



Illinois State Board of Education

# FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

## **FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH ON EQUITABLE ACCESS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS**

*This section provides the research basis for this toolkit. Literature reviewed includes: the benefits of multilingualism, development of bi/multiliteracies, importance of cross-cultural competency, standards-based instruction and assessment, and the need to value the positives ELs bring.*

Recent research suggests that tapping into diverse students' rich linguistic and cultural resources support their academic success (e.g., Tung, 2013; Horsford & Sampson, 2013; Keaton, 2013). Sylvan (2013) shared a positive case where teachers leveraged diverse experiences of new high school students and their families to develop rigorous projects. Consequently, these newcomers were well supported to achieve academic success and integrate into their new community and society. Adolescent Hispanic English language learners in Ajayi's (2006) study expected school to prepare them for "a multicultural and multilingual life—where their Hispanic heritage and American culture coexisted without one necessarily dominating the other" (p. 477). The study demonstrates the critical link between diverse students' understanding of their own identities and school practices; that is, only when a school's curriculum and instructional activities are aligned with students' needs, interests, and expectations, can they be expected to perform well academically (Ajayi, 2006).

The practice of constructing schooling experiences on the basis of students' different linguistic, social, and cultural perspectives is critical for each and every student. To develop multilingual and multi-literacy competencies, programs in which students simultaneously receive instruction in two languages is beneficial to all students (Nora, 2013). While some native English speakers sometimes struggle to learn the other language, the empathy they receive from their English-learning peers as they learn another language and acclimate to another culture significantly outweighs the challenge (Nora, 2013).

Cross-cultural competence for all students can be achieved, in part, through a multicultural curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogy, and daily activities and interactions in classrooms (Nora, 2013; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2006).

Today's youth need to be able to learn with and from their diverse peers, work collaboratively, and communicate effectively in groups. They will need to be culturally sophisticated enough to empathize with peers of different ethnic backgrounds and religions and of different linguistic and social origins (Nora, 2013, p. 8).

Teachers need to provide students ample learning opportunities to foster cultural competence; as a result, students will interact positively to people from diverse backgrounds, develop understanding and appreciation of different cultures, think critically, and ultimately become advocates for equity and mutual respect among all human beings (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2006). Further, research has shed light on how diversity promotes social sensitivity and collaboration, supports students' negotiation of identities, and as a result, contributes to social justice and prosperity (Ajayi, 2006; Nora, 2013; Phillips, Kim-Jun & Shim 2010; Osterling & Fox 2004; Azzi, Chrysochoou, Klandermans, & Simon, 2011). For instance, when students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds work together, they are more likely to approach and analyze problems from multiple perspectives (Nora, 2013; Finney, 2011). Diverse, heterogeneous groups often outperform homogenous groups in schools and various social organizations to reach responsible decisions (Phillips, Kim-Jun & Shim 2010; Page 2007; Boaler 2008). In the process of collaboratively working with peers from different backgrounds, students develop a better sense of who they are and how they negotiate participation in multiple communities (Ajayi, 2006; Azzi et al., 2011; Voiland-Sanchez & Hainer-Voiland, 2006).

The U.S. Commission on Educational Excellence suggests that "In an increasingly global economy, these young people [culturally and linguistically diverse people] could be our strategic advantage" (USDOE, 2013, p. 13). Thus, the increasing diversity in society should not be viewed as a problem; rather, it offers "an opportunity for state policymakers and education leaders to invest in and reap the benefits of a well-educated, culturally competent workforce" (Horsford & Sampson, 2013, p. 47).

While English learners are acquiring a new language and acculturating into new cultural expectations, they also have funds of knowledge that schools should value and investigate. Bringing such home and community resources to the center of the instruction is the key to

academic success (Moll, Amanti, & Gonzalez, 1992). Additionally, creating a school environment that respects and values their first language(s) and culture(s) is important in order for ELs to succeed (NAEYC, 1995).

Our schools need to adopt pedagogy based on Culturally Responsive Teaching, which acknowledges and integrates students' cultural knowledge in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and positions English learners in an asset-based paradigm (Tung, 2013). This paradigm will help schools acknowledge English learners' cultural values and view them as strengths, incorporating them ultimately into the school curriculum (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). The creation of a positive, collaborative learning environment that goes beyond school and community supports ELs' negotiation for desired identities (Cummins, 1996; Chen, 2010).

The presence of ELs in our schools offers teachers, administrators, and staff the opportunity to learn new instructional methods and strategies that will benefit not only ELs but also the rest of the students in the classrooms. Schools can provide professional development so that teachers would learn and refine the necessary skills to enforce both language acquisition and learning in the content areas.

Educators of English learners not only have to possess pedagogical knowledge and skills, attend to individual and affective factors (e.g., variety of education experiences, socioeconomic status, linguistic backgrounds, attitude, motivation, and level of anxiety), and understand the impact of such factors on learning (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002; Yedlin, 2003), but they also must have the right dispositions. All of these factors will help them see the students' languages and cultures through an asset-based, rather than deficit, perspective. Teachers and administrators need to understand there is nothing wrong with English learners and therefore there is no deficit to address.

Apart from valuing ELs as assets in the classroom and the school, educators must encourage the students to realize their own values and identities. "We have to make sure students see themselves as valuable assets to the school community and we see each child as a unique treasure with great potential," according to the National Education Association (2015, p. 19).

Thus, it is important that schools adopt an asset-based approach to language learning and policies that celebrate and appreciate cultural and linguistic identities.

Because of evolving understandings of language and language acquisition, as well as changing educational contexts, approaches to teaching English learners have historically ranged from, broadly, a focus primarily on the linguistic forms (or grammar) of language to a focus primarily on the functions( or social uses) of language. Educational reforms evoked by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) include an explicit focus on using all four language modalities within English language arts – listening, speaking, reading, writing – to participate in meaningful activities using complex texts. The emphasis of the CCSS aligns with a current conceptualization of language as a “complex adaptive system” (Beckner et al., 2009), which encompasses a view of language as interconnected systems that emerge through social interaction. Understanding language as a complex adaptive system in practice means that learners develop language through participation in meaningful, standards-aligned activities, highlighting the interdependence of language development and accessibility to content<sup>4</sup>. As learners engage in complex, meaningful activities within content areas, teachers support access to the language by using techniques to make content comprehensible and to promote receptive and productive competence. For example, they teach cognates (Nagy & Garcia, 1993), focus on word analysis (Genesee & Riches, 2006), build on and facilitate transfer of knowledge from learners' first languages (Cummins, 2007), and facilitate preview-view-review (Freeman & Freeman, 1998).

English learners also need opportunities in the classroom to explicitly learn about how the language works (Wong Fillmore and Fillmore, 2012). A key component of language instruction entails raising learners' awareness of linguistic forms as they relate to meaning and function (Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Scarcella, 2003) within specific content domains, e.g., math (Moschkovich, 2007) and science (Carlsen, 2007), etc. A key component of explicitly teaching complex grammatical forms and functions includes raising learners' consciousness of the forms and focusing attention on them through explicit instruction and providing support to understand and use the forms in the context of meaningful interaction (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Flexibility is

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<sup>4</sup> See later sections of the toolkit for more details about standards-aligned instruction.

given to districts to achieve these instructional goals through a variety of instructional designs<sup>5</sup> that will also meet legal and pedagogical requirements.

English learners must acquire and develop English language proficiency at the same time as they learn academic content in order to reach grade-level norms in core content areas (Collier & Thomas, 2009). Within this context, language development and content learning are interconnected and equally important, necessitating collaboration among language specialists and content teachers at all grade levels in order to promote shared responsibility (Staehr Fenner, 2013). This means that collaboration involves language specialists sharing knowledge of second language acquisition and language development and content teachers sharing expertise in teaching academic content (Echevarria, 2006; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010).

Language specialists and content teachers agree that shared responsibility is vital; however, effective collaboration requires intentional efforts to create skills and contexts necessary to create productive collaboration. To promote collaboration and shared responsibility for the education of English learners, Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010) suggest that professional development that focuses on differentiated instruction and assessment of English learners for all teachers. Valdés (2004) has pointed out that language specialists and content teachers may have divergent understandings of what constitutes academic language. To address differing perspectives, Santos, Darling-Hammond, and Cheuk (2012) promote sustained learning institutes in which language specialists and content teachers collaborate to build shared understanding about the challenges of acquiring language and content simultaneously. Stegemoller and Bouchard (2015) propose the use of technology for language specialists and content teachers in order to remove the barrier of time, and to provide a framework for combining expertise in planning, and sharing data about language development and content learning.

Furthermore, it is widely understood by educators that the connection of parents and caregivers to schools affects student academic achievement (Echevarria, 2006; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Hong (2011) describes the value of moving from a traditional to an ecological view of

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<sup>5</sup> See Instructional Design section for more details.

parent and community engagement, emphasizing the importance of community-based organizations for creating connections between families and schools.

Assessment instruments must be valid and reliable measures (Bachman, 1990) that capture both the strengths and weaknesses of English learners in terms of content knowledge and language proficiency. As such, they need to be carefully crafted, tailored and field tested, in the case of high-stakes assessments. These tools need to be reviewed for bias and sensitivity to ensure that the students' cultural backgrounds do not interfere with their performance and the results are as valid as possible (Laing & Kamhi, 2003).

In the case of classroom assessment, teachers need to ensure that their practices include not only summative, but also formative and authentic assessment (Tombari & Borich, 1998). The goal of authentic assessment is to gather evidence that students can use knowledge effectively and be able to critique their own efforts. Tasks used in authentic assessment are meaningful and valuable and are part of the learning process. Authentic assessment can take place at any point in the learning process and it implies that assessment takes place repeatedly. Patterns of success and failure are observed as learners use knowledge and skills in slightly ambiguous situations that allow the teacher to observe the student applying knowledge and skills in new situations over time.

In today's world, multiliteracies and multilingualism offer both individual and societal advantages. Students' native languages should play an essential role in instruction. Students should be encouraged to use their existing skills in their home language to promote the acquisition of new knowledge. Furthermore, development of pathways to multiliteracies will ultimately contribute to students' college and career readiness (New London Group, 1996).

As George Lakoff (2014) puts it, "Speaking different languages means you get different frames, different metaphors, and also you're learning the culture of the language so you get not only different words, but different types of words." Multilinguals, more than monolinguals, have access to a richer and wider variety of words, concepts, metaphors, and frames. An additional language "enhances children's understanding of how language itself works and their ability to

manipulate language in the service of thinking and problem solving” (Cummins 1981). Multilinguals perform better than monolinguals in formal language learning contexts, thanks to more complex linguistic knowledge and higher language awareness. The linguistic advantages of multilingualism are numerous. Meaning interpretation, conceptualization, and language learning, in general, become less challenging.

From a cognitive point of view, studies have consistently shown that the knowledge of a second/additional language enhances intellectual abilities. Multilinguals have a greater faculty for creativity. They also generally possess greater cognitive flexibility, better problem solving and higher-order thinking skills. Marian and Shook (2012) maintained that

The cognitive and neurological benefits of bilingualism extend from early childhood to old age as the brain more efficiently processes information and staves off cognitive decline. ... The enriched cognitive control that comes along with bilingual experience represents just one of the advantages that bilingual people enjoy. ... bilingualism has been associated with improved metalinguistic awareness,... better memory, visual-spatial skills, and even creativity.

Several studies (Baker, 1988; Ricciardelli, 1992; Braun (2007, 241) have confirmed that bilinguals perform better on creativity tests compared to their monolingual peers. They also enjoy higher metalinguistic capacities due to better analytical skills as well as better cognitive control over linguistic operations (Bialystok, 1988, 1991a). Besides, “Being bilingual, it turns out, makes you smarter, says a writer from Science Magazine. It can have a profound effect on your brain, improving cognitive skills not related to language” (The New York Times).

Job opportunities are closely tied to multilingualism. Speaking a second (or third or fourth!) language broadens your horizons, opening many different doors for you, according to the Northwestern University Global Languages Initiative. In addition to the obvious cognitive and intellectual benefits, being multilingual and intercultural increases employment opportunities. Government and national security agencies are in constant search for bilingual workers; multinational corporations, NGOs, and non-profits prefer multilingual candidates with global experience. Bilingual health professionals are always in high demand. Moreover, graduate study and academic fellowships often require substantial foreign language skills.



Being multilingual is becoming more and more important to employers. They want to know what languages (note the plurality) the job seeker speaks. In a recent article, *The Boston Globe* highlights the importance of speaking more than one language: “For an increasing number of careers, being bilingual puts an employee a step ahead; in many fields, it's essential. Flight attendants, sales representatives, geologists, paralegals, travel agents, bank tellers, and social workers all find a second language helpful or necessary in their jobs.” The business world is aggressively advocating for multilingualism: A *Harvard Business Review* video recommends making oneself a global asset by learning another language, the BBC business news underlines the need to pay attention to a multilingual web, and the *International Business Times* stresses the fact that foreign language skills provide a sharp edge in the job market.

Socioculturally, the more languages one learns, the greater appreciation of other cultures. Thus, one becomes more tolerant. Cook (2001) asserts that “a person who speaks multiple languages has a stereoscopic vision of the world from two or more perspectives, enabling them to be more flexible in their thinking, and to learn reading more easily. Multilinguals, therefore, are not restricted to a single world-view, but also have a better understanding that other outlooks are possible. Indeed, this has always been seen as one of the main educational advantages of language teaching.” In addition, multilingualism and multiliteracies stimulate cultural enrichment through digital media. Lam and Rosario-Ramos (2009) claim, “Within their digital networks, the youths mobilize multiple languages to conduct interpersonal relationships and seek out ideas and information from various sources in their ‘home’ and ‘host’ societies, and sometimes across a larger diaspora.” In a nutshell, the benefits of multilingualism and multiliteracies are well documented. Therefore, any language education program should encourage and promote their development and expansion.