MYTHS & REALITIES about EDUCATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Myth 1
“what was good enough for Grandpa is good enough for Ali”

- tales of successful immigrants in the early 1900s
- success was accomplished following schooling which made no special provisions for special language and cultural backgrounds
- these tales are often invoked by those who believe that ELLs do not need special accommodations

→ sink-or-swim education
WE NOW KNOW THAT:

- most immigrants during grandpa’s time did not graduate from school and they acquired only basic literacy & math skills – they worked as laborers
- such limited education is inadequate for the 21st Century – many skilled labor jobs require literacy
- ELLs in English-only programs with no provision for their language and cultural differences underperformed ELLs in programs that accommodated their needs (Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006).
- we are competing with the developing world whose citizens are often bi- or multilingual and know English: more L2 speakers than L1 speakers of English ⇒ English is not enough
- to lose immigrant children’s heritage languages is to squander a valuable resource in the global economy

GLOBALIZATION
Myth 2
“children soak up new languages like a sponge”

Assumptions:

🌟 children can acquire languages (L1 and L2) easily, quickly and naturally (effortlessly)

🌟 thus, they require no or minimal instructional support in school, especially when it comes to oral language development

➡️ no, limited, or short-term accommodations
WE NOW KNOW THAT:

- minority language children often do not achieve age-appropriate competence in English and academic subjects (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, in press)

- they have high drop-out rates

- they require considerably longer to acquire language than previously thought
  - 2-3 years for conversational skills (Paradis, 2006)
  - 5-7 years for academic language skills (Cummins, 1981; Thomas & Collier, 2002; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006)
IMPLICATIONS

⇒ schools need to provide sustained, coherent and carefully designed programs that span grade levels to support oral language development

⇒ this can be accomplished by integrating language instruction for ELLs with content teaching throughout the curriculum

⇒ sheltered content instructional strategies should be part of the tool kit of all teachers
Myth 3
“the ability to use English in day-to-day situations is enough for doing well in school”

Assumptions:

- ELLs who come to school speaking English do not need additional support in school
- ELLs who speak English and have trouble in school must have learning disabilities
WE NOW KNOW THAT:

- the language of science, math, and social studies is not the same as everyday English (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010)
- everyday English is necessary but not sufficient to be successful in school, especially in the higher grades
- ELLs do not usually learn the kinds of language skills they need for academic success from peers or in the home
**IMPLICATIONS**

- we must adopt more sophisticated notions of language proficiency and how to promote acquisition of language for academic purposes

- language development of ELLs should not be the sole responsibility of ESL or bilingual specialists

- all teachers have responsibility for teaching language at all times

- ELLs benefit from explicit English language development instruction, in addition to sheltered instruction (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010)
Myth 4
“earlier is better”

- children learn second languages faster and better the earlier they begin
- there is a link between time spent learning in English and competence in English -- “time-on-task”
  - parents of ELLs often use English at home in order to give their children a head start
  - the home language is undermined and the parents’ role in language development is truncated
WE NOW KNOW THAT:

- yes, overall, earlier is generally better

BUT

- earlier is not better for all aspects of language acquisition and, especially, language for academic purposes – children who can read in the home language learn to read English quickly (Genesee et al., 2008; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, in press)

- earlier is not better if the learning environment cannot support it – parents’ use of English in the home does not necessarily promote English (Riches & Genesee, 2006; Genesee, Geva et al., 2006)

- competence in the L1 can support development of academic language and literacy skills in English-L2 (August & Shanahan, 2006)
IMPLICATIONS

- ELLs and their parents should not be discouraged from using the home language.

- ELL parents should be encouraged to use the home language in ways that support literacy and academic achievement.

- Using minority languages in the home otherwise may not be beneficial for schooling (Genesee & Geva, 2006).
Myth 5
“second language learning is a zero-sum game”

Assumptions:

- children have a limited capacity for language
- more time spent in English in school \(\Rightarrow\) the better the outcomes
- learning 2 languages (at once or in succession) has its costs \(\Rightarrow\) delays, incomplete mastery, even impairment
WE KNOW THAT:

this is NOT true!
Evidence from Evaluations of Alternative Educational Programs for ELLs

- Bilingual instruction/education > English-only instruction
  (August & Hakuta 1997; Francis, Lesaux, & August 2006; Genesee et al. 2005, 2006; Greene 1998; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass 2005; Slavin & Cheung 2005)

“Overall, where differences between two instructional conditions were found in the studies reviewed, these differences typically favored the bilingual instruction condition. This is the case for studies conducted with students in both elementary and secondary schools, and with students possessing a range of abilities.”
(August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 398)
More evidence…

- ELL student achievement is related to length of participation in program:
  - Evaluations in primary grades $\Rightarrow$ bilingual $<$ Eng-only
  - Evaluations at end of elementary school $\Rightarrow$ bilingual $>$ English-only

- Found for:
  - Reading and mathematics achievement,
  - GPA
  - Attendance rates
  - High school completion rates
  - Attitudes toward school and self

(e.g., Block 2007; Cazabon, Nicoladis, & Lambert 1998; Curiel, Rosenthal, & Richel 1986; Lambert & Cazabon 1994; Lindholm-Leary 2001; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato 2001, 2006; Lopez & Tashakkori 2006; Thomas & Collier 2002)
More English ➔ better outcomes?  
(Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2010)

**NO:**

a) bilingual instruction ➔ better English language outcomes

b) 90/10 bilingual programs ➞ 50/50 bilingual programs by the end of elementary school

c) more exposure to English in CA schools due to Prop 227 ➞ no improvements in English achievement levels
Levels of Achievement?

- ELLs in dual language programs (two-way immersion) on norm-referenced, criterion-referenced state tests of reading and math at the end of elementary school:
  - DL ELL students > ELLs in English only
  - DL program ELLs = English-L1 students in English-only programs
  - DL program ELLs =/ > grade/age norms in L1
  - true of Spanish-L1, Chinese-L1, and Korean-L1 ELLs
“… the NLP [National Literacy Panel] was the latest of five meta-analyses that reached the same conclusion: learning to read in the home language promotes reading achievement in the second language… Readers should understand how unusual it is to have five meta-analyses on the same issue conducted by five independent researchers or groups of researchers with diverse perspectives. The fact that they all reached essentially the same conclusion is worth noting. No other area in educational research with which I am familiar can claim five independent meta-analyses based on experimental studies—much less five that converge on the same basic finding.” (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 15).
IMPLICATIONS

- ELLs are resourceful learners who draw on ALL their linguistic and cognitive resources

- L1 resources are linguistic and cognitive **bootstraps** that ELLs can use to break into English

- Effective instruction draws on and encourages use of these bootstraps
thank you
Selected References


