

TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Utilizing English Language Learners' L1s in the Secondary Classroom to Maximize Learning Potential

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In most secondary classrooms English language learners' native languages are ignored (Cummins, 2007) despite the fact they are a very important factor of students' academic success. The level of native language proficiency a student has at the time of arrival in the new country is the strongest predictor of their academic success in English (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Furthermore, students who have access to high-quality bilingual education achieve more academic success through high school than ELLs taught exclusively in English (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Clearly, students' L1s (first languages) are significant, but few ELLs in middle and high school have access to bilingual programs. ESL (English as a second language) or mainstream teachers might not speak nor have curriculum available in the students' L1s. Nevertheless, regardless of the languages teachers do or do not speak, there are many ways they can utilize ELLs' L1s in the secondary mainstream or ESL classroom in order to maximize learning potential. This chapter will serve to provide a theoretical framework, based on principles of second language acquisition and bilingualism, which view an ELL's L1 as a resource. First, false assumptions about the use of the L1 are discussed and evaluated. Then, a brief review of the research on the effectiveness of using

adolescent ELLs' L1s in the mainstream classroom is presented. Finally, recommendations are offered on how a secondary teacher of any content area can tap into the potential that the first languages of ELLs provide to more effectively teach for mastery of subject matter and the English language.

The view of L1 as an enemy

Cummins (2007) and Cook (2001) both point out that most teachers strongly believe two commonly held assumptions about teaching ELLs. One is that instruction should occur exclusively in English in order for the ELLs to learn English most efficiently and effectively. The second assumption is that there should not be any translation between a student's L1 and L2 (second language) because this could confuse the learner and impede second language acquisition. According to Vivian Cook (2001), these assumptions stem from recent methods of teaching language to ELLs that ignore the fact that these students' L1s even exist, creating an anti-L1 attitude among teachers. His assessment is that teachers often feel guilty or condemning toward any L1 use in the mainstream or ESL classroom. He concludes:

The pressure from this mostly unacknowledged anti-L1 attitude has prevented language-teaching from looking rationally at ways in which the L1 can be involved in the classroom. It has tended to put an L2 straightjacket on the classroom which has stifled any systematic use of the L1. (p. 410)

Many researchers (Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2007; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006) claim that the assumption that the best way to teach a second language is through the exclusive use of L2 is false and an

impediment to the effective acquisition of L2 and academic concepts. They claim that it is harmful to the acquisition of English and to academic learning because students are denied access to their L1 abilities and strengths. More than hindering student learning, exclusive use of L1 sends messages to ELLs that may have negative psychological effects. Auerbach (1993) views language as a means of power and the decision to prohibit the use of students' L1s in the classroom as politically motivated. She writes:

Whether or not we support the use of learners' L1s is not just a pedagogical matter: It is a political one, and the way that we address it in ESL instruction is both a mirror of and a rehearsal for relations of power in broader society. (p. 10)

Teachers must ask themselves what are the reasons they have English-only policies in their classrooms and then examine what message that sends to their students. Furthermore, teachers should make decisions on language use that serve not only the academic but also the affective needs of their ELLs. There are, in fact, pedagogical reasons to allow and even encourage the use of L1 in the mainstream or ESL classroom.

The view of L1 as an ally

As demonstrated to be effective by the SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) model (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004), many secondary teachers of ELLs have language and content objectives for their students in each lesson they teach. That is, teachers want ELLs to master components of the English language as well as the subject matter. Students' L1s can actually assist teachers in accomplishing both of those goals. In addition,

there are many psychological benefits that students receive from viewing their L1s as a valuable academic resource respected in their classrooms.

Much of the research that documents the success of utilizing L1 in the L2 classroom bases its findings on Cummins' (1994) theory of the Common Underlying Proficiency. This theory states that the knowledge and skills a bilingual possesses for academically demanding tasks reside in a reservoir that is independent of either language. What one learns in L1 can manifest itself in L2 if enough language proficiency is possessed. Therefore, when a student develops reading comprehension strategies in Vietnamese, he or she will be able to use those same strategies in English, providing a basic level of English proficiency is attained. Likewise, an Arabic speaker who has already learned the concept of photosynthesis in Arabic will not need to relearn it in English. The student will only need the English vocabulary and grammatical knowledge to express his or her understanding of photosynthesis in L2.

There are many accounts in research that document the use of the L1 to the benefit of secondary students' content and English-language learning. Additionally, research studies have documented positive affective outcomes in using L1 concerning student self-efficacy, pride, engagement and relationship with the teacher. In a review of research on the influence of L1 on L2 literacy, Riches and Genesee (2006) state that L1 is very influential in an ELL's L2 literacy abilities and overall academic growth. One of their synthesis statements from the research is that L1 literacy coupled with English can actually lead to more effective English literacy development than the exclusive use of English. Lucas and Katz (1994) studied the practices of nine campuses across the

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United States deemed exceptional in their teaching of ELLs by experts due to remarkable test scores and site visits. They found that these nine schools, which were considered English-only programs, were actually utilizing the students' native languages in a variety of ways. The authors describe these classrooms as "multilingual environments in which students' native languages served a multitude of purposes and functions" (p. 545).

More recently, the Multiliteracies Project in Canada (www.multiliteracies.ca) has served to understand the outcome of utilizing students' L1s in mainstream and ESL classrooms. The project documents the instructional possibilities that come from teachers viewing a student's L1 as an important resource for learning. Besides the many academic gains that they have documented by teachers' systematic use of L1, ELLs have greatly benefited by gaining a voice in the classroom and the school. The acceptance, validation, and respect for their identities as bilinguals have enhanced their school engagement.

Generally, this body of research states that a student's L1 in the mainstream or ESL classroom can be useful to:

1. Gain access to higher-order thinking and academic tasks that would be inaccessible in English.
2. Effectively and efficiently learn academic and content area knowledge that can then transfer to English.
3. Develop reading skills in L1 and in English.
4. Foster a sense of pride in one's culture, language, and identity.
5. Perceive oneself as a successful learner.
6. Strengthen student-teacher relationships by showing respect, acknowledgement, and validation for students' L1 abilities, experiences, and knowledge.

Practical uses of L1

Once an educator understands the reasons behind using ELLs' L1s, everyday classroom decisions can be made regarding the best language to use for a certain student, in a specific subject area, and for a particular purpose. There are no umbrella statements on exactly when the best time to use L1 is for each and every ELL. As teachers learn more about a student's background, needs and strengths, and develop a relationship with that student, they can then make the best decision for such student in each circumstance. The scenarios mentioned below are not prescriptions of how teachers *should* use an ELL's L1, but descriptions of instances where L1 *could* be used to the benefit of the student.

Reading

In order for the most second language acquisition to occur, ELLs need large quantities of comprehensible input in English (Krashen, 1994). They need to read English texts that they can understand and that expose them to an appropriate amount of new vocabulary that they can comprehend in context. However, teachers often have a class with students of mixed levels of English-language reading abilities. Sometimes an ELL receives a class reading assignment that is far above his or her reading level in English. The student might stare at the pages for hours, trying to fight through the book and get relatively little out of the assignment. In this instance, it might be beneficial for the student to read the text in L1 before reading it in L2. Many classic and popular novels are translated into several languages and some curriculum is available in other languages such as Spanish. Allowing the student to read first in L1 will make the English text

more comprehensible, and perhaps more readable. However, if the English text is far beyond the student's current capabilities even after reading the L1 text, he or she can still benefit by reading the L1 text and participating in class activities about the reading assignment. If the teacher provides key vocabulary from the book in English, the student who reads only in L1 could still participate in a literature response group with classmates in English, thus developing literacy and English-language skills.

Jiménez, García, and Pearson (1996) found that successful 6th and 7th grade Latina/o readers were more likely than unsuccessful Latina/o readers to use bilingual reading strategies such as identifying cognates in the two languages, transferring strategies learned in one language to another, and translating when needed for comprehension. Therefore, students of the same L1 can discuss the meaning of an English text in their L1s. They can use their L1s to discuss how they determined the meaning of unknown words and share reading strategies with each other. Less successful readers can benefit from seeing the connections that more successful readers are making to L1 as they read in English.

Finally, Krashen (2004) attests to *The Power of Reading* in his aptly titled synthesis of research findings that suggest that free voluntary reading of self-selected texts "is one of the most powerful tools we have in language education" (p. 1). However, many secondary ELLs are not able to engage in sustained, lengthy reading in English although they might be very adept at reading chapter books in their L1s. Reading for pleasure in L1 has many benefits such as maintaining the heritage language, developing reading skills and gaining knowledge that will transfer to English, and most importantly, nurturing a love of reading. Krashen notes, though, that few L1 texts are available to ELLs. Teachers can

stock their own classroom libraries with high-interest books in students' L1s for DEAR (drop everything and read) or SSR (sustained silent reading) time. Most of the middle school newcomers in the author's class, students in their 1st year in a U.S. school, could only read short children's books in English, but enjoyed reading adolescent novels in Spanish during sustained silent reading time. Today, many popular adolescent and young adult novels are published in various languages and easily available from internet booksellers. If teachers have difficulty finding texts in less common languages, they can consult the website of the International Children's Digital Library (<http://en.childrenslibrary.org>) to find children's and adolescent books in over 50 different languages. Most of these books are available in their entirety to be read online and are a great resource for students who do not have access to trade books in their first language.

Writing

Academic writing is often a very difficult task for secondary ELLs. They can benefit from discussing grammatical differences in English and their language with a group of peers sharing the same L1. More advanced ELLs can point out key differences in the languages that can help others edit their compositions. Grammar usage can also be addressed by having a student translate what he or she wrote in English to the L1. For example, a student who possessed high literacy levels in Spanish wrote an entire page without any punctuation besides a period at the end. After orally translating his paper into Spanish, he immediately realized that in Spanish he needed punctuation. That gave the teacher the opportunity to explain that it was the same in English. The writing

abilities he possessed in his L1 were able to transfer to English once that opportunity was provided. Until he became more proficient in writing in English, his teacher encouraged him to orally translate each English composition in order to improve his punctuation. As soon as he accessed his knowledge in Spanish, the problem was corrected. Of course this strategy would not work for all of students. Therefore, individual writing conferences are crucial in determining a student's L1 literacy strengths that could possibly be used as a foundation for L2 writing.

Teachers sometimes also receive compositions from ELLs that lack organization or remain on the surface level. Students can engage in many pre-writing strategies in their L1 such as organizing their composition in the L1 by making an outline. They can also brainstorm and engage in journal writing in their L1s in order to be more creative and draw upon all of their pre-existing knowledge which is often encoded in the L1 (Cummins et al., 2005).

Writing in the L1 can be an end in itself as well. Cummins et al. (2005) propose the use of identity texts in mainstream and ESL writing classrooms for immigrant students. These books are written in L1 and English and represent a student's dual language identity. A 7th grade teacher used this method in her writing classroom of ELLs (Cohen & Leoni, 2006). Three girls who spoke varying levels of English and Urdu wrote a bilingual book about a girl who moved to Canada from Pakistan. One of the girls, Madiha, had been in the Canada for only a few months when she completed this assignment. Instead of being relegated to sitting quietly in the back of the class and minimally participating due to a lack of English skills, she was highly engaged in this project. Her Urdu skills were essential to her group because although the other

girls also spoke Urdu, they did not possess the advanced abilities she did. Additionally, Madiha's English-language proficiency grew as a result of translating her group's book. Her home language and her own immigration story became a vehicle for her to participate more fully in the class, acquire more English and share her bilingual identity with the school.

Science

Cummins (2007) states that translating from L1 to English and from English to the L1 has the potential to be a “powerful tool to develop language and literacy skills” (p. 237) and to learn academic concepts. In his research in mainstream classrooms successfully utilizing ELLs' L1 to enhance instruction, he tells of a newcomer who was allowed to use Urdu alongside English in her science class to help her better understand the concepts. She created a chart of new science vocabulary including lungs, kidneys, and heart. The chart consisted of one column in English, another in Urdu, and lastly, a picture. Students in the science classroom can use this bilingual picture dictionary strategy to help them better understand and recall scientific vocabulary such as laboratory equipment, parts of a cell, or anatomy.

Many vocabulary words in the sciences stem from Latin roots. This can greatly help speakers of Romance languages comprehend the meaning if they are allowed to make the connection to their L1s. Students who speak languages such as French and Spanish can identify similarities of the academic vocabulary and words in their language while documenting those in a chart. By working in a group, students can discuss advantages their L1 gives them in the science classroom and then share their findings with the whole class.

Mathematics

Cummins' theory of the Common Underlying Proficiency (1994) is extremely relevant to the subject of mathematics. Even when a program is not considered bilingual, students' L1s can be used in many ways to help them comprehend the math concepts being taught and to facilitate their ability to answer grade-level, higher-order thinking word problems in English.

Sometimes students may struggle to grasp a concept despite the use of manipulatives, visuals and other sheltered instruction strategies. A student could shut down with an overwhelming amount of math content and English words to understand. During those instances the student's L1 may be employed to explain the concept. Once the concept is understood, the English input is more likely to be comprehensible to the student. When a teacher's knowledge of Spanish is less than adequate, the strategy can still be implemented. Teacher assistants and other more students who speak the various languages of the ELLs may explain certain concepts. For example, a Vietnamese student was struggling with the ideas of similar and congruent and was getting very frustrated when trying to play a game involving these concepts with another student. It was the end of the class and he was ready to shut down from being immersed in English for hours. A Vietnamese math teacher was able to explain it to him in about two minutes. In this instance, learning the concept in the L1 also facilitated his L2 acquisition because he was able to return to class and accurately use the English words for this concept (similar, congruent, size, shape, same, figure) in the game he was playing with a non-Vietnamese student.

It is common for ELLs' receptive language to grow more quickly than their productive language. They might follow every

step of a carefully sheltered lesson in English, yet may still be unable to represent their understanding of those ideas through speech or writing in the L2. In math classes, students will often practice writing their own word problems to demonstrate and further their understanding of a skill such as dividing fractions. Perhaps an ELL understands the concept of dividing fractions but is unable to express it by writing a word problem in English. In this case, students can create word problems in their L1s in groups, act them out, and then explain them to the teacher and other students. This will reinforce the mathematical concept and allow ELLs to more fully participate in the class by demonstrating their learning.

History and social studies

Many newcomer ELLs will not have much prior knowledge about Texas or American history or even world history from the United States' perspective which will inhibit their comprehension of the text as they read it. Due to their little prior knowledge of the subject, they will be hindered in making connections, asking questions, and making predictions as they read. Judie Haynes (2009) gives an example of a Korean student who had only been in the U.S. for nine months and was not able to participate during the social studies lessons. Then, he read an entire book at home about the Civil War in Korean, his L1. In class, the students were reading an easier book about the Civil War than the one he had read at home. Having constructed enough prior knowledge, he was then able to read the book in English with his class and more actively participate. Reading first in his L1 gave him the appropriate schema to understand the English text and interact with the class about the topic. The internet provides a wealth of

resources in this area for students who have developed a certain level of literacy skills in their L1s. Pre-reading in the L1 can provide them with background knowledge in their own language, thus allowing them to be an active reader while they read the text in English and an active participant during class discussions and activities.

Using the internet as a resource for news, opinions, and historical representations in other languages and cultures will also enhance students' critical thinking abilities. Spanish-speaking students can learn about a different perspective of the Alamo and how Texas won its independence from Mexico. Students who can read in Japanese have the ability to gain a different perspective about World War II on the internet and share that with the class. Any L1 can be used to acquire different perspectives of historical or current events and all students in the class will benefit from the critical thinking that could emerge from understanding different perspectives.

Across content areas

Many of the ideas presented can be adapted and applied to all grade levels and content areas. Cook (2001) posits more ideas for using the L1 in any subject area that have previously been used successfully in mainstream classrooms. For example, students of the same L1 may be allowed to work in a group and use L1 for scaffolding in order to increase academic knowledge and English-language development. By discussing academic material in L1, they can gain access to higher-order thinking and reasoning that might be stunted in L2. Another example is to group students of the same L1 together so they can check for comprehension and clarify meaning with each other. Often an ELL becomes confused

during a lesson because of a simple vocabulary word that he or she does not know in English but understands perfectly well in L1. By allowing quick comprehension and clarification checks in L1, the instruction in English can continue more successfully.

Finally, when another L1 speaker is not readily available, bilingual dictionaries and electronic translators are very useful for students with sufficient literacy in their L1s to use them efficiently. Before teaching a lesson, it is sometimes helpful for students to translate some of the basic vocabulary that they will encounter so that one's teaching (input) is comprehensible. For example, before engaging in a lesson on solving math word problems about perimeter and area, students might look up words such as tile, fence, build, patio, and garden. A bilingual dictionary can be quite useful when a class has a majority of speakers of one language and one or two students who speak a different language. Those students who speak the same language can be shown how to identify words and meanings together while a teacher utilizes a bilingual dictionary to assist the others, showing them the translation. When more capable students finish, they may help students who have not yet completed the assignment. Even newcomers are able to assist other new arrivals in accessing their L1s in order to maximize their learning in math class.

Guiding principles

Although the purpose of this paper is to encourage secondary mainstream and ESL teachers to utilize ELLs' L1s when appropriate, it must be clearly stated that English language acquisition will not occur unless students receive a large quantity of comprehensible input in the L2 (Krashen, 1994). Furthermore,

teachers should use the L1 systematically and judiciously (Cook, 2001). It is not "an all-or-nothing phenomenon" (Lucas & Katz, 1994, p. 537), but a powerful resource available to the teacher and student. This resource often goes underused, but it also has the potential to be harmful if used to the detriment of English language acquisition. Each teacher is a professional who must make the choice to avoid umbrella statements in the classroom such as "English-only" or "translate everything." Conversely, the teacher of ELLs should weigh each decision and use practiced judgment to decide what is most effective for each individual student in each unique circumstance. Some guiding questions teachers could ask in the secondary classroom are:

1. Is the English input comprehensible to the student? If not, how might the students utilize L1 in order to make L2 input more comprehensible?
2. Is the student not able to participate in class due to limited English proficiency? How could L1 be utilized to engage and include the student?
3. Does the student grasp the content objectives? Does he or she seem extremely confused?
4. Does the student possess enough prior knowledge with this content to be an active reader?
5. Is the text far above the student's reading abilities in English?
6. Do the classroom, curriculum, and instruction value the ELL's bilingual identity?

Conclusion

English language learners bring much linguistic, cultural and

academic capital with them into our classrooms. Even if they arrive at the classroom door without knowing a word in English, they are not blank slates. Teachers have the opportunity to tap into a student's prior knowledge, abilities, and experiences through the L1 and use them as a foundation for content and English-language learning. If our goal is for every student to achieve maximum success, then the pathways that bilingual students have available to them cannot be ignored. The L1 is not the enemy to success in the secondary classroom, but rather an ally, an opportunity, a resource, and most importantly, a large part of an ELL's identity. Teachers cannot ignore the language. They cannot ignore the student.

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