Chapter 5

Elementary English Language Learners: Misconceptions About Second Language Learning and Teaching Practices

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ABSTRACT

During the last decade, the United States has witnessed an influx of multicultural and multilingual students, especially the dramatically increasing number of students at elementary level, which accounts for 85% of native born (Sugarman, 2015). However, most of teachers still lack professional developments in teaching those increasing population. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to synthesize different studies to address the most common misconceptions on how elementary English language learners learn English as a second language and teachers’ pedagogical practices. This chapter ends with some recommendations, solutions, and future directions for researchers to advance teachers’ pedagogical practices, so they can best serve this increasing population in the U.S. school system.

INTRODUCTION

The number of students from various cultural, racial and linguistic backgrounds is increasing considerably in the U.S. According to Harper and de Jong (2004) students who speak a language other than English at home and whose proficiency in English is limited are the fastest growing group of K–12 students in the United States. The number of English language learners (ELLs) will account for approximately 40% of the school-age population by 2040 (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). However, at the beginning of the 20th century, to promote the concept of homogeneity and national unity, the Bureau of Naturalization and the Bureau of Education of the United States “provide for substantial federal aid to states, on a dollar-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3123-4.ch005
matching basis, to finance the teaching of English to aliens and native illiterates” (Higham, 1992, p. 82). With this policy, there is a need for English-only instruction and curriculum for language classes for these immigrants or “language minority students” (Ovando, 2003), so that students can have a good command of English in order to join mainstream classes. Therefore, teachers are striving to find the best way to meet the needs of those students within schools. Undoubtedly, the number one challenge is to provide the most appropriate language instruction since ELLs have to be well prepared academically to take and succeed in the high stake standardized tests. Teachers in mainstream classrooms must therefore be prepared to teach students who come from different linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Advocates such as O’Halloran (2007) argue for the need to “develop theoretical and practical approaches for developing effective teaching strategies, particularly for teachers working with disadvantaged students” (p. 235). However, 87% of teachers are White American (Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen, & Peyton, 2001), and most of them are not adequately prepared to teach the increasing number of ELLs. The discrepancies in cultures and linguistic backgrounds also cause lot of hindrances in teachers’ practices. This leads to misconceptions about the ways ELLs learn the language and the pedagogic practices in teaching ELLs. Therefore, we begin this chapter by addressing some of the most recurrent misconceptions among ESOL teachers that we have encountered in our practice. In addition, we will synthesize some of the best pedagogic practices in supporting ELLs in hope that elementary ESOL teachers can benefit from them, and can support ELLs in better ways.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Misconceptions of How ELLs Learn a Second Language

There is not any doubt that teachers (both language teachers and non-language teachers), administrators, parents and in some instances student themselves possess certain beliefs or commonly referred as misconceptions about the learning and/ or acquisition of a second language. Moreover, ELLs are usually depicted as a homogeneous group, when in fact they are extremely diverse. They are diverse not only linguistically, but also academically, culturally and economically. There are some who come from households where English is not spoken at all, while others come from families where the parents speak their native language and older siblings speak English. Likewise, there are some who identify themselves with American culture whereas others consider themselves bicultural or multicultural. In any event, these are issues that play a significant role in their language learning process. As Bialystok (2001) states, “The constellation of social, economic and political circumstances of life have a large bearing on how children will develop both linguistically and cognitively” (p. 7). Therefore, it is a reality that there is not a unique profile for ELLs nor a general or exclusive method to address their needs. Nevertheless, people tend to make generalizations quite frequently, which leads to establish myths or misconceptions regarding the language learning process of non-English Speakers. Some of the most common misconceptions among practitioners seem to be: (a) young language learners are more successful in learning a second language, (b) the language acquisition process can be accelerated c) native language interferes with the learning of a second language, (d) the more children are exposed to a target language the faster they will acquire it, (e) many ELLs need special education services.