Multilingual Learners: Literacy, Identity and Learning

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The University of Toronto

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Overview

Goal of presentation
What can teachers, school leaders, and policy-makers do to enable multilingual students to succeed academically?

Segment 1: Some key theoretical ideas and how they were developed

Segment 2: The persistence of monolingual instructional orientations both in the education of immigrant students and in bilingual/L2 immersion programs

Segment 3: Instructional examples of multilingual instructional strategies

Segment: Identifying causes of underachievement and effective instructional responses to underachievement - teachers as knowledge-generators
The BICS/CALP distinction emerged from observations of educational practice (analysis of > 400 psychological assessments and teacher referral forms);

This distinction has been critiqued on various grounds - e.g., oversimplification; however, none of the critiques (to my knowledge) has bothered to dispute the empirical data upon which the distinction is based (e.g., differences in the lexicon used in everyday face-to-face interactions as compared to the lexicon of school curriculum);

The distinction emerged from educational practices and was intended to highlight problematic aspects of current assessment and instructional practices. To critique it as oversimplified ignores the fact that it is an empirically based distinction, not a comprehensive theory of language development or instruction.
What Do We Mean by Language Proficiency?
(a) Conversational Fluency

- The ability to carry on a conversation in familiar face-to-face situations;

- Developed by the vast majority of native speakers by the time they enter school at age 5;

- Involves use of high frequency words and simple grammatical constructions;

- Students learning the school language typically require 1-2 years to attain reasonable fluency in everyday situations.
What Do We Mean by Language Proficiency? (b) Academic Language Proficiency

- **Academic language proficiency represents a fusion of conceptual and linguistic knowledge** (disputed by some researchers who view ‘language proficiency’ as entirely distinct from conceptual or academic knowledge (e.g., MacSwan and colleagues, 2017; Lambelet and colleagues, 2017);

- Includes knowledge of less frequent vocabulary as well as the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written language;

- Academic language makes frequent use of nominalization (e.g., *acceleration*) and passive voice;

- Immigrant-background students typically require **at least** 5 years to attain grade expectations in language and literacy skills;

- Because academic language is found primarily in books and printed texts, extensive reading is crucial in enabling students to catch up;

- Frequent writing, across genres, is also crucial in developing academic writing skills.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Studies Vocabulary</th>
<th>(Grade 5 Unit on the American Revolution)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>amend</strong></td>
<td><strong>boundary</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>annexation</strong></td>
<td><strong>colonist</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>bombarded</strong></td>
<td><strong>cavalry</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>declaration</strong></td>
<td><strong>independence</strong></td>
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<td><strong>dissolved</strong></td>
<td><strong>induced</strong></td>
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<td><strong>dynasty</strong></td>
<td><strong>inference</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>resolution</strong></td>
<td><strong>sentiments</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>revolt</strong></td>
<td><strong>seige</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>revolution</strong></td>
<td><strong>skirmish</strong></td>
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Immigrant Academic Trajectories: 5-7 Years Typically Required to Catch-up to Native Speakers in the School Language:

Cummins (1981) Re-analysis of Toronto Board Data

The fact that at least 5 years are typically required to catch up academically highlights the importance of Language Oriented Content Teaching (LOCT) as elaborated by SLO researchers.
Linguistic Interdependence and the Importance of Teaching for Cross-Linguistic Transfer

“To the extent that instruction in Lx is effective in promoting proficiency in Lx, transfer of this proficiency to Ly will occur provided there is adequate exposure to Ly (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn Ly” (Cummins, 1981, p. 29)

The interdependence hypothesis (aka: Common Underlying Proficiency) attempted to provide a coherent explanation of why students in bilingual programs experienced no adverse academic consequences in the majority/dominant language despite considerably less instructional time in that language. Its instructional analogue, teaching for cross-linguistic transfer, is directly relevant to pedagogy in bilingual programs and to the teaching of multilingual/immigrant-background students in mainstream school programs.
Different languages don’t occupy separate spaces in our brains: There is overlap and interdependence among languages (strongly supported by recent neurological research).
Two Languages Are Better than One

The positive effects of L1 development on L2 academic development has recently been demonstrated in a large-scale longitudinal study involving 202,931 students carried out in the Los Angeles school district in California.

These students entered Kindergarten (age 5) as English language learners between 2001 and 2010. Thompson (2015) examined the length of time these students required to develop sufficient English academic proficiency to be reclassified as no longer needing English language support services.

Students who entered kindergarten with high levels of L1 conceptual language proficiency were 12% more likely to be reclassified as English proficient after 9 years than students who entered with low levels of L1 academic language proficiency.

Those who entered kindergarten with high levels of English conceptual proficiency were 13% more likely to be reclassified than those with low levels of initial English proficiency.

Students who entered kindergarten with high levels of proficiency in both their languages (English and L1) were 24% more likely to be reclassified than students who entered with low levels of academic L1 proficiency and low levels of academic English proficiency.
Segment 2

The persistence of monolingual instructional orientations both in the education of multilingual students and in bilingual/L2 immersion programs

I am not always comfortable speaking Cantonese when I have to go to the office for some reason. I don't like it because a lot of teachers are at the office and I don't like speaking it in front of them. I know that they are listening to me, I get nervous and afraid. For example, I once didn't feel very well in grade one. So my teacher took me to the office to call my grandma. My grandma can't speak English and she also can't hear very well, so I had to speak in Cantonese very loudly for her to hear. So when I spoke to my grandma, I felt very nervous.

The Unintended Consequences of Benign Neglect of Students’ Multilingual Talents
Monolingual Instructional Strategies in the Education of Immigrant-Background Students

- Schools in many contexts continue to prohibit students from using their L1 within the school, thereby communicating to students the inferior status of their home languages and devaluing the identities of speakers of these languages. This pattern is illustrated in a study of Turkish-background students in Flemish secondary schools carried out by Agirdag (2010). He concludes:

  “Our data show that Dutch monolingualism is strongly imposed in three different ways: teachers and school staff strongly encourage the exclusive use of Dutch, bilingual students are formally punished for speaking their mother tongue, and their home languages are excluded from the cultural repertoire of the school. At the same time, prestigious languages such as English and French are highly valued” (p. 317).

- In a more recent study, Pulinx, Van Avermaet, & Agirdag (2016) documented the fact that 77 percent of Flemish teachers were of the opinion that immigrant-background students should not be allowed to speak a foreign language at school and almost one-third believed that students should be punished for speaking their L1 in school.
Wallace Lambert’s Monolingual Instructional Principle

“No bilingual skills are required of the teacher, who plays the role of a monolingual in the target language ... and who never switches languages, reviews materials in the other language, or otherwise uses the child’s native language in teacher-pupil interactions. In immersion programs, therefore, bilingualism is developed through two separate monolingual instructional routes” (1984, p. 13).

Three inter-related and overlapping assumptions:

- *Instruction should be carried out exclusively in French without recourse to students’ L1;*
- *No translation between L1 and L2 is appropriate in French immersion programs;*
- *Within immersion and bilingual programs, the two languages should be kept completely separate.*
Various terms have been used during the past decade+ to refer to the same pedagogical orientation:

-- Translanguaging
-- Heteroglossic instructional orientation
-- The Multilingual Turn
-- Plurilingual pedagogy
-- Bilingual instructional strategies
-- Interlingual teaching

These strategies have in common a rejection of the 'two solitudes' orientation to bilingual proficiency and a commitment to teaching for cross-lingual transfer (although the construct of 'teaching for transfer' is rejected by Garcia and Li Wei [2014] on the grounds that languages don't exist)
Although English is the usual language of instruction, the school is very much a bilingual and multilingual learning environment. Students' first languages are integrated into all phases of learning and assessment. In developing their portfolios in the various interdisciplinary programs, students write in both their first language and English, according to their choice. Teachers will often ask other students or members of the wider community for assistance in translating material that has been written in a language they themselves do not know.

For example, in the American Reality program, students formally explore their native language, human development, and career education, spending at least half their school day doing academic reading and writing in their native language. …

Teachers have asked students to write letters home in their native languages to describe the interdisciplinary programs, to explain what they were learning, and to explain the portfolio and grading process. Parents were encouraged to respond to the letters in either the native language or English. When parents' letters came back in the native language, the student was requested to translate the letters for the teacher into English. (Cummins, 2001, pp. 250-251)
Among the other instructional initiatives noted by De Fazio are the following:

- Students write an autobiography or a biography of another student using their choice of English, L1 or both languages.

- Students work in groups to carry out comparisons of English and their L1s including topics such as the sounds in different languages (using the International Phonetic Alphabet) and cross-linguistic differences in syntax and other aspects of the languages.

- Students write multilingual children’s books on some aspect of language or linguistics (e.g., 'How the Chinese Got Language' or 'The Monster that Ate Polish Words').

- Students interview community members about social dimensions of language such as dialect, language prejudice, bilingual education, etc.
The Dual Language Showcase

WELCOME

Dual Language Links
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Thornwood Public School

A Thornwood Public School (Peel District School Board), York University, and OISE/University of Toronto Project
The NEW COUNTRY

About The Authors
We are three best friends. Our names are Madiha Bajwa, Kanta Khalid, and Sulmana Hanif. We are in grade 7 at Michael Cranny E.S. in Maple, Ontario. This story we wrote mostly describes how hard it was to leave our country and come to a new country.
Sonia’s dad for the first time had his own car. He drove the family to their new apartment. The apartment had an elevator and Sonia actually thought the elevator was her home. She also thought that when she would press each button, things would pop out. Then when the elevator opened, Sonia saw a lot of doors in front of her. She thought they were all rooms in her new apartment.
Kanta's Perspective

- And how it helped me was when I came here in grade 4 the teachers didn't know what I was capable of.

- I was given a pack of crayons and a coloring book and told to get on coloring with it. And after I felt so bad about that--I'm capable of doing much more than just that. I have my own inner skills to show the world than just coloring and I felt that those skills of mine are important also. So when we started writing the book [The New Country], I could actually show the world that I am something instead of just coloring.

- And that's how it helped me and it made me so proud of myself that I am actually capable of doing something, and here today [at the Ontario TESL conference] I am actually doing something. I'm not just a coloring person—I can show you that I am something.
I think using your first language is so helpful because when you don't understand something after you've just come here it is like beginning as a baby. You don't know English and you need to learn it all from the beginning; but if you already have it in another language then it is easier, you can translate it, and you can do it in your language too, then it is easier to understand the second language.

The first time I couldn't understand what she [Lisa] was saying except the word Hebrew, but I think it’s very smart that she said for us to do it in our language because we can't just sit on our hands doing nothing.
What’s Happening Instructionally in these Examples of Multilingual Pedagogy?

Teachers are:

- Connecting curriculum to students’ lives;

- Scaffolding access to the curriculum and comprehension of academic language;

- Expanding students’ knowledge of academic language;

- Promoting L2/English oral language use;

- Affirming student identities;

- Acknowledging students’ multilingual talents;

- Promoting parental involvement and pride in students’ accomplishments.
Segment 4. How Can Schools Reverse Underachievement?

- Which groups of students underachieve?

- Why do they underachieve - what causal factors are operating?

- What high-impact evidence-based educational interventions are available?

- There are 3 overlapping but conceptually distinct groups that tend to experience disproportionate underachievement:

  (a) immigrant-background students who are learning the school language as L2,
  (b) Low-SES students
  (c) students from socially marginalized groups who have been subject to racism and various forms of exclusion from educational and social opportunity, often over generations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student background</th>
<th>Linguistically Diverse</th>
<th>Low-SES</th>
<th>Marginalized Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sources of potential disadvantage</td>
<td>Failure to understand instruction due to home-school language differences;</td>
<td>Inadequate healthcare and/or nutrition; Housing segregation; Lack of cultural and material resources in the home due to poverty; Inadequate access to print in home and school;</td>
<td>Societal discrimination; Low teacher expectations; Stereotype threat; Identity devaluation;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Evidence-based instructional response | Scaffold comprehension and production of language across the curriculum; Engage students’ multilingual repertoires; Reinforce academic language across the curriculum; | Maximize print access and literacy engagement; | Connect instruction to students’ lives; Decolonize curriculum and instruction; Affirm student identities in association with literacy engagement; |
Linguistically Diverse Students

- **Source of potential disadvantage**
  Failure to understand instruction due to home-school language differences.

- **Evidence-based instructional responses**
  Scaffold comprehension and production of language across the curriculum;

  Engage students’ multilingual repertoires;

  Reinforce academic language across the curriculum (e.g. LOCT).
Scaffold Language

Scaffolding refers to the provision of instructional supports that enable learners to carry out tasks and perform academically at a higher level than they would be capable of without these supports.

- Graphic organizers
- Visuals in texts
- Demonstrations
- Hands-on experiences
- Collaborative group work
- Encouraging L1 use (e.g., writing) as a means of transferring knowledge and skills from L1 to L2
- Learning strategies (planning tasks, visualization, note-taking/summarizing, questioning for clarification)
- Language clarification (explanation, dictionary use, etc.)

Scaffolding needs to happen across the curriculum - it's not just the job of the ESL or bilingual teacher.
## How Arabic and English are different?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) starts from left to right</td>
<td>Starts from right to left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Noun comes after adjective e.g.</td>
<td>Noun come before adjective e.g. The apple green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Green apple</td>
<td>(Hazzaar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) English we say “yes” To our parents and friends.</td>
<td>To our parents we say “بلا” which is more respectful and serious. It means “I am here” or “I am ready” but the meaning changes depending on country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) uses less words to describe something e.g. A short girl</td>
<td>More descriptive words and details when we speak about something, because one word can have more than one meaning e.g. “أهلا” - holla Can mean Candy or a cute girl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) English is capitalized for Our language group is Arabic</td>
<td>You don’t capitalize the first letter of the word Arabic Group members: Faisal, Wegdan, Ossama M, Ossama A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- (Hazzaar)
Students from Low-SES Backgrounds

- The OECD PISA research has consistently demonstrated that students from low-SES backgrounds perform at significantly lower academic levels than those from higher-SES backgrounds both with respect to the SES of individual students and the collective SES of students within particular schools.

- **Sources of potential disadvantage**
  
  Multiple factors that will vary across contexts; for example, housing/school segregation; overcrowding; nutritional/medical issues; lack of access to books and other forms of print etc.

- **Evidence-based instructional responses**
  
  Immerse low-SES students in a print-rich pre-school and school environment;

  Reinforce academic language across the curriculum.
Data on the reading attainment of 15-year olds in 27 countries showed that “the level of a student’s reading engagement is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socioeconomic background, indicating that cultivating a student’s interest in reading can help overcome home disadvantages” (OECD, 2004, p. 8).

Guthrie (2004) cites the PISA data as showing that students whose family background was characterized by low income and low education, but who were highly engaged readers, substantially outscored students who came from backgrounds with higher education and higher income, but who themselves were less engaged readers. Based on a massive sample, this finding suggests the stunning conclusion that engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education, and income. (p. 5)

OECD (2010) - about one-third of the negative impact of SES is mediated through reading engagement (or lack thereof). In other words, schools can significantly reduce the negative effects of low-SES by strongly promoting literacy engagement.
Creating an Identity-Affirming School Environment: Multilingual Books in the Library (Crescent Town School, Toronto)
Creating an Identity-Affirming School Environment

Linking Literacy Engagement with Identity Affirmation

Reading makes me powerful because I get smarter and I learn more facts. I learn new words and I will never forget.
Creating an Identity-Affirming School Environment

Linking Literacy Engagement with Identity Affirmation

Reading makes me powerful because I learn new words and I love reading!

By [name]
Creating an Identity-Affirming School Environment

Linking Literacy Engagement with Identity Affirmation

Reading makes me powerful because...

When I grow up I can find a better job than people who can't read. Somebody can also trick you to do something that will get you in trouble.

Reading gives you new words to learn. It gives my brain new ideas. It helps your vocabulary so when you need to write something you can use longer and harder words. In school you can get a better mark using more words.

By Tasneem
This framework represents an entry point (portal) to school-based discussions of instructional strategies. In multilingual school contexts, mobilizing students’ L1 repertoires can play a significant role in all components of the framework. For example, connecting to students’ lives implies acknowledging and affirming their language proficiencies and translanguage practices.
Students from Socially Marginalized Communities

- **Sources of potential disadvantage**
  - Societal discrimination;
  - Stereotype threat (students’ task performance deteriorates when negative stereotypes are communicated to them);
  - Low teacher expectations;
  - Devaluation of identity reflecting societal power relations.

_Gloria Ladson-Billings:_

“The problem that African-American students face is the constant devaluation of their culture both in school and in the larger society” (1995, p. 485).

- **Evidence-based instructional responses**
  - Connect instruction to students’ lives;
  - Decolonize curriculum and instruction;
  - Affirm students’ identities in association with literacy development;
  - Enable students to use language (L1/L2) in powerful (identity-affirming) ways;
Creating an Identity-Affirming School Environment

Validating Home Language and Culture
What Image of the Child Are We Sketching in Our Instruction?

- Capable of becoming bilingual and biliterate?
- Capable of higher-order thinking and intellectual accomplishments?
- Capable of creative and imaginative thinking?
- Capable of creating literature and art?
- Capable of generating new knowledge?
- Capable of thinking about and finding solutions to social issues?
Summary

- **Print access/literacy engagement** is the strongest instructional variable predicting literacy achievement - its effects are greater than the effects of SES;

- **Societal power relations (e.g., stereotypes) and their reflection in teacher-student identity negotiation** exert a major effect on the achievement of students from marginalized social groups; students who come from social groups whose identities (culture, language, religion, etc.) have been devalued and subordinated in the wider society experience disproportionate academic failure.

- Maximizing students’ literacy engagement and creating opportunities for students to use language (L1 and L2) in powerful (identity-affirming) ways are crucial components of effective instruction.

- **This interpretation of the research relating to achievement gaps and how to bridge them is very different than the interpretations that have dominated recent educational policies in many countries.**
  - Literacy engagement, Affirming identities, and Engaging students' multilingual repertories have been largely omitted from 'mainstream' (e.g., OECD) discourse.
Appendix 1

Research supporting the centrality of literacy engagement for literacy achievement
Research Supporting the Role of Literacy Engagement


Research Supporting the Role of Literacy Engagement


