

# Busting ELL Myths

**BY NICHOLE BERG**

*From Teaching Tolerance*

“Why am I in this class? I know how to speak English!”

“ESOL is for kids who don’t know English! I don’t want to be in here!”

I was shocked to hear these comments the first year I took a position as an ESOL “unified arts/exploratory” teacher at my middle school. For three years, I had been a social studies/language arts teacher; I adapted my instruction to build language proficiency for the English language learners (ELLs) in my classes. I took for granted that these students would be excited to take a stand-alone class with me.

Once I became aware of the negative perceptions surrounding the ESOL/bilingual skills class, I knew I had to prioritize classroom safety and create an environment where students felt supported and respected

enough to learn. This meant addressing stereotypes associated with ELLs, explicitly teaching students about language proficiency and academic language, and empowering students to embrace their bi/multilingualism.

Two of the most common stereotypes associated with ELLs are: (1) English language proficiency is an indicator of intellect, and (2) ELLs cannot learn material taught in English until they have mastered English (which research shows takes seven to 10 years!). Consequently, the first thing students learn in my class is that language is one of many ways to show what they know. I also teach that, because of their unique ELL identities (most of my students have lived in other countries), they are not only intelligent but have many interesting things to teach us. We talk about school culture in other places around the world,

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*Nichole Berg is a middle school bilingual resource teacher in Madison, WI. Condensed, with permission, from a Teaching Tolerance blog post, November 18, 2013. Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. To read the entire blog and for reproductions, visit [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org).*

and I look for opportunities to highlight students' unique knowledge and to thank them for teaching me new things.

In addition to helping my students look beyond stereotypes about their ELL identity, I explain that my class is designed to teach the academic language they need to communicate their knowledge accurately and creatively. Many of my students are well versed in social language, and this causes teachers to assume they understand everything that is happening in class. Without structured academic language support, however, ELLs can miss critical concepts in core instruction and—as a result—do not progress in their language comprehension. I am very clear that our class is a place for students to practice using and understanding academic language, or the “language of school.” I challenge them to use this language in their core courses so they are prepared for high school, where academic language becomes even more complicated. And I point out that knowing a language other than English can actually help them develop academic English. For example, I encourage speakers of Romance languages to find cognates with the same

meanings between languages.

When students see their bi/multilingualism as an asset, they feel a sense of pride in themselves as learners and become more willing to take on academic challenges. My students routinely learn about the range of job, travel, friendship, and educational opportunities available to them because they are bi/multilingual. This change in perspective—seeing bi/multilingualism as an asset rather than a deficit—recently resulted in a significant number of students registering for high school courses like English 9 Honors, Hmong for Hmong Speakers, and Spanish for Spanish Speakers next year. In previous years, Spanish speakers mostly chose to take French—if they took any language at all. I am overjoyed to see them opting to study their home language as well as challenging themselves with the honors English course.

Over the past three years, I have worked hard to build a program that supports ELL students to see themselves as both learners and contributors. They are empowered, believe in their multiple intelligences, see bi/multilingualism as an asset, and strive for the language comprehension they need to access higher-level instruction. ■

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