Common Myths about ESL and Second Language Acquisition

**Myth #1:** *Students can learn English quickly by being exposed to and surrounded by native language speakers*.

**Fact:** Mere exposure to the target language is insufficient to ensure native language proficiency, particularly academic language proficiency. Collier's (1989) research on ESL students in the United States found that whereas grammatical proficiency may be established in two years, academic competence comparable to that of native language peers takes much longer, between five and 10 years. There is some evidence that this period may be shorter in international schools (Sears, 1998), but again, not simply by being surrounded by native language speakers.

**Myth #2:** *The ability to converse comfortably in English signals proficiency and means the child should be achieving academically*.

**Fact:** It is easy to confuse conversational competence with academic competence in a language (Baker, 1995). Proficiency in social language interaction in English is not the most important factor in school success (Collier, 1989). Spoken practice in English may not be necessary for development of English proficiency and may retard it in some instances. Emphasis on interpersonal communication may even inhibit academic achievement (Saville-Troike, 1984), as noted in Myth #3.

**Myth #3:** *Students should learn English before attempting to study an academic subject in that language.*

**Fact:** While pull-out or beginning ESL classes may offer a measure of comfort to ESL students, much of the "survival English" taught in these classes focuses on the language of social interaction. This, in fact, does little to assist the student in learning an academic discipline. Academic disciplines have their own vocabularies and their own expectations for satisfactory performance and these are rarely taught outside the subject area, other than perhaps in sheltered content courses. Academic strategies (e.g. for completing assignments, even with incomplete comprehension) need to be learned in connection with studying the discipline itself so that the student develops concepts rather than simply coping mechanisms.

**Myth #4:** *ESL students should stop speaking their native language and concentrate on speaking English.*

**Fact:** Full proficiency in the native language facilitates second language development and academic achievement is significantly enhanced when ESL students are able to use their native languages to learn in school (TESOL, 1999). Collier (1989) found that second language students who achieved the greatest academic success were enrolled in bilingual programs that provided solid cognitive academic instruction in both the first and second language. Baker (1995) also notes that to deny the native language of an individual is to deny that person's existence.

*An excerpt from The US Department of State*

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