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# Building on the cultural and linguistic capital of English learner (EL) students

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# Building on the Cultural and Linguistic Capital of English Learner (EL) Students

**Katie Brooks & Katya Karathanos**

## Introduction

Currently, public schools in the U.S. are experiencing dramatic increases in the number of English learner (EL) students they serve. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2006), between 1979 and 2004, the overall number of school children in U.S. public schools increased 18 percent. In contrast, the number of these children who spoke a language other than English at home increased by 162 percent, and the number who spoke a language other than English at home and who spoke English with difficulty increased by 114 percent. Projections have further indicated that school-aged children who are ELs will constitute an estimated 40 percent of the k-12 population in the US by the year 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

While an extensive body of research indicates that bilingual education is the most successful type of programming for EL students—with some models being more effective than others (Greene, 1998; Ramirez, 1992; Ramirez, Yen, & Ramey, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002; Willig, 1985), the reality exists that as a result of factors including shortages of bilingual teachers or the representation of multiple native languages within a school district, most EL students spend the majority of the school day in English-dominant contexts with predominantly English-speaking teachers (Berube, 2000).

While our nation has a long history of competing ideologies and political controversies related to English immersion (in which the primary language of instruction is English) programs versus bilingual education, scholars contend that these two educational approaches need

not be conceptualized as dichotomous. Rather, when educators consider what approaches and strategies will provide the best opportunities for particular students to learn in particular contexts, they must bear in mind that for EL students, their native languages and cultures are key resources to draw upon for teaching both content and language (Lucas & Katz, 1994). They must also think about how the language and culture a student brings with them is intimately connected to their community, loved ones, and personal identity (Delpit, 1988).

## What the Research Says

For students in the school setting, learning is a search for meaning using formal education and one's own experiences. As the brain interacts with the environment, it forms mental structures based on patterns of understanding, or schema (Caine & Caine, 1991). When the brain encounters new information, it interprets the information using existing schema. Because these schema develop through personal experience, they reflect the cultures and experiences of the learner (Quinn & Holland, 1987). Consequently, learners who have experienced different events and cultural contexts interpret the world in unique ways. Moreover, language is the primary tool learners use to symbolize their unique experiences and thoughts and to communicate with others (Vygotsky, 1962).

Educators often expect EL students to succeed in the classroom without considering the ways in which these students' experiences, cultures, and languages shape their schema (Cummins, 1996). Rather than recognizing culture and language as essential to EL students' connections between their schema and key content area concepts, educators frequently view diverse languages and cultures from a deficit perspective as "inadequate preparation for learning" (Jones & Fennimore,

p. 16, 1990). In other words, rather than building upon the rich cultural and linguistic capital of EL students, teachers often expect students to adapt to an English-only classroom environment that reflects White, middle class, native English speaking curricula. As a result, EL students may encounter problems in understanding the academic language of instruction, and they may undergo difficulty in making meaningful connections among fundamental concepts in the curriculum to their prior knowledge and experiences.

Currently many teachers take an additive or contributions approach to multilingual/multicultural education by "adding on" multicultural concepts, themes, and perspectives to the curriculum, without changing the basic structure of the curriculum (Banks, 2003). Yet, culturally responsive teaching requires that students' cultures, languages, and multiple other cultures are integral components of the curricula (Vavrus, 2002) as opposed to something extra added to enhance the curricula.

Teachers must go beyond surface-level inclusion to provide equitable learning opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Teachers who truly embrace culturally responsive pedagogy recognize the importance of helping EL students make meaningful connections between their existing schema and content area concepts and skills. Cummins (1996) explained the consequences of teachers not embracing the prior knowledge, languages, and cultural backgrounds that EL students bring to the learning process:

When students' language, culture and experience are ignored or excluded in classroom interactions, students are immediately starting from a disadvantage. Everything they have learned about life and the world up to this point is being dismissed as irrelevant to school learning; there are few points of connection to curriculum materials or instruction and so students are expected to learn in an

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experiential vacuum. Students' silence and nonparticipation under these conditions have frequently been misinterpreted as lack of academic ability or effort, and teachers' interactions with students have reflected a pattern of low expectations which become self-fulfilling. (p. 2-3)

Language, culture, prior knowledge, and experience are the foundation of EL students' meaning-making processes. Although decoding text is essential for reading text, reading comprehension does not occur without meaning making, or semantic processes (Goodman, 1996). Grade level academic concepts are more accessible to EL students when teachers provide personally engaging instruction that helps students cognitively connect new information to their native languages, cultures, and experiences (Cummins, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

### **The Common Underlying Proficiency: Why Native Language Support Works**

First and second language development are interdependent. Cummins (1991) describes this interdependence between first and second language acquisition with his theory of the Common Underlying Proficiency. This theory proposes that, provided sufficient exposure to the second language, the literacy and cognitive development of the first language transfers to the second language. Cummins (1991) based this theory on extensive research he has conducted with bilingual students in Canada, Ireland, and the Ukraine (Cummins, 1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1980; Cummins & Gulutsan, 1974; Cummins & Mulcahy, 1978).

A host of additional studies have further supported the Common Underlying Proficiency theory (Bialystock, 1991; Collier, 1989, 1992; Garcia, 1994; Genessee, 1987, 1994; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Empirical evidence from these studies further indicate that children who receive academic instruction in both their first and second languages perform better linguistically, cognitively, and academically in their second language than students who receive instruction in the second language only.

Learning most effectively occurs in the language that the learner knows the best. The skills and understandings acquired in the first language are accessible to a learner in the second language. For example, if students learn about the process of photosynthesis in their native languages, they do not have to relearn this concept for a second language environment. They only need to acquire the vocabulary and

language structures necessary to convey this knowledge in the second language.

However, if these same students study the process of photosynthesis in a second language that has not yet been highly developed, they may not understand much of what the teacher is saying as the teacher explains important concepts, or the students may have difficulty reading or comprehending text in the second language. In this case, the students do not understand the language of instruction enough to construct a solid understanding of the key concepts presented.

Perhaps the most important area for development in the native language is literacy. EL students who have high levels of literacy in their native languages generally develop high levels of literacy in their second languages; whereas, EL students who have low literacy development in their native languages often struggle to develop high levels of literacy in their second languages (August & Hakuta, 1997).

The common underlying proficiency explains this correlation between first and second language proficiencies. Literacy skills such as decoding or making inferences transfer between languages. As a result, students benefit from explicit instruction that shows them ways they can apply literacy skills learned in their first languages to literacy tasks in their second languages (Bialystock, 1991; Hudelson, 1987; Mace-Matluck, 1982). Additionally, teachers can use vocabulary teaching strategies that build on their students' first languages to help them acquire vocabulary in the second language. Vocabulary development in the second language is critical because it is a primary meaning making factor in reading comprehension (Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996).

### **"But I Don't Speak Their Language"**

The implications of the Common Underlying Proficiency concept and the differences between first and second language acquisition is that EL students need as much native language support as a school and teacher can provide. Unfortunately, many teachers are unsure of how they can support the native languages of their students when the teachers do not speak the languages of their students. However, even teachers who are not bilingual can incorporate use of students' native languages to promote cognitive, academic, and linguistic development as well as reinforce a positive self-identity for students (Freeman and Freeman, 1993; Lucas & Katz,

1994; Tikunoff, Ward, van Broekhuizen, et al, 1991).

For example, teachers can encourage EL students to use their native languages for academic purposes in small collaborative groups; enlist parent support in developing native language literacy in the home; support EL student use of native language learning logs; and provide instructional materials, environmental print, and reading materials in the native languages of their EL students. Even for difficult to find languages and under-funded schools, older EL students and parent volunteers can write both fiction and nonfiction bilingual books for class projects. These books can be reproduced and shared with younger EL students. They can also serve as resources to translate key vocabulary into students' native languages for bilingual word walls.

While encouraging native language development and use among students may initially seem daunting or present challenges to monolingual teachers, creative solutions can help teachers to overcome potential barriers to this practice. The following includes detailed strategies and considerations that monolingual teachers, or teachers who do not speak all of the native languages of their students, can utilize to help EL students learn new concepts and develop their language skills by building on students' cultural and linguistic schema.

### **Strategies for Building on Cultural and Linguistic Schema**

#### **Coding the Text**

Students read a text selection. As they read, they should record on sticky notes the kinds of schematic connections that they are making and what the connections are. Since students often develop comprehension skills more quickly than writing skills, encourage students to write their notes in the native language if they are having difficulty doing so in English. (The goal here is for students to make meaningful connections as opposed to write perfectly in English).

After students have made their connections, they place the sticky note next to the line of text to which they are connecting. The kinds of schematic connections include text-self (T-S) which are personal connections, text-text (T-T) which are academic connections, and text-world (T-W) which are cultural.

Next, have students discuss their connections with a partner or small group.

You can follow this activity up by using the sticky notes to make a class graphic organizer on a bulletin board (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

### Say Something

Place students in pairs. When listening to a lecture or reading a text, ask students to stop every five minutes or so, and discuss with their partners the kinds of connections that they are making to the ideas presented. Encourage them to make personal, cultural, real-world, and prior learning connections. Pair students who speak the same native languages but have varying levels of English proficiency together (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996).

### Sketch to Stretch

After reading or listening to text, have students sketch what the text means to them. Encourage students to experiment and assure them that there are many ways to represent personal meanings. Have students gather in groups of three to five. Each student in the group shares his or her sketch. As the sketch is shared, all other group members give their interpretations of the sketch. Once everyone has shared, the artist reveals his or her interpretation. Repeat the process until everyone in the group has had a chance to share (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996).

### Cross-Linguistic Strategies

One way for teachers to support EL students in making meaning from print is to teach them to use appropriate meaning-making strategies. EL students can improve their reading comprehension through the strategic application of reading strategies (Chamot, 1995; Chamot, Dale, O'Malley, & Spanos, 1992; Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Many of the strategies used in teaching native English speaking students to read also support the literacy development of EL students (Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

These strategies include skimming for information, monitoring comprehension, reflecting on what one has learned, classifying material, linking new information to prior knowledge, and summarizing. However, unlike monolingual students, EL students can use their native languages to help them understand information in the second language. In other words, they have a variety of cross-linguistic transfer strategies such as code-switching or focusing on

cognates that they can use to improve their reading comprehension.

### Code-Switching

EL students who are good readers tend to code switch, or to switch between languages as they speak or write (Garcia, 1998; Heredia & Altarriba, 2001). Some teachers erroneously discourage EL students from code switching because they think that this practice will inhibit second language acquisition. However, code switching actually promotes second language acquisition because students are able to express their ideas more completely.

Additionally, Garcia (1998) found that paraphrasing English text in the native language facilitated EL student reading comprehension. Translating text word for word, on the other hand, inhibited reading comprehension. Thus, writing or discussing English text in a student's own words helps students to make personal meaning from the text; whereas, exact translation can cause students to focus more on the language than on the meaning of what they read.

### Focus on Cognates

Another cross linguistic transfer strategy that research has shown to support reading comprehension in English has been student recognition and use of cognates. Cognates are words that have the same root word in two different languages. Rodriguez (2001) identified several kinds of cognates (particularly English/Spanish cognates):

- ◆ Some words are spelled identically in both languages, such as fatal, hotel, actor.
- ◆ Some words are spelled nearly the same: contamination—contaminación; evidence—evidencia; castigate—castigar.
- ◆ In some words the similarities aren't as apparent: sport—deporte; perilous—peligroso.
- ◆ Some words are more of an oral cognate than a written cognate. In other words, they sound more similar than they appear, such as pleasure—placer; peace—paz.
- ◆ Some words are cognates for one meaning but not another: letter—letra (letter of the alphabet); letter—carta (as in written correspondence).
- ◆ Some similarities among words can be taught to help teach other words: disappear—desaparecer; appear—aparecer.

- ◆ There are false cognates, in which a word is similar to an English word but not related in meaning: bigote—moustache; embarazada—pregnant.

Strong bilingual readers identify and use cognates to help them comprehend text while struggling bilingual readers tend not to recognize and use cognates (Garcia, 1998; Jiménez, 1997; Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1996). Fortunately, studies have shown that less successful bilingual readers who receive instruction in recognizing and using cognates as a strategy and apply these strategies demonstrate increased reading comprehension (Garcia, 1998).

Thus, EL students can benefit from explicit instruction in using cognates as a meaning making strategy (Garcia & Nagy, 1993). Helping students recognize words in English that have roots, or cognates, in their native languages can support the reading comprehension of EL students and help them build their vocabulary in the second language.

### Highlighting Cognates Strategy

Explain to students that they do not have to understand every word in text in order to get the main idea. Tell them that good bilingual readers know how to look for cognates, or words with roots similar to those in their native languages, and other words they know. Encourage them to use these words, pictures/visuals provided with the text, and their prior knowledge to understand the text. Give students a highlighter marker and a copy of a content area text. Have students highlight the words they know, including cognates and create a graphic organizer or write their own summaries of what they think the main ideas in the text are. This highlighting can give teachers a rough idea of what the students understand.

### Cautions about Native Language Use

Although native language support is a crucial strategy for supporting EL students in content area classes, it is important for educators to consider the following issues in providing native language support:

1. Just because teachers provide text written in the students' native languages, it does not mean that the students can understand the text without additional support. Native language text and peer conversation should not be the only strategies that teachers use to facilitate EL student learning.



2. The students' native languages may not be their dominant language. If EL students have spent a few years in the U.S. in English immersion programs, they may not have strong academic language development in their native languages.

3. EL students need frequent opportunities to interact with native English speakers and to read/write in English. Working in small native language groups most of the time will not provide enough engagement with academic English.

4. Teachers need to invest time in both teaching EL students to collaborate effectively and helping native English speaking students to understand why bilingual students need to use their first language.

5. In deciding how and when to provide native language support, it is important for teachers to understand their students' characteristics and needs and ensure that they have opportunities to learn in both their native languages and English.

### When Should They Use Each Language?

The grouping configurations of students should meet your lesson objectives. If your focus is higher order thinking skills or prior knowledge connections, EL students should probably work together in their native languages. If you want EL students to practice using some of their new English language structures and vocabulary, you should pair them with native English speakers.

You can also group students by similar second language proficiency levels for targeted instruction in English development or by mixed native language proficiency levels when focusing on new content, so that they can support each other's learning. Just keep in mind that always putting EL students together is just as ineffective as never putting them together for collaborative group work and that you should vary the grouping of your students.

### Self Assessment Questions

Teachers can use the following questions as a good starting point for reflecting on the degree to which their instruction builds on the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students:

- ◆ In what ways do you encourage your EL students to use their native languages as a learning tool within your class?
- ◆ In what ways do you seek out and provide native language materials to support your EL students in learning new content?
- ◆ In what ways are your EL students actively engaged during classroom instruction?
- ◆ What cultures and languages are represented in the books in your library and/or classroom? What cultures, languages, and ethnicities are represented in posters, textbooks, and student work?

### Sources for Native Language Materials

- ◆ Culture for Kids: <http://www.cultureforkids.com/>
- ◆ Scholastic Books: <http://www.scholastic.com/> (Search bilingual/EL)
- ◆ The Spanish Bookstore: <http://www.thespainishbookstore.com>
- ◆ Content-related internet sites in students' native languages
- ◆ Publishers of current textbooks (may have textbooks available in other languages)
- ◆ Local: public library, ESL program, churches (book drives), parent donations, Scholastic warehouse sales, school library

### Conclusion

Researchers contend that what's important is not what a particular educational program is called (i.e., English immersion, bilingual, sheltered instruction), but rather what is being transacted between educators and students within the school and classroom (Cummins, 2000). Some programs labeled as bilingual may make little effort to value and incorporate students' native languages and cultures into instruction. On the other hand, English-dominant programs in various contexts may view infusion of the native language into classroom practices as an integral component to the success of EL students.

By implementing approaches and strategies that value and build upon the cultural and linguistic capital of EL stu-

dents, teachers send a vital message to students and families that multiculturalism and multilingualism are invaluable assets to the classroom, school and community.

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