WIDA FOCUS ON Language & Culture

In This Issue

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Variables Affecting Individual Academic Achievement

The U.S. population of English Language Learners (ELLs) is highly diverse. Although they share the common trait of having one or more dominant language other than English, ELLs may be foreign- or U.S-born; they may enter U.S. schools at any point during the K-12 grade span; they may have a range of first language (L1) schooling experiences commensurate with or disparate from U.S. classroom experience; and they may possess a range of literacy skills in either their first language and/or English. This bulletin discusses two general variables affecting achievement – context & culture and language – and offers tips and resources for informing and strengthening your classroom practice.

Context and Culture

To understand and offer differentiated support, it is helpful to consider that ELLs in public school classrooms can be immigrants, refugees, migrants, 'ethnic', or sojourners.

IMMIGRANT ELLs and their families have chosen to leave their culture of origin. From the outset, they are usually ready and willing to acculturate to U.S. society and have a positive frame of reference for approaching the challenges leading to successful cultural adaptation. After an initial period of cultural adjustment, immigrant children typically adapt well to schooling.

REFUGEES have been forced to leave their home culture for political and/or economic reasons and they have been granted asylum in the U.S. Threats of death, bodily harm, economic ruin, and/or social isolation are the motivating factors which have resulted in displacement. Often there is a lengthy period of transience and/or upheaval caused by

refugee camp experiences. Acculturation may take considerably longer due to trauma or unwillingness to leave the culture of origin, and there may be difficulty in adapting to the challenges of differing U.S. cultural values and practices. Refugee children may face any combination of issues due to the trauma of forced migration, thus causing stress and delay in adapting to U.S. schooling.

MIGRANTS are itinerant workers who move from place to place seeking work opportunities. Their economic survival is usually dependent on the cyclic availability of local agricultural or fishing opportunities. The transient and mobile nature of a migrant family traveling from location to location often leads children of school age to experience gaps in language and content instruction.

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Context and Culture (continued from page 1)

Families who maintain their cultural heritage while surrounded by the dominant culture can be described as ETHNIC MINORITIES. They take pride in maintaining their cultural and linguistic integrity and may be distinctly bilingual and bicultural in their cultural profile. It is possible they may hold implicit resistant attitudes toward the dominant U.S. culture, as acculturating would result in the loss of their heritage. It is also possible that children from ethnic groups might reject the values of success and achievement promulgated by schools.

Finally, SOJOURNERS are those whose residency in the U.S. is temporary. Sojourners generally embrace U.S. culture while maintaining their culture of origin, as they know they will eventually return. In schools, a sojourner ESL is often an exchange student or a child of professionals working temporarily in the U.S. Sojourner children often have experienced continuous grade-level schooling in their culture of origin and are generally comfortable with academic culture.

Culturally, ELLs might exhibit behaviors quite different from native English speakers in the U.S. The activities and learning behaviors fostered in U.S. schools are often based on individual achievement and behavior; many ELLs come from schools where the achievement and behavior is based on a collectivistic perspective. In addition, U.S. schooling fosters creativity, problem-solving, and analysis; schooling in other cultures often emphasizes recitation and rote memorization. Academic communication in speech and writing in U.S. schools is mostly linear; in other cultures it is often circular or digressive.

"Effective pedagogy Is not simply teaching subject areas in another language, but instead finding ways to use the language, culture, and experiences of students meaningfully in their education."

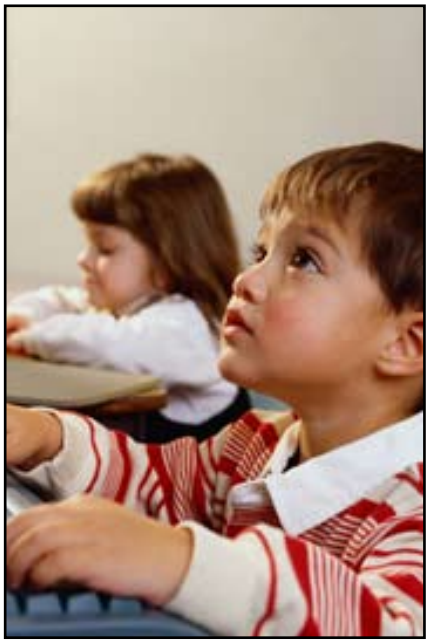
- Nieto, 2000

"Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language."

- Cummins, 2000

Language

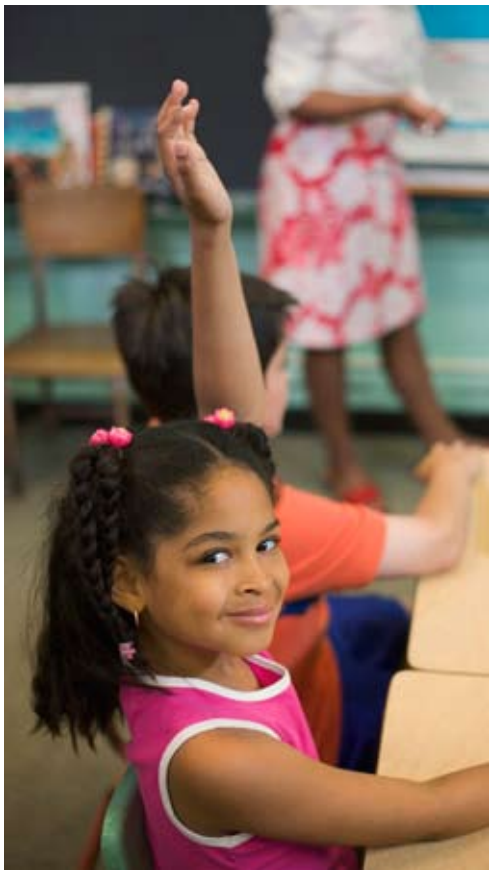
The first, home, or dominant language(s) of ELLs may vary according to multiple factors such as phonology, or sound system;



morphology, or the way in which words are formed and used; syntax, or the way in which words and sentences are combined to produce coherent speaking or writing; and style, or the manner in which language is delivered. The qualities and characteristics of language may vary greatly from one to another as contrasted with English; as a result, it is important to recognize that one or a combination of certain characteristics may help and/or hinder academic English development.

One factor which affects a foreign-born ELL's English language acquisition upon entry into U.S. schools is age. Longitudinal studies (Collier 1995) have shown that ELLs who enter U.S. schools between the ages of eight and twelve require less time to attain academic achievement (as measured by standardized test scores) because they have firmly acquired their home language for transfer of cognitive functioning to English. Entering U.S. schools prior to age eight or after age twelve often results in slower language progress due to increased challenges in cognitive language transfer.

Consistency of home language usage is another variable impacting academic adjustment. Whether or not an ELL is foreign- or U.S.-born, consistent use and development of the home language often results in more effective transfer to English, as cognitive development and vocabulary development in the first language provides a rich contextual base for transfer to English (Cummins 2000). Inconsistency of home language use, on the other hand, can decrease an ELL's ability to acquire developmentally-appropriate language for schooling, thus slowing progress in academic language and achievement in school, unless they are placed in a strong, supportive ELL program.



Classroom Tips: Know Your Students!

ELLs are not a monolithic group of learners. It is necessary to know your ELLs individually to be able to provide effective strategic support for their ultimate academic success. But effective support is based on knowing their cultural profiles and understanding how their background experiences impact their potential for social and academic success in school. The following are some specific recommendations:

• Make sure your district or school has a procedure for gathering intake information on ELLs. The intake procedure should include contact information of family members, the nature and quality of prior schooling experience in the country of origin and in the U.S., a health profile, and a diagnostic assessment of English language proficiency.

• When possible, arrange a home visit to the ELL's home to meet the family. A home visit has the potential for creating a mutual understanding of U.S. schooling culture and practice for the family and allows you to experience the cultural setting of an ELL's home environment.

• Have informal conversations with your ELLs. The amount of communication, of course, depends on the ELL's language proficiency. However, the more opportunities you provide for getting to know ELLs individually, the greater the insights for connecting with students and becoming more effective as a teacher.

• Increase your knowledge base and understanding of your ELL(s). What do you need to do to become more informed about and sensitive to the cultural and language needs of your student(s)? What do you need to learn about in order to make the classroom environment more relevant to your students' social and academic needs? What areas of professional growth are necessary in order for you to become a more culturally sensitive teacher and advocate?

Web Sources

How to Create a Welcoming Classroom Environment:
www.colorincolorado.org/educators/reachingout/welcoming

CREDE - Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence
www.crede.ucsc.edu

CREDE is a federally funded research and development program focused on improving the education of students whose ability to reach their potential is challenged by language or cultural barriers, race, geographic location, or poverty.

Resources About Language and Culture:
www.cal.org/resources

The Center for Applied Linguistics provides a comprehensive range of research-based language and cultural education resources and testing tools. At this site, you can find online resources, databases and directories, publications, and other archives. CAL's searchable databases can point you toward a wide variety of articles and multilingual teaching materials, even for languages and cultures of low frequency occurrence in the U.S.

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Recommended Print Resources

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About WIDA

WIDA is a consortium of states dedicated to the design and implementation of high standards and equitable educational opportunities for English language learners. To this end, WIDA has developed English language proficiency standards and tests aligned with those standards, such as ACCESS for ELLs®. Research and professional development activities importantly complement the WIDA standards and assessment products. This bulletin is brought to you by WIDA's professional development team. To learn more about the products and services available through WIDA, please visit www.wida.us.

Your Turn

WIDA welcomes additional information and personal experiences you can share regarding variables affecting students' social and academic achievement. We hope to include many of your stories and ideas in future issues of this bulletin.
Please send your insights and experiences to:

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