Chapter 1

Misconceptions About ELLs:
Culturally Responsive Practices for
General Education Teachers

Lara Christoun
Carthage College, USA

Jun Wang
Carthage College, USA

ABSTRACT

A growing number of American students are English language learners (ELLs) who speak another language other than English. By 2030, the percentage of students who speak a language other than English is expected to increase substantially. Unfortunately, general education teachers often do not feel prepared to teach ELLs in their classrooms or even hold negative attitudes toward ELLs included in their classrooms. As a result, ELLs are being underserved and continually experience lower achievement. This chapter summarizes several important misconceptions related to the teaching practices of general education teachers for ELLs based on the current literature. The authors then make recommendations for practicing teachers about culturally responsive strategies for ELLs in classrooms. Finally, they conclude with remarks regarding the mindset school communities should offer ELLs.

INTRODUCTION

Across the nation, about 5.3 million or 10% of American total K-12 students’ enrollment are English language learners (ELLs) who speak a language other than English (Wingert, 2014). The number of ELLs has been seeing a stable increase over the recent decade. As an example, the percentage of ELLs in public schools increased from 8.8% of total enrollment in school year 2003-2004 to 9.3% in school year 2013-2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Furthermore, Herrera, Perez, Kavimandan, and Wessels (2013) estimated that, by 2030, about 40% of students in U.S. schools were expected to speak a language other than English. As states are moving more and more ELLs from bilingual education programs and integrating them into English-only or sheltered English classrooms, general education teachers...
are increasingly held accountable for meeting the needs of ELLs who are being included and instructed in general education classrooms throughout their school day (Harper & de Jong, 2004; O’Day, 2009).

However, general education teachers often do not feel prepared to teach ELLs in their classrooms or even hold negative attitudes toward ELLs included in their classrooms (Harper & de Jong, 2004; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson- Gonzalez, 2008; O’Day, 2009). As a result, ELLs are being underserved and continually experiencing lower achievement (Genesse, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; Gil & Bardack, 2010; Xu & Drame, 2008). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in 2015, a large achievement gap exists between ELLs and non-ELLs in reading and mathematics. Furthermore, as they progress toward higher grades, the achievement gap even widens. For example, between 4th grade ELLs and non-ELLs, there is a 37-point gap on their reading achievement. The reading achievement gap increases to 45-point when they are in 8th grade. Similarly, there is a 25-point gap on their 4th grade mathematics achievement. The achievement gap increases to 38-point when these students are in 8th grade (NAEP, 2015).

Clearly, the academic achievement gap between ELLs and their peers widens as they progress from elementary to secondary school. Some researchers contribute ELLs’ continuous low academic achievement to inappropriate instruction that is caused, in part, by the instructional complexity imposed on general education teachers serving a wide array of linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse students (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Xu & Drame, 2008). In addition to inappropriate instruction, Harper and de Jong (2004) are also concerned that including ELLs in general education classrooms is “often based on misconceptions about effective instruction for ELLs” (p.152).

As a result, the objective of this chapter is two-fold. It will summarize several important misconceptions related to the teaching practices or instruction of elementary education teachers for ELLs based on the current literature. Further, the chapter will present suggestions about how to help elementary education teachers be more culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) in order to meet the unique needs of ELLs in their classrooms. Those suggestions will have implications for teacher educators and professional development providers regarding how to prepare elementary culturally responsive teachers instructing ELLs. Finally, this chapter will provide concluding remarks regarding mindsets school settings should embrace regarding ELL inclusion. Such an outlook would certainly offer crucial short and long term implications for national and global communities and economies.

BACKGROUND

The current literature suggests that several misconceptions have already existed regarding the learning, behavioral, and social needs of ELLs in inclusive general education classrooms (Harper & de Jong, 2004; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). It is important to address these misnomers because ELLs continue to face the double challenge of learning academic content as well as language with the additional accountability of increasingly rigorous standardized testing (Shorts & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Therefore, school communities must consider the cultural perspectives and misconceptions of effective instructional strategies for ELLs.

The following section will compare five misconceptions related to elementary education teachers’ instructional practices for ELLs with the available relevant research literature. As we present the five misconceptions, we will first briefly describe each misconception based on current scholarly literature. Then, there will be a discussion regarding effective strategies that elementary education teachers can
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