



This e-bulletin focuses on some key dynamics in newcomer children's ESL learning.

Welcome to the *ANCIE Bulletin*, a monthly electronic newsletter that explores different topics about newcomer children in BC.

## English Language Learners

The BC Ministry of Education defines ESL students as "English language learners... whose primary language, or languages, of the home are other than English. For this reason they require additional services in order to develop their individual potential within British Columbia's school system. English language learners may be immigrants or may be born in Canada" (*English as a Second Language and Francisation – Langue seconde in the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique: Policy and Guidelines*. 2009, p.3).

Immigration brings people to Canada with a wide range of language abilities, such as a child fluent in English from India, a child with little or no English from France, a child born in Canada to immigrant parents, or a child raised in a Burmese refugee camp with little formal education. Some or all of these children may require ESL services to improve their language skills.

## Language Acquisition

The needs of ESL students are complex. All students go through some form of culture shock, especially when they first enter the school system. This normal adjustment period is complicated as basic communication (language) has been taken away (Helmer, Sylvia. "S.O.S. – Sharing our Stories: Refugee Learners in our Classrooms and Schools." 2009). The rate of language acquisition depends on a number of factors, including literacy level in the native language, previous schooling experience, the education system in the home country, and family supports. ESL students with a mother tongue using the Roman alphabet (e.g. Spanish or Tagalog) have a distinct advantage over those students with mother tongues using other scripts (e.g. Mandarin or Arabic).

Learning English as an additional language does not only involve studying the language, but also requires learning new cultural norms, common slang, and interpersonal cues such as voice intonations, gestures and facial expressions. While ESL students are also required to focus on learning a new language, their peers continue to advance academically and develop their command of the language through other subjects and ESL students run the risk of falling significantly behind. It is important to remember that a lack of English does not represent a "problem" or "deficit" in the student. An ESL student's cognitive development can fit anywhere within the spectrum of learning abilities found in the general population (BCTF Research. *Identification, Assessment, and Programming for ESL Learners with Special/Additional Needs*. June 2003, p.10).

### ESL FACTS:

- In BC, there are 349,518 students registered in the K-7 system, of which 52,832 (or 15.1%) are designated as ESL. However, the percentage of students designated as ESL is higher in some cities. For example, there are 28.4% students designated as ESL in the cities of Vancouver and Burnaby, and 33.6% in Surrey (Student Statistics, 2009/2010 Provincial and District Reports – Public and Independent Schools Combined. Ministry of Education).
- A child can become fluent in English, even if it is not the language of instruction throughout primary school. It is both literacy and fluency in the mother tongue that lay cognitive and linguistic foundations for learning additional languages (Ball, Jessica. "Educational equity for children from diverse language backgrounds: Mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years." UVicDSpace, 2010).
- Six to eight years of education in a language is needed to develop the level of literacy and verbal proficiency required for academic achievement in secondary school (Thomas and Collier, as cited in Ball, 2010, p.2).
- In BC, the top ten mother tongues, other than English, are: Chinese, Punjabi, German, French, Tagalog, Korean, Spanish, Persian, Italian and Dutch (2006 Census Fast Facts Mother Tongue and Home Language. BC Stats).





## Case Study

A grade five ESL student was lashing out angrily at his classmates and teachers. He would often disrupt the class with his tantrums, resulting in being sent out of the classroom. He also frequented the principal's office for hitting and punching other students in the playground. His grades were low, and he had no friends. His behaviour was increasingly becoming a problem for the school staff. What was happening?

Upon closer examination, it was discovered that the child was frustrated because he was unable to communicate

effectively in English. He had already been in Canada for two years, but was still developing his English language skills. He was unable to follow the lessons because of the advanced vocabulary required, which were far beyond his beginner skills. When he would try to communicate in English, other students had difficulty understanding him, and therefore would not play with him. He became embarrassed, confused, isolated and disheartened. The teacher began using appropriate language and working with him on a one-on-one

basis. His behaviour was no longer a problem, and he was found to be very intelligent and polite.

Learning a language is an active and social process. However, students can become frustrated when they are unable to communicate freely. ESL students may also be experiencing culture shock, which can be expressed through anger, aggression, depression, sadness, anxiety, confusion or withdrawal. Educators need to understand ESL challenges and actual cognitive abilities.

## What can educators and services providers do to help?

### When communicating:

- Speak slightly slowly and enunciate. Try to use less compound and/or complex sentences to start off, but do not “dumb down” the content. The problem is not their brains, but rather a lack of English.
- Use concrete objects, actions and visuals to convey meanings.
- Repeat and paraphrase cheerfully and patiently. Continue to link visual and verbal cues as long as it is needed. Do not get frustrated because you cannot understand a heavy accent.
- Do not expect children to respond as quickly as their peers. Processing and translating takes time.

(Helmer, Sylvia. “Working with Refugee Learners in our Classrooms and Schools – Tips, Traps and Tangles”, 2009)

*Continued on next page...*

## Mini Survey

The next ANCIE Bulletin will look at the physical, mental and emotional health of newcomer children. **What do you think are the top three health issues for newcomer children?**

Please send your answers to Rishima Bahadoorsingh at [newcomerchildren@amssa.org](mailto:newcomerchildren@amssa.org).

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### For programs and lessons:

- Develop cultural competencies by learning about the background of children and their families, which can be done by talking to the parents with an interpreter (though not the child as the interpreter). This helps to build a relationship with the family and provide a feeling of community.
- Research the home country of the child. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) has developed a great tool called the “Cultural Profiles Project” (click [here](#) to access the tool). It provides an overview of different cultures, education systems, religions, communication styles and lifestyles from around the world.
- Learn to recognize the different stages of acculturation, as well as the causes of culture shock.
- Know how, where and to whom to refer children.
- Provide parents with information on the Canadian school system. For example, the Vancouver School Board's Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) program has developed a series of pamphlets, called Parent Information Pamphlets (PIP), which provide information on homework, curriculum, learning styles, etc. To download the pamphlets, click [here](#).
- Provide information, lessons and activities that are culturally relevant. For example, include cultural references from children's background knowledge and experiences (Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teaching for African-American students*, 1994).

### Ask parents or guardians:

- How is education structured in the child's home country? What is the primary learning style (e.g. rote memorization vs. critical thinking)?
- What is the literacy level of the students in their native language?
- What are the cultural norms and rules in the home country for various age groups?
- Was there a disruption of education due to war?

For more information on English as a Second Language, please visit the ESL section of the ANCIE website. All research and resources cited in this bulletin can be found [here](#).

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### About AMSSA:

The Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (AMSSA) is provincial not-for-profit, non-partisan umbrella organization representing and serving over 75 immigrant settlement and multicultural agencies in British Columbia. AMSSA members are mandated to address a broad spectrum of multicultural and immigrant settlement and integration issues in their communities. AMSSA acts as a central resource for member community agencies working in large urban centres and smaller communities. AMSSA's services and engagement extend to all levels of government, as well as to relevant public institutions, the private sector, community groups, and the general public. For more information, please visit [www.amssa.org](http://www.amssa.org).

For more information about AMSSA's Newcomer Children's Advocate Program, please contact Rishima Bahadoorsingh at [newcomerchildren@amssa.org](mailto:newcomerchildren@amssa.org).

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