

Who are the English Learners and where did they come from?



Introduction

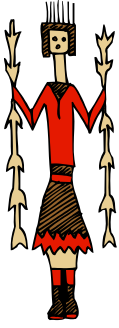
English Learners [ELs] are students who speak a language other than English at home and are learning English as a second language at school. They have not mastered the four domains of English language arts: listening, speaking, reading, and writing to a level approaching native-English speakers of their same age. (Find Law For Legal Professionals, 1974) They are also below grade level in academic subjects in English. They remain identified as ELs until their English language and academic skills are close to grade level. When they meet multiple criteria, they are reclassified as Fluent English Proficient students.

In the United States, we have a large population of individuals and families who speak languages other than English as their native language. They are facing the constant dilemma of culture conflict and cultural identity. As they are learning English as a second language, enormous pressure is placed on them to reject their native language and culture [This is America, speak English. English Only Movement. Only English allowed at school]. The Native American children were taken from their families and placed in Indian Schools. Many Spanish-speaking children [like me] from the United States were punished for speaking Spanish at school. Some children are choosing to maintain their own language and culture, some are becoming bilingual, and some are choosing to reject their own language and culture in favor of English.

Most people assume that people learning English as a second language are from Mexico and speak Spanish. They also assume that these people are illegal immigrants. This is only part of the picture. Individuals who live in the United States and speak other languages find themselves in this country through different routes. Let's explore some of those routes.

Many people immigrated to the United States from throughout the world. Some came from the countries south of the United States speaking Spanish, Portuguese, and a wide range of indigenous languages. Some came from countries north of the United States speaking Native American dialects and French. Some came from the European, African, Australian, and Asian continents speaking an even wider range of languages. Some were forced to come to work in the United States [Africans & Chinese].

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Many individuals did not immigrate to the United States but were indigenous to this country. The indigenous people of this country come from backgrounds of Native American languages that have also evolved into new languages as they came in contact with the languages of the explorers. Many islands became territories of the United States [1867-1950]. (About.com. American History) Hawaii is now a state while the other islands are still territories of the United States. The Islanders had their own language and culture before contact with the explorers from the rest of the world and many were forced to learn English.

Languages of the United States

Wikipedia has an article called Languages of the United States.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_the_United_States

"Approximately 337 languages are spoken or signed by the [United States] population, of which 176 are indigenous to the area. 52 languages formerly spoken in the country's territory are now extinct."
(Wikipedia)

Wikipedia has the following categories regarding the languages spoken in the United States: Native American languages, Austronesian languages, Immigrant languages, New American language dialects and creoles, and Sign languages. **Please note that English is listed as an immigrant language.**

Indigenous inhabitants



Let's consider first the indigenous inhabitants of the United States and its territories. These people were already here in the United States when they were conquered by the explorers from around the world. Most conquerors came with the attitude that the natives needed to learn the language and culture of the conquerors. Some of the conquerors killed most or all of the indigenous peoples. The indigenous peoples were often prohibited from speaking their own language, participating in their own religious beliefs, and/or participating in cultural activities that clashed with the language, culture, and religion of the conquerors. Many of the indigenous people also intermarried with the conquerors either by force or by choice. Their children had to choose to become bilingual or to assimilate into the language and culture of the conquerors. Many indigenous inhabitants refused to learn the language and culture of the conquerors. Many chose to maintain their own language and culture and

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still continue to do so. Some of your students are descendants of the indigenous peoples and the conquerors and place a very high value on their own language and culture.

In 1848 the Treaty of Guadalupe was signed between the United States and Mexico. The indigenous people and the people of mixed heritage living in the newly created Western United States were given the choice to stay and become United States citizens or move to Mexico. They had one year to make a choice.



“Under the terms of the treaty negotiated by Trist, Mexico ceded to the United States Upper California and New Mexico. This was known as the Mexican Cession and included present-day Arizona and New Mexico and parts of Utah, Nevada, and Colorado (see Article V of the treaty). Mexico relinquished all claims to Texas and recognized the Rio Grande as the southern boundary with the United States (see Article V).” (Gray)

Most of these people had been living in their homes on ancestral property passed down for generations. They chose to stay home. They were promised that they would retain ownership of their land, that their children would receive education in their own language, and that they would become United States citizens. In many cases, their own languages were Spanish, an indigenous language, or a mixture of both.

Many of the Indian tribes signed treaties with the United States [1778-1868]. (The Avalon Project) The Native Americans were pushed out of their ancestral lands onto reservations [usually areas of no interest to others in the United States]. When the Native American signed treaties with the United States, they became sovereign nations within the boundaries of the United States.

As a group of indigenous and mixed heritage inhabitants, they prefer to become bilingual. They do not want to become monolingual English and lose their own language and culture. As their teacher you need to respect the wishes of their parents and their communities and continually provide activities that reflect not only the English language and culture but also reflect the languages and cultures of the children. You need to create multicultural classrooms. Many of the members of these communities are starting heritage language programs in their local schools to make sure that their children do not lose their own language and culture [New Mexico, Hawaii, Alaska]. (Center For Applied Linguistics)

Immigrants

The immigrants to United States, including the conquerors, also fall into a variety of categories. Some left their own countries to become a part of the “American Dream”. Some were forced to leave their countries due to wars, famines and other life-threatening conditions and are refugees in the United States. Some come to United States temporarily looking for work to support their families with the intention of eventually returning to their own country. We also have a large group of “children of immigrants” who were born and raised in the United States and are American citizens even though their parents are not American citizens [Over 5 million]. (Office of Public Affairs, 2006)

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American dream



Let's talk about the immigrants who came to United States for the "American Dream" [coined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book: The Epic of America]. Many of them came through Ellis Island [and other ports of entry] and began the process of becoming American citizens. They saved their money, sold their properties, and made many sacrifices to come to the United States. They moved into the communities where they had friends and relatives and were able to speak their own language and participate in familiar cultural activities. When they came to the United States, they made the conscious decision to leave behind their own language and culture and become American citizens. Many decided not to teach their children their own language and culture [insisting that the children speak in English]. Most of their descendants no longer speak the languages of their ancestors. Most of them are monolingual English citizens who have little or no knowledge of other languages and cultures. As a group they are not interested in becoming bilingual or returning to their homelands.

Refugee immigrants

What about the refugee immigrants that came to the United States? They were forced out of their own country in order to survive. Many of them hope one day to return to their own country. Here are a few examples:



The Hmong soldiers who assisted the American soldiers came to the United States with their families. Many Hmong families were forced to live in concentration camps before they were able to flee the country. I have met many Hmong individuals who are trilingual [Hmong, Spanish and English].

The Jewish people were placed in the concentration camps in Germany and many were slaughtered. Many of them were able to come to the United States as refugees.



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Oaxaca, one of the states of Mexico, experienced severe drought conditions. The Miztec Indians were forced to leave their ancestral homes in search of food. Their first language was one of the mizteco dialects and their second language was Spanish. Now many of them are in California learning a third language [English].

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A growing number of refugee immigrants are coming to the United States because of the drug wars and violence in their homelands. It is too dangerous to live there. The refugee immigrants are facing a different dilemma. The process to enter the United States legally is long and sometimes very costly. What you do when your life, or the life of your family, is in immediate danger? Do you run for safety even if it means crossing a border illegally? How often does the United States go to other countries to rescue refugees and bring them into this country?



The refugee immigrants to the United States still strive to maintain their own language and culture while learning whatever language they need to survive [including English]. Whenever they can, they return to their home lands in the hopes that conditions have improved and that they can stay. Many of them will never be able to return to their homelands.

Temporary immigrants



The largest population of the temporary immigrants come from the various states of Mexico and speak either Spanish or one of the Mexican Indian dialects. Now a growing number of temporary immigrants are coming from Central and South America. Usually the adult males come to United States to work as migrant fieldworkers, to work as dairy migrant workers, to work in the fishing industry, or in any other type of jobs that they can locate. They usually live in poverty, work for minimum wages without any health benefits, and send the bulk of their money back to their families. When

they can no longer find work, they return to their home county to their families.

Some of them were able to obtain work visas, commonly called green cards, but many couldn't because they couldn't afford to pay for the process to obtain them. If they had the choice they would stay with their families in their own country and work there. Unfortunately they can't earn enough money to support their families. Sometimes the adult males send for their wives and children to come join them in the United States. The women end up working low-paying jobs in the garment industry, hotel industry, restaurants, and anyplace else they can find work. They usually do not qualify for benefits.

The United States used to have the Bracero program [1942-1964] where temporary workers were recruited in Mexico and brought to the United States. (The Farmworkers Website) There were so many abuses of the Bracero program that the program was dismantled. Many of the Mexican workers never got paid or didn't receive their full wages. Occasionally the Bracero program comes up in the news as a

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possible solution to both the illegal immigration and the need for temporary workers. In 2010 some Bracero workers received back pay for work done 40 to 60 years ago.

Unfortunately, many of the temporary immigrant workers are here illegally. Their main goal is to support their families and eventually return to their homelands. The temporary workers who are here illegally are constantly being exploited with the threats of deportation. Many of the temporary workers have been working here in the United States for so long that their children were born and raised as American citizens. All too often children are left alone when their parents are deported to their home country.

Implications for these students

Students learning English as a second language may have come to the United States last week from anywhere in the world or may have been born here. The fact that over 100 languages are spoken by English Learners in the state California is evidence of this diversity. Some immigrants come to the United States with a strong education foundation from their own country and some never receive any educational instruction in their own language and culture. English Learners may come from the indigenous or mixed heritage population or may be immigrants to the United States. They may have immigrated voluntarily to reach the American Dream or get better employment. They may have immigrated involuntarily to escape war, famine, extreme discrimination, or other negative factors. Their attitudes towards bilingualism/biculturalism vary from group to group. They might become literate in two languages, literate only in English, or almost illiterate in two languages.

Some English Learners are becoming proficient bilingual students. This means that they reach fluency levels in their home language and in English, learn to read and write in both languages, and become academically successful [preferably in two languages]. When they almost reach grade level language and academic skills in English, they are reclassified as Fluent English Proficient students.

Other English Learners are becoming English dominant students. This means that their English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills are stronger than the same skills in their native language. They are gradually losing their native language and culture. Not all of these students are experiencing academic success.

Some English learners have lost their first language and became monolingual English-speaking students. Many of these monolingual English-speaking students were created as a direct result of the public school system's focus on speaking only English at school without providing primary language support. Some of these English learners never reach high proficiency levels in their first language and never reach high proficiency levels in English. We call them limited bilingual students and many of them end up as referrals to special education. The referrals to special education for the newly created monolingual English speaking students and the limited bilingual students can be prevented by providing a sound and strong foundation in the first language of the English learners.

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Parent Choices

The parents of English learners have the right to select the type of program and the languages of instruction for their children under state and federal laws. They can request an English only program with the minimum mandated English learner required instruction components or they can request an alternate placement where their children can be taught in both English and their native language. Some families have rejected the language and culture of their ancestors. Some children have rejected the language and culture of their parents. Some families are embracing their own language and culture and want their children to become as proficient as possible in the native language and English. Parents also want the children to attain high academic achievement levels in English or in two languages.

You have the obligation to provide the best instructional program available to your English Learners while developing their language and academic skills to the highest levels possible and demonstrating respect and awareness of the languages and cultures of all of your students.

Dual Language Immersion



Many parents of the native English-speaking students are choosing to enroll their children in dual language immersion or two-way immersion programs so that their children can reach the following goals: 1. High proficiency levels in two languages, 2. the ability to function comfortably in two cultures, and 3. grade level or above academic achievement in two languages.

Many language minority parents are choosing to enroll their children in either heritage programs, dual language immersion programs, or two-way immersion programs so that their children can reach the same three goals: 1. High proficiency levels in two languages, 2. the ability to function comfortably in two cultures, and 3. Grade level or above academic achievement in two languages.

33 school districts in California have decided to provide a "Seal of Biliteracy" on the high school diplomas of students who have met multiple criteria of proficiency in two languages and academic success in two languages. (McLean, 2010)

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For a national, long-term study on the academic achievements of English Learners in the United States read the most recent publications by Thomas & Collier. The programs where English Learners are reaching the highest academic levels by 11th grade include the dual immersion and heritage immersion programs. Most English Learners enrolled in programs that focus more on English and are performing below grade level on a national level. (Collier & Thomas, 2009)

My personal goal is to help as many students as possible to reach their highest potential in two or more languages. I do not want to take away the language and culture of any student as a direct or indirect consequence of my actions. We need to graduate students from our schools with the job skills to prosper in their own language and culture in addition to the English language and culture. Hopefully we can assist them in becoming multilingual professionals.

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