Classroom research has overwhelmingly showed that students from diverse backgrounds who are successful learners are solidly connected in their home language and culture. These students are most likely to succeed in school, particularly in settings which connect to their backgrounds in experientially and contextually relevant ways.

There are several areas in educating language minority learners in which teacher intent and learner interpretation of this intent can differ. This Bulletin examines the sources of such potential mismatches.

**POTENTIAL MISMATCHES**

1. **Cognitive.** A student’s knowledge and understanding of physical and natural phenomena may be very different from that of middle class mainstream native English speakers. For example, students from Islamic backgrounds who ascribe to fundamentalist interpretations of the origin of the universe may regard scientific origins as heretical.

2. **Communicative.** The direct, linear conversational style of native English speakers and writers is often contrary to the more indirect, circular styles of many English Language Learners (ELLs), especially learners from Africa and Asia. While their English may be structurally appropriate, the style and manner of presenting ideas may be inappropriate. At least initially, ELLs will imitate the style and manner of their home language when communicating in English.

3. **Linguistic.** Native English speakers frequently use idiomatic and metaphorical language and complex language structure. Teachers may have to paraphrase or explain their use of language to enable ELLs to better comprehend intended messages.

4. **Pedagogic.** Many learners, used to a learning setting punctuated by choral response to questions, memorizing and reciting information, and practice worksheets, may need assistance in adjusting to a more dynamic classroom setting marked by individual, small group activities, creative application, and informal interactions.

5. **Strategic.** The variety of ways to plan, monitor, problem-solve, and
evaluate learning in U.S. schools may be unfamiliar or unknown to students. Teachers cannot assume that students have acquired the means to learn in independently meaningful ways.

6. **Cultural.** U.S. teachers usually have a more facilitative, informal teaching style in their instructional delivery. They invite narrative discourse to embed learning, and they often engage students in interactive, group-oriented activities. These practices may be culturally alienating to the experiences of ELLs, especially to older learners recently arriving from other cultures of origin.

7. **Assessment.** Tests are the only means of assessment in schools in other cultures. Observable, performance-based forms of assessing student progress are often meaningless and incomprehensible to learners coming from other cultures. Additionally, report cards with language reflecting contemporary views of assessment can be extremely difficult to explain in the student’s home language.

8. **Attitudinal.** Student attitudes towards literacy, learning in a second language, and schooling in general are allied to cultural values and assumptions, as well as to individual family influences and expectations. When congruent with teacher hopes and expectations, there can be an excellent synergy of teaching and learning between teacher and student; when not, this can become an overwhelming challenge for teachers in connecting meaningfully and purposefully with students.

**IMPLICATIONS**

U.S. public schooling is designed for mainstream, middle class students. Bridges must be created to connect diverse students' backgrounds with U.S. mainstream teaching and learning practices. The success of learners from diverse language and cultural backgrounds is often impeded by mismatches between the beliefs and practices of the family and the community to which the student belongs. It is no longer feasible to assume that students will or should automatically assimilate (i.e., assume the values and assumptions) of U.S. white middle class culture. This invalidates the students’ cultural backgrounds and conveys the not-so-subtle message that their culture is invalid or unworthy. Acculturation should be the goal of schooling, but not to the denigration of students' home culture.

This, then, is the irony in instructing language minority students: by valuing our students’ diverse backgrounds, we validate them and accelerate their potential for social and academic success in U.S. society. Academically, this means:

1. **Incorporate learners’ knowledge, style, and interests to differentiate instruction.** This means creatively blending and aligning standards with learner needs while simultaneously maintaining grade-level complexity in small and large group formats.

2. **Be sensitive to the fact that the purposes of instructional and assessment practices used in the U.S. may not be clear to ELLs. Their purposes may need to be repeatedly clarified.** Learners need to know why they are doing what they do. This helps them become better self-evaluators of their learning.

3. **Personally connect with students and their families!** This will help unite perspectives and minimize misunderstandings.

**SOURCES:**

