EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND OTHER FACTORS AFFECTING LANGUAGE MINORITY LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT IN THE MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM

"My culture influences the way in which I understand what you do. My home language influences the way in which I use your language. Your culture influences the way in which you understand what I do. Your language influences the way in which you believe I must use your language. Therefore, we must realize that we might not always be aware of what we are communicating." ¹

This can be the unspoken sentiment of any student studying in our public schools whose native language is not English and whose primary culture is other than U.S. culture. For these students, learning in the mainstream classroom setting is a huge challenge that requires sensitivity on the part of all educators.

A first step towards better understanding language and cultural minority learners is to become aware of the various educational experiences which might have influenced their ability to acquire English as their second (or more) language and learn content in school. This Bulletin examines those influences and suggests how to frame instruction for language minority learners.

BACKGROUND INFLUENCES

1. Age upon entry into the U.S. educational system. Although all English language learners are at risk academically, research has clearly identified learners' potential for academic success according to age groups. The group with the optimum potential for achieving academic success (identified by the ability to achieve grade level parity with native speaker peers) is between 8-12 years of age. These learners have had enough opportunity to be exposed to their first language to minimize confusion in conceptual transfer from one language to another; in addition, these learners will have enough time remaining in U.S. schools to solidify language and concepts in English. Another group, 5-8 year olds, risks not having enough time solidifying their first language structures and concepts, thereby, potentially confusing English language concepts with those in their first language. A third group, 13-18 year olds, risks not having enough time to catch up academically while remaining in school. (It can take at least 4 -7 years to acquire academic English.)

2. Educational background in the first language. Learners who have experienced literacy and concept development in their first language will have a distinctive academic advantage, especially if this development was uninterrupted by war or other trauma (e.g., refugee camp life) before arriving to the U.S. Students with no

¹ Excerpted from Ewa Pytowska's April 1995 NNETESOL Keynote address at the University of Southern Maine.
first language literacy or with interrupted schooling will be at greater academic risk.

3. **Nature of the first language writing system vis-a-vis English.** First language script (other than Roman), directionality (other than left-to-right), syntax (grammar), phonology (sound), and punctuation, are some of the variables which may affect a student's ability to learn English quickly and efficiently. The more differences there are between a student's first language and English, the greater the challenge to master the writing system.

4. **Prior instruction in English.** Students who come to the U.S. with prior knowledge of English will also have an advantage. It is important to note that students can have varying oral proficiencies as well as different levels of literacy in English, which will have an overall affect on learning content, especially if they immediately enter the mainstream classroom.

5. **Experience with print.** In addition to literacy level, language minority learners may have different attitudes towards print which are culturally influenced. In their daily lives the printed word, which is directly linked with cultural experience, may have fewer or different purposes; print may be used for more specific purposes (e.g. religious); and/or print may lack the narrative (storytelling) or technological (computer-related) role that is commonly understood in U.S. culture.

6. **Family expectations.** Along with majority mainstream students, language minority learners will vary in their motivation towards learning. This can be directly connected with family attitudes toward schooling. Basically, if the family values education, sees the link between learning and good jobs, and/or promotes literacy in the home environment, this positive attitude will have a highly motivating influence on students. Children from home environments lacking these characteristics may lack intrinsic motivation and, as a result, struggle to succeed academically.

**WAYS TO FRAME INSTRUCTION**

1. **Obtain as much background information as possible about your learners through home language surveys, student files, and informal conversations.** The more familiar we are with our students, the more effective we will be in providing specific instruction. This is crucial with regard to the language and cultural minority populations, since a sensitive understanding about the learner's needs will have a positive impact on providing effective instruction.

2. **Be aware of culturally biased or irrelevant content; be sure to provide sufficient advanced organizers to aid in comprehension.** Language and cultural minority learners need input in a variety of ways such as visuals, outlines, and charts, so that they can make the best possible connections with prior knowledge.

3. **Communication is paramount in learning; therefore, remember that language accuracy is not as important unless it impedes communication.** Specific problematic aspects of language such as article and verb tense usage will improve through time and practice. It is important to realize that certain grammatical aspects and functions of English can be inherently nonexistent in the learner's first language; they will always be a challenge to the learner.

4. **Emphasize team learning with mainstream peers and provide a lot of comprehensible input.** Essentially, exposure to content through group-related activities, focused materials, and simplified speech, aids in reinforcing learning and in making that content more comprehensible.

5. **Use alternative assessments and monitor frequently through checks for learning/understanding.** The more that learners can be assessed, and assessed differently (orally as well as in written form), the greater the opportunity they will have to demonstrate their learning.

**SOURCES:**


Cummins, Jim (1989). Empowering Minority Students. Sacramento, CA; CABE.