

How Long Does It Take?

Cummins, J. (2006). How long does it take for an English language learner to become proficient in a second language? (pp. 59-61). In Hamayan, E. & Freeman, R. (eds.), *English Language Learners at School: A Guide for Administrators*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon.

This question seems fairly straightforward until we probe a little deeper into what we mean by proficient and what aspects of second language proficiency we are talking about.

What is language proficiency?

As all administrators who have to deal with state standards and high-stakes assessments know, the term *proficient* can refer to widely different levels of actual competence, depending on the test and state standards. What counts as proficient in one state on a reading assessment, for example, may be far from proficient in another state. For purposes of thinking about English language learners' (ELLs') academic progress in English, however, we can define proficient in relation to the level of English competency of their native English-speaking peers. So the question can be rephrased as, How long does it take ELLs to catch up to their native English-speaking peers in English proficiency?

This brings us to the issue of what we mean by English proficiency. Although we commonly talk about "learning English" as though English proficiency were a unitary construct, we can all intuitively recognize some clear distinctions within that notion of English proficiency. These distinctions are apparent whether we are talking about native speakers of a language or second language learners. Specifically, we know that *conversational fluency* is quite different from *academic proficiency* in a language. The fast talkers in our classes are not necessarily the best readers. We also know that there are major differences between many of the technical or rule-governed aspects of a language, such as the rules for sound-symbol relationships (phonics), spelling, grammar, and so on, and the kinds of skills involved in reading comprehension. Thus, we can begin to distinguish three very different aspects of language proficiency: *conversational fluency*, *discrete language skills*, and *academic language proficiency*.

How long does it take for ELLs to catch up academically?

Very different time periods are required for ELLs to catch up to their peers in each of the three dimensions of proficiency. It usually takes about one to two years for students to become reasonably fluent in conversational English. About the same time is typically required for many ELLs in the early grades to acquire basic decoding skills in English to a level similar to that of their English-speaking classmates of similar socioeconomic background. However, research studies conducted in several countries show that second language learners usually need at least five years to catch up to native English speakers in academic English. Sometimes the catch-up period is much longer. Research conducted in Israel, for example, showed that Russian and Ethiopian immigrant students required about nine years to catch up to their peers in Hebrew academic skills.

These observations bring us to the next question: What exactly *is* academic English, and why does it take so long to catch up in this dimension of language?

Why does it take so long?

Academic English is the language of school success. As students progress through the grades, they are required to read increasingly complex texts in the content areas of the curriculum (science, math, social studies, literature). Academic language becomes increasingly complex after grades three and four. The complexity of academic language reflects:

- The difficulty of the concepts that students are required to understand.
- The vocabulary load in content texts, which may include many low-frequency and technical words (primarily from Latin and Greek sources) that are rarely used in typical conversation.
- Increasingly sophisticated grammatical constructions that, again, are almost never used in everyday conversational contexts. By the upper grades of elementary school, students encounter the frequent use of the passive voice, embedded clauses, and extended noun phrases.

Not only are students required to read this language, they must also use it in writing reports and essays, and in other forms of homework.

One reason that catching up in academic English is challenging for ELLs, then, is the complexity of academic language. A second reason is that they are trying to catch up to a moving target. Native English-speaking students are not standing still waiting for ELLs to catch up. Every year, they make gains in reading, writing, and vocabulary abilities. So ELLs have to run faster to bridge the gap. In fact,

in order to catch up within six years, ELLs must make fifteen months' gain in every ten-month school year. The average student makes just ten months' gain in every ten-month school year.

How can we support students in acquiring academic English?

Understanding the nature of academic language points to some of the ways we can help students acquire it. If academic language is found in texts rather than in typical conversations, then we have to ensure that students are given ample opportunities and encouragement to read extensively. Thus, an administrative priority should be to ensure that school and classroom libraries are well stocked with engaging books. Encouraging students to write for authentic purposes is also crucial. Even recently arrived ELLs can create dual language books by writing stories or accounts of their experiences, initially in their first language and then working with peers, teachers, volunteers, older bilingual students, and even technology (Babel Fish or Google language tools) to translate and adapt their writing into English. (Two good Web sites with examples are <http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual/> and <http://www.multiliteracies.ca>). Finally, some technology tools may be useful. An example is the the e-Lective Language Learning program, which provides supports to enable students to access the curriculum and to harvest the language of academic texts (www.e-Lective.net).