

## The importance of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction

Vancouver is the most linguistically diverse school district in Canada with more than 100 different languages spoken. ESL students are a diverse group—some are immigrants, some are born in Canada, some are refugees. Even when most students do not speak English as a first language, schools are still organized on the assumption that children should learn in English.

A recent research study shows immigrant students in Vancouver schools drop out of secondary schools at a higher rate than the average—60% compared to 30% overall. About two thirds of those students eventually graduate, either by re-enrolling or through alternative programs. Vietnamese and Spanish speaking students were more likely to drop out of school.

English as a Second Language instruction helps students. It works best when started early; when learning English includes content-based instruction (such as learning English by doing math or socials), as well as basic English grammar and vocabulary; when the first language and culture of students is valued and used; and when instruction extends over at least five years.

Research has shown that successful ESL instruction should a) use simple, contextualized language, b) give ESL students sufficient time to complete tasks, c) encourage group work so ESL students can learn from their peers, d) refrain from continual correction and instead favour modelling correct use, and e) use results of standardized tests, like the FSA, and multiple choice tests cautiously.

Some kids and parents think ESL instruction is remedial, but in fact it is not. ESL instruction develops the language skills of non-English speaking students. Bilingual education is another approach, one where the teacher is a fluent speaker of two languages and both are used to support proficiency and academic success in a child's first language and English.

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