

The Intersection of Culture, Language, and Learning

Maria Montalvo-Balbed

The United States probably has one of its richest natural resources in its population of immigrants: their diversity ought to be an advantage in an interconnected global village. Of the 40 million immigrants living in the United States in 2010, about 17 percent or 7 million arrived between 2005 and 2010 (Walters & Trevelyan, 2011). The U.S. Department of Education reported that 11.2 million school-age children (ages 5-17) spoke a language other than English at home (Aud, et al, 2011). That's an increase of 13 percent in just the last decade.

However, in his popular book *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, author Thomas Friedman reasonably claims that the American education system is not exactly meeting the needs of a global economy (2005). The increase of non-native English speakers, that began in the last decades of the 20th century, has prompted much research about the most efficient and effective ways of educating this growing group of English learners in U.S. schools. The research is voluminous in the area of second language acquisition, but debate continues about the optimal conditions for developing native-like proficiency for English language learners. The following discussion will cover the research that supports the critical role that language and culture play in the second language acquisition process.

Frank Smith, a psycholinguist who has extensively researched the reading process, eloquently writes in *Comprehension and Learning: A Conceptual Framework for Teachers*, "Children know how to learn. And it is the responsibility and privilege of teachers to make learning possible by ensuring that what is to be learned is comprehensible. The teacher's role is to help a child to make sense of school and of the world" (1975, p. 247). Smith's premise is key to learning a second language: the lesson has to be comprehensible. We have learned a great deal in the past 20 years about how English language learners become proficient in the target language, yet the data shows a lack of success for the vast majority of English language learners in the United States (Short, 2005).

Before discussing how language and culture interact in the second language proficiency paradigm, it is important to define the linguistic complexities of acquiring second language proficiency.

Social Versus Academic Language

Language and literacy professor Jim Cummins at the University of Toronto makes the distinction between two kinds of language proficiency (1979). He defines the "surface" skills of listening and speaking, typically acquired early in the second language acquisition process, as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). This language is used in social situations, whether on the playground, asking directions, or chatting at a party. The second type of proficiency, which involves the language needed for

academics and specialized fields, he calls Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). This language is more difficult to attain, and Cummins suggests that although many children develop native speaker fluency (i.e., BICS) within two years of immersion in the target language, it takes between five to seven years for a student to be working on a comparable academic level with native speakers.

Acknowledging that there are multiple factors that affect learning in a second language, this reading focuses on the research about the intersection of culture and language learning. Research supports the notion that literacy in the first language is a great predictor for second language proficiency (Garcia, 2006; August & Shanahan, 2006). However, Kenji Hakuta (2001) also notes that “it takes a considerable amount of time for ELL students to develop English language proficiency—certainly much longer than one year, and it depends on the aspects of language proficiency as well as the socioeconomic background characteristics of students.” While scholars may debate the timeline for second language acquisition and the positive or negative factors that influence it, other educators are pointing to the value of culture and how cultural understanding is crucial if we are to engage and motivate those students who seem to be most disengaged in our schools.

Leveraging Culture for Language Development

Consequently, research indicates that there is a strong link between one's culture and language development. James Banks (1977) affirms Garcia's (2005) position as he points out “that language is an integral part of culture and that students learn best when their culture as well as their language is respected, affirmed, and used in instruction when they are learning a second language.”

Garcia further notes that “staff should reject program and model labels and instead answer the following questions when considering the education of English language learners:

1. What are the native-language and English-language characteristics of the students, families, and communities we serve?
2. What model of instruction is desired?
 - a) How do we choose to use the native language and English as mediums of instruction?
 - b) How do we choose to handle the instruction in the native language and English?
3. What is the nature of staff and resources necessary to implement the desired instruction?” (2005, p.39)

Similarly, Moll's (2005) work indicates that understanding the “funds of knowledge” or experiences that these students bring with them to school and learning how to infuse these cultural and language experiences into our curriculum honors the linguistic and cultural diversity of the ELLs in our schools. Understanding where our students come from and how they communicate at home entails more than just knowing the country of birth and the standard language of that particular country. Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005, p. 170) further describe funds of knowledge as “approaches (that) focus on the processes of everyday life in the form of daily activities as a frame of reference.”

They also contend that in order for teachers to be able to tap into and use the cultural capital of the communities they work with to mediate literacy, teachers must understand their own socially constructed identity. In other words, teachers must understand how their own identity has been shaped by their own cultural experiences and how their beliefs and actions influence the way they interact with their students (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Villegas and Lucas (2002) also confirm the notion that educators must affirm the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students if they are to make learning a successful experience for the many language minority students currently in U.S. schools. Culturally responsive education means students are respected and engaged in rigorous academic work with teachers who understand how language and culture affect students' second language proficiency. Stanford University's Understanding Language initiative emphasizes that the Common Core standards will offer many opportunities for English language learners to become part of an inclusive community in schools where

- All learning builds on student's prior knowledge and experiences.
- English language learners are provided opportunities for "apprenticeship" with peers and teachers.
- Language development and cognitive development are mutually interconnected.
- English language learners learn to practice language in meaningful and challenging tasks within the classroom community. (Bunch, Kibler, Pimentel, 2012)

Best Practices to Help ELLS Meet Reading, Writing, Speaking & Listening, and Language Standards

English language learning experts George Bunch, Amanda Kibler, and Susan Pimental offer synthesis of best practices for helping teachers help ELLs meet standards in the four strands of the Common Core's anchor standards for English language arts and literacy--reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language (2012)

Reading

With CCSS call for students to be reading increasingly complex texts, it is especially important at the younger grades that students have plenty of opportunities of using oral language as the foundation for the development of their reading, as research shows reading literacy grows hand in hand with speaking proficiency (Bunch, Kibler, Pimentel, 2012). For all grade levels of ELLs, teachers can use pre-reading activities and conversations that build up students' background knowledge, or use glosses for crucial vocabulary, and signal the purpose behind reading.

Teachers can help English language learners use a variety of strategic approaches to read independently across the curriculum, including the following:

- Have ELL students read "more accessible texts" (including those in their first language) to prepare for more complex texts within the same lesson or unit.
- Help readers focus on important vocabulary versus in a text and know what can be skipped.

- Focus readers on grammar that's critical for meaning making, and use parallels in grammar in the students' first language.
- Using authentic and original complex texts, have readers focus on only one or two specific features of text complexity. (Bunch, Kibler, Pimentel, 2012)

When it comes to the Common Core's call for using text-based evidence as part of thinking about and arguing from a text, teachers should encourage ELLs to make and justify their own hypotheses even if their English is limited and their reasoning does "initially match" experienced readers. (Bunch, Kibler, Pimentel, 2012)

Writing

To be college and career ready, the standards expect that high school graduates will be able to write arguments logically, present information cogently for a variety of purposes and audiences, and use evidence from text and other sources to back their claims. "The goal is to ready student for college and careers so that they are able to conduct investigations, analyze information, and create products that reflect the increasing emphasis research receives in an information-based economy." (Bunch, Kibler, Pimentel, 2012)

Strategies to help ELLs write in the context of the Common Core include the following:

- Allow ELLs to use language and cultural resources, technology they like, and their background experiences and knowledge to help furnish meaningful ideas to write about.
- Give ELLs models of text types (e.g., within narrative, informational/expository, argumentative categories) and help students understand what linguistic and rhetorical patterns make up different genres.
- Provide opportunities for ELLs to write for authentic and meaningful communication instead of wrote exercises; provide thought peer and teacher feedback to students during the writing process.
- For research, students with a strong literacy background in their first language should be able to use this to locate, evaluate, and analyze information.
- Provide clear guidance to students about academic conventions in textual citation and ownership along with the reasons behind using them.
- Teach elements of research processes by giving ELLs assignments done with the teacher or with peers.

(Bunch, Kibler, Pimentel, 2012)

Speaking and Listening

Teachers across the curriculum can help their ELL students meet CCSS standards in Speaking and Listening by first giving them a wide variety of opportunities to speak, including the following:

- Discussions, ranging from one-on-one, small group, and whole-class, that encourage students to engage in extended discourse that allows them to combine everyday language with academic registers.
- Develop collaborative tasks around linguistically rich discussions
- Allow ELLs to collaborate in their home language as they work on tasks to be completed in English.
- Teach ELLs strategies for using their current English language proficiency to engage in different modes of communication, e.g., interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive.

(Bunch, Kibler, Pimentel, 2012)

Language

Bunch, Kibler, and Pimental remind educators that although Common Core standards related to the Language strand call for “firm control” over the conventions of standard English, ELLs will use “imperfect” English (2012). In fulfilling the both the mandate and the spirit of the Common Core standards, teachers should ensure that the focus on the mechanics of standard English takes place in context of “meaningful and engaging academic work” instead of becoming ends in themselves.

They caution that teachers should not interpret student’s use of developmental English as “an inability or unwillingness” to take part in the academic work of the classroom. At the same time, they emphasize that a teacher’s appropriate support “can promote the development of both language and literacy.” (Bunch, Kibler, and Pimental, 2012)

The Common Core standards encourage students to obtain, evaluate, and communicate information; build on ideas and concepts; and develop arguments from evidence. Classroom teachers will need to learn about and maximize all the cultural and first-language strengths their ELL students have in order to help them meet the Common Core standards’ demanding expectations. As a result, K-12 education’s mandate will be met, and the United States will truly benefit from the richness its diverse population brings with it from other places.