

**Square Pegs in Round Holes:
Educating and Evaluating English Learners—
Bilinguals Are Not Two Monolinguals In One Head**



COSA 2016 State English Learners Alliance Conference

March 10, 2016 • Eugene, OR

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A Very Brief History of Language and Education in the U.S.

The U.S. has always been a multilingual society and the recent "English Only" movement was fostered as a result of its connection to patriotism and jingoism, particular as associated with foreign wars.



A Very Brief History of Language and Education in the U.S.

Since schools in the U.S. are public, they are governed by public sentiment, views regarding languages other than English. This view has not been kind in public schools.



A Very Brief History of Language and Education in the U.S.

In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Lau v. Nichols* attempted to remedy some the inequity of English-only (“sink or swim”) programs for English learners. The final ruling, based on Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that prohibited discrimination by any agency receiving federal funding, was as follows:

“Under these state-imposed standards, there is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education. Basic English skills are at the very core of what these public schools teach. Imposition of a requirement that, before a child can effectively participate in the educational program, he must already have acquired those basic skills is to make a mockery of public education. We know that those who do not understand English are certain to find their classroom experiences wholly incomprehensible and in no way meaningful (414 U.S. 563).

A Very Brief History of Language and Education in the U.S.

States have enacted laws that have effectively mandated “English Only” in the schools. Recently, California, Massachusetts, and Arizona did so, but the practice existed long before in other places like Nebraska.

In 1919, Robert Meyer was charged with violating a Nebraska State law that mandated English-only instruction in all public and private schools because he attempted to teach a bible story to a 10-year-old student using German.

The State Supreme Court argued: “the Legislature had seen the baneful effects of permitting foreigners, who had taken residence in this country, to rear and educate their children in the language of their native land. The result of that condition was found to be inimical to our own safety.” (262 U.S. 390).

Fortunately, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the State decision.

A Very Brief History of Language and Education in the U.S.

As a result of *Lau v. Nichols* decision, States are required to identify students who lack such proficiency in English and to provide them a “special linguistic program” presumably designed to help them attain the necessary proficiency. But the court’s understanding of such proficiency was sorely lacking:

“Against the possibility that the Court’s judgment may be interpreted too broadly, I stress the fact that the children with whom we are concerned here number about 1,800. This is a very substantial group that is being deprived of any meaningful schooling because the children cannot understand the language of the classroom. We may only guess as to why they have had no exposure to English in their preschool years. Earlier generations of American ethnic groups have overcome the language barrier by earnest parental endeavor or by the hard fact of being pushed out of the family or community nest and into the realities of broader experience (414 U.S. 563; emphasis added).

Really?

A Very Brief History of Language and Education in the U.S.

The reality of the educational success of immigrants in the U.S. is not one characterized by simple “hard work” and instant “assimilation.” Rather, success in school has been the result of differences in wealth/privilege and prior education. Possession of these assets ensured success. Lack of them did not.

- 1908: - 54% of New York’s native-born 8th graders went on to 9th grade compared to 34% of foreign born
 - 80% of urban, native-born, white 7th graders graduated but only 58% of Italian children did
- 1910: - There were 191,000 Jewish children in New York schools, but only 6,000 were in high school, and the overwhelming majority dropped out.
- 1921: - Half of all “learning-disabled” children in New York “special-education” classes were Italian
- 1931: - Only 11% of Italians graduated high school compared with 40% overall
- 1957 vs. 1965 Cuban immigrants: - The wealthy and educated vs. the poor and institutionalized
- 1975 vs. 1979 Vietnamese immigrants: - The politically connected vs. the “boat people”

A Very Brief History of Language and Education in the U.S.

Immigrant achievement, even with continued application of “English Only” policies has increased over the years.

1972 to 1995:

- Latino high school completion crept up from 66% to 70%
- 54% of Latino graduates now enroll in college, up from 45% (it’s 64% for non-Latino whites)
- Latino high school graduates who complete college rose from 11% to 16% (for non-Latino whites it’s 34%)
- Graduation rate for Mexico-born youths, age 15-17 years, is 74%
- More than 70% of Latino immigrants who came here before their sophomore year in high school go on to graduate

The reason for increasing immigrant educational achievement is the same as it was for all previous, low SES immigrant groups: greater cultural assimilation and English language exposure.

A Very Brief History of Language and Education in the U.S.

Type	Stage	Language Use
FIRST GENERATION – FOREIGN BORN		
A	Newly Arrived	Understands little English. Learns a few words and phrases.
Ab	After several years of residence – Type 1	Understands enough English to take care of essential everyday needs. Speaks enough English to make self understood.
Ab	Type 2	Is able to function capably in the work domain where English is required. May still experience frustration in expressing self fully in English. Uses immigrant language in all other contexts where English is not needed.
SECOND GENERATION – U.S. BORN		
Ab	Preschool Age	Acquires immigrant language first. May be spoken to in English by relatives or friends. Will normally be exposed to English-language TV.
Ab	School Age	Acquires English. Uses it increasingly to talk to peers and siblings. Views English-language TV extensively. May be literate only in English if schooled exclusively in the language.
AB	Adulthood – Type 1	At work (in the community) uses language to suit proficiency of other speakers. Senses greater functional ease in his first language in spite of frequent use of second.
AB	Adulthood – Type 2	Uses English for most everyday activities. Uses immigrant language to interact with parents or others who do not speak English. Is aware of vocabulary gaps in his first language.
THIRD GENERATION – U.S. BORN		
AB	Preschool Age	Acquires both English and immigrant language simultaneously. Hears both in the home although English tends to predominate.
AB	School Age	Uses English almost exclusively. Is aware of limitation in the immigrant language. Uses it only when forced to do so by circumstances. Is literate only in English.
AB	Adulthood	Uses English almost exclusively. Has few opportunities for speaking immigrant language. Retains good receptive competence in this language.
FOURTH GENERATION – U.S. BORN		
Ba	Preschool Age	Is spoken to only in English. May hear immigrant language spoken by grandparents and other relatives. Is not expected to understand immigrant language.
Ba	School Age	Uses English exclusively. May have picked up some of the immigrant language from peers. Has limited receptive competence in the language.
B	Adulthood	Is almost totally English monolingual. May retain some receptive competence in some domains.

Source: Adapted from Valdés, G. & Figueroa, R. A. (1996). *Bilingualism and Testing: A special case of bias* (p. 16).

Understanding Language, Education, and Assessment

So what does all of this mean for identifying learning disabilities in English language learners?

The validity of norm-referenced, individually administered, standardized tests is based on certain assumptions. According to Salvia & Yssledyke (1991):

"When we test students using a standardized device and compare them to a set of norms to gain an index of their relative standing, we assume that the students we test are similar to those on whom the test was standardized; that is, we assume their acculturation [and linguistic history] is comparable, but not necessarily identical, to that of the students who made up the normative sample for the test. When a child's general background experiences differ from those of the children on whom a test was standardized, then the use of the norms of that test as an index for evaluating that child's current performance or for predicting future performances may be inappropriate" (p. 18).

Understanding Language, Education, and Assessment

When do the background experiences of ELLs become comparable to that of native English speakers who comprise the vast majority of the norm sample on which the test was based?

Never. The issue is not merely one based on a specific level of language proficiency, in part because language proficiency is not a static ability but rather increases with education. Salvia and Yssledyke further assert:

"When we say that a child's acculturation differs from that of the group used as a norm, we are saying that the experiential background differs, not simply that the child is of different ethnic origin, for example, from the children on whom the test was standardized" (p. 18).

Once an ELL, always an ELL. The difference in linguistic and acculturative learning experiences between those who are exposed to only one language vs. those exposed to two (or more) can never be made "equivalent" in any real sense.

Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning: Formal and Informal Learning Experiences

Children raised in two cultures naturally split their time and experience across each of them. Unfortunately, parents are usually able to mediate aspects of only their native culture to their children and cannot do so with the new culture because of their own lack of familiarity with it.

This means that children from bilingual-bicultural backgrounds must often navigate both the new language and culture almost on their own, a term I refer to as "cultural pioneering."

The process of learning a new language and culture thus becomes very dependent on the experiences a child has, particularly while in school. If something is not explicitly taught in school, the chances that it may be taught and learned informally outside the school decrease. This often results in hit-or-miss learning that although occurs for children in general, becomes a much more frequent occurrence for children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Areas that are highly susceptible to this influence include cultural knowledge, especially the subtle, idiosyncratic, and less frequent aspects of it as well as language, particularly correct grammar, pronunciation, usage, and pragmatics including idioms and humor.



**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
Formal and Informal Learning Experiences**



**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
Opportunity for Learning**

Assessment of a student's academic skills and abilities must directly examine the student's skills and abilities with respect to the actual materials and content used for instruction. Thus, authentic assessment seeks to uncover whether learning difficulties can be ascribed to experiential differences rather than ability differences. Not only does this ensure greater validity of the assessment, it provides valuable information necessary to develop specific and effective instructional strategies. In general, evidence of lack of opportunity for learning, ineffective prior instruction, and linguistically inappropriate curricula, are all factors that increase the likelihood that no disability exists.

For example –

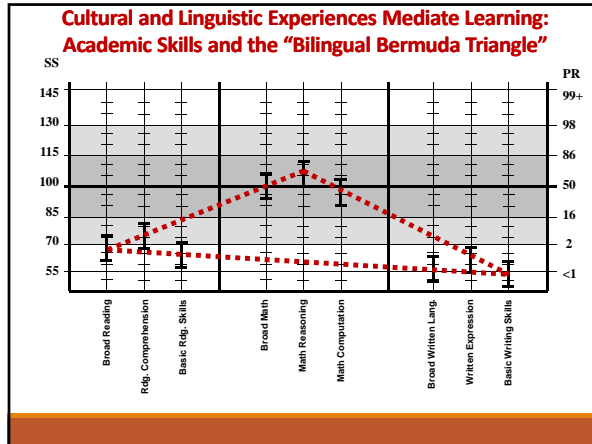
According to the manual (1993) for the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, the 80 vocabulary words and their definitions were drawn from :

*"current, widely used high school and college texts, including words that **must be known** by students in order to cope successfully with school assignments." (emphasis added)*

**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
Vocabulary Exposure and Development**

- It is fruitless to attempt to indoctrinate a superannuated canine with innovative maneuvers.
- Scintillate, scintillate, asteroid minified.
- Members of an avian species of identical plumage congregate.
- Pulchritude possesses solely cutaneous profundity.
- It is fruitless to become lachrymose over precipitately departed lacteal fluid.
- Eschew the implement of correction and vitiate the scion.
- All articles that coruscate with resplendence are not truly auriferous.
- Where there are visible vapors having their prevalence in ignited carbonaceous materials, there is conflagration.
- A plethora of individuals with expertise in culinary techniques vitiate the possible concoction produced by steeping certain comestibles.
- Individuals who make their abodes in vitreous edifices should be advised to refrain from catapulting petrous projectiles.

Homes where English is not the primary or native language results in linguistic experiences that shape the perceptions and views of the speakers particularly in reference to vocabulary but also what might constitute acceptable ways of communicating that can include comfort with basic grammatical errors, use of code-switching, frequent use of slang or colloquial terminology, uncommon or unusual pragmatics, and variances in general language usage.



Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning: Classroom Behavior and Performance

Characteristics and behaviors often associated with various learning problems	Common manifestations of English Language Learners (ELLs) during classroom instruction that may mimic various disorders or cognitive deficits.
Slow to begin tasks	ELLs may have limited comprehension of the classroom language so that they are not always clear on how to properly begin tasks or what must be done in order to start them or complete them correctly.
Slow to finish tasks	ELLs, especially those with very limited English skills, often need to translate material from English into their native language in order to be able to work with it and then must translate it back to English in order to demonstrate it. This process extends the time for completion of time-limited tasks that may be expected in the classroom.
Forgetful	ELLs cannot always fully encode information as efficiently into memory as monolinguals because of their limited comprehension of the language and will often appear to be forgetful when in fact the issue relates more to their lack of proficiency with English.
Inattentive	ELLs may not fully understand what is being said to them in the classroom and consequently they don't know when to pay attention or what exactly they should be paying attention to.
Hyperactive	ELLs may appear to be hyperactive because they are unaware of situation-specific behavioral norms, classroom rules, and other rules of social behavior.
Impulsive	ELLs may lack the ability to fully comprehend instructions so that they display a tendency to act impulsively in their work rather than following classroom instructions systematically.
Distractionable	ELLs may not fully comprehend the language being spoken in the classroom and therefore will move their attention to whatever they can comprehend appearing to be distractible in the process.
Disruptive	ELLs may exhibit disruptive behavior, particularly excessive talking—often with other ELLs, due to a need to try and figure out what is expected of them or to frustration about not knowing what to do or how to do it.
Disorganized	ELLs often display strategies and work habits that appear disorganized because they don't comprehend instructions on how to organize or arrange materials and may never have been taught efficient learning and problem solving strategies.

Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning: Listening Comprehension and Receptive Language

"I pledge a lesson to the frog of the United States
of America, and to the wee puppet for witches hands.
One Asian, under God, in the vestibule,
with little tea and just rice for all."

Source: In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson by Bette Bao Lord, © 1986, Harper Trophy.

Children who are learning a second language hear and interpret sounds in a manner that conforms to words that already exist in their vocabulary. This is a natural part of the first and second language acquisition processes and should not be considered abnormal in any way. It represents the brain's attempt to make sense and meaning of what it perceives by connecting it to what it already knows.

Songs are a good example of this linguistic phenomenon even for native English speakers. Consider these classic misheard lyrics:

"There's a bathroom on the right"
 "Excuse me while I kiss this guy"
 "Doughnuts make my brown eyes blue"
 "Midnight after you're wasted"

**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
Oral and Expressive Language**

'Twas the night before Christmas, y por todo la casa,
Not a creature was stirring—Caramba! Que Pasa?
Los niños were tucked away in their camas,
Some in camisas, some in pijamas.
While hanging the medias with mucho cuidado,
In hopes that old Santa would feel obligado.
To bring all children, both buenos y malos,
A nice batch of dulces y otros regalos.

A Visit From St. Nicolas - Anonymous, 1823

Bilinguals/bicultural individuals are perfectly happy with two languages existing side by side. It provides an ability to use code switching and dual-mode communication not available to monolinguals. For bilinguals, it doesn't matter what language is used in conversation because it all makes sense—and mutual comprehension is the goal of all language and communication.

**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
Reading Comprehension**

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Jabberwocky by Lewis Carroll

Questions: 1) What things were slithy? 2) What did the toves do in the wabe? 3) How were the borogroves? 4) What kind of raths were there?

Meaning in print is not derived solely from word knowledge. Mature and advanced readers eventually discard "decoding" as the primary means for developing reading abilities in favor of orthographic processing of letters, words, sentences, and grammatical structure. Meaning is often inferred from our cultural knowledge and experience with the language. More experience equals clearer meaning and better comprehension.

**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
Orthographic Processing**

NON APPETIT
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NA ZDROWIE
JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

As before, comprehension in print is not derived solely from actual word or letter identification or recognition. English is extremely irregular in morphology and mature and advanced readers eventually discard "decoding" as the primary means for developing reading abilities in favor of orthographic processing of letters, words, sentences where even small surface features are sufficient to derive meaning. Similar to grammatical structure, the ability to understand printed text in the absence of such structure, is accomplished via knowledge of the morphological rules and experience with vocabulary that comes from formal and informal sources. Comparatively speaking, ELLs have less experience and thus less ability to generate meaning automatically, fluently, or transparently.

**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
Orthographic Processing**

Finished files are the
result of years of scientific
study combined with the
the experience of years...

How many times does the letter "f" appear in the sentence above?

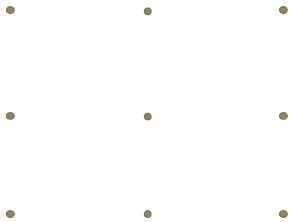
**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
Verbal and Mathematical Reasoning**

What day follows the day before yesterday if two days from
now will be Sunday?

Paul makes \$25.00 a week less than the sum of what Fred
and Carl together make. Carl's weekly income would be
triple Steven's if he made \$50.00 more a week. Paul makes
\$285.00 a week and Steven makes \$75.00 a week. How
much does Fred make?

The ability to engage successfully in verbal reasoning tasks and mathematical word problems
presumes the existence of a developmentally proficient level of fluency with the language since
it is not the language that is being tested, but the ability to reason. When the native language
development is interrupted, bilingual/bicultural individuals may not have the necessary
command of the language and the task is confounded by simple comprehension issues and
degrades into a test of language, not reasoning.

**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
Cultural Perspective and Reasoning Ability**



Rules: Connect all 9 dots above using only 4 straight lines. You may cross lines, but you cannot
lift your pencil.



**Cultural and Linguistic Experiences Mediate Learning:
General Knowledge and Cultural Artifacts**

What I thought	The reality
Tabasco – Mexican hot sauce	Made by McIlhenny Co., USA
Kahlua – Hawaiian liquor	Coffee liqueur made in Mexico
Enfamil – Puerto Rican baby formula	Made by Meade-Johnson, USA
Amoco – Bilingual reference to mucous	Brand of British Petroleum gas
Chiclet – Mexican chewing gum	Made by Cadbury/Adams, USA
Toto – Strange name for a dog	Dorothy's dog's real name

Acculturation to the mainstream plays a significant role in linguistic development and learning in and out of the classroom. The presence and interaction of dual cultural contexts with which to embed certain culturally-specific words or ideas in English may lead to a failure to comprehend or acquire the true meaning of the word or the concept. Idioms are another example of this problem, for example: "I think it's cool the way you don't get on my case about everything."

Bottom Line - The Bilingual/Bicultural Experience

Bilinguals are not two monolinguals in one head

Attainment of developmental proficiency in language and acculturation is multifaceted and complex

Both language acquisition and acculturation are and must be understood as developmental processes

The standards by which bilinguals in U.S. public schools will always be judged will necessarily be based on the performance of individuals who are largely monolingual and monocultural

Once a bilingual, always a bilingual—individuals do not suddenly cease to be bilingual/bicultural simply because they have become English dominant or English proficient

Bilingual/bicultural experiences differ significantly from monolingual/monocultural ones and have important implications for schooling and learning in the classroom across the lifespan

Influences on early language development can have profound and lifelong effects that are manifested in testing and evaluation
