

Common Misconceptions about Newcomers

Schools often need support in implementing educational practices. This may encompass recognizing and helping to shift schools' and educators' misconceptions about educating newcomers and ELs. Without consciously addressing misconceptions, schools may not develop specifically designed policies, procedures, and strategies to help newcomers learn content and language as rapidly as needed.

Below are four common misconceptions about educating newcomers, along with current practices that may help prepare newcomers to acquire the skills needed to actively participate in their education and community environments.

Misconceptions, Current Understandings, and Suggested Practices

MISCONCEPTION 1:

Newcomers must develop significant language proficiency prior to participating in disciplinary learning.

Current Understanding: Students learn language to do things in the world. To help students develop academic language, they need to participate in meaningful and authentic activities about academic ideas and concepts (van Lier & Walqui, 2012).

- Orient students to the different types of texts they use in school and how language is used in each content area.
- Help students use academic language to promote English language development and support academic learning.

Example:

- Provide newcomers with diverse types of text and help them understand different types of text (e.g., narratives, temporary expressions such as “first” and “later”) and content-specific language. This will help students create their own academic practices and language.
- Focus on how students use key phrases associated with the type of text, and convey meaning about the content through written, oral, visual, and symbolic texts, thus moving away from a focus on errors (such as verb tense and pronunciation). Initially, student efforts may be inaccurate, but proficiency will evolve.

Example:

- Observe students' written and oral expression, and support and check on their development over time. Also create opportunities for newcomers to use language in a variety of academic situations, both formal and informal, helping the student to increasingly use subject specific English.

MISCONCEPTION 2:

Students need simplified content and language as they learn English.

Current Understanding: Simplified language decreases, rather than increases, meaning. Removing connections between sentences and paragraphs and using simple sentences, for example, reduces the content and meaning of a text. Instead, texts for newcomers should be amplified, not simplified (van Lier and Walqui, 2010).

Develop connections between sentences and paragraphs to help students navigate a text.

Example:

- Identify text that contains illustrative examples and connections in both sentences and paragraphs. These include embedding definitions, repeating and rewording key terms, and adding connections between sentences and paragraphs.

- Expose and invite students to participate in content-related English so they may respond when provided with metacognitive strategies.

MISCONCEPTION 3:

Students can learn only one language at a time, and bilingualism is counterproductive. Use of a student's home language will negatively affect academic and language learning.

Current Understanding: Literacy in a student's first language positively affects the learning of a new language (August & Shanahan, 2006).

- Develop programs in which the student's first language supports learning a new language such as bilingual or dual language programs and classes (August & Shanahan, 2006).
- Help students learn English by using the home language as a tool for learning English and academic content (van Lier, 2004).

Examples:

- Provide amplified models of how to use English appropriately in academic contexts. In doing so, also accept the students' need to create and share meaning in their native language(s).
- Invite students to develop their native language by reading books in that language.

MISCONCEPTION 4:

Not all educators working with ELs or newcomers need to be specially trained. If teachers speak English, they can teach English.

Current Understanding: Teachers need specialized knowledge to teach English and academic content to ELs, and to support the other needs of newcomers. Without pedagogical and socio-emotional supports for newcomers and ELs in particular, we will fail to support the attainment of ambitious futures by these students.

- Provide class teachers, administrators, curriculum specialists, and EL teachers with sustained and high-quality professional learning opportunities about strategies for supporting the academic content and language knowledge of newcomers.
- Focus professional learning on effective pedagogical and social emotional supports for newcomers.

Example:

- Enrich and contextualize academic language to increase its accessibility for EL and newcomer students, particularly in upper grades.