Language minority learners use English as their second (or more) language for expanding their knowledge of content in learning. They learn language arts, science, social studies, and math are learned in increasingly complex ways using increasing amounts of sophisticated language to understand complex concepts.

What are the characteristics of language minority learners' ability to develop concepts through language? This Bulletin examines those characteristics and provides teaching suggestions.

There is a difference between conversational and academic use of language. Spoken language requires less vocabulary; less use of complex grammatical structures, such as compound and complex clauses; and fewer connectors, such as although, even though, etc. Academic language incorporates both an understanding and use of these more complex structures and specific, specialized vocabulary to express an understanding of concepts in reading and writing.

Language minority learners have an intuitive understanding about how language works. Consciously and unconsciously, these learners naturally compare and contrast their home language with English as they engage in learning. Thus, the "medium" (language) and the "message" (content) are both simultaneously considered in the process of learning.

Lack of experience using English means a more tenuous understanding of how this language works in learning. Not having spent as much time as their native speaker peers in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English can result in a learner's decreased confidence about using the language, with a resulting greater need to practice it in a variety of ways.

How the English language is presented in structured formats is important for understanding. The ways in which texts are structured, such as distinctions between fiction and nonfiction; the meaning of chapter and section headings for how to engage in reading; and how to navigate through
complex text formats, such as internet websites, are examples of what learners must be familiar with in order to use language in a variety of ways.

**Connecting background experiences with relevant curriculum choices and specific, connected activities supports language minority learners' ability to comprehend language and content.** There is an enormous unspoken message of inclusion sent to learners whose interests and background experiences are incorporated into the curriculum and associated activities. In addition, connecting activities with prior knowledge and experiences enables students to scaffold new information to previously learned knowledge.

**TEACHING SUGGESTIONS**

1. **Check frequently for conceptual progress in learning content through reading and writing prompts and oral questioning.** Do not be misled by a learner's conversational fluency and lack of accent, nor by the ability of learners to seek out factual information. Critical use of language requires the ability to summarize, directly and indirectly connect ideas, and synthesize information. Language minority learners need frequent opportunities to develop their conceptual understanding of content beyond factual knowledge.

2. **Look for language "minefields", i.e. aspects of language such as vocabulary, grammar structures, connectors, and idioms.** Proactively anticipate potentially problematic aspects of language and make students aware of how language is used. Remember that these learners are more sensitive to how language works as they compare/contrast English with their home language.

3. **Keep in mind that despite progress in learning, language minority learners do not have the innate "feel" for English or the depth of vocabulary for articulating themselves orally or in writing.** This means that learners may continue to make errors in pronunciation, orally, and in writing, as their home language patterns (or lack of compared to English) cause miscues. These miscues are varied depending upon the learner's home language and may take a long time to overcome.

4. **Continue to teach learners about aspects of written language, such as content formats of textbooks and their headings and subheadings; how to use charts, pictures, diagrams, etc. for obtaining information; and the ways in which authors use words to direct and focus the reader to think in certain ways.** Because of their relative unfamiliarity with how language can be structured in texts, language minority learners need consistent reminders to help them comprehend what they read.

5. **Frequently probe learners' background knowledge and use many and varied graphic organizers to help them organize information and to construct their oral and written responses.** Graphic organizers are invaluable teaching tools for deconstructing information and language; equally important, they provide a rich opportunity for learners to reconstruct text according to desired rhetorical patterns, such as cause/effect, comparison/contrast, choice, summary, emphasis, etc.

6. **Finally, provide helpful, timely, and useful feedback on all efforts to use language through content.** Learners need to know how well they are doing. Consistent feedback helps learners to assess their progress realistically.