ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOMS: CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS

Fall 2012

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Gifted English Language Learners: Using Popular Culture Texts to Enhance Learning

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In recent years, there have been a growing number of studies devoted to understanding how students use popular culture texts in their everyday lives and how these texts can be utilized in classrooms. However, research is limited regarding how students identified as talented and gifted English language learners (ELLs) use popular culture texts to connect to school-based learning. These popular culture texts include television; movies; music; art; the Internet; reading materials, including magazines, trading cards, books, comics, advertisements; and technology, including video games, cell phones, and iPods. Many of these popular culture texts are situated in relevant sociocultural contexts and offer enhanced literacy experiences and acquisition (Page, 2006; Williams, 2005a; Xu, Sawyer-Perkins, & Zunich, 2005). Yet popular culture texts are often viewed as irrelevant to literacy acquisition; some educators even view them as inhibiting educational learning or as a waste of time (Flood, Lapp, & Bayles-Martin, 2000; Harste, Ariogul, Sanner, East, Enyeart, & Lehman, 2003; Pailliotet, 2003). On the contrary, talented and gifted ELLs in this study employed various popular culture texts to experience, practice, learn, examine, and,

most importantly for the classroom, connect these literacies to school-based learning.

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which popular culture texts were used to facilitate comprehension for ELLs in the second language acquisition (SLA) process. Moreover, the researcher wanted to know whether ELLs chose to use popular culture texts to augment their own learning.

Theoretical framework

In 2001, in an effort to broaden the view of literacy appropriate for the 21st century, the International Reading Association and the National Council for Teachers of English noted that literacy includes reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visual representation. The organizations identified these as *language arts*. Page (2006, 2008) refers to these components as the *six elements of literacy* when he extends the context of language arts to include popular culture literacy practices within families, homes, and communities and how specifically these literacy practices can be connected to school-based topics in all subject areas.

In recent years, new literacy studies, which include popular culture texts, have garnered great attention. Many of these studies focus on popular culture text usage that is home-, family-, and community-based (the Internet, text messages, e-mails, blogs, television, magazines, books, films, video

games, iPods, and music) and how these popular culture texts intersect with society and with students in particular (Alvermann, 2002; Page, 2006; Xu, Perkins, & Zunich, 2005). Research projects involving new literacies contribute to a 21st-century understanding of literacy that moves beyond the often dominant perception of learning, which is limited to traditional, school-based literacy skills (Street, 1984, 1995; Trier, 2005). This movement should be of particular interest to researchers of ELLs, yet very limited research has been carried out on them in the context of popular culture texts.

Popular culture text research, based on sociocultural theory, prompts dialogue, and sometimes debate, about the home-based literacy practices of non-mainstream students that occur in the home, family, and community (Moll, 1992; Page, 2006; Paratore, 2001; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Valdez, 1996; Williams, 2005a, 2005b). These non-mainstream students include ELLs. It is these students who use many socioculturally based literacy practices relevant to their lives (Gonzalez, 2001; Moll, 1992). Several of these relevant popular culture literacy practices, including reading comic books, writing lyrics, listening to music, talking to friends, viewing television, and creating visual representations, are brought into the classroom by ELLs, yet these practices are often not recognized or utilized by teachers (Page, 2006). Numerous contemporary classrooms have ignored the holistic approach to children's literacy acquisition that capitalizes on popular culture texts for a more structured, school-based form of teaching literacy (Williams, 2005a, 2005b). Yet recognizing the sociocultural dynamics of literacy as a foundation for enhanced school-based content has the potential to contribute to effective educational

practices and successful students (Gadsden, 1992; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Norton-Meier, 2005; Osterling, 2001). When teachers use these dynamics of literacy within the context of popular culture texts, they also have the potential to enhance student learning and success (Luke, 1997; Trier, 2005).

Methodology

This study used an ethnographic case study approach to gather data based on the guiding questions which provided an open framework for examination and thick description. According to Glesne (1999), "Ethnography comes from the anthropological tradition of illuminating patterns of culture through long-term immersion in the field, collecting data primarily by participant-observation and interviewing. The data focuses on description and interpretation of what people say and do" (p. 9). Ethnography allows the researcher to represent the shared beliefs, practices, and behaviors of the culture to be studied. Spindler and Spindler (1987) validate the use of ethnography as a research discipline by stressing that the goal is to discover what cultural knowledge people have and how they use it in social situations.

The researcher's qualitative investigation involved an eight-month data-collection time frame, using ethnographic techniques (Glesne, 1999). Triangulation of data included interviews, observations, and field notes. The actual design of ethnographic research is considered emergent based on the understanding that information from persons interviewed, observations accomplished, and field notes documented is always flowing from previous data collected. The data

interpretation was completed via a coding system to assist interpretation. This coding allowed the researcher to assign units of meaning to the information compiled. The information was compiled in "chunks" of words, phrases, sentences, segments, or meanings significant to the study, which led to drawing conclusions from the data. These codes were used as a guide to form new and subsequent questions for future interviews. From this coding came connections and interpretations that created themes, which became the foundations for theory development (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Setting, participants, and researcher

The setting included one multiage public school classroom located in an urban city in the Southwest with students aged 8-11 who were identified as talented and gifted. The students met with the teacher twice a week. The researcher, who was also the teacher, was an observer-participant in the study. The researcher is male, European American, considered middle-class in the context of socioeconomic status, was 39 years old at the time of the study, and has taught for 10 years, all in the urban school district where data was collected. The school had a Latino population of 96%, with 94% of students receiving free or reduced lunches. The students identified as second language learners made up 90% of the school population. The participants in the study included 52 elementary-aged students in grades 3, 4, and 5 (30 females and 22 males). Eighty-three percent of the students in the study were identified as ELLs with English language proficiency levels

ranging from intermediate to advanced high based on the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System. This school is one of 157 elementary schools situated in a school district with an elementary student population of 88,000. The students in the district speak 70 different languages; 65% of the students are Latino.

Research questions

Questions guiding the data collection included:

- Do ELLs use popular culture texts to make connections to and enhance understandings of a classroom topic or lesson?
- What popular culture texts were used by ELLs to make connections to and enhance understandings of a classroom topic or lesson?
- When during lessons were popular culture texts used to make connections and enhance understandings?

Results

Question 1. Do English language learners use popular culture texts to make connections to and enhance understandings of a classroom topic or lesson?

In an effort to answer the first research question, it was found that elementary-aged ELLs within this study used the six elements of literacy (reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and interacting with visual representations) all within the context of popular culture texts. These popular

culture texts included movies; television; computers and the Internet; technology that incorporates music and games; video games; magazines; newspapers; art; trading cards; and all types of books, including comics. As a participant-observer in the study, the researcher also found that students at times used popular culture texts within the context of the six elements of literacy to mediate their own understanding of the curriculum content topic. Often this action was unnecessary as the researcher came to realize that many of the students had an abundance of home-based experiences with the topics via popular culture texts.

By using a frequency count, the teacher-researcher determined that the elementary-aged ELLs in this study used a multitude of popular culture texts to enhance understanding of theme-based topics. Throughout the data collection period, multiple content-based topics were introduced by the teacher around the theme of "Travel Opens the Mind." Students "traveled" to locales that included London, England; the state of Hawaii; and New York, New York. Within this theme, topics were studied. Examples related to London included London landmarks (Big Ben, London Bridge, Tower of London, Thames River); historical persons related to London, such as the Queen of England, Captain James Cook, Henry VIII, wives of Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, other kings, queens, princes, and princesses of England; and supplemental topics, such as the crown jewels, British accents, beheadings, and art produced by British artists. Examples of topics related to Hawaii included volcanoes, Pearl Harbor, beaches in Hawaii, fruit eaten and exported, Hawaiian mythology, historical persons associated with Hawaii, and cloud formations. New York City topics comprised landmarks Rockefeller Center,

the Empire State Building, Central Park, Times Square, and Ellis Island.

> Question 2. What popular culture texts were used to make connections to and enhance understandings of a classroom topic or lesson?

Data found to answer the second question of this study included using television (*The Simpsons*, *Hannah Montana*, the Golden Globe Awards, travel programs featuring Samantha Brown, Spanish-language shows, History Channel shows), movies (the Harry Potter movies, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Princess Diaries*, *Mr. Bean*, *The Mummy Returns*, *Garfield in London: A Tale of Two Kitties*, *Finding Neverland*, *Titanic*), video games (Medal of Honor), music (Cold Play, IZ, the *American Idol* singers), reading (the *Harry Potter* series, by J.K. Rowling; *Pirates of the Caribbean*; other books at the local library), and the Internet (travel websites, history-based websites, computer-based games).

As the various topics related to each travel locale were introduced, students used a multitude of popular culture texts to connect to the topic and build understanding. It should be noted that during each introduction of locale and topics, students constantly referenced popular culture texts that occurred within the home as indicated in the above examples. As students talked, the investigator did not limit their connections or conversations, even though he realized that some popular culture text citations would be considered by some as out of place. The researcher knew, based on a literature review, that other researchers of popular culture texts indicated that student comprehension of topics can be enhanced when popular culture texts are connected to content

(Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Norton-Meier, 2005; Rasinski, 2000; Squire, DeVane, & Durga, 2008; Xu, Perkins, & Zunich, 2005). The conversations served to enhance content understanding.

In this study, data indicated the television was used most often to enhance understanding of school-based topics. ELLs read texts and wrote about, listened to, spoke about, and watched television to gain knowledge and understanding of topics. It was also found that learners in this study used this gained knowledge and understanding to connect to school-based topics. The students identified and connected topics to a multitude of television examples viewed at home and within the classroom to enhance understanding. These broad examples ranged from *The Simpsons*, (an episode featuring Bart Simpson going to London, visiting landmarks such as Big Ben, discussing historic persons related to London, including Henry VIII, and beheadings; another episode featured Bart Simpson visiting the Empire State Building in New York City) and *Hannah Montana* (a show featuring Hannah visiting London, visiting various landmarks, visiting the Queen of England), to travel, history, documentary, sports, cartoons, reality, news, and celebrity award shows featured on the Travel Channel, the History Channel, the Discovery Channel, ESPN, *l*, and Univision. It should be communicated that the teacher-researcher utilized segments of episodes from the Travel History Channels within the classroom, but all the other examples were popular culture text references viewed within the home but discussed in class to cement connections to classroom topics.

Throughout the learning, students constantly referenced television as their primary connection to the classroom topics.

A notable example occurred after the Golden Globe Awards broadcast, in which references were made to the movie *The Queen*. One female student talked about how this movie is about Elizabeth II, the present Queen of England. One male student also made a connection to the Hawaiian mythological figure, Pele. His link came from a television show viewed at his home that featured the soccer player Pele. As these connections were made, it would have been easy to limit the conversations and thus the link to topics being addressed in the classroom but the teacher-researcher let the conversations progress and many connections cementing understanding were made by the students.

Throughout the study, the ELLs also brought experiences with movies to the classroom to enhance their school-based understanding. Students read texts and wrote about, listened to, spoke about, and viewed movies within their homes. The *Harry Potter* series of movies, as well as *Mr. Bean, Garfield in London: A Tale of Two Kitties, Finding Neverland, The Mummy Returns*, and *The Princess Diaries* were referenced extensively in the context of London, including landmarks and British accents versus American accents. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies prompted additional conversations about British accents and about art featured in the movie, which is similar to art displayed at the Tate Gallery in London. One female student referenced *Molly: An American Girl on the Home Front* as she discussed the setting of this DVD, in which a young girl from London comes to live with Molly's family for a period of time during World War II. The movies *50 First Dates* and *Titanic* were cited during the learning about Hawaii. The former takes place in Hawaii and students discussed the beaches, food, and landmarks relevant

to the state. The latter movie was related to the class conversations about Pearl Harbor. Many large ships sank during the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the *Titanic* ship sank in the movie. Several students, without prompting, compared and contrasted the two situations. When New York City landmarks were discussed, several students referenced the movies *King Kong, Spiderman, Elf, The Princess Diaries,* and *Night at the Museum.* As the conversation progressed, more and more students began to participate and make connections to other landmarks from New York City. The teacher-researcher allowed this teachable moment to occur from student to student without limiting the conversation time. With subsequent conversations, the investigator again did not limit the time spent when ELLs made higher-order thinking connections. At times, redirection of conversations back to the topic occurred but to limit these conversations was to limit the relevant connections of the students. These "aha moments" once again validated the understanding that children often connected home-based popular culture text experiences to school-based learning to cement learning.

Popular culture texts involving video games and video gaming used within the home were also used to make connections about Pearl Harbor, London, and New York City. A male student connected his experiences with a video game which, as he explained, focuses on the attack on Pearl Harbor. He spoke to the class about the boats, servicemen, and the Japanese planes, explaining the timeline and the motivation of the attack and naming key players. When interviewed by the teacher-researcher about how he knew these details, he stated he knew them from the game. During a subsequent interview, the teacher-researcher asked if he also reads words on the

game case and during the game, talks to his friends about the game, or writes about the game. He indicated he read about the specifics of the game on the case and talks to his friends about the game. Three different ELLs (male and female) indicated they played video games that featured various New York City landmarks. When asked, each was able to name the landmarks for the whole class, indicating they knew the names from the video game. Another male student stated he challenged a friend during a video game that featured the city of London and its landmarks. He then shared the names of various London landmarks for the class and details about each.

Student use of music in the context of popular culture texts and bringing this knowledge to school was evident. After an introduction by the teacher during the study of Hawaii, the ELLs became interested in the Hawaiian musical icon Israel "IZ" Kamakawiwo'ole. On their own, several students also used their home computers to listen to and download IZ's music and find out about his death, creating several multimedia presentations to share with the class. One older student referenced the musical group Cold Play when the teacher-researcher introduced the lesson on important persons associated with London. Initially, this connection seemed unrelated to the topic but the teacher let the student talk about his link. The student discussed how Cold Play's lead singer lives in London and the group recently released a new compact disc. As he spoke, other students offered their connections to the topic, thus increasing interest and the desire to learn more about people associated with London, with three students joining to produce an edited multimedia presentation that met standard requirements, including

searching out multiple texts and using visuals to complete research reports or projects. Students also organized, selected, and used different forms of writing for specific purposes, such as to inform, persuade, or entertain. Students also used varying sentence structures, conjunctions to connect ideas, and literary devices, such as dialogue and figurative language, in their writing and presentation. They edited their writing based on their knowledge of grammar and usage, spelling, punctuation, and other conventions of written language. In addition to the presentation, students produced a final, error-free written composition.

Students often talked about using the Internet to obtain information for themselves or family members. The researcher questioned various students about their computer use. Many of the students discussed using the Internet at home and at their local library to gain information, play Web-based games, and read websites, such as Disney, Barbie, and Harry Potter (found at J.K. Rowling's website) for fun. It was evident, based on their comments, that ELLs frequently utilized the computer (within the home, at the local public library, in the homeroom class, and in the talented and gifted classroom) to read, write, listen to, speak about, view, and create visual representations and then connected this learning to content in the classroom.

Students referenced various types of books as a connection to the topics associated with the theme. Several males talked about reading *Spider-Man* comic books (its setting is New York City). Many students referenced reading books (from home, local public libraries, their homeroom, and the talented and gifted classroom) related to the topics being studied. Examples are the *Harry Potter* book series, the

Pirates of the Caribbean books, and books about Pearl Harbor, pearls, volcanoes, pineapples, submarines, beaches, subways, and parades.

Question 3. When during the lesson was the popular culture text used to make connections and enhance understandings?

To answer the third question, data was gathered during the eight-month collection process. Listening to student conversations, the investigator realized popular culture texts are extremely relevant to the lives of students. Students often referenced television shows, movies, and reading materials, including comics, trading cards, books, music, and websites. It was theorized it would be beneficial to relate these literacy-based experiences to new topics covered in the classroom as they were so relevant in the lives of the students. The teacher-researcher used popular culture texts before, during, and after lessons to enhance student understanding of topics that may not have been initially understandable to students. Many more times than expected (in what became the norm rather than the exception), the ELLs also used their own germane popular culture text experiences to make connections before, during, and after school-based lessons to cement their understanding of topics, including those that were less familiar. Discussions among the students and between the teacher and the students often happened with a link to popular culture texts to make meaning of classroom topics and lessons as they were introduced, verified, and concluded.

Educational understandings

In the constantly evolving 21st century, educators

must understand that ELLs regularly interact with popular culture texts. These texts include television, movies, video games, music, the Internet, and reading materials. These texts are often viewed by educators as unrelated to literacy learning; some even view their use in the classroom as a deterrent to academic success. Findings from this study negate this assumption. ELLs in this study used these authentic, engaging experiences and practices to cement understandings of school-based topics covered in the classroom.

Listed below are the educational understandings for educators and the ELLs they teach based on the results of this study.

• ELLs bring a multitude of literacy experiences and practices to the classroom.

• Many of these literacy experiences and practices are in the context of popular culture texts.

• Popular culture texts, such as television, movies, art, music, and reading materials, including websites, books, comics, and trading cards, are relevant to lives of ELLs. These are prevalent tools in the 21st century that students use to gain knowledge and understanding.

Educational recommendations

• Educators should become familiar with popular culture texts that are relevant to their students. Invite ELLs to discuss what popular culture texts or media they use. These texts may consist of television shows and movies; computer activities, including browsing websites, blogs, Googling, instant messaging, tweeting, using Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, or

Facebook, listening to music and lyrics, playing video games, and listening to podcasts; and print material, including magazines, books, comics, and trading cards. Students are knowledgeable about popular culture texts and when educators become familiar with these texts, more can be accomplished in the classroom.

• As educators understand and embrace using popular culture texts to make a connection to school-based learning, benefits for the students occur. But understanding and embracing are not enough; the educator must take these experiences and practices of the students and integrate them into the classroom. This engagement contributes to meaningful learning because it takes something that is authentic and engaging to students (popular culture texts) and links it to lessons in the classroom, thus enhancing their knowledge. Educators should remember that the skills students use to understand popular culture texts—inquiry, critical thinking, questioning, reasoning, evaluating, inferencing, processing, and comprehending—are the same skills taught and used in the classroom. These actions help to transition ELLs out of school learning to school-based learning. This bridge also emphasizes the value of the sociocultural aspects of students' lives.

• Educators should allow students the time and opportunity to speak in the. classroom before, during, and after lessons. The teacher-researcher realized at the beginning of the study that students were not allowed enough time or opportunities to fully explore learning opportunities within their popular culture texts. Often, instead of lessons being student-centered, they were teacher-centered and the teacher-researcher was the speaker most of the time. Allowing and

encouraging ELLs to speak about and connect popular culture text experiences to the classroom lessons cements their understanding to school-based content.

• Educators should ensure that state standard requirements are met, as students utilize popular culture texts to connect and enhance understandings of school-based topics. These standards often include searching out and using multiple texts while also using visuals to complete activities.

• Within the context of popular culture text usage (from the home or in the classroom), there are some limitations.

• The teacher-researcher realizes that generalizations beyond the participants in this study cannot be made. Yet it should be noted that the popular culture text experiences, knowledge, and skills of the ELL-participants offer a chance for educational stakeholders to consider literacy usage beyond the classroom and how these experiences can be incorporated into academic settings. It should also be noted that popular culture may not be viewed as an appropriate medium for instruction because stereotypes may be perpetuated. Educators should also be mindful of and address the existence of stereotypes within these connections used to enhance learning of academic content.

Conclusions

ELLs come to school with a multitude of literacy experiences (reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and creating visual representations) that are in the context of popular culture texts. These texts include a wide variety of television shows, movies, video games, music, the Internet, and readings initiated in the home, local public libraries, homeroom class, and the talented and gifted classroom.

Because these texts are often relevant to the lives of students, educators should be eager to understand and use them to scaffold school-based content within the classroom. This study contributes to research in these areas and will serve to encourage educators to fully appreciate the popular culture text-based literacy experiences and practices that ELLs bring to the classroom while enhancing the understanding of academic-based topics covered in the classroom.

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