Whether they are U.S. or foreign-born, language minority learners come from diverse cultural and language backgrounds and are in all levels of K-12 schooling. If their conversational and academic English language skills are minimal, they receive specific support services in English as a second language; when they have sufficient language proficiency, they are mainstreamed into regular content instruction.

There are several possible areas of misunderstanding about how language minority learners achieve competence in English and perform academically in school. This Bulletin examines these misconceptions according to the following categories: misconceptions about how English is acquired; misconceptions about the role of cultural adaption; and general suggestions for teaching.

**MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ENGLISH**

**Misconception** - Students have acquired English once they can speak it.

**Reality** - There is more to knowing a language than conversing. Using English academically, i.e., the ability to read, write, engage in higher order thinking, etc. takes a great deal of additional time and depends on tailored support of content with scaffolding techniques to make concepts more comprehensible without watering down grade-level delivery of content.

**Misconception** - The more time students spend using English, the quicker they learn the language and/or the content in the language.

**Reality** - A student's home language can form a conceptual bridge to understanding in English; therefore, allowing students to clarify abstract words or challenging concepts in their home language (through peers or with a language facilitator) can accelerate the process of academic language use.

**Misconception** - Younger learners have more potential for success in school.

**Reality** - Age upon entry into U.S. schools is an important criteria for success: 5-7 year olds are at risk in not having successfully acquired their home language for appropriate conceptual transfer for academic study; 8-12 year olds have the best potential for academic success because they have
fully acquired their home language and have enough time in school to catch up with their mainstream peers; finally, depending on literacy level and previous continued schooling, 13-18 year olds can be at risk of failure due to lack of time in school for catching up academically.

**Misconception** - Younger students learn English more quickly and easily than older students.

**Reality** - Children's language constructions are shorter and simpler, they have a more limited vocabulary, and they usually speak without an accent; they, therefore, do not have to learn as much to achieve a level of communicative competence. Adolescents and adults are expected to and need to have a greater knowledge of English in order to communicate. An accompanying accent also can create a false impression of low proficiency.

**MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT CULTURE**

**Misconception** - A student's culture consists of dress, food, language, literature, and music.

**Reality** - Culture consists of a complex variety of several interacting additional aspects: values, behavioral styles, nonverbal communication, perspectives, world views, and group identification.

**Misconception** - The process of adapting to U.S. culture is quick and easy.

**Reality** - Cultural adaptation takes time and depends on a number of variables, such as age; similarity of values, assumptions, and behaviors shared by the students and U.S. culture; the cohesiveness of the cultural community to which the student belongs; and the U.S. community's willingness to embrace the student's culture.

**Misconception** - Success in school has little or nothing to do with a student's cultural background.

**Reality** - Success in school has everything to do with cultural background. Incorporating a student's culture in curriculum choices and performance tasks and activities, regardless of the content area, conveys to the student a powerful message of esteem, respect, and acceptance and broadens the scope of topic choices for all students.

**TEACHING SUGGESTIONS**

1. Deliver content in an integrated fashion through the combination of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In other words, reinforce the spoken work with the printed word, and vice versa.

2. Allow students to use their home language in the classroom in order to clarify concepts. Trust the students' communication process in the home language. Allowing them to process concepts in their home language will improve their comprehension.

3. Recognize that a student's ability to communicate socially and academically in English is an important part of that student's ongoing process of acculturation. Incorporating the student's cultural background successfully involves recognition of individuality that comes with processing learning. The result is cultural validation, with all students broadening their understanding of the diversity language minorities bring to learning.

**SOURCES:**
