Because language minority learners come from different language and cultural backgrounds, each possesses a different "profile" of characteristics which can either delay or accelerate adaptation to U.S. culture and, in addition, impede or facilitate success in school. The interaction of these characteristics vary for each learner. All variables which affect an individual from one culture may not affect another individual from the same culture due to personal, familial, or geographical differences, despite the fact that there will be shared characteristics. Educators need to be aware of this fact and not draw the conclusion that all learners from a particular culture have identical profiles.

This Bulletin examines challenges to learner success in school and provides some suggestions for teachers.
Age upon entry to the U.S.  8 - 12 year olds coming from other language and cultural backgrounds are the most positively disposed to achieving grade level parity with their mainstream peers (according to standardized text scores), because they have had enough time to firmly acquire their home language. 5 - 8 year olds may not have fully acquired their home language, thus encountering conceptual challenges as they attempt to use English for learning new concepts. 13 - 18 year olds entering U.S. schools are at highest risk because they do not have enough time to catch up with their native English-speaking mainstream peers. Teachers need to examine a learner's background for information on entry age for insights into helping them reach grade level parity.

Cultural differences. Shared values and assumptions with U.S. culture make adaptation easier. Thus, learners coming from cultures without those shared characteristics will have a more challenging time adapting to U.S. culture. Teachers need to become informed about the values and assumptions of the cultures represented in their classroom.

Differences in the first language (L1) and English. Aspects of language, such as sentence patterns, verb tenses, articles, script, and pronunciation, vary from one language to another. One result is that learners from other language backgrounds will produce miscues in oral or written English based on home language aspects that are different from English. Sensitivity to the oral and written miscues that learners make can provide valuable clues about these language differences and help to frame delivery of instruction.

Trauma. As refugees, many language minority learners have been violently forced out of their country of origin which psychologically and physically affects their ability to adjust efficiently and may cause behavior and management issues in the classroom. Teachers need to consult a learner’s file and talk with family and colleagues to obtain insights about any behavioral issues.

Family background. Members from a cultural community reflect a cross-section of life in that community, representing a wide range of professions, educational backgrounds, and interests. Families will vary in their understanding of and appreciation for their children's education as in any other cultural community. Teachers need to connect with parents to gain insights about parents' attitude towards education. Discontinued schooling. Many language minority learners have spent considerable time in refugee camps or have escaped from impoverished circumstances. As a result, they may enter U.S. schools with gaps in their schooling. Teachers need to examine a learner's background for clues into cognitive or content gaps in their schooling.

Concept development. Learners coming from different cultures also have different schooling experiences. For example, some educational systems, such as those in eastern Europe, value analytical learning; others, such as those in certain African cultures, value memorization. The emphasis on a particular conceptual emphasis for learning means that other styles, such as creativity or playfulness, will not be stressed or even included in the curriculum. Teachers need to be aware of the teaching emphases in their students' cultures, in order to understand the variations which exist in their students' learning.

Literacy level in the first language. The benefit of developing literacy in the home language is enormous. Many learners, however, have not had the opportunity to develop literacy in their home language because they arrived in the U.S. at an early age or because, as older learners, they lacked prior schooling experience. As a result, their initial acquisition of literacy in English will thus be delayed because of a weaker conceptual and oral English proficiency and a lack of shared cultural experiences upon which to negotiate meaning. Teachers need to deliver their instruction contextually, comprehensibly, and meaningfully in order to frame language and concepts in increasingly cognitively demanding ways.

SOURCES:
*Flower Metaphor: Don Bouchard/Grace Valenzuela, Portland Public Schools.