills, and understandings about language acquisition, the demands of academic language, and effective practices of scaffolding for EL success (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2012; Samson & Collins, 2012).

Requiring ELs to speak English before learning academic content is a legal issue that has already been overturned in court. *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) found that schools must provide English instruction without compromising academic progress. In other words, it is unconstitutional to not provide grade level academic content and material to students in a comprehensible way. With proper sheltered and scaffolded learning opportunities, all levels of ELs can be successful in academic settings (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002; Ovando Collier, & Combs, 2003). Furthermore, the high-stakes testing and accountability environments require this academic rigor to be infused with English learning. That is, academic learning requires acknowledgment of the language embedded in the content (O'Hara, Pritchard, & Zwiers, 2012). ESOL teachers wishing to advocate for ELs around this topic can suggest professional development training opportunities that include relevant second language acquisition information, processes of identifying the language of the standards and objectives, and opportunities to develop scaffolded assignments. The Center for Applied Linguistics offers a video and downloadable list of its seven principles of effective instruction for ELs at http://www.cal.org/solutions/resources/video/seven-principles-video.html.

It Only Takes One to Two Years to Achieve Fluency. Reeves (2006) reported that mainstream teachers believed it took only one to two years to achieve fluency in English when immersed in an English-only setting. This misconception stems from an assumption that because a student can converse easily with adults and peers, they are capable of doing academic coursework at the same level as native speaking peers. Samson and Collins (2012) consider second language acquisition processes a key understanding that teachers of ELs must have. Advocacy actions ESOL teachers can

take in this arena include posting information about important aspects of second language growth and development in teacher work rooms or faculty listservs.

One key piece of information includes the difference between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2008). BICS refers to the language needed for social interaction, and CALP refers to the academic, content-specific, metacognitive language needed to perform successfully academically. Cummins (1981) suggests an iceberg model of language acquisition, CALP is what lies below the surface of the water; it is the hidden language needs of the EL. While a student may appear to be proficient in English, many teachers are actually only observing BICS (which would be the tip of the iceberg that appears above the surface of the water).

Another essential understanding about second language acquisition is the progression most learners follow in acquiring a second language from the early silent stage to advanced (Freeman & Freeman, 2001). WIDA (2014) highlights these stages within their Can Do Descriptors document, and Levine, Lukins, and Smallwood (2013) have developed a set of 'go-to' strategies that map directly to the Can Do Descriptors – an easy way to introduce teachers to the value of knowing EL language levels.

Mainstream teachers will also benefit from knowing that English learners progress at varying rates in different language domains. For example, a student's listening or speaking skills may be at a higher level than their written or reading skills. Due to these differences between interpersonal communicative language and academic

language, research suggests it can take five to seven years to learn a language to the academic level of same-age peers (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

Knowing the factors that influence EL academic performance can provide ESOL teachers with appropriate responses to teachers who 'suspect' their ELs speak more English than they are demonstrating. Formal schooling in the native language and socioeconomic status are the primary influences on EL language acquisition (Center for Public Education, 2007) and often teachers are unaware that many ELs arrive in the United States with limited formal schooling. Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) are a subset of ELs who arrive in the United States with very little formal education for a variety of reasons including poverty, geography, limited transportation, work expectations, natural disasters, and political and civil unrest (WIDA, 2015). Providing information to teachers about key elements of culturally responsive teaching can be a starting point in working with schools seeking to support SLIFE (DeCapua, 2016).

Mainstreaming Should Occur Only After Minimum Level of Fluency Achieved. While seventy-two percent of respondents in a survey conducted by Reeves (2006) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I would welcome the inclusion of ESL students in my class," a strong agreement with the statement that ELs should not be mainstreamed until minimum attainment levels have been reached was also reported (Reeves, 2006). This indicates perhaps a fear of low-proficiency ELs and their impact on mainstream classrooms or a lack of understanding of the language acquisition process and the benefits of high academic rigor for ELs. In actuality, with proper support, ELs can benefit greatly from being mainstreamed with native-English speaking

peers at the appropriate academic level. Rich opportunities for interaction in English combined with the expertise of content area specialists can support ELs in not only language acquisition, but also content mastery.

One tool that takes an additive stance toward ELs and offers a realistic portrayal of linguistic capabilities at various levels, are the Can Do Descriptors (WIDA, 2014). These provide teachers of all grade levels a guide to reasonable expectations of student ability. Rather than frame discussions with teachers around what ELs can't do, offering this tool to teachers can change to nature of the conversation while also providing valuable information.

Students Should Speak Only English in School. Over half of the respondents in Reeves' (2006) study reported the belief that students should avoid using their native language while at school. Teachers who believe this are not aware that a focus on immersion in English, with little acknowledgement of the student's native language, can have detrimental effects on first and second language development (Johnson, 2008). Furthermore, many teachers assume that exposure and interaction in the target language will result in acquisition of that language (Harper & de Jong, 2004). Unfortunately, as noted by Harper and de Jong (2004) this assumption does not consider the complexities of teaching and learning academic language nor, in fact, the absence of rich language interaction among students in mainstream classrooms. ESOL teachers can and should work to dispel this myth actively due to its detrimental effects. Not only is it not supported by language acquisition theories, but it also works to undermine a student's sense of self in the school community. Encouraging multilingual signs in school buildings along with bilingual books is one active step ESOL teachers

can take to promote a school culture that embraces the linguistic diversity of its students. Additionally, recognizing the importance of translanguaging for multilinguals can add a level of cultural competence to school climate. A vast topic and discussion that spans multiple theoretical fields, translanguaging can be understood as a learner's use of and reliance on all languages in his or her repertoire for multiple purposes and in a variety of contexts (Lindahl, 2017). Understanding the value of translanguaging for English learners who come to classrooms with a wide range of linguistic experience can open opportunities for both the language teacher and the mainstream teacher to support ELs in a more holistic way. Speaking up for ELs to teachers who might otherwise like to ask ELs to "check their L1 at the classroom door" (Lindahl, 2017) is an act of advocacy that ESOL teachers can take in schools to support their students.

Learning English Looks the Same for All ELs. Teachers in Harper and de Jong's study (2004) believed that all ELs learned English in the same way and at the same rate. This concept of a universal process of language learning rests in the assumption that learning a second language follows the same trajectory as learning a first language and that all ELs go through similar learning processes and have similar learning needs (Leung & Franson, 2001). Furthermore, teachers assume that all students arrive with the same level of formal education and the same levels of fluency in their native languages. However, there is no one size fits all definition of the immigrant student and there are numerous factors that influence the rate at which an English language learner acquires English (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2012). For example, there is a significant difference between the schooling experiences of ELs who were born and raised in the United States and those who have immigrated to the United

States during their schooling years. The schooling experiences and challenges of immigrant youth in the United States have been widely documented (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2009; Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Many factors influence the rate of language acquisition, and acquisition across the domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing is not uniform. Knowing students' literacy backgrounds, and keeping in mind age and motivation can help teachers understand the unique learning needs of their students. ESOL teachers can expand the depth of information provided to teachers about the ELs they serve through initial conferences, formal workshops, and informal discussions at the lunch table.

Misconceptions about Teachers and Teaching

The ESOL Teacher Teaches English, the Mainstream Teacher Teaches Content. The growing number of ELs and continued pressure for all students to make yearly academic progress means the ESOL teacher can no longer be considered the sole teacher of ELs. The role of the ESOL teacher and the mainstream teacher in the education of ELs is expanding to include more opportunities for collaboration (Martin-Beltrán & Peercy, 2012). There are many program models that support language instruction for ELs, but schools and districts are often constrained by budgets to make the best choices for ELs. The Georgia Department of Education supports pull out, push in, cluster centers, resource centers, sheltered instruction, and scheduled class periods of ESL instruction, each having advantages and disadvantages (Georgia Department of Education, 2015). The pull out program model, common in elementary and middle schools, takes ELs away from the mainstream classroom for small group English language instruction. While this program model is still very common in many school

districts and schools, it does not support best practice for the growing numbers and emerging needs of English learners in this high-stakes era of Common Core (TESOL International Association, 2016). Strict standards and accountability measures have placed new emphasis on the language of academic content. With this in mind, the role of the ESOL teacher is shifting to that of co-teacher and advocate (Staehr Fenner, 2014), and it is imperative that all teachers consider themselves language teachers.

Offering sheltered instruction in the content areas is one way to support ELs and ensure access to the same academic content as their same age peers while simultaneously developing language skills. Other ways include the ESOL teacher push-in or co-teaching model to support mainstream teachers in effectively scaffolding content for EL academic success (TESOL International Association, 2016). Working as a collaborator with mainstream teachers offers academic support for ELs with embedded professional development for content area teachers. ESOL teachers who find themselves in a school environment that is not promoting collaboration with mainstream counterparts can advocate for ELs by working with administration and leadership teams to facilitate schedules and collaborative teaming with mainstream teachers in support of EL academic success.

Good Teaching Is the Same for All Learners. Harper and de Jong (2004) reported the teachers in their study to believe that good teaching is the same for both native and non-native English speakers. Furthermore, one popular way of appealing to mainstream teachers regarding expanding their range of techniques to include strategies that support English learners is to explain that many of the strategies used to support ELs will, in fact, support many other types of struggling learners. Indeed, some

research indicates this might be the case (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Canges, & Frances, 2011; Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011). Nevertheless, there are specific attributes of effective instruction targeted directly to ELs in mainstream classrooms that must be clearly understood if proper instruction of ELs is to take place.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) mandates that state and national standards be used to determine appropriate instruction and assessment for all students. However, these standards and guidelines do not take into account the wide variety of linguistic needs of ELs in mainstream classrooms (Harper & de Jong, 2004). Assuming that there is one best way of teaching, it cannot be inferred that all students will equally benefit from the same strategies. For example, a well-designed student-centered activity, complete with group work and rubric assessments, does not ensure access to the language necessary to successfully complete the activity or assignment.

Research suggests the components of effective instruction for ELs are focused on: a) academic language, literacy, and vocabulary; b) background knowledge and culture; c) comprehensible input and language output; d) classroom interaction; e) higher order thinking and the use of learning strategies (Levine, Lukens, & Smallwood, 2013). ESOL teachers can encourage mainstream teachers to purposefully plan for EL support and scaffolding at various levels of language proficiency. Incorporating academic language support, comprehensible input, and instructional scaffolding at appropriate levels moves good teaching to appropriate, equitable teaching.

Comprehensible Instruction Is Enough. Comprehensible instruction, such as providing non-verbal support, graphic organizers, and hands-on activities, is an

important aspect of working with ELs, but it is not all teachers must do to provide

effective instruction for ELs (Harper & de Jong, 2004). Gay (2010) defines culturally

responsive teaching as, "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of

reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning

encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). Meaningful engagement

through building and activating prior knowledge, integrating opportunities for rich

language interactions, and acknowledging and encouraging the influence of students'

L1 on their learning are important aspects of effective teaching of ELs. Eighty-two

percent of teachers in American classrooms in 2011 – 12 were White (Goldring, Gray &

Bitterman, 2013) and most teachers are monolingual (Culture in the Classroom, n.d),

and institutes of higher education continue to train a predominantly White, female cadre

of teacher candidates (Deruy, 2016).   Thus, as demographic trends show the student

population is less White (Crouch, 2012) and EL student populations continue to grow

(U.S. Department of Education, 2016), infusing curriculum and pedagogy with culturally

responsive teaching principles goes beyond the mere expectation that academic

classroom input is comprehensible.

Furthermore, comprehensible input, while important, does not necessarily mean

that the EL will be able to use English to perform academic tasks. Knowing and

understanding the language of academic performance within a subject area is essential

to meeting the academic needs of ELs (Harper & de Jong, 2004). For example,

teaching students the language of scientific inquiry is essential for students to be able to

discuss the hypotheses they have formed. Ensuring students have access to the pros

and cons of a particular theory does not mean they will be able to debate that with

peers. Understanding the language involved in various modes of communicating academic concepts is paramount.

Conclusion

ESOL teachers are the bridge for EL students in most content area classrooms, and knowing what mainstream teachers think and believe is an important part of advocating for ELs. It is now more than ever imperative that ESOL teachers ground themselves in the facts about the issues that most affect their students: immigration and documentation; speaking and learning English; and the role of all teachers and teaching ELs. Advocating to mainstream teachers and administrators on behalf of ELs is an essential role of an ESOL teacher. As the role of advocate continues to evolve in our profession (Staehr Fenner, 2014) it is imperative that ESOL teachers gather the facts to counter misconceptions they will face. Teacher preparation programs can use these misconceptions as a starting point for discussion that will lay a foundation for future teachers to be better equipped to teach the English learners they are sure to encounter in their classrooms. Professional development providers as well can keep these misconceptions and realities at the forefront of their work with teachers. Taking school-based steps to increase awareness of the realities of ELs' experiences, situations, and language acquisition processes and how to navigate this with mainstream teachers is a way to start the advocacy journey.

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