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**The Inequity of Current Educational Designs, Standards, and Assessments
for English Learners**

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Abstract

Federal mandates have caused high stakes testing and government approved or designed curricula and standards to become an integral part of the American public education system. This article will discuss how English language learners acquire language proficiency, how long mastery of English can take, and issues that may negatively or positively impact language learning and retention. Evidence from current research that reveals that these prescriptive programs and assessments both fail to serve and actively discriminate against minority language and culture students is presented and linked to theoretical hypothesis of second language acquisition. Comparisons between English language programs in the U.S. and other countries is provided, and suggestions of ways to improve learning environments and outcomes for English language learners in U.S. schools are offered.

Keywords: English Language Learner, Common Core State Standards, achievement gap, affective response, assessment

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The Inequity of Current Educational Designs, Standards, and Assessments for English Learners

Due in large part to federal education mandates such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (United States Department of Education, 2001), high stakes testing has become an integral part of the American educational experience. The associated accountability penalties enacted on school districts and personnel that fail to make the grade have led states and districts to adopt prescriptive one-size-fits-all federal government approved or designed curricula and standards (Tsang, Katz, & Stack, 2008). Unfortunately, these curricula and standards rarely adequately address the needs and capabilities of diverse learners such as English Language Learners (ELL) (Yanoff, LaDuke, & Lindner, 2014). This article will present theoretical perspectives on how ELL students learn English and how long mastery of English can take, as well as issues that may negatively or positively impact language learning and retention. Next, requirements and expectations for ELL students in some U.S. districts will be discussed and compared with requirements and expectations for some ELL students in other countries. Information will then be offered concerning the attitudes and training of teachers in specific ELL teaching situations. Finally, a summary of information and a reference list of sources cited in this article will be provided.

As individuals and as a group, ELL students are unique in U.S. schools. Quoting statistics from other researchers, Tsang, et al. (2008) reported that ELL students who arrive in English language schools between the ages of eight and 11, with a strong two- to three-year native language education from their home country, can be expected to acquire English language ability at the 50th percentile within five to seven years. Similar students arriving in English language schools with no formal education can be expected to take seven to 10 years to reach the same

level of English proficiency. Students who were below grade level in their native language schools can be expected to take a minimum of seven to 10 years and may, in fact, never attain proficiency. In practical terms, this means that an intelligent, educated non-English speaking child who arrives in a U.S. school at the beginning of the third grade year should not be expected to function at a comparable English language level to native English language speaking peers until somewhere between the beginning of the student's seventh grade year through the end of the ninth grade year. Of course, many factors other than prior education can affect English language and academic content acquisition.

One of the factors that research suggests as either a barrier or a benefit to language acquisition for ELL students is the affective, or emotional, response to language learning. Yildirim and Torun (2014) suggested that language information is better absorbed indirectly while students are engaged in fun, visually, auditorially, and physically stimulating activities. The researchers concluded that language instruction that was based on skill-specific direct instruction was less likely to engage young learners than were active, holistic learning events. The results of this research support Krashen's (1981) Acquisition-Learning hypothesis. While some theorists and researchers disagree, Krashen is widely acknowledged in the education field as a leader in the theory of second language acquisition. With this hypothesis, Krashen offered a distinction between *learning* language and *acquiring* language, and suggested that "acquiring language through meaningful interaction and communication in the target language is more effective in second language acquisition" (p. 48) than is learning language through formal grammatical instruction.

In their research, Jean & Geva (2012) found that when children felt comfortable and accepted, they were more motivated and performed better in both their home language and in

English, while the rejection of their home language by school personnel and native English-speaking peers made using their home language *at school* uncomfortable for the ELL students. The ELL students in Jean and Geva's research also lacked confidence in their use of English, and their feelings of discomfort led to an unwillingness and inability to internalize instruction presented in English. Hamada's (2011) research with ELL students in Japan revealed that reduced self-confidence was the strongest demotivator for English language learning. Hamada further concluded that tests were the main source of the students' loss of confidence in their learning capability, and the psychological pressure of tests combined with low test scores led students to believe that their learning efforts were in vain, leading to a drop in the students' efforts which led, in turn, to further drops in test scores. These results are both relevant and problematic in that in most U.S. schools, ELL students are required to take an annual English language ability assessment *no matter how long* they have been enrolled in a U.S. school. ELL students are also required to take annual state and federally mandated academic content assessments beginning as early as kindergarten.

While Common Core State Standards (CCSS) spell out specific goals for all students, including ELLs, little accommodation is given for a prior lack of content instruction, limited English proficiency, or affective issues relating to time in the U.S. or other psychosocial issues frequently experienced by ELL students. In fact, the CCSS may contribute to an ELL student's negative affective response by requiring that the student think "deeply and critically about texts and *explaining* [emphasis added] this thinking to an audience" (Yanoff, et al., 2014, p. 7). This requirement of CCSS is in direct contrast to Krashen's (1981) Input hypothesis. Krashen suggested that ELLs acquire, rather than learn, language when the target language input is one

step above the learner's current ability level. The input, according to this hypothesis, must be *comprehensible*; that is, language skills that the learner can understand, but not yet produce.

Another requirement in many states' public schools is that all academic instruction be conducted in English despite research that confirms home language can support and enhance second language literacy and learning (Dotson-Blake, 2010) and that bilingual instruction can benefit both ELL and native English speaking students. Some instruction for ELL students at the university level in Canada makes use of commonly owned and used handheld mobile electronic devices, and centers on authentic learning tasks as opposed to segmented learning units focused on specific literacy or grammatical elements (Park & Slater, 2014). The curriculum focuses on "tangible learning outcomes in the form of 'tasks'—that is, what learners are able to do with the language" (p. 96). The researchers stated that "learners can best acquire the target language by engaging in activities that they will likely encounter in real-world communicative contexts" (p. 96). This conclusion agrees with Krashen's suggestion that second language skill is best achieved in natural communication situations in which the goal is to convey meaning rather than to attain grammatical perfection. In Turkey, Yildirim and Torum (2014) also emphasized the importance of using English "within a context that mirrors the real world" (p. 47). The researchers advised against teaching language "in isolated chunks or breaking the language into its grammatical components" (p. 47), and suggested that language be taught holistically in enjoyable ways.

In seeking to discover the beliefs of teachers about immigrant students, Shodavaram, Jones, Weaver, Márquez, and Ensle (2009) discovered that personal and professional beliefs do not always align. While the teachers in the study professed a personal belief in the recognition and importance of diversity and the differing needs of immigrant students, approximately 75

percent did not feel they had a professional need to be aware of the differing needs of immigrant students within their classrooms. The teachers also believed immigrant students should learn English *in place of* their native language. Hasty and Fain (2014) suggested that teachers “intentionally design ways to learn about students, their families, and their communities” (p. 11) to help counterbalance the “severe loss of power in the curricular decisions that ultimately affect student learning” (p. 11) experienced by ELLs and their families due to the current political and educational context across the U.S.

In summary, research reveals that current government policy and practice on the education of ELLs do not align with accepted theory of second language acquisition, or with the needs and capabilities of ELL students. Further, the instruction design and assessment methods mandated for ELLs are inappropriate when balanced against what research has revealed concerning English language acquisition. Education researchers and second language acquisition theorists have suggested that providing language instruction that focuses on real-world applications and situations in a positive environment may allow ELL students to more effectively internalize, recall, and apply English language and content skills. Finally, while the wording of the CCSS concedes that the implementation instructions for teaching the standards does not adequately address the unique learning needs of ELLs, no comprehensive and effective accommodations have been provided. In 2013, on learning that the theme of a conference at which he was to speak was the support of CCSS, Krashen changed his speech topic to “The Case Against Common Core.” This topic was rejected by the conference’s Executive Committee. In his October 31 blog explaining his decision to withdraw from the conference, Krashen stated, “I cannot in good conscience speak at a conference dedicated to the common core without presenting what I know about it.” (2013).

The following table gives a summary of the information provided in this article. The first column of the table summarizes five ways in which researchers have determined ELLs may acquire, or fail to acquire, English language ability. The second column provides five corresponding points of state and federal level ELL education policy. The final column offers practices educators may use to enhance learning for ELLs in U.S. schools.

Table 1

Summary of Information: Learning, Policy, and Practice

How ELLs Learn	ELL Education Policy	ELL Educator Practices
Depending on age and prior education, acquiring English language ability at the 50 th percentile can take a minimum of five to ten years.	ELLs are required to take annual state and federally mandated English language and content area assessments regardless of prior educational experience, time in U.S. schools, or grade level. States determine the length of time allowed for ELLs to attain English language mastery.	Teachers must educate themselves on district, state, and federal ELL policy and become an active voice in as many levels of policy and curriculum design as possible to influence the development of realistic and attainable ELL goals based on current ELL education research.
The affective filter can be a barrier or benefit in English language acquisition for ELLs.	CCSS makes no accommodations for affective issues experienced by ELLs.	Create an open, low-stress, inclusive learning environment. Reduce assessments with quantified scores.
ELLs <i>acquire</i> , rather than <i>learn</i> , language when target language input is comprehensible and one step above the learner's ability level.	Many states mandate English as the sole language of instruction and require the use of scripted curriculum for ELLs, thereby reducing comprehensible input and teachers' ability to individualize instruction.	Create natural communication and learning situations where the goal is to convey meaning and communicate student comprehension rather than attain grammatical perfection.
ELLs acquire language skills best in low stress, highly interactive real-life learning situations	English as a second language is predominantly taught in discrete segmented grammar and phonetics units.	Create authentic learning tasks focused on tangible learning outcomes that use English in real-world contexts.
Home language can support and enhance second language literacy and learning	English-only policy minimalizes home language and culture support for ELLs.	Actively design ways to learn about ELL students, their families, and communities, and incorporate them into the learning environment whenever possible.

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