

# Getting Started with English Language Learners

## How Educators Can Meet the Challenge

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# Introduction

*Getting Started with English Language Learners: How Educators Can Meet the Challenge* is written for teachers, administrators, board of education members, and teacher trainers in the United States who are responsible for educating the growing number of English language learners (ELLs) in our public schools. The book's aim is to help you provide an effective learning environment for ELLs.

This book is based on my personal experience and passionate involvement in the field of English language education over the past 26 years. It is not meant to be a research document but a practical resource to help educators who are not specialists in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) understand the needs of English language learners. I wish also to help administrators and board members implement programs to help English language learners reach the learning level of their native English-speaking classmates. Throughout the book I have provided scenarios of actual classrooms and real students both in my own school and in the schools of my colleagues throughout the United States.

Information about instructing English language learners has become vital over the past few years as school districts wrestle with the guidelines mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB contains significant changes regarding federal policies that

directly affect mainstream classroom teachers and individual school districts in the following areas:

- All English language learners must be tested at least once a year using an English proficiency test. They are no longer exempt from statewide accountability.
- Students who have been in U.S. schools for three consecutive years and have been tested in their native language must be tested in English for reading and language arts. They are required to meet the same standards as their native English-speaking peers and demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP).
- Standards for English language proficiency need to be tied to core curriculum content standards.
- In the past, English proficiency tests for ELLs assessed basic communication skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Now subject-area academic skills must also be tested.

These guidelines place the classroom teacher and the school districts on center stage. Teachers are obliged to ensure that teaching strategies in their classrooms are aligned with English language proficiency standards. These standards make it imperative for mainstream teachers to learn about the theories and teaching strategies that have been used successfully to teach ELLs.

The first three chapters cover essential concepts to help you understand how children learn a second language. I implore you not to skip these chapters because they contain crucial knowledge for educators who are making decisions about English language learners in their classrooms, schools, and school districts. In these first chapters I also discuss how long it takes ELLs to learn English and review the stages of second-language acquisition. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I focus on practical strategies for teaching newcomers and address how to differentiate instruction for students who are not ready to undertake grade-level work. I also discuss what approaches skilled teachers use to provide the best possible education for ELLs.

## INTRODUCTION

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The last chapter gives a brief overview of the different types of programs used in the United States. This is not meant to be a definitive review of all programs, but it is a short synopsis of popular alternatives that provide effective instruction for English language learners.

# 1

## Key Concepts of Second-Language Acquisition

Many popular beliefs about second-language acquisition are perpetuated in our society. The following statements are related to six key concepts of second-language acquisition. Check the ones you think are true.

My newcomer should be referred to the child study team. He is often disruptive in the classroom and kicks and hits other children. There is something wrong with him aside from not knowing the language.

The more time students spend soaking up English in the mainstream classroom, the faster they will learn the language.

Children who have the ability to memorize grammar rules and complete pages of grammar drills will learn to speak and write English more quickly.

Children learn a second language faster and more easily than teenagers and adults do.

The emotional state of the learner doesn't interfere with the acquisition of a new language. As long as English language learners (ELLs) receive instruction from classroom teachers, they will learn English.

Students should be strongly encouraged to speak English from the first day.