WestEd

BRIEF #3

Reframing Common Myths About Students Who Are Multilingual: Language Development

Molly Faulkner-Bond

This brief is the third 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 third brief addresses a set of myths about whether and under what circumstances English Learners can best develop the English proficiency they need to engage in disciplinary learning and expression at school. This brief is relevant both to **classroom-level educators** (in any content area) and to **local and state administrators** who design schedules, programs, and pathways for English Learners—for example, individuals who develop master schedules or who establish timelines and criteria for English Learners' progress and targets for developing their language proficiency.

Misguided Myths

Unlike the myths addressed in Brief #2, which generally share the same underlying misconceptions, myths related to language development tend to reflect more specific and unique ideas—though several are related to one another and to misconceptions about students' academic capabilities.

Myth 3A.

Students do not (or should not) need explicit support or instruction to learn English—exposure is enough.

Many people have stories about grandparents or great-grandparents who came to the United States

as immigrants a century or more ago, usually speaking other languages when they did so. "My great-grandfather didn't have to take classes to learn English, so immigrants now shouldn't need to either." This myth proposes that learning a new language is an individual responsibility and that **being immersed in a new language with no support or instruction is sufficient** to make language development happen.

Myth 3B.

Language development is a quick process; students should exit from English Learner status quickly.

Another popular myth—particularly in the late 20th and early 21st centuries—is that **children can learn new languages very quickly**. Several states (including Arizona, California, and Massachusetts) passed ballot measures based on the expectation that English Learners exit from status after only a single year of intensive language instruction (Mitchell, 2019; Ryan, 2002). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this myth often exists alongside the "English first, then academics" myth described in Brief #2.

Myth 3C.

Supporting Multilingual Learners in using and developing their home language delays or jeopardizes their academic achievement.

This concern is often used to argue against bilingual education programs, which have students learn in and use their home language for academic subjects. It may also be used to justify preventing students from using their home language in school at all, even if it is not part of their formal instruction. The underlying belief is that **supporting a student's use of a non-English language might get in the way of or delay their development of English**. (*Note:* This concern about delays often also reflects some of the myths related to speed of exit or development of linguistic proficiency first.)

Myth 3D.

Teaching English Learners means teaching them language.

It is not uncommon for people to assume that **any reference to teaching or learning for English Learners is a reference to teaching language and literacy**. This can lead to conversations or considerations about these students' education being limited to focusing on specialized English language development classes, or possibly language arts, while overlooking subjects such as mathematics or science.

Myth 3E.

The best way to teach language is through direct instruction.

This idea is likely intuitive to anyone who has learned a world language in school in the United States. In this country, it is common for students to learn additional languages through a dedicated language class (e.g., Spanish) in which they receive direct instruction on grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, for example. Often, **the language itself**, as well as the cultures in countries where the language is used, **is the content for instruction**. In other words, this approach sets a model for language learning in which lessons are often structured around learning a new set of vocabulary or a new verb tense, followed by applications of this new linguistic content to activities such as ordering in a restaurant, shopping for groceries, or interacting with friends or family in social settings. While students may read poetry or learn about snippets of history in these classes, often their engagement is more about comprehension or form as opposed to analysis of texts or construction of arguments.

Reframing

Addressing these myths is a great example of the power and value of rigorous, open research. Nearly all of these have been directly or indirectly explored and evaluated, and all have been shown to be inaccurate or incomplete. What has the research found? In some cases, findings directly conflict with previous thinking:

- Simply putting students into general education classrooms with no acknowledgment of or pedagogical support for their language learning is not sufficient to help them learn language (Faulkner-Bond et al., 2012) and leads to more negative outcomes compared to providing these students with language-relevant instruction and supports (contra Myth 3A).
- Students generally need well over a year to develop the kind of language proficiency they need to independently engage with and express rigorous grade-level content in English. The exact timeline to proficiency generally varies depending on the level of proficiency students have when they enter school (Kieffer & Parker, 2016; Slama et al., 2015; Slama et al., 2017; Thompson, 2017) (contra Myth 3B).
- While students in dual language programs may take slightly longer to reach full proficiency compared to students in English-only programs, those in dual language programs do as well academically (Steele et al., 2017) or better (Valentino & Reardon, 2015) in the long run (Umansky & Reardon, 2014) (contra Myth 3C).

In the case of Myths 3D and 3E, evidence and best practice suggest that more nuance and context are needed for these points. First, even before looking to research findings, common sense indicates that if English Learners are to have the same chances for success as any other student, they should spend the majority of their school day learning the same academic content (language arts, mathematics, science) that all students attend school to learn. So, while language and literacy learning is assuredly important to any English Learner's education, it is ultimately only one *part* of their education. Any efforts to plan for these students' education must also address their academic content learning (including the ways language is used in association with this learning).

And second, the direct instruction approach that is typically used for learning world languages is often limiting for English Learners because this approach does not teach students how to use language in the context of the academic disciplines they encounter in school. While understanding verb tenses or academic vocabulary may be helpful, this knowledge is not enough for students to be able to use language in authentic ways for academic learning and sense-making.

What do these points mean in terms of reframing Myths 3D and 3E? They essentially point to a "yes, and" approach. *Yes*, it is true that teaching English Learners means teaching language, and direct instruction may be part of that, particularly for students at the very beginning of their language development. *And*, ultimately, language learning and academic learning are connected—so instruction of both must be connected as well. As noted in Brief #2 in this series, academic content and language are intimately connected to one another; language is not a distinct thing to be taught independently of the academic disciplines and purposes in which students must ultimately use it.

Several research syntheses have landed on the recommendation that some instruction dedicated to language development is positive for English Learners (Saunders et al., 2013) *and* that connecting language use to academic content and disciplinary practices is critical for preparing

students to use language authentically in the classroom (Baker et al., 2014). Unsurprisingly, several states have gone on to mandate that English Learners receive both *dedicated language development* instruction and language development that is *integrated with learning academic content* (Arizona Department of Education, 2019; California Department of Education, 2019; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2009/2023).

Takeaways for Decision-Makers

Language development takes time and requires practice. Accepting this means letting go of the desire to fast track students to language proficiency. Instead, start planning for how to ensure that all students in your system have meaningful opportunities to engage in grade-level learning regardless of where they are in their language development. Relatedly, start thinking of language development as something that is happening everywhere, all the time—not just in dedicated classes that only English Learners take. Recent attention to the concept of disciplinary literacy may help underscore this approach by emphasizing the idea that all students need and benefit from instruction that addresses how language functions for and within a given academic discipline (Sawchuk, 2024; Tripathy, 2025).

Focusing on disciplinary literacy may require some shifts in behavior and practice for academic content teachers who may not always think of language as something that is part of their discipline. One way of overcoming this attitude is to ensure teachers are not interpreting the focus on language development as meaning they must provide direct language instruction. The idea is not that academic content teachers include grammar lessons in their instruction or grade student work based on whether verbs are conjugated correctly. Rather, teaching language as part of the discipline means drawing attention to how language functions within their disciplines and giving students opportunities to use authentic disciplinary language as part of their learning (see also the "Quality Interactions" and "Language Focus" principles of WestEd's Quality Teaching for English Learners initiative, as described in Brief #2).

The next brief in this series considers how decision-makers can leverage limited resources to create systems in which this kind of interconnected learning of language and content takes place regularly for all students.

First, though, the table below provides some examples of what programs and systems can look like in settings where misconceptions about language development are entrenched and what they can look like once the underlying misconceptions are reframed. All 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.

In addition to the table, the following resources provide more in-depth tools and examples:

- Redefining Approaches for Engaging English Learners With Mathematical Ideas. This brief provides clear examples (and counterexamples) of how mathematics educators can teach students disciplinary vocabulary in ways that include students at all levels of language development and how they can foster authentic connections to and extensions of mathematical thinking.
- Rethinking Language in Mathematics for English Learners: Connecting Theory, Research, and Practice. This brief summarizes three ideas about language and mathematics, followed by three suggestions for how teachers can implement these ideas in their classroom practice. It also includes examples of student work and engagement.

- The California Department of Education has produced several collections of exemplars describing classrooms and instructional practices in which English language development (ELD) and academic content learning occur concurrently:
  - a series of written vignettes that focus specifically on blending English language arts and ELD
  - a series of videos showing classroom examples of designated ELD in which instruction is driven by language development standards and of integrated ELD in which instruction is driven by academic content standards but includes language focus and development
  - a series of written vignettes at the elementary level and vignettes at the secondary level that describe integrated ELD in mathematics and science
- The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition published several reports and briefs on evidence-based instructional practices for English Learners, including the following:
  - a comprehensive report on evidence-based instructional practices that summarizes the research and provides exemplary templates, tools, and real-world vignettes of each practice in action (U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2025)
  - three teaching practice briefs intended for an educator audience that summarize evidence-based practices and provide examples of the practices in action in the context of early childhood, science and engineering, and mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c)

Myths About Language Development: What They Can Look Like in Action

	Under the myth	Under the reframing
In 5th grade ...	• English Learners spend the majority of their day in a separate cohort comprising only other English Learner students. Even in their academic content classes, their instruction is driven primarily by the state's ELD standards rather than academic content standards. • If an English Learner speaks during class, their teacher focuses on the accuracy of their grammar or pronunciation and corrects any errors before acknowledging (if at all) the student's content question or contribution.	• English Learners spend the majority of their day in classrooms with instruction driven by their state's academic content standards. Students may move in and out of flexible small groups for targeted language development that reflects individual student progress and needs relative to the academic content being taught. • All students, including English Learners, are given ample opportunity to read, write, and engage in discussion during class. Teachers provide English Learners with linguistic supports such as sentence starters to help them engage with peers.
In 9th grade ...	• Newcomer students are given a schedule in which the majority of their day is spent in intensive ELD instruction to try to build their basic language skills as quickly as possible before they attempt to engage with grade-level academic content. • Students who have spent more than 5 years in English Learner status without exiting (sometimes called "long-term ELs") are required to take additional ELD courses, which often crowd out at least one academic content course (e.g., language arts, science, math) in their schedule. These missed opportunities often result in students being ineligible for later courses with prerequisites.	• Newcomer programs provide students with a range of linguistic and content scaffolds to help them access the concepts being taught. For example, teachers provide students with organized note catchers and allow them to translate and translanguage as needed to develop and express their thoughts, even with "incorrect" language. • Student schedules are carefully checked to ensure that English Learners are not being excluded from any core academic subjects. Content teachers receive professional development to help them plan and implement instruction that consistently draws attention to disciplinary language and practices so that students are consistently learning content and language in tandem.

References

Arizona Department of Education. (2019). *Arizona's language development approach*. https://www.azed.gov/sites/default/files/2020/01/Arizona%27s%20Language%20Development%20Approach_December%20State%20Board%20Meeting_2019_rev2-25.pdf?id=5e149c9e03e2b32094fa7b5c

Baker, S., Lesaux, N., Jayanthi, M., Dimino, J., Proctor, C. P., Morris, J., Gersten, R., Haymond, K., Kieffer, M. J., Linan-Thompson, S., & Newman-Gonchar, R. (2014). *Teaching academic content and literacy to English Learners in elementary and middle school* (IES Practice Guide No. NCEE 2014-4012). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/19

California Department of Education. (2019, December 18). *Designated and integrated English language development* [Letter to county and district superintendents and charter school administrators]. https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/el/le/yr19ltr1218.asp

Faulkner-Bond, M., Waring, S., Forte, E., Crenshaw, R. L., Tindle, K., & Belknap, B. (2012). *Language instruction educational programs (LIEPs): A review of the foundational literature*. Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, U.S. Department of Education. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED531981

Kieffer, M. J., & Parker, C. E. (2016). *Patterns of English Learner student reclassification in New York City public schools* (REL Nos. 2017–200). Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED569344.pdf

Mitchell, C. (2019, October 23). *"English-only" laws in education on verge of extinction*. Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/english-only-laws-in-education-on-verge-of-extinction/2019/10

New Mexico Public Education Department. (2009, amended 2023). *English language development: 6.29.5 NMAC* (Title 6, Chapter 29, Part 5). New Mexico Administrative Code. State Records Center and Archives. https://www.srca.nm.gov/parts/title06/06.029.0005.html

Ryan, W. (2002). The Unz Initiatives and the abolition of bilingual education. *Boston College Law Review*, *43*(2), 487–519. https://bclawreview.bc.edu/articles/1126

Saunders, W., Goldenberg, C., & Marcelletti, D. (2013). English language development: Guidelines for instruction. *American Educator*, *37*(2), 13.

Sawchuk, S. (2024, October 28). *What is disciplinary literacy?* Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/what-is-disciplinary-literacy/2024/10

Slama, R., Haynes, E., Sacks, L., Lee, D. H., & August, D. (2015). *Massachusetts English Language Learners' profiles and progress: A report for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*. American Institutes for Research. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED578925.pdf

Slama, R. B., Molefe, A., Gerdeman, D., Herrera, A., Brodziak de los Reyes, I., August, D., & Cavazos, L. (2017). *Time to proficiency for Hispanic English Learner students in Texas* [REL 2018-280]. Regional Educational Laboratory Central, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED577092.pdf

Steele, J. L., Slater, R. O., Zamarro, G., Miller, T., Li, J., Burkhauser, S., & Bacon, M. (2017). Effects of dual-language immersion programs on student achievement: Evidence from lottery data. *American Educational Research Journal*, *54*(1_suppl), 282S–306S. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216634463

Thompson, K. D. (2017). English Learners' time to reclassification: An analysis. *Educational Policy*, *31*(3), 330–363. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0895904815598394

Tripathy, R. (2025, July 17). Why disciplinary literacy belongs in elementary classrooms. *Literacy at WestEd*. https://www.wested.org/blog/why-disciplinary-literacy-belongs-in-elementary-classrooms/

Umansky, I. M., & Reardon, S. F. (2014). Reclassification patterns among Latino English Learner students in bilingual, dual immersion, and English immersion classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, *51*(5), 879–912. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214545110

U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2020a). *Integrating language into early childhood education*. https://ncela.ed.gov/resources/brief-ncela-teaching-practice-brief-effective-instructional-practices-examples-and-0

U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2020b). *Integrating language while teaching STEM*. https://ncela.ed.gov/resources/brief-ncela-teaching-practice-brief-effective-instructional-practices-examples-and-1

U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2020c). *Integration of English language while teaching mathematics*. https://ncela.ed.gov/resources/brief-ncela-teaching-practice-brief-effective-instructional-practices-examples-and-2

U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2025). *Implementing evidence-based instructional practices for English Learners: Using research to guide practice*. https://ncela.ed.gov/resources/brief-implementing-evidence-based-instructional-practices-for-english-learners-january

Valentino, R. A., & Reardon, S. F. (2015). Effectiveness of four instructional programs designed to serve English Learners: Variation by ethnicity and initial English proficiency. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *37*(4), 612–637. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373715573310

Suggested citation: Faulkner-Bond, M. (2026). *Reframing common myths about students who are multilingual: Language development*. WestEd.