

Information for the August 18, 2016 meeting of the
Research and Policy Planning group

The following question has been posed to the members of this group:
"What is the maximum number of years of ESOL instruction should each immigrant child receive in public schools?"

At the outset I would like to say that-for me- a maximum for all students should not exceed the eight years formerly set by research. (Some have seen that maximum reset to ten years. I totally disagree with that figure. I even have a little trouble with the eight year figure, but as that had been the standard for many years, I'll stick with that.) My experience of over 16 years teaching in public school settings in the United States, prior teaching for over five years in two foreign settings with students of all ages, as well as two years ESL teaching in a private English language school have, at least to my own satisfaction, supported the information I would like to share with you. Reading from bottom to top (if the data were to be presented in 'Excel Format' (see page 6-technology is not my strong suit) are many factors that effect a student's progress towards proficiency in English- especially as they grow from younger to older students.

- Personality
- Education goals
- Immigration Status-legal/ illegal
- Positive/negative attitude about the United States
- Reason(s) for being in the United States
- Positive/negative attitude about being in the United States
- Family members in the home who speak English well
- Family members in the home who speak mostly the home language
- Family members in the home who speak ONLY the home language
- Family composition
- Attendance record
- Attitude about learning
- Years of education in the United States
- Years in the United States
- Years of studying English in the home country
- Years of general education in the home country

Home Language

Gender

Age upon arrival in the United States

Born in the United States

Students born in the United States to parents who both speak the same other language usually spend their first 1-3 years hearing mostly that language. If they have an English speaking nanny, are in another English speaking setting for day-care, or are exposed to a lot of children's English television, they will also be exposed to a lot of English, and will readily absorb both languages. However, in cities where there are large numbers of one ethnic/cultural group, and members of that group stay very much within their own culture, exposure to English may remain very limited.

If, on the other hand, only one parent speaks another language, the chances are that the home language will mostly be English when both parents are present. The other language will likely only be used when the child is alone with that parent. How many members there are in the household, whether family or not, has an effect on the student's language acquisition, as well. Household composition information can help a teacher better understand factors affecting a student's learning: How many people are there, and how many speak English and to what degree?

When the child reaches pre-school, kindergarten, or first grade it is very important that the school ascertain what the family/social/language environment has been for that student up to that time. Of course, the more English language exposure the student has had, the better. In any case, we all know that young children are much better able to pick up language than older people.

To follow up on the above, the younger the student is upon arrival in the United States, the fewer years will be needed for that child to reach a par with fellow classmates.

It is important not to overlook the roots of the language family that is spoken in the home. If the language uses the same alphabet as English, there is some inherent language acquisition support. Languages which use a different alphabet altogether are much more difficult for students to manage. Teachers need to truly begin at "square one" and teach the sounds of the letters before real progress can be made in the student's education.

In my experience, girls, in general, seem to learn the grammar and vocabulary more readily than the boys, but the boys are more willing to do the talking. Boys are more willing to jump in and make some friends, while girls are often more reticent. This seems to be more evident as the students get older-past the primary school age.

The years of general education in the home country are very important. This information helps teachers know if learning issues are just a matter of the student translating information already attained, or the students needing to learn new information. This is not a fool proof concept in that different countries teach different concepts at different age levels. However, it is helpful to have a ballpark idea. Likewise, knowing if the student learned any English in the home country is equally important. A placement test can not give us all the information we would like, but it is better that being completely blind about a student's potential and instruction can be adjusted as time passes.

As well as knowing how long a student has been in the United States (laws seem to prohibit us from learning that right up front) knowing how many years they have attended public schools here helps teachers have a better idea of what they can reasonable expect in class. Again, we know that school programs vary from area to area and from state to state, but teachers can get a general idea.

An important item to check on school records that come from other US public schools (and foreign schools if such information is recorded) is daily/yearly attendance. Students can't learn well if they don't come to school regularly. We know there are many reasons students have poor attendance records. However, for many immigrant students there are additional, valid reasons for absenteeism. They may be vitally needed to care for other family members who remain at home. They are often called upon to attend doctor's appointments as translators for other family members. In their home country school attendance may not have been considered very important.

Then we need to think about the student's attitude about learning. Much of a student's attitude comes from the attitude of the culture and the home. In my experience, the older the student is upon arrival the more their individual attitude affects their educational progress. Older students who are compelled to come here for family reasons which they don't understand or acknowledge can have a very hard time settling down to learn. They can carry large blocks on their shoulders that say, "I'm hurting and I'm going to make everyone around me hurt as well."

They are feeling lost and without friends. They don't think their feelings have been considered. Why should they go to school? Why should they learn English? As soon as they can they are going back home, and they won't need English. This attitude is in sharp contrast to that of older students who are part of the decision making within their family. These students have already understood the reasons they are transplanted so far from home, and they are ready to make the most of it for themselves and for their family.

The paragraph above talks about immigrant students and their attitudes about going to school here. They clearly don't want to go to an American public school where they don't know anyone and don't speak the language. The situation is much, much worse for student's for whom the United States is generally not regarded as a good country. Just imagine what these students must feel like when they are forced to enroll in an American public school.

For the many students who overstay their visas there is the added tension of the specter of immigration hunting them down and sending them back home. There is tension in the home from parents who continually fear the same thing. Such fear is not conducive to excelling in the classroom.

And then we have to consider the individual educational goals and personalities of all these students, under all these different conditions, factors, and situations. Students that have goals for themselves and personalities that guide them to be self-directed, goal oriented, hard-working, determined, yet still remain sensitive to their families and culture, are ideal, and gifts from the Gods when they arrive in our classrooms. But they are few and far between, and we must do our very best for all students who cross our thresholds, regardless of what situations and conditions they come from-the same as we do for the students who have been with us from the beginning, who have been raised in our culture, and who may have 'special' needs of their own.

So, how long do we continue to offer immigrant students ESOL services in our public schools? I feel that the shorter the time the better- if they are to truly feel 'like' their peers-that they are not singled out as 'different' somehow. These students are just like all our other students in equal measure-the same percentages of those who excel at various levels and those who do not-for a variety of reasons. And it is surely true that no matter how much teaching, assistance, and time, there are many people who will never speak English well-just listen to many of our own native- born citizens.

A final word on the subject: If a child should be unable to successfully pass the state required test of English proficiency (ACCESS at this time) in the recommended eight years (or however many has been set as the desired length of time), there should be an all inclusive meeting with the parents, the student, all involved teachers, and any other involved school staff and personnel who have knowledge of the students activities, skills, and circumstances. The purpose of this meeting would be to determine just what course of support in problematic areas would best aide this student to overall academic success.

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Factors effecting second language acquisition

Personality	
Education goals	
Immigration status-illegal	
Immigration status-legal	
Positive attitude about being in the United States	
Negative attitude about being in the United States	
Reason(s) for being in the United States	
Positive attitude about the United States	
Negative attitude about the United States	
Family members in the home who speak English well	
Family members in the home speaking mostly the home language	
Family members in the home speaking only the home language	
Family Composition	
Attendance record	
Attitude about learning	
Years of education in the United States	
Years in the United States	
Years of studying English in the home country	
Years of education in the home country	
Home language	
Gender	
Age upon arrival in the United States	
Born here	
Age at entering the public schools in the United States	ages 3-6
	ages 7-10
	ages 11-14
	ages 15-21