

# Issues in ESL Education



## for Young Learners

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# I. The Benefits of Bilingualism

If you become bilingual, you will be able to:

- speak, read, and write in two languages
- be open-minded to other cultures
- actively seek multicultural friendships
- form stronger problem-solving skills
- have enhanced cognitive development
- express greater creativity: “think outside the box”
- easily learns a third and fourth language
- embrace differences in people

The basic principle of bilingual education in the USA is to use the student's native language to teach academic content while providing additional English language instruction at the same time. In this way, limited English proficiency students can learn English and still keep pace with native English-speaking students of the same grade level. The goal is to combine equal access and excellence in learning for all students.

All good teaching uses the learning tools students already have as the basis for building new skills and acquiring new knowledge. Most children enter school with basic language skills, in English or other languages, already in place; it is up to qualified teachers to use those skills to help them develop the academic skills they need to succeed in life. Children learn more effectively if they learn English through the use of their native language, which provides a contextual basis for learning and allows them to keep pace with their peer group while acquiring the language they will need to learn in order to interact effectively in today's society.

There are several other benefits to the use of bilingual education, in addition to its basic effectiveness. First, it preserves children's sense of pride in the language of their parents, allowing them to move freely in an English-language dominant society while retaining an important link to their cultural and linguistic heritage. It helps protect their sense of identity, which is also strongly linked to the language and culture of their family and heritage. Today, there are also economic advantages in bilingual fluency and literacy; many jobs pay higher salaries to their bilingual employees. In an increasingly global society, the ability to speak and write in several languages is becoming necessary to effectively compete in the job market.

## » Summary

Most researchers agree that bilingual learners develop more skills in cognitive areas. This might explain why these students usually achieve better scores in verbal intelligence, conceptualization, global thinking and the discovery of original approaches to problem solving. The bilingual learner is also able to approach language learning with an advantageous distance from language mechanics. In this way, the teaching makes sense for the learner, and he can see the immediate benefit to gaining this knowledge.

Research shows that the earlier a child begins to learn a second language, the better. This is partially due to the general abilities of younger children and the importance of stimulation at this stage. At a later age, auditory discrimination and the ability to imitate sounds begin to fade (thus, a first language accent will be retained), but fortunately it is possible to learn a second language at any age. Younger students tend to be less fearful of making mistakes and are more willing to go with the flow of communicating in another language.

## II. Is There an Optimum Age to Start Learning a Second Language?

**A very common question amongst parents is "*What is the ideal age for my child to start learning a second language?*" The answer is easy...the earlier the better!**

When young children are exposed to a new language, they have the capacity to learn that language quickly, and with little effort. But how early should parents begin this exposure? Many linguists believe that the optimum age to learn a second language is at the same time you're learning your first language. Beyond that, it's best to begin learning or being exposed to a foreign language before the age of 12. Linguists have determined that it is very difficult to produce a native accent after that age. While teens and adults can and do learn second (or third) languages, current research suggests that the earlier your children begin to study a new language, the more advantageous it will be for them.

Total immersion - that is, being surrounded by that language on a daily basis - is of course the best method. If that's not possible, the next best way to learn a foreign language is by studying it regularly and actively using it. A good language program, either with a class or studied independently, must maintain your child's interest, be an enjoyable process, and produce the desired results. If

fluency is the goal, your child should be motivated and willing to do some serious studying. With a little research and an adventurous spirit, your kids can experience the joy of learning a new language. Language learning comes easily to young children, who have an innate capacity to learn languages.

### ➤ Benefits of learning a second language

Studies show that a child's overall mental development is enhanced by learning a second language. A study of 13,200 third to fifth graders in Louisiana found that children (regardless of gender, race, or academic level) who learned a second language did significantly better on the English language section of the Louisiana Basic Skills Test.

In addition, Educational Testing Service has reported that students who had four or more years of a foreign language scored higher on the verbal section of the SAT than students who had studied four or more years in any other subject area. What amazed researchers the most was finding that these same students scored identically on the math tests as students who had taken four years of mathematics.

In summary,

▶ children who learn a foreign language improve their cognitive skills, develop greater self-confidence, and broaden their horizons by learning about other cultures.

and...

▶ children who have early foreign language experiences do better in their foreign language classes once they enter middle school or junior high school.

### III. Young Learners and Creative Writing

Most children enter school with a natural interest in writing, as they have an inherent need to express themselves in words. Couple this with the child's love of stories and nursery rhymes (who has not seen a goggle-eyed group of kindergartners lost in the world of imagination as their teacher reads them a favorite story or nursery rhyme?) and you have the basis for building an emotionally involving and intellectually stimulating creative writing program for your students.

Researchers<sup>(1)</sup> have suggested seven reasons why children should practice creative writing: 1) to entertain; 2) to foster artistic expression; 3) to explore the functions and values of writing; 4) to stimulate imagination; 5) to clarify thinking; 6) to search for identity; and 7) to learn to read and write. With these compelling reasons in mind, it is easy to justify making creative writing a part of a child's education, whether he or she is a native speaker or an ESL student. However, it is important that the justification be made clear to administrators and parents, who may automatically categorize creative writing as merely frivolous play, something akin to recess. While writing certainly should be enjoyable, and children should have opportunities to choose their own subjects and methods of writing, the importance of creative writing in developing children's cognitive and communication skills cannot be underestimated.

Both the writer of fiction and the writer of nonfiction must put forth a kind of questioning of his or her world. Teachers should emphasize that good fiction requires logical consistency and factual accuracy. Creative writers are asking us to believe in their dreams, and this requires that they "get the details right." If a student wants to write a story about a pitcher for the Seattle Mariners, then he/she should know things like: what the stadium looks like, what kind of glove the pitcher wears, how high the mound is, etc. Even stories that are based on fantasy or science fiction, with monsters and space aliens, need to obey various rules of logic; they need to "make sense." For instance, what might the monster eat? What kind of planet would the alien come from? This kind of questioning can open up many new areas of intellectual and emotional interest for student writers of fantasy or science fiction. These are areas that they might not have as easily accessed through other types of writing. Thus, their understanding of their world is deepened.

So, how can creative writing be taught? The creative writing process detailed as follows permits the author to construct, through a series of well-planned stages, a thorough piece of writing that is both organized in its presentation and thorough in its development. Since this is a process, we are dealing with several stages of development from the initial thoughts and ideas to the final polished product. For young learners, this process will need to be somewhat simplified.

## ➤ Steps in a creative writing lesson

1. The first stage of writing is usually the selection of a topic to write about. It involves the consideration of several possible subjects. Pre-writing techniques such as brainstorming and clustering are often effective here. Following a critical evaluation of the pros and cons of each possible candidate, a selection is made and stated with a reason given for its choice.
2. Now that a topic has been selected, one must organize the sub-topics that will be included within the piece of writing. One of the easiest methods of visualizing the proposed topics that will be developed is to draw a web map. This graphic organizer is the blueprint for writing as it shows the relevant paragraphs and their supporting thoughts that will form the body of each paragraph. When the web map is completed, we have before ourselves the basic elements of a story and the sequence in which they will occur.
3. While the web map organizes the basic elements of our writing, we still need to focus in on the statements that will be made in the paragraphs. The outline keeps paragraphs focused on a single topic with carefully selected supporting statements, and sets up the topic and concluding sentences. At this stage, we are still writing in point form only since we are merely organizing our ideas. While most of the ideas of the outline are probably supporting the main idea of their prospective paragraphs sufficiently, some could be better. Careful revision of a few of the ideas recorded in the outline will improve the content and quality of the final product.
4. Students can now write in earnest with all the zest and vigor that they possess. In preparing the first draft, students should make liberal use of adjectives, adverbs, and colorful descriptions. A variety of simple, compound, and compound complex sentences should be used. Obviously, the complexity of the language will depend on the age/skill level of the writers.
5. When finished, checks for spelling and grammatical errors should be done, probably with the teacher's or parent's assistance. Next, learners should edit their work to improve the way that their sentences flow, change awkward wording, and add or remove words to make the sentences more polished.

## ➤ Sample creative writing lesson plan

### Outline:

Basic writing skills should include correct spelling, strong sentence structure, and standard punctuation. For this lesson, students will write a paragraph.

Topic: Down By the Old Mill Stream

Time: 45 – 60 minutes

### **Part I:**

Explain the following to the students:

*Elementary: You are on a field trip with other kids your age. Lunch is planned by a stream. As you look down the stream, you can still see the old textile mill. It is abandoned now. Or SHOULD it be abandoned? Who - or what - do you see?*

*Junior high and high school: You and the love of your life have packed a picnic lunch. Finding the "perfect" spot by a stream, you begin unpacking lunch onto the yellow checked blanket you have spread on the ground. You are thinking how wonderful it is, so quiet, so private. You stand and look down the stream toward the old textile mill. You wonder if some other couple long ago sat by the stream. Then you notice someone behind a tree not so far away - a girl in a long flowing dress. Could it be someone from days gone by? Who is it and why is she here? Is she looking for someone?*

*Now write a paragraph. When you are finished, exchange papers with a partner and read what he or she has written. Check spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Ask me for help if needed. Then return the paper to your partner.*

### **Part II:**

*Now read your paragraph out loud. Does it tell a story? The answer is probably "yes." But what if someone asked you to describe your spot by the stream? Then your paragraph would be different.*

There are three basic types of paragraphs in writing: narrative, descriptive, and expository.



**NARRATIVE:** The narrative paragraph tells a story, just like a narrator in a play.

**DESCRIPTIVE:** The descriptive paragraph paints a picture. It describes a person, place, thing, or idea.

**EXPOSITORY:** The expository paragraph "exposes" things about a subject. It is also sometimes called an information paragraph because it gives information about a person, place, thing, or idea.

*Your first "Down By the Old Mill Stream" task was to create a story that happened in the setting of an old mill and the stream that flowed by it. That was a narrative paragraph. You told a story.*

*Now...let's change things a little. Take your same paragraph and write it as a descriptive paragraph. Describe the mill. Describe the stream. Describe the trees and grass, or the fish in the stream. Describe the sky. Is it night or day? That would change whether you describe the sun or the moon and stars. Give lots of details. Have fun with it!*

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► To further develop the skills needed to write effectively in English, ESL Pro Systems offers the [Creative Writing Workbook](#) on CD-ROM for this very purpose. Using a variety of techniques, it will encourage young learners to share their ideas through vivid stories and exciting adventures.

(1) Tompkins, Gail E. (1982). "Seven Reasons Why Children Should Write Stories." Language Arts, 59(7), 718-21

## IV. Has Handwriting Become a Lost Art?

Cursive writing, once a cornerstone of English education in Canada and the U.S., is becoming a cultural artifact, as computers and the demands of standardized tests squeeze it out of its once lofty position. Taught for more hundreds of years in these two countries, cursive writing has a storied past. But in many schools, cursive writing has been reduced to an independent study, an "as-we-have-time" course in second or third grade. Papers written in cursive may be required in later grades, but with legibility sometimes less than ideal, computer printouts are often accepted instead. In 2002, when 220 randomly selected first-, second-, and third-grade teachers from across America were asked, "Do you feel prepared to teach handwriting?", an overwhelming number - nearly 90% - answered no.

What does this lack of teacher training mean for our children? A lack of instruction in our classrooms, where formal handwriting time has decreased in the past 30 years and often peters out by the end of third grade, according to Graham. A generation ago, the traditional recommendation for penmanship was 75 minutes of class time a week, and children practiced the skill through daily drills. For traditionalists, the demise of cursive is an outrage - the loss of a skill, even an art form. People who can only print argue there's no point in wasting students' time to teach a vestigial skill in a computer age. For the educators in the middle, pragmatism usually wins. A number of teaching methods promise quick and easy cursive writing skill: "D'Nealian," "Zaner-Bloser", and "Handwriting Without Tears," to name a few. Proponents of each argue that their method will help little hands pick up cursive quickly and legibly.

Of course, legibility depends on the beholder. By the time kids reach high school, most have already developed their own version of printing/cursive/ secret code. And for some, unless schools can find hours to devote to handwriting practice, no single method will improve writing. As a result, many students may well never master that tricky "b" and "r" connection, let alone write anything readable. A nod to tradition may be keeping cursive alive, though shoved to the curriculum edges. In some schools, curriculum coordinators get more calls asking why cursive is taught at all than calls demanding more class time devoted to it. Some argue that cursive writing has been carried on because of tradition, not as a necessity. It is making a few last cultural gasps, though. In the U.S., the SAT college admissions test still requires students to copy a few paragraphs in cursive at the end of the test, most of which say the student didn't cheat and followed the rules. Students are asked to write out the paragraphs, rather than just sign a written statement, so the College Board has a copy of the students' handwriting in case later verification of the student's identity is needed. Studies

have also shown that when grading papers and tests, teachers who are asked to judge purely on content and not on presentation still give lower grades to work that is written less neatly.

One of the most popular reasons given for teaching cursive is speed, but those who really appreciate cursive admit they can be a little neurotic about the letters, which tends to slow things down. "I don't like it to look messy," said Amanda Zaitchik who won a pen and second place in the World Handwriting Contest in July, 2003. She remembers loving her cursive lessons at school, then taking hours at home to practice. "If you look at the practicality, it's easier not to teach it," the high school senior said. "But tradition is a good enough reason to keep going. It's an art in itself."

At ESL Pro Systems, we believe that all English learners - both native and non-native speakers - need to work on grammar, semantics, essay construction, vocabulary development, and other "building blocks" of the language. However, there is also a need for the promotion of better legibility and neatness in writing. Handwriting is the marvelous key that allows us to do this: to communicate our thoughts with friends, family, business colleagues—with anybody we choose. Unlike e-mail, which is produced by a machine, the aspect of writing by hand allows us to truly have a written conversation with our correspondent. The wonder of our thoughts and emotions comes through to the recipient in a most personal manner through our handwriting. And yet, poor handwriting is not easy to read, is certainly not pleasing to the eye, and can even give the impression that little thought or care was put forth by the writer. Poor handwriting often gives the impression that the writer did not think the recipient was important enough to put any time or care into the action of corresponding.

Good handwriting says a lot about the writer. It shows that the writer values both the recipient and the act of corresponding. It's also an indication that the writer is a person of good self-esteem who cares about communicating in a pleasing fashion, so that his/her written conversation is a reflection of their regard for the recipient. Even in this computer age, handwriting is still a necessary life skill. To be able to write legibly not only means that you possess this skill to a high degree, but that you can communicate in a more pleasing and attractive manner.

## V. The Concept of Interlanguage

### Definitions of key terms:

*interlanguage* – a developmental process language learners go through as they progress to full competence in the target language.

*fossilization* – *fossilization* occurs when specific second language errors remain firmly entrenched despite good proficiency in the second language.

*error vs. mistake*– the terms *error* and *mistake* are similar in meaning; the difference is that an error cannot be self-corrected and is usually unknown to the language learner. A mistake, on the other hand, can be self-corrected.

Students' interlanguage often causes teachers to cringe and cover their ears. It's the use of language traditionally allowed for foreigners, but never allowed for students. It's that point of language learning/teaching where students attempt actual communication in the language as if they were in the target culture having to use the second language as best they can, given their present level of competence - without any help from their teacher, textbook, or dictionary. It means students are sinking or swimming in the second language, using their knowledge of the target language, their knowledge of the world, and of people to get ideas across to people who do not speak their language. It's their production of the target language that shows language teachers exactly what students could do, if indeed "plopped" into a second language "sink-or-swim" situation.

Many teachers are afraid of allowing interlanguage: 1) afraid perhaps of what students cannot do and 2) afraid of "bad habits" setting in - afraid of *fossilization*, fearful that those habits cannot be reversed. But interlanguage is to be expected when students are actually using the language as if they were in the second/other culture. How many human beings learn language in school or college for a year and then can speak it with no errors in pronunciation, grammar, usage, appropriateness, etc.? How many after two years of school? Three? Four? The answer must be a resounding "NONE!" Everyone must go through the interlanguage stages of language development, which sometimes last a number of years.

Teachers and students alike become afraid if students are not using the language 100% correctly. They'll say: "But aren't students 'fossilizing'? Aren't they learning incorrect language that will stay with them if they are allowed to use the language spontaneously?" There's a difference between interlanguage and fossilization. Fossilization occurs when learning ceases. Fossilization occurs

when there is no improvement of the interlanguage from year to year. Interlanguage is a reality. If you are speaking with people and writing to people in your second language, you are using interlanguage. You are speaking your interlanguage until you have reached native speaker fluency, correctness, and appropriateness. If you are fairly fluent in your target language, remember your own development. Even now you probably make mistakes!

The fact is, no one has ever spoken a language correctly without first making many errors. Whether it is the native language or a second, we have to make many errors before we can use it fluently and correctly. Perhaps a better way to express this fact is to say we have to test a host of developing hypotheses, many of which are "wrong," before we eventually use the language correctly and appropriately. When a child is learning to walk, we could say s/he makes a lot of mistakes first, but we don't. We see falling down as part of the developmental process. A baby turns over, crawls, stands before ever attempting to walk, and once s/he does, falls down many times before "having the hang of it." This is the same in first and second language learning. Although there are differences in child language acquisition and adult language acquisition, both children and adults make many errors. We simply have to be "bad" at a language before we can be "good" at it. Therefore, if you're currently learning a second language, don't get too frustrated with yourself! With time, effort, and effective learning resources, you will improve!

## VI. Speech Articulation Disorders and How Pronunciation Software Can Play a Role in Overcoming Them

Speech articulation disorders are disorders in the production of individual speech sounds. Consonants are most often misarticulated. Normal articulation The ages listed below are the ages at which 90% of children (native speakers of English) can say sounds appropriately:

- At 32 months a child should have acquired /p/, /h/, /b/, /m/, /n/
- At 36 months a child should have acquired /f/, /w/, /l/, /g/, /d/, and the "ng" sound
- At 48 months the child should have acquired /s/
- Articulation disorders are only considered a disorder when the sound being said incorrectly should have already been acquired

There are four types of errors in articulation. These are best remembered as the acronym S.O.D.A. SODA stands for Substitution, Omission, Distortion, and Addition.

1. Substitution occurs when a sound is substituted for one the speaker cannot make yet. E.g.: *wed(x)-red*, or *fumb(x)-thumb*.
2. Omission occurs when a sound is left out that is too hard. i.e. *ed-red*.
3. Distortion occurs when the sound is not left out or substituted but does not sound right. There is an attempt to make the sound but it is misarticulated.
4. Addition occurs when an extra sound is added. E.g.: *galue(x)-glue*.

Articulation disorders may result from abnormal structures of the articulators, faulty learning (no physical/anatomical reason), hearing loss, or neurological damage (problems with the nervous system).

### ➤ Main Causes in Children

1. Faulty learning is the #1 reason in children.
2. Hearing loss causes trouble with consonants and vowels in severe cases.
3. Structural differences such as cleft palate or poor dentation (misalignment of teeth or poor shape of the dental arc).
4. Neurological - Cerebral palsy results in tight muscles that may cause a delay in articulation and poor coordination.

### ➤ Main Causes in Adults

1. Poor learning. This is usually corrected before adulthood but not always.
2. Hearing loss makes it harder for adults to monitor their own speech.
3. Changes in anatomy and oral structures such as a glossectomy (removal of pieces of the tongue), car accidents that cause facial fractures, or tumors in the mouth that may or may not have been removed.
4. Neurological – A stroke may cause paralysis of the tongue and face or cranial nerves. Multiple sclerosis or an aneurysm can also cause damage.

## » Therapy:

An effective therapeutic program to improve speech articulation disorders should consist of the following steps:

- Sensory perceptual training (hearing one's own mistakes)
- Producing a new sound with cuing
- Able to make sounds correctly in isolation
- Use the sound in syllables
- Use the sound in words
- Use the sound at the phrase level
- Use the sound at the sentence level
- Carry over the sound and make it automatic

Most ESL learners would like to be able to speak English like a native speaker, but English pronunciation is often a significant problem for them. Poor English pronunciation may confuse people even if you use perfect grammar. You can use simple words and simple grammatical structures that make people understand you, but you cannot use "simple pronunciation".

There are three levels of proficiency in English pronunciation:

**Level 1:** People often don't understand what you want to say. You use the wrong sounds in English words.

**Level 2:** People understand what you want to say, but it is unpleasant to listen to you.

**Level 3:** People understand you, and your English is pleasant to listen to.

Level 3 can be called "good" pronunciation. Keep in mind that good pronunciation does not mean a perfect American or British accent. You don't have to sound like the Queen of England, the Prime Minister of Canada, or the President of the United States. But your accent must be close to the standard". What is the standard? Well, that depends on where and with whom you will speak English! Turn on your TV and watch channels like CNN International, CBC, NBC, BBC, or Sky News. You will hear many different people (news anchors, reporters, etc.) from Germany, France, and other non-English-speaking countries. They all have good accents - easy to understand and pleasant.

The rule is: If you are close to the standard, you can always communicate, and your English will be pleasant. If you are far from the standard, sometimes you won't communicate successfully.

But how can learners practice their pronunciation again and again by themselves?

One option is by using [ESL PRO](#), the award-winning pronunciation program that will help non-native speakers learn to speak English clearly and with confidence.

[ESL PRO](#) is based on a unique linguistic approach to teaching correct pronunciation. It improves spoken English by helping learners avoid common pronunciation mistakes from the very beginning. The program, developed by linguists and ESL/EFL professionals, has been used by over 250,000 teachers, students, and business people over the last decade.

With *ESL PRO*, learners will:

*Gain confidence in speaking English.*  
*Enjoy over 50 hours of pronunciation practice.*  
*Master all English sounds in 31 easy lessons.*  
*Avoid common pronunciation errors with a proven learning system.*  
*Learn through a combination of pictures, movies, and sounds.*  
*Be able to record their own voice and compare it to a native speaker's voice.*  
*Increase their vocabulary with a multimedia dictionary.*

First, *ESL PRO* teaches learners how to pronounce the basic sounds that make up English words. Then, they learn how to put these sounds together to form English words. As they go through each lesson, their English will get better and better.



## ➤ Questions & Answers about *ESL PRO*

**Q:** *Can adults use this program to correct their own speech problems?*

-Yes. The process of correcting sounds is the same for children and adults. The progression of the lessons and what is taught are the same for both.

**Q:** *My child can say the sound if I ask him to say it. But, he never uses it when he talks. Is he just being lazy?*

-No. Learning a new sound is a progression of steps that ultimately lead to using the sound in conversation. The fact that the child does not use the sound means that he is not yet ready. First, he must learn to use the sound at more basic levels. He moves to levels of increasing difficulty until he is ready to use the sound in conversation, the final level. *English PRO* software helps learners proceed from one level to the next.

**Q:** *Shouldn't speech therapy best be left to a speech pathologist?*

-Yes and no. A child who has multiple articulation errors should be seen by a speech pathologist. The speech pathologist will know which sound to work on first and how to proceed to help the child attain normal speech. Speech therapy to correct any one sound is a simple process. The child succeeds at step one and from there moves on to step two, three, and so on. This process does not change no matter what the targeted sound.

**Q:** *Isn't it true that it is best to wait until a child is eight or nine before correcting the "s" or "r" sounds?*

-Some speech pathologists feel that children younger than eight or nine are not developmentally ready to learn to say these sounds. The fact is that about 75% of all five year old children use the "s" and "r" sounds in conversation. This is clear proof that children far younger than eight are developmentally ready to use those sounds. There are several good reasons not to wait. Many children are embarrassed about the way they talk. They know they sound different. Many children are teased because of their speech problems. Some children have trouble spelling because they spell a word the way they incorrectly say it. Also, the older a child gets the more they resent having to take the time to go to speech therapy. They resent the embarrassment of being pulled out of class for speech if they receive therapy in school. Private therapy, after school, may interfere with after-school activities the child loves. As a rule, waiting is not usually in the best interests of the child.