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THE STATE OF THE ART OF SECONDARY ESL TEACHING AND LEARNING

Commentary by Lee Gunderson
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Who is Lee Gunderson?

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- Veteran educator with nearly 45 years of experience teaching and researching ESL
- Faculty member at the University of British Columbia's Language and Literacy Education department
- Widely published researcher focusing on English as a second language, literacy, and multiculturalism

Summary

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- English-only education goes against America's historical acceptance of bilingualism.
- However, during the past 30 years, a negative view of bilingual education has become widespread in the U.S.
- Legislation forcing English-only education, such as NCLB, is not helping ESL students succeed in American schools.

Summary, continued

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- ESL students are diverse, so statistics relating to ESL education must be disaggregated to reveal accurate trends among different ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic groups of ESL students.
- More research is needed to determine strategies to help ESL students succeed in U.S. schools – even if the government does not agree with the results.

Relevant legislation

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- **Bilingual Education Act of 1968**
 - The first national legislation in the U.S. to focus on ESL students; however, participation by school districts was voluntary, and it was not about ESL.
- **U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Lau v. Nichols*,**
 - This 1974 decision upheld Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Since language ability is so closely connected to national origin, ESL students must receive equal educational opportunities as native English speakers.
- **Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001**
 - NCLB overrides the earlier BEA, and the focus is now on increasing English proficiency rather than a bilingual approach to education.

An increase in ESL students

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- A 2007 study found that since 1995-1996, the percentage of ESL students in the U.S. has increased by just over 57%.
- A 2006 study found that about 10% of all students in the U.S. are ESL.
- According to a 2002 study, the highest growth rate is in grades 7-12, the grade levels typically referred to as secondary education.

What is secondary ESL education?

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- Generally speaking, a secondary school teaches students 14 to 19 years old.
 - For example, in the U.S., a high school that serves students in grades 9 through 12 is considered a secondary school.

What is ESL education?

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- Defining ESL is more difficult.
 - Some students were born overseas or in the U.S. or Canada.
 - Some students do not speak any English.
 - Some speak interpersonal or conversational English.
 - Some have developed academic language ability in English.
 - Some arrived as youngsters, others as young adults.
 - Some came as poor refugees, others as rich immigrants,
 - Some never attended school in their L1 environment, others studied advanced subjects.
- ESL/ELL students come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but they often feel “ghettoized” by their school system’s ESL/ELL label.

Reality of secondary ESL education

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- Based on achievement results and graduation rates, not all ESL students are being served by their school systems.
 - Gunderson conducted studies in 2000, 2004 and 2007. “Schools with higher percentages of ESL students had higher ESL disappearance rates and lower grades in academic classes.”
 - However, groups within the ESL category had different graduation rates and different academic success.

North Carolina graduation rates

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CATEGORY	2010	2009
All Students	74.2	71.8
Male	69.6	67.1
Female	78.9	76.6
American Indian	67.9	60.0
Asian	85.2	83.7
Black	66.9	63.2
Hispanic	61.4	59.0
Multi-Racial	71.2	71.5
White	79.6	77.7
Economically Disadvantaged	66.3	61.8
Limited English Proficient	48.3	52.1
Students with Disabilities	57.5	56.8

Source: NCDPI Press Release, August 5, 2010 (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/newsroom/news/2010-11/20100805-01>)

Excerpt 1:

Teachers' opinions about ESL

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- “Teachers have claimed that ESL students bring down the overall learning level (Gunderson, 1985). A large majority in this dated study felt that English should be a requirement for immigration and a prerequisite for admission to their classes. It is shocking to find that these sentiments are still held by secondary teachers in the new millennium (Gunderson, 2007b).”

Excerpt 2:

More qualitative research required

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- “We need research that addresses the complexities of instruction in high schools rather than research that reduces the issues to fit into controlled and quasi-experimental design [such as the government-commissioned 2006 study by the National Literacy Panel]. Secondary ESL students ... are missing from ‘approved’ research, and teachers are not trained to teach them.”

Excerpt 3:

Gunderson's call for action

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- “We have known for about the last 40 years that ESL students are at risk. It seems to me that the lack of success in the teaching and learning of ESL students is a national disgrace and a colossal failure. Why has no progress been made?”

Question 1

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- What might be some causes of the achievement gap among different groups of ELL? As teachers, what can we do to help all our students succeed?

Question 2

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- Why do you think qualitative studies about English-language learning are not taken as seriously as their quantitative, or “quasi-experimental,” counterparts?

Question 3

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- As a future ESL teacher, what are your personal beliefs about having English-language ability as a prerequisite for content area classes?