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## 10 Assumptions to Rethink About English-Language Learners

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The percentage of English-language learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools is steadily increasing, according to the **National Center for Education Statistics**. While much of the growth is in urban areas that have traditionally attracted immigrants, significant increases in ELL populations can be found all across the nation. Since new and veteran teachers often feel inadequate when teaching ELLs, it's crucial that we acquaint ourselves with them as individuals and avoid stereotypes or misconceptions about these learners.

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After numerous conversations with other educators, including some fellow English-as-a-second-language teachers, I've compiled a list of common assumptions that might affect our ability to relate to our ELLs.

### **Assumption #1: ELLs are homogeneous.**

*Reality:* Contrary to stereotypes, not all families of ELLs are Hispanic, poor, and/or uneducated. English-language learners span a wide array of cultures, races, socio-economic levels, and academic experiences. There are growing numbers of Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and European populations in pockets of the United States. Furthermore, it's not uncommon to find a variety of cultures, dialects, and races in any given ethnic group. Also, many of our ELL families immigrate for professional reasons, and they are well-educated and economically stable.

### **Assumption #2: All ELLs are immigrants.**

*Reality:* In 2012, 57 percent of English-language learners were born in the United States, according to the **U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition**. For those born outside of the United States, their immigration stories are as individual as they are. And it's important to make no assumption—much less ask—about their immigration status. Not only is it illegal for educators to inquire about their status, it is completely irrelevant.

### **Assumption #3: Parents of ELLs do not speak English.**

*Reality:* Just because a child is not proficient in English doesn't mean his or her family isn't. Many parents (perhaps in an effort to retain their home language and culture) will purposely not expose their children to English prior to attending school. Some students live in a bicultural and bilingual home with one American parent and one immigrant parent. A few years ago, I taught a young man whose American father had been a missionary in Mexico, where he met and married his spouse and started a family. They lived in Mexico until the son was in middle school. My student spoke very little English until his sophomore year in high school when he was served in the ESL program. Lastly, we also have many adoptees. Some of these kids may not appear as ELLs based on name, or even appearance, but they will

need language support as most will speak no English whatsoever when they are welcomed to the United States by their new parents.

**Assumption #4: ELLs are fluent in their native language.**

*Reality:* It's not uncommon for children to replace their first language with English, especially international adoptees. Because they have no one in the home to converse with in their native tongues, they forget everything they learned as young children. However, you may find many of them still have difficulty understanding and producing English. These students will not need a translator, but they most definitely need scaffolding and differentiation.

**Assumption #5: English-language proficiency is an indicator of intellect.**

*Reality:* Can an English-language learner be academically gifted? Most certainly! She can also have learning differences, although we cannot identify them until we rule out language issues. While it may be difficult to distinguish between a language deficiency or a learning disability, it's crucial that we offer **comprehensible input** and scaffolded instruction that draws on the experiences of students in order to maximize understanding. Furthermore, assessments are not valid if students do not understand the questions, although they may be assimilating the material.

**Assumption #6: Social English proficiency equates with academic English proficiency.**

*Reality:* Academic English proficiency can take up to 10 years, yet social English is usually acquired within only one to two years. It's not uncommon for students to be fully conversational with teachers and peers relatively quickly, but still unable to grasp academic concepts because of their deficits in academic language. While it may appear as apathy or laziness, language gaps often interfere with learning, causing students to lose momentum.

**Assumption #7: Using a native language in school interferes with English-language acquisition.**

*Reality:* From annotating passages to academic conversations to brainstorming an essay, having students process content in their native language will maximize learning and help them acquire English more effectively. Learners don't need to drop their native language in order to be proficient in English. Quite the contrary. It can be an effective strategy that increases comprehension and validates the individual's identity. While they do need to be assessed in English, bilingual materials can help ELLs assimilate the curriculum and give them a jumpstart. And don't fret about your inability to understand their native language. As educators, we know full well when students are off-task. I've observed some beautiful think alouds in Thai as students discussed English readings, which positively impacted subsequent assessments.

**Assumption #8: English is their second language.**

*Reality:* It may actually be their third or fourth. And don't assume that the student's strongest language is the official language of their most recent residence. This is especially important when providing translation. How will we know? Just ask.

**Assumption #9: A classroom buddy is a translator.**

*Reality:* A classroom buddy does not need to speak the learner's native language, although it would be an asset. Classroom buddies are simply students who will watch out for our ELLs—making sure they are on the right page or website, providing handouts they may not have picked up and more. The best buddies are students who are tolerant, compassionate individuals. And while it may seem that this additional duty may be a distraction to the buddies, it can actually serve to reinforce their learning as they explain content to the English-language learner.

**Assumption #10: Communication is not possible because of language barriers.**

*Reality:* Technology tools are at our fingertips. While they may not be perfect, they are tremendously helpful. From translation to visual aids, bridging the communication gap is not an unrealistic task. Furthermore, kindness and compassion are understood by all, and a smile will speak volumes. Whether or not you share a common language, students know when you are their ally.

Bottom line, there's no room for xenophobia among educators, and we cannot allow common stereotypes to keep us from serving our ELLs well. While these common myths may be normal practice, it's high time we debunk them and learn as much as possible about our ELLs, so every student can start our classes with a clean slate.

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