



Success Indicator IN07: The ELs' instructional program positions these students' home languages and cultures as resources rather than barriers to academic success. (5884)

Overview: Research has shown that teachers who tap into the strengths of students' home cultures, rather than focus too heavily on proficiency weaknesses, boost both behavioral and academic outcomes for their students (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). By drawing on the breadth of linguistic, social, and environmental resources EL students bring to the classroom, rather than dismissing them as barriers, educators can dramatically improve the opportunities for these students to thrive in their schools. This shift in perspective and approach demands a more holistic and systemic evaluation of student strengths beyond academic proficiency, the encouragement of teachers and staff to examine their own implicit biases concerning English learners, and appropriate resources to implement high quality, culturally responsive instruction.

Questions: What does it mean to "position students' home languages and cultures"? How can traditional positioning be changed? Why does this matter? What does this look like in practice? What are some of the challenges and how can they be addressed?

What does it mean to "position students' home languages and culture"?

Traditionally, schools have equated low material wealth and low English proficiency with "poor" quality home experiences for the child (Moll, et al., 1992). While anthropologists, advocates and educators have made some progress in challenging these notions, disparaging ideologies still dominate much of the public discourse around English learners. Some of this is explicit and intentional, but more often those perpetuating these beliefs and attitudes are unaware they are doing so.

Well-intentioned teachers often believe that it benefits their students to learn and conform to dominant cultural and language norms (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). However, research shows that student academic outcomes are negatively impacted when teachers position student cultures as inferior, even if teachers think they are cultivating an environment where students learn English more quickly (Wellborn, Huebner, & Hills, 2012; Duran, 2016). Biased storylines manifest in implicit ways through classroom interactions, negatively impacting the environment for ELs (Nasir, Snyder, Shah, & Ross, 2002; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). Sociologist David Kirp (2013), for example, documented a "corrosive nostalgia" among non-Latino educators in one school district, where some teachers clung to monolingual instruction (p. 76). These veteran educators in an area undergoing rapid demographic shifts saw incoming ELs as instructional burdens. They were used to monolingual environments and struggled to see how ELs might be a resource in shifting their instruction. By seeing ELs as deviating from cultural norms, these corrosively nostalgic educators marginalized students' funds of knowledge and established a clear language hierarchy.

How can traditional positioning be changed?

Opportunities always exist for a third space where both teachers and students leave their comfort zones and avoid returning to well-worn scripts (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). All adults and children shift their speech, attitudes, and behaviors when moving among work, home, and school. Rymes (2014) calls these linguistic repertoires and defines them as “the collection of ways individuals use language and other means of communication (gesture, dress, posture, accessories) to function effectively in the multiple communities in which they participate” (p. 10). The ability to transition effectively between environments is a serious strength, even if it develops less consciously among monolingual children. It is particularly important in monolingual countries to have teachers re-conceptualize multilingualism as a resource (Fielding, 2016).

Thus, while non-English households may not necessarily teach the cultural norms rewarded in K-12 schools, these households do provide their children a wealth of other funds of knowledge (Moll, et al., 1992). The key is tapping into these resources and using them to make meaningful connections between what students already know and what the teachers want them to learn. As students’ funds become more used – and useful – in the classroom, both teachers and students have the potential to benefit. Teachers gain new resources to support their instruction and students start believing that they are valuable participants in the learning environment. Both begin to see and behave as though the curriculum and school language add to students’ funds of knowledge, rather than replacing what they have learned at home.

This work is challenging and does not mean simply trying out common reforms or new instructional methods. What counts as learning and knowledge dramatically shifts in these schools and classrooms to generate multiple kinds of literacy through joint participation (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995).

Why does this matter?

Not only does a deficit attitude among school personnel alienate students, but it can also hinder access to and deep understanding of content. If teachers only use U.S. English cultural references to explain concepts, students unfamiliar with the examples gain nothing from

them. Furthermore, such teachers then shut down their own opportunities to expand their knowledge of other cultures as well as their teaching practice. They may become stuck in increasingly ineffective practices while ELs become progressively more disengaged.

In Germany, scholars discovered that third-grade ELs had academic and achievement advantages over their monolingual peers when they reached the sixth grade (Maluch, Neumann, & Kempert, 2016). The study found similar results in other contexts. Over time, ELs outperformed those who could only speak one language, and this held true across three different language minority groups. Maluch, Neumann, and Kempert (2016) highlighted how this finding demonstrates the need to draw connections to previously learned languages in order to activate the unique abilities of plurilingual children, who are helped rather than hindered by their language minority status in terms of achievement over time. In another study, elementary students in dual language programs later outperformed their peers in single language programs in terms of high school achievement (Harris, 2015). These studies help disprove the attitude that not knowing the majority language hinders achievement; instead, English learners have the capability to outpace their monolingual peers. Teachers who may be worried about lower accountability and test scores in a single year for ELs can in fact boost overall achievement in a school by treating these students as assets, not burdens.

Understandably, students also enjoy learning more when they are able to use their home language (Fielding, 2016). Science and mathematics in particular may be more enjoyable when learned in a native language, rather than forcing students to learn content knowledge exclusively in English. Students with an active interest in their own learning have consistently shown greater achievement (Wisniewska, 2013). In environments where all languages have value, non-English speakers have a chance to become experts and flip the classroom script.

It has become cliché to say that all citizens need to know multiple languages in an increasingly globalized world, but there are also more immediate, measurable benefits to treating all languages as resources in schools (Penycook, 2012). Teachers who treated student language differences as strengths saw dramatically increased student behaviors and high school graduation rates (Well-

born, Huebner, & Hills, 2012). Training teachers to think positively rather than negatively about ELs has positive effects on learning and achievement, and these benefits are even greater for at-risk students (Duran, 2016). However, teachers cannot do this work in isolation. The entire instructional program should adopt this same mentality. For example, if there are bilingual science classes, there should be bilingual music classes as well. Isolated pockets of bilingualism undercut efforts to build a high achieving school community.

What does this look like in practice?

In practice, it can be easy and obviously unfair to place all of the work squarely on the shoulders of the classroom teacher. The whole instructional program must integrate students' home languages as a resource, which requires cohesive, cross-disciplinary curricula and a supportive administrative and policy environment. Otherwise, implicit language and cultural biases will continue to work their way into the school, even through seemingly neutral times such as recess.

During recess (or during other times with less formal classroom structures such as art and electives), teachers can monitor students to ensure that language minority students are not being excluded from activities (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011). They can encourage students, especially at elementary age, to practice each other's languages. This guidance can make recess higher-functioning by offering opportunities for student engagement, conflict resolution, pro-social skill development, and emotional and physical safety (London, Westrich, Stokes-Guinan, & McLaughlin, 2015). These issues may be of particular concern to ELs and their families.

Garcia and Sylvan (2011) outline these core principles for a fully supportive instructional program:

1. Educators realize that students who speak the "same language" are still individual learners;
2. Teachers collaborate regularly, and students collaborate regularly;
3. Students are active learners who feel comfortable practicing multiple languages;
4. Language and content instruction are integrated (i.e. unit plans are designed collaboratively across teachers with both language and content goals);
5. Teachers intervene when students exclude one another through language use; and

6. Learning is experiential (i.e. goes beyond the school walls).

These principles are not easy to implement, particularly when they threaten established school norms. They require time, resources, good data, and stable, supportive leadership.

What are some of the challenges, and how can they be addressed?

Lack of Background Information

Schools may provide little information to teachers on students' linguistic learning backgrounds, often through no fault of their own – records may be incomplete or missing for ELs who have recently immigrated. They can address this lack of information by administering surveys to learn more about their students' backgrounds (Brooks, 2017).

Denial of Need to Change Practices

In order to create new classroom norms where all languages are respected, teachers have to explicitly discuss the ways in which they speak differently in different environments (Duran, 2016; de Jong, 2011). Doing so may be very challenging for teachers, particularly at the secondary level, who may not be used to this level of vulnerability. They have to make mistakes and model that there is no "perfect" language before they can respect students' languages (Fielding, 2016). Teachers should also model how to move among languages skillfully and appropriately (Pennycook, 2012).

Ellis (2013) suggests that teachers of ELs first reflect on their own linguistic repertoires. This reflection may seem odd to ask of teachers who speak only one language, but shifting from a deficit to an asset-based attitude toward ELs requires teachers to realize that they, too, engage in what researchers call "translanguaging" (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011).

Lack of Systemic Support

As any teacher or parent knows, school-wide change requires supportive leadership. Principals should visibly buy-in to the idea that ELs are assets by modeling reflective practices in front of teachers. Administrators can engage in role-play during professional development and unconventional dramatic activities to help teachers empathize with student perspectives (Rymes, 2008). They can promote these principles by:



- analyzing their own discourse in how they communicate about ELs to the faculty, then model how to do so for teachers in their own classrooms (Rymes, 2016);
- ensure that ELs are not underrepresented in gifted and talented programs; and
- disseminate research and knowledge on the value of integrating students' home languages and cultures in schools (Montecel & Danini, 2002).

Through this difficult but important work, faculty, parents and students can shift ideologies that position languages other than English as resources for social and academic development (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011).

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