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Debunking the Myths of English Language Learners

English-Language Learners

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Myths in the education system are important to debunk in order to build a better support system for students. The future of education depends on looking at past failures, and not just learning from them to move forward, but to rise upwards. There are several myths in English Language classrooms that are often seen as normal practice.

Identifying these myths will help us meet our students' needs, and be able to serve them better.

Myth #1: Students cannot use their first language in the classroom

There are still many teachers who enforce this rule in their classrooms despite the fact that it is outdated and has many negative effects on the learner. When students are able to use their first language amongst peers who also speak the same language, they are more likely to use English for communicative purposes in social settings. Another reason to allow students' use of first language in the classroom is for them to understand instructions fully. In this way, the student is able to concentrate on the task at hand, rather than being preoccupied with trying to understand the instructions.

Myth #2: Students need to be corrected when they're speaking English

It is often tempting for teachers to correct grammar or pronunciation when student is speaking. However, it's best to let the students speak freely without the interfering act of correcting. Correcting often decreases students' self-confidence and diminishes their agency and voice in the classroom. Over time, with lots of practice of oral communication, students will eventually recognize grammar and sentence structure patterns on their own. In the meantime, teachers should support students when speaking by offering help when the student asks for it. Corrective strategies in the classroom, if at all necessary, need to be done privately, with kindness and care.

Myth #3: All English language learners are immigrants

Many language learners are not immigrants and have in fact been born in the US. Some language learners are also international students, who are here on a study period. It is important to be mindful and empathetic to the backgrounds of our learners to help us meet their learning needs and create a safe classroom culture for them.

Myth #4: To learn English students must assimilate within North American culture

To assimilate is to change or acquire certain characteristics of a group. Many teachers are under the impression that in order for students to succeed in language acquisition, a student must adopt and assimilate in North American culture. It is important to remember that the two processes are completely separate from each other.

Students can and do learn the language regardless whether they assimilate to North American culture practices or not. Understanding that the two processes are unrelated will help teachers be supportive of the student's learning of the new

culture and its practices and ideologies. In this way the teachers can act as a support system to help the student navigate new cultural understandings and help them make sense of what is usually an overwhelming experience.

Myth #5: All English language learners share similar background, culture, socio-economic status

This might seem like an obvious myth, however, often times teachers unconsciously view English language learners as a collective of students. It is absolutely crucial to shift this mindset and focus on the student from an individualistic perspective. English language learners are often so different from each other that they do not relate to their peers for the simple fact that they are both ELLs. Reminding ourselves that our language learners do not share the same culture, religion, socio-economic background, race, etc. helps us see them as the special individuals that they are. Connect with students by knowing who they are, it is the only way to touch their minds and their hearts.

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