

## **Position Statement on the Diversity of English Language Learners in the United States**

Beginning in the 1990s, surges in immigration and other demographic trends in the United States have had dramatic impacts upon both the number and diversity of the students and adults referred to as English language learners. What was once a more narrowly defined group has become tremendously diverse, representing a broad variety not only in linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but also in educational and socioeconomic characteristics. These complex and interrelated differences have a tremendous impact on the ways these individuals learn English and, even more importantly, on the time required for them to reach academic-level proficiency in English.

While it would be impossible to specify all the ways in which a learner's background impacts his or her learning, educators and policy makers should be aware of several significant areas that current research has highlighted.

### *Culture and Language*

English language learners come to the classroom with unique knowledge and experiences built upon their first language and culture. Cultural differences can often be subtle; however, they do impact students' learning. For example, learners from different cultures can have different views on classroom behavior, such as student-teacher interaction, as well as different views on the value of education. Cultural differences can also affect how students understand content, because students from different cultures may not have in common the cultural experiences needed to comprehend many texts.

The same holds true for language. Language is imbedded in culture, and culture influences how people think and use language. Thus, a learner's native language impacts the ways in which they learn English. It is also important, however, to recognize that "culture" is not fixed within the learners permanently. Over time, English language learners will develop their own cultural sensibilities in local contexts.

### *Age and Educational Background*

Just as with culture and language, the age and educational background of English language learners will also have a significant effect upon the way in which they will develop proficiency in English. Research indicates that children and adults learn in very different ways; this is especially true for language learning. Learners of different ages have different needs and approaches to learning, and thus the language teaching methodologies employed must be appropriate for each age group.

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Research in the field of second language acquisition has consistently shown that strong language and literacy skills in a learner's first language greatly enhance second language learning. With classrooms becoming increasingly diverse, it can no longer be assumed that English language learners come to programs with similar educational backgrounds and the same level of native-language literacy. For example, a young immigrant who has been educated in Europe, the intermittently schooled child of a migrant worker from Mexico, a U.S.-born child of immigrants who speak Chinese at home, and a refugee from Africa with no formal education may share the same middle-school classroom. Although they may be the same age, their educational backgrounds and native language literacy skills are vastly different, which affects their educational needs as well as the rate at which each develops English language proficiency.

*Socioeconomic Status*

As with all students, the socioeconomic status of English language learners will impact their learning. Some may come from families that rely heavily on social service agencies because of financial or other difficulties. School-age English language learners may come from families in which the parents are working long hours outside the home, and older children are expected to take on responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings. Still others may be refugees displaced due to social unrest or war in their native countries, and may be struggling with additional psychological burdens that affect their learning. These experiences not only affect how students learn, but also how they view and approach education.

*Impact on Teaching and Policy*

As the United States becomes ever more culturally and linguistically diverse, it is critical that all educators understand the impact this diversity has upon teaching and learning. Moreover, decision makers at all levels must also understand and appreciate the impact this diversity has upon education policy, especially as it relates to English language learners. Because of the increasing diversity in the English language learner population, educational policies that focus on singular methodologies, reliance on standardized assessment, and limited timeframes for learning will not effectively serve these learners. Educational and assessment policies must be flexible to give diverse English language learners equal access to greater educational content and opportunities for success. TESOL urges decision makers at all levels to explore and understand the diversity of their target population(s) before formulating education policies. Furthermore, TESOL calls upon decision makers to consult with researchers, educators, and other stakeholders in the formulation of sound education policy as it relates to English language learners.

*Approved by the Board of Directors  
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