

How long does it take to learn English?

by Judie Haynes

The most frequently asked question of ESL professionals by mainstream teachers, administrators, and even politicians concerns how long it should take English language learners to acquire English.

The Research

How long does it take to learn English? How long should students receive support in language? These are the most frequently asked questions by administrators, school board members and classroom teachers. The most comprehensive work done in this field is the research conducted by Wayne Thomas & Virginia Collier. Thomas & Collier studied the language acquisition of 700,000 English language learners in a longitudinal study from 1982 to 1996. They wanted to find out how long it took students with no background in English to reach native speaker performance (50th percentile) on norm-referenced tests. In addition, they looked at variables such as socioeconomic status, first language, programs used to learn English, and number of years of primary language schooling. In their study, Thomas & Collier found that **the most significant variable in how long it takes to learn English is the amount of formal schooling students have received in their first language.**

In one study, Thomas & Collier researched a group of Asian and Hispanic students from an affluent suburban school district receiving 1-3 hours second language support per day in a well-regarded ESL program. These students were generally exited from ESL in the first two years. All of the students researched were at or above grade level in native language literacy. Here are the results for students in this study.

- Those students who were between 8-11 years old and had 2-3 years of native language education took 5-7 years to test at grade level in English. These were the lucky ones.
- Students with little or no formal schooling who arrived before the age of eight, took 7-10 years to reach grade level norms in English language literacy.
- Students who were below grade level in native language literacy also took 7-10 years to reach the 50th percentile. Many of these students never reached grade level norms.

This data holds true regardless of the home language, country of origin, and socioeconomic status. (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

How do ELLs in ESL Programs Compare?

English language learners receiving ESL services **do not make more rapid progress in English than students in other types of programs.**

Those who teach in ESL programs would say that the above statement is false. They would assert that students in ESL programs outperformed second language learners in any other type of program. Research does not support this belief. Across different types of bilingual and ESL programs, Thomas & Collier found that:

- English language learners who received all of their schooling in English did extremely well in kindergarten through third grade. The gains these students made in English were dramatic.

- From fourth grade on through middle and high school, when the academic demands of the curriculum become more rigorous, the performance of these students fell substantially below the 50th percentile. Why did this happen? Native English speakers make an average gain of ten months each school year. However, English language learners only made a 6-8 month gain per school year. The gap between native-English and second language speakers widened from the 4th grade through high school. In the Thomas/Collier study the native language students spoke had no influence on these results. Students speaking Spanish made the same progress as those from an Asian background.
- Students in Two-Way Bilingual Immersion and Developmental Bilingual programs reach the 50th percentile in both their native language and English by 4th or 5th grade in all subject areas. These students were able to sustain the gains made in English, and in some cases, to achieve even higher than typical Native-English-speaker performance as they move through the secondary years of school.

This does not mean that all bilingual programs are more effective than all ESL or sheltered content programs. It is important to look beyond the program label. Are teachers qualified to teach English language learners? Are there sufficient materials? What instructional methods are used? Are students exited into all English programs too quickly? Cummins (1998) notes that "quick-exit transitional bilingual education is an inferior model based on an inadequate theoretical assumption; this model aspires to monolingualism and does little to address the causes of bilingual students' underachievement."

What Does this Research Mean for Schools?

Bilingual programs are not always feasible, especially in school districts where students come from multiple language backgrounds. Here are the key considerations for school districts:

- Give students more time to develop English language academic skills. Don't rush kindergarten through third grade students through your language support programs.
- Provide more support services to under-schooled upper elementary and middle school students. Remember that it will take them 7-10 years to reach grade level norms.
- Maintenance of native language in the home should be encouraged. Development of native language literacy should be fostered. Persuade parents to send their children to after-school and Saturday instruction in first language. If your school district has the requisite number of students, push for a developmental bilingual or two-way immersion program.