



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from The Multilingual and Multicultural Center

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Sociocultural Issues in Language Minority Education

THE EFFECT OF EARLY VS. LATE IMMIGRATION ON SCHOOLING

This *Bulletin* explores the context of schooling in combination with time of arrival (*early vs. late*) to U.S. schools. The term "immigration" here is broadly defined to encompass immigrants (i.e., willingly choosing to come to the U.S.) and refugees (i.e., forced out of country of origin because of civil war or economic or political circumstances).

ADVANTAGES OF EARLY IMMIGRATION FOR SCHOOLING

Early immigration for school-aged children is defined as entering U.S. schools at the elementary level. The following are potential advantages for these children:

1. *Cognitively less demanding tasks upon arrival.* There is sufficient time to engage learners in plenty of language enrichment activities to develop their conversational skills as a prelude to more cognitively demanding tasks.
2. *Smaller "gap" to catch up with native-speaking peers.* All children are likely to progress in their language and content knowledge while in school; for elementary level English Language Learners (ELLs), the gap for catching up with their native English-speaking peers is smaller than for

older learners who are learning at more advanced levels of content learning and language use.

3. *More frequent exposure to English in natural settings.* Earlier arrival to the U.S. means considerably more opportunities for acquiring communicative competence in English across a wide variety of daily contexts.

4. *Possibly more willingness to take risks.* The proclivity to engage in language use, both in conversational and academic settings, is enhanced by the increased English language exposure in and out of school.

5. *Arrival before "critical period".* There is general agreement that second language success is highly correlated to acquisition before the onset of puberty; therefore, early-arriving ELLs have a natural advantage because they are developmentally more disposed to native-like acquisition.

6. *More years of exposure to English.* Common sense dictates that early arrival naturally leads to more exposure. However, arrival before the age of eight creates a disadvantage because children might not have fully acquired their first language for transfer to English.

7. *Greater familiarity with U.S. educa-*

tional practices. Schools and schooling have their own culture. The more time exposed to it, the more readily one adapts to its complexities.

8. *Fewer responsibilities that distract from school.* Early arrival can allow for more time to focus on school-related issues and activities without the worries of having to seek work or to take responsibility for siblings or family matters.

DISADVANTAGES OF LATE IMMIGRATION FOR SCHOOLING

Late immigration is defined here as arriving at some point during one's secondary level of schooling. The following are possible disadvantages:

1. *Cognitively more demanding tasks upon arrival.* Having to catch up to and keep up with peers who have more sophisticated content knowledge and language proficiency to engage in learning is a huge challenge. Longitudinal research reveals that it takes 4 - 10 years to catch up academically with mainstream native-speaker peers.
2. *Less frequent exposure to English in natural settings.* Being older and being more sensitive to peer chiding means fewer opportunities to engage in and practice English naturally.
3. *Arrival after the "critical period."* Acquiring another language in a native-like manner after puberty presents additional challenges for those learners because a developmental "window" has already passed.
4. *Fewer years to prepare for post-secondary education.* A 40,000 word knowledge bank is considered necessary for engaging in college-level work. Older arrivals struggle to catch up to this amount of vocabulary for continued learning unless they engage in an extraordinary amount of extensive reading.
5. *Less familiarity with U.S. educational practices and culture.* Unless an ELL is

guided carefully by caring educators, negotiating the complexities of culture and schooling can be overwhelming.

6. *More life responsibilities to distract from school.* The need and/or desire to work, the futility of not being able to do post-secondary schooling because of costs, and culturally differing concepts about adulthood and raising a family are some of the factors that put older learners at risk for remaining in school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Note that late immigration is minimally disadvantageous if learners have maintained grade level competence in content and literacy, engaged in continuous schooling, have prior English language proficiency and read extensively. That stated, here are some suggestions:

1. *Pay careful attention to the early or late immigration dynamic of your ELLs.* This will have implications concerning the amount and degree of language emphasis you will need to do in delivering instruction.
2. *Especially for late arrival immigrants, encourage extensive reading.* Extensive reading can be encouraged through 'narrow reading': student grade-level reading of narrative stories written by one author to promote familiarity of writing style; and/or promoting above-level reading of texts in topics of interest to the student.
3. *Writing will exhibit speech and thought patterns characteristic of the learner's home language; a more focused approach to teaching writing with lots of modeling helps to offset home-language-based language patterns.* Word and phrase choice is particularly important to discuss and model in teaching writing.

SOURCE:

Roberge, Mark (Spring 2005). NNETESOL Keynote Speech, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Early/Late Immigration."