

How English as a Second Language Affects Learning

Millions of U.S. students must learn English to access the rest of the curriculum – and teachers are stepping up to help.

By [Barbara DeLollis](#) | Dec. 6, 2021, at 9:52 a.m.



To meet the need, a growing number of schools and districts seek out teachers with ESL training and some require teachers with ESL certification, regardless of the subject they teach. (GETTY IMAGES)

Almost one in 10 U.S. students in grades K-12 — about 5 million children total — are pulling double duty in school, learning English as a second language while absorbing math, science, social studies and all of the other subjects they need.

That number increased by about 1 million students over the past two decades, according to the [latest statistics available](#) from the U.S. Department of Education. While about three-quarters of those students speak Spanish at home, Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Somali and Russian are also on the top 10 list, according to [federal data](#).

The increasingly multilingual character of America's student population creates a high-stakes challenge for all parties involved, including children in classrooms, parents who want to see them flourish and educators charged with teaching an increasingly diverse population.

A student's ability to learn English impacts their ability to learn other subjects, and decades of research have gone into evolving frameworks and curriculum to support English learners. Now, schools are increasingly looking for teachers with specialized skills, training and cultural sensitivity to ensure that English is accessible.

"Unless you're explicit and purposeful about language development, it won't happen," says Tomás Galguera, a professor of education at Mills College in Oakland, California. "It must be done in a hands-on, direct way. That's why teacher education must have a framework. It is so much more complex than vocabulary."

Teaching An Increasingly Diverse Student Population

A [Brookings Institution report](#) in 2017 noted that America's need for teachers with ESL training is growing. The increasing immigrant population and the move to more integrated instruction, in which English language learners are educated alongside native speakers in the same classroom, means that teachers nationwide are more likely to be confronted with students who are still learning English.

“Most teachers, regardless of where they teach, will have a very good chance of encountering ELs (English learners) during their careers,” the report says. “This creates a need not only for specialists but also for general teachers who are prepared to support ELs in the classroom.”

There are few better examples than the Los Angeles Unified School District, which serves 600,000 K-12 students across more than 1,000 schools. Roughly 45% of those students are either in the process of learning English as a second language or have transitioned out of that phase.

“If you look at the makeup of Los Angeles, LA Unified represents a tapestry of multiculturalism and multilingualism,” says Lydia Acosta Stephens, executive director of the district’s Multilingual and Multicultural Education Department.

Teaching English, experts say, goes far beyond the basics of oral and written language instruction. It often requires cultural understanding.

“We believe in the value of every child,” Stephens says. “It always begins by knowing a child’s name and then their potential, needs, and social and emotional assets — and we don’t stop there. Our ultimate goal is building on who they are.”

Experts say that starts with eliminating any stigma for those learning English. Stephens, herself once an English learner in Los Angeles schools, says that was not always the case. “There was shame for me to use my home language at school,” in the 1980s, she says. “It was not honored.”

“We’re beginning to change labels,” Galguera says. “Instead of ‘English learner,’ we call the students ‘bilingual.’”

Challenges for English Language Learners

Teaching English to students who have been raised speaking Spanish, Russian, Armenian, Vietnamese or other languages from around the world can present a variety of challenges, experts say.

For example, there is often trauma involved in making the transition to a new school system in a new country with a different language. A student who arrives in a U.S. school with a strong academic background from a stable country has different needs than one whose family fled war or poverty and who may have little schooling, Galguera says.

“There are more basic needs that the teacher needs to tend to than ever before,” he says.

Because some English learners may have witnessed “the ugly side of life,” Galguera says young teachers are taught to be more aware of their actions and to see classroom policies and procedures through the lens of the student. “For example, putting a hand on the shoulder of a student can be triggering,” Galguera says, rather than the caring gesture that was intended.

Local or national attitudes about immigrants can also present a problem, Stephens says. In recent years, immigration has become a flashpoint in the national political conversation, and children can be confronted with hurtful, negative rhetoric.

Yet ensuring that students are able to feel safe and learn amid all of this is vital because learning English is integral to accessing the rest of the curriculum.

“The bottom line is they have to learn valuable content like math,” Galguera says.

The Importance of ESL Training

To meet the need, a growing number of schools and districts seek out teachers with ESL training and some require teachers with ESL certification, regardless of the subject they teach. Many colleges and universities have integrated that training into their teacher education programs so new teachers can apply it throughout their careers.

At Bradley University in Illinois, for example, the school's education program embeds ESL, culture and history within the curriculum, says Dean Cantu, associate dean and chair of the Department of Teacher Education.

"ESL plays a major role for our students," Cantu says. "We have embedded [ESL] in many of our degree programs, including childhood education, elementary education, special education and middle school education."

The highest percentage of English learners in K-12 are in the western portion of the country, in states such as California (20%), Texas (17%), Nevada (16%), New Mexico (13%) and Colorado (12%), according to federal statistics. But the number jumped 28% nationwide between 2000 and 2017, with 43 states seeing an increase.

"The need is here today and it's also going to be here tomorrow," Cantu says of the demand for ESL teacher training. "It's an essential skill set for our students to have over the course of their career. It's in high demand."

Searching for a school? Explore our [K-12 directory](#).

<https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/articles/how-english-as-a-second-language-affects-learning>