WestEd

BRIEF #2

Reframing Common Myths About Students Who Are Multilingual: Academic Capabilities

Molly Faulkner-Bond

This brief is the second in a series for educators, leaders, and policymakers and is designed to reassert what is known about educating students classified as English Learners, also referred to as Multilingual Learners. The series reframes a set of common myths and misunderstandings that often get in the way of best practice.

- Brief #1 Framing and a Fundamental First Myth
- **Brief #2 Academic Capabilities**
- Brief #3 Language Development
- Brief #4 Resource Use and Legal Requirements

This second brief addresses a family of myths that pertain to expectations regarding the **academic abilities** of Multilingual Learners. What are students capable of academically, particularly those students still developing proficiency in English? How should educators design instruction, implement programs, interpret these students' performance, and set expectations for their achievement? As these questions suggest, this brief will be most relevant and resonant for individuals who are *classroom-level educators* (in any content area). It is also relevant for individuals who design schedules, programs, and pathways for all students, including those who are English Learners.

Misguided Myths

In educators' and leaders' discussions about English Learners' academic capabilities and achievement, the following interrelated ideas frequently surface:

Myth 2A.

English Learners are unlikely to do well in school until they are fully proficient in English.

Myth 2B.

English Learners cannot handle challenging academic content.

Myth 2C.

Achievement gaps are inevitable while students are still learning English.

Myth 2D.

English Learners must attain language proficiency before they can handle grade-level content.

Myth 2E.

English Learners will do better if they learn English as quickly as possible.

Each of these myths reflects slightly different versions of a few core ideas. First, these ideas are all framed in terms of what English Learners can or cannot do. As with the first myth in this series (the belief that English Learners are at greater risk of failure because of their multilingualism), this kind of framing assumes that any **achievement gaps between English Learners and other students stem from student characteristics** (i.e., multilingualism) rather than system design (i.e., the system's failure to plan for and provide instruction that allows students to learn in, build on, and express themselves in multiple languages). It assumes the education system is already as good as it can be and then interprets lower achievement as the result of inadequate student effort or characteristics.

Second, these myths all also echo the deficit orientation described in Brief #1. They position students' **multilingualism as a barrier to their learning and success**, and—building on the first idea immediately above—they go on to presume that the best approach to removing this barrier is to change the students (by helping them attain proficiency in English as quickly as possible) rather than change the system (e.g., by making academic instruction more accessible to the students).

Third, a core idea in these myths is that **proficiency in English is a prerequisite for doing well in school**. If students who are not yet proficient in English cannot do well in school, it can easily lead to the conclusion either that schools should expect less from these students (as in Myths 2A–2C) or that educators must get them to proficiency in English as quickly as possible (as in Myths 2D and 2E) so they can succeed.

This latter approach in particular (Myths 2D and 2E) implies an artificial separation between *learning a particular language* and *learning content*. The idea that **students must become proficient in English first**, *before* they can become proficient in academics, suggests that learning the language that students need to succeed academically is somehow separate from learning the academic content and practices.

All of these assumptions can lead to harmful practices for Multilingual Learners, such as narrowing the breadth or simplifying the depth of what these learners are taught (Dabach, 2014; Estrada, 2014)—or worse: excluding English Learners from grade-level courses altogether (Umansky, 2016) while they learn English *first*.

Reframing

It may seem obvious, but it is worth saying: You do not need to know English to be good at analyzing informational text or algebraic expressions. Brilliant thinkers exist around the world postulating new mathematical theories, designing buildings, creating medical breakthroughs, imagining new technologies to solve water shortage problems, and much more—and they do this all in a variety of languages besides English. English proficiency is a prerequisite for achievement in the United States only because the public education system in this country teaches, measures, and reports achievement solely in English.

There are two ways to address this challenge for English Learners. One is to teach, measure, and report achievement using other languages in addition to English. This is one of several reasons that bilingual education programs tend to produce superior long-term academic outcomes for English Learners (Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Valentino & Reardon, 2015).

Another solution is to find ways to make teaching and assessment in English more accessible and more inclusive for students who are multilingual so that English Learners are not shut out of learning opportunities. This latter intent, in particular, is the basis for almost all the laws and court rulings that govern English Learner education.

Of course, the "how" of making teaching and assessment in English more accessible matters. A common first instinct is to try to make academic content simpler, narrower, or less challenging. Research has found, however, that this approach often backfires. It turns out that the **rigor of students' course assignments predicts their achievement** better than language proficiency (Callahan, 2005). In other words, given two students with the same or similar level of English proficiency, the one in the more challenging classes will do better, on average. As such, when schools simplify, dilute, or restrict the academic content that they teach English Learners, this practice **sets students up to be at a permanent disadvantage**, even once they have become proficient in English.

If they really accept these truths—that English proficiency is not a prerequisite for academic success and that reducing students' access to rigorous content actually undermines their ability to succeed—educators and leaders must let go of the excuse that English Learners are not capable of succeeding in school or doing as well as English-proficient peers. Instead, schools must embrace a shared responsibility for ensuring that teaching and learning are structured in ways that include these students and allow them to access instruction even while they are still learning English. If schools wait for students to be fully proficient in English before giving them opportunities for rigorous learning, this undermines students' chances at future success.

Takeaways for Decision-Makers

Try to let go of the idea that English proficiency is a requirement for being smart or doing well in school. Focus instead on ensuring that all students are supported to meaningfully engage in rigorous learning, regardless of what language they learn the content in or how proficient they are in English.

Start by examining the system—meaning the crosscutting features of your school, district, or state, including policies, programs, staffing, scheduling, resource use, and decision-making processes (REL West, 2024). If you see English Learners struggling or see achievement gaps between English Learners and monolingual English speakers, start by trying to identify systemic features that may be contributing to these undesirable outcomes. Areas to examine might include the following:

- **cross-office coordination and collaboration:** To what extent are individuals with expertise in English Learner education included in general discussions and decisions about the education system? For example, are these individuals at the table when new policies, academic curricula, assessments, or software tools are vetted, selected, and purchased?
- **teacher team composition and collaboration:** How are teachers with expertise in teaching Multilingual Learners teamed with other teachers to plan and implement instruction?
- **professional learning:** To what extent is professional learning available to or required of general education teachers to help them learn more about pedagogical practices for English Learners?
- **scheduling and course assignment:** Are there any practices or policies that constrain the courses or teachers to which English Learners have access?

At the classroom level, there are various ways to ensure that all students can engage with rigorous content regardless of where they are in their language development. Examples include scaffolds, formative assessment practices, opportunities to practice using language in authentic ways, and attention to disciplinary language and practices (Baker et al., 2014). WestEd's Quality Teaching for English Learners initiative identifies the following five evidence-based principles of quality instruction for English Learners:

- Sustain **Academic Rigor** by promoting deep disciplinary knowledge and developing the central ideas of a discipline.
- Hold **High Expectations** by engaging students in tasks that are high challenge and offer high support.
- Engage in **Quality Interactions**, defined as interactions that are sustained and deep and that build knowledge in relevant aspects of the discipline.
- Sustain a **Language Focus** by explicitly developing disciplinary language, discussing how language works, and highlighting the characteristics of different discipline-specific uses and practices.
- Develop a **Quality Curriculum** that has long-term goals, is problem-based, and requires sustained attention beyond a single lesson.

Enacting practices guided by all of these principles is at worst harmless and at best beneficial to *all* students, including those who are monolingual or have no exposure to or knowledge of other languages. The next brief in this series addresses common myths about language development to delve more deeply into the overlap between what works for English Learners and what works for all students.

First, though, the following table provides some examples of what instructional decisions and practices can look like when the myths covered in this second brief are entrenched and what they can look like once the underlying misconceptions have been reframed. All of the examples in this table are based on or adapted from published research studies, published vignettes of actual classroom practices, and classroom observations and student shadowing carried out by WestEd service providers.

Myths About Academic Capabilities: What They Can Look Like in Action

	Under the myth	Under the reframing
In 3rd grade ...	• While other 3rd grade science students use manipulatives to develop and test hypotheses about ramps and pulleys, English Learners fill out vocabulary worksheets and watch their teacher demonstrate experiments using manipulatives. • Opportunities for advanced coursework and gifted programs are based on a single test administered in English. Although hardly any English Learners are identified for advanced placement services, it is assumed that this is to be expected because they are still learning English.	• Teacher teams work together to coordinate what language supports are provided—and when—during instruction to ensure that English Learners have what they need to participate in the same activities and discussions as other students. • There are multiple pathways to advanced placement, including teacher recommendation, nonverbal assessments, and family petition. Teachers of English Learners are encouraged to recommend students for screening if they see promise, and English Learners' families are made aware of program opportunities for their students.
In 10th grade ...	• English Learners are prohibited from taking advanced math courses until they can demonstrate their language proficiency on either a statewide English language proficiency assessment or a locally administered writing assessment that many non–English Learners cannot pass. • Guidance counselors do not discuss advanced placement opportunities, dual enrollment courses, or college entrance exams with English Learners on the assumption that these students will not be able to participate in these kinds of opportunities.	• Advanced math teachers are provided with professional learning opportunities to help them plan and implement instruction that can engage students with a range of language proficiency in mathematical practices such as interpreting graphs and statistics. • Guidance counselors discuss the full range of postsecondary pathways with all students and families, including English Learners. Counselors are well prepared with information about language supports and access in postsecondary settings to help students understand their options and potential experiences.

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