

TESOL Statement on the Acquisition of Academic Proficiency in English

The challenge of contemporary education is to prepare all students to succeed in life, including those learners who enter schools with a language other than English. The number of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, including those with limited English proficiency in our nation's schools, is large and growing. Between 1990 and 1997, the number of limited English proficient (LEP) students increased by 57% to roughly 3.4 million (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1998). These students and their families are increasingly living in places that have not previously schooled large numbers of LEP students.

The LEP population more than doubled in 18 states between 1989–1990 and 1996–1997 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1998). Current projections estimate that by the year 2000, the majority of the school-age population in 50 or more major U.S. cities will be from language minority backgrounds. To cope with this changing landscape and to ensure that all LEP students have access to an excellent education, schools, districts, and states must design and implement world-class education standards for all students, including those of limited English proficiency.

The following series of statements forms the basis for the acquisition of academic proficiency by LEP students.

Language Acquisition Is a Long-Term Process.

Language learning is a complex, multifaceted process that encompasses academic and cultural knowledge as well as basic communicative skills. Learners move through various developmental stages in a predictive manner, although abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing may occur interdependently and nonsequentially. Multiple factors influence rates of acquisition, including an individual's educational background, first language and literacy level in that language, learning style, cognitive style, motivation, and personality. Education policies that impose artificial time limits on programs and services for LEP students fail to account for these factors and may result in lower levels of academic achievement for such students in English and academic subjects.

There Is a Clear Distinction Between Social Language and Academic Language.

Historically, English as a second language (ESL) programs have focused on teaching social language. Such communication is vital if LEP students are to avoid the negative social and economic consequences of low proficiency in English and are to participate responsibly in our democracy.

In the past decade, research has shown that content-based instruction that focuses on the development of academic language proficiency is critical for success in school. LEP students are expected to learn academic content in English in order to compete academically with their native-English-speaking peers.

For most LEP students, 2 years is the general timeframe for acquiring social language skills in English. The acquisition of academic language proficiency, on the other hand, is more demanding and takes LEP students from 6 to 9 years to achieve parity with their native English language peers.

ESL Standards for Pre-K–12 Students Offer Developmental Stepping-Stones for LEP Student Attainment of Rigorous Standards.

After extensive study by leading practitioners and researchers in TESOL, content ESL standards were developed to identify what LEP students need to know and be able to do. The ESL Standards for Pre-K–12 Students (TESOL, 1997) are organized around three goals:

1. to use English to communicate in social settings
2. to use English to achieve academically in all content areas
3. to use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways

The first two goals articulate the importance of social and academic language use. The third goal recognizes the importance of language variation among culturally diverse populations.

LEP Students Are Heterogeneous With Variations in Learning.

LEP students arrive at school at various ages with varying educational backgrounds, some with limited or no prior formal schooling. According to the U.S. Department of Education (1993), 12% of LEP students in middle school and 20% in high school have missed 2 or more years of school since age 6. Twenty-three percent of LEP students have limited skills in their native language. Other students arrive with well-developed language and academic abilities. These variations in academic experiences result in different lengths of time needed for students to reach academic success. Key factors influencing the length of time needed for LEP students to learn English include the following:

- quality of previous education
- prior English learning experiences
- literacy of the family
- socioeconomic status
- mobility
- family displacement
- cultural isolation
- exposure to social unrest or war.

Research Informs Us That There Are Predictors of LEP Student Success.

Effective education for LEP students strives for levels of proficiency in English like those of native English speakers. Schools that are most successful in assisting LEP students to achieve to high levels in English and academic subjects ensure the following in their programs and services:

- native language support
- family involvement in the child's education
- highly qualified ESL teachers trained in second language acquisition
- high expectations and rigorous content standards
- a strong system of accountability using multiple measures for student assessment
- content-based instruction
- alignment of curriculum instruction and assessment
- classroom teachers trained in ESL strategies
- whole school commitment to educating LEP students
- a learning environment that respects and honors cultural diversity of students

Recommendations

Education policies for LEP students must be grounded in sound pedagogical principles and not politics or ideologies. TESOL recommends that national, state, and local education policy makers incorporate the following elements into their programs and policies for LEP learners:

- no time limits for services that support and move toward standards-based education
- sustained professional development for ESL and grade/content level teachers
- ongoing student assessment that uses fair, reliable, and valid qualitative and quantitative measures
- accountability for stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers) at different levels of implementation (e.g., school, district, state)
- native language support to help students achieve academic success
- cultural and linguistic diversity in school curriculum and programs
- emphasis on academic and content-based English language instruction
- active parental involvement in a student's education

*Approved by the TESOL Board of Directors
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