



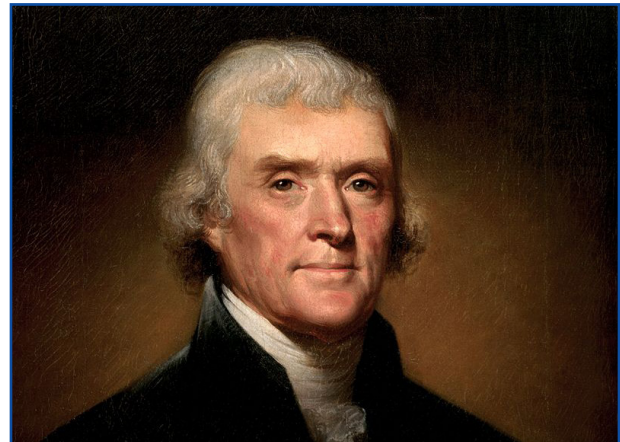
Quality education for English Language Learners/ Multilingual Learners: Why we need it and how we can achieve it

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Defining quality education for English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners in the U.S. starts with our being mindful of three critical ideas: the role and purpose of education in a democracy, the need to transform the current state of education for English Language Learners (ELLs)/Multilingual Learners (MLLs) to enable their full participation in our evolving society, and the importance of using solid theory to drive that transformation in the education of ELLs/MLLs. This brief explores these three interrelated themes and provides a rationale for educators to rethink and reinvent quality education for English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners. It also serves as an introduction to a series of briefs posted by the New York State Department of Education. Those briefs explore in more detail the specific dimensions of what quality education of English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners looks like when it is informed by the ideas described here. Those briefs include topics such as: Working in students' zone of proximal development, Assisting students to read complex texts, Understanding and setting up quality interactions, and others. We hope that educators across the state and throughout the nation find these briefs useful and inspiring.

The role of education in a democracy

In the United States, education has long been conceived as a key requisite for sustaining a thriving democracy. Education has been seen as the means to prepare all future citizens for an active, participatory, responsible, and fulfilling present and future life. While systems of public education were not widely established until the mid- to late-1800s, education was recognized early on by some of the founders of the nation as an essential component of a thriving democratic society. The Jeffersonian ideal, for example, (see sidebar) included the notion that the purpose of education was not only to serve the needs and interests of individuals, but also to enable citizens to develop the competencies they needed to take responsibility for the society. In a true democracy, these dual individual and societal purposes of education apply equally to all—and benefit all, precisely when the education provided capitalizes on the rich, multiple, and varied backgrounds and assets that all students bring with them to school. It is through that equalization of access and by building on the unique backgrounds and potentials of individuals that education's purpose in the democracy is fulfilled—not only providing equitable opportunity for all individuals to develop to their full potential, but also by that very development ensuring the enhancement of society and the public good.



"[The objects of education are] To give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business; To enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts, in writing; To improve, by reading, his morals and faculties; To understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either; To know his rights...And, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed."

—Thomas Jefferson, from "Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia," August 4, 1818



In order to realize these expectations, public education and educators must have a clear view not only of what full participation means in our society but also how that society is evolving and what knowledge and skills students will need to succeed and to continue to adapt in a rapidly changing world upon their graduation. The kindergartener is not preparing for life today, but rather, he is preparing for post-secondary options that will come in 13 years and beyond. Preparing students for their future is essential to enabling them to succeed in as well as to become the designers of the academic, social, and civic society of which they will be a part.

“Public education isn’t important because it serves the public, it is important because it creates the public.”

—Neil Postman, 1995.

All students have strengths and potential upon which to build their future individual competencies and contributions. English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners, in particular, have unique cultural and linguistic resources which can add considerably to the breadth and depth of knowledge, perspectives, and talents of American society. ELLs/MLLs have immense potential that needs to be developed. The role of education is to grow this potential and assist these students in becoming fully multilingual, intercultural, and literate students who enjoy participating in rigorous academic activity. The quality of our democracy, our society and our world relies on our providing top quality education for the expanding populations of ELLs/MLLs in our schools.

The need to transform the education of English Language Learners/ Multilingual Learners

In spite of this societal imperative to ready students for rigorous and thoughtful interaction in the world, it is still typical to observe English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners in U.S. schools spending time filling in worksheets that contain disconnected sentences with blanks where the correct forms of verbs need to be inserted. As our students engage in this and other similarly atomistic activities, we need to ask ourselves whether they are being prepared for the kind of thoughtful, purposeful, and substantive interaction that will enable them to be fully participating learners and adults in their not-too-distant futures.

“If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow.”

—John Dewey, 1944.

In today’s world (perhaps even more in tomorrow’s), to be fully engaged participants, students need to learn how to hear or read and interpret varied and complex multimodal texts. They need to be skilled in understanding ideas, judging their validity based on evidence, and often making decisions based on inferential interpretations of the ideas and information presented in the narrative or written texts they encounter. In addition to taking in and comprehending complex information in a variety of disciplines, they need to be able to communicate information and ideas to diverse audiences in different ways for different purposes, understanding their audiences and shaping messages appropriately and effectively in different academic, social, and civic contexts. Besides assessing sources of information, students need to know where and how to gather and evaluate that information. Furthermore, since society is growing increasingly diverse, ELL/MLL students need the ability to identify and articulate their own perspectives as well as understand those of others – in order to interact constructively and effectively with others in various academic, social, and civic communities of which they are becoming a part. All the skills mentioned here are part of New York State’s new standards for learning. As such, they set the destinations to which teachers and schools need to lead ELLs/MLLs and all their students.

English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners are ideally situated to engage in the exchange of perspectives and ideas. They bring unique global experiences and continuously experience American society in its complexity – often comparing it to and reconciling it with their own lives and views. In classrooms they interact with others who come

from different cultures and thus possess different experiences and viewpoints. In the process, differences become salient to them; at the same time, commonalities are reassuring and comforting amidst the richness of experiences their new environment presents to them. The more support schools can offer in helping ELLs/MLLs successfully navigate multiple contexts appropriately—not giving up their cultures, languages, or perspectives, but adding to them in order to participate appropriately in diverse circles—the more they will become assets to the future of our nation in an increasingly globalized world.

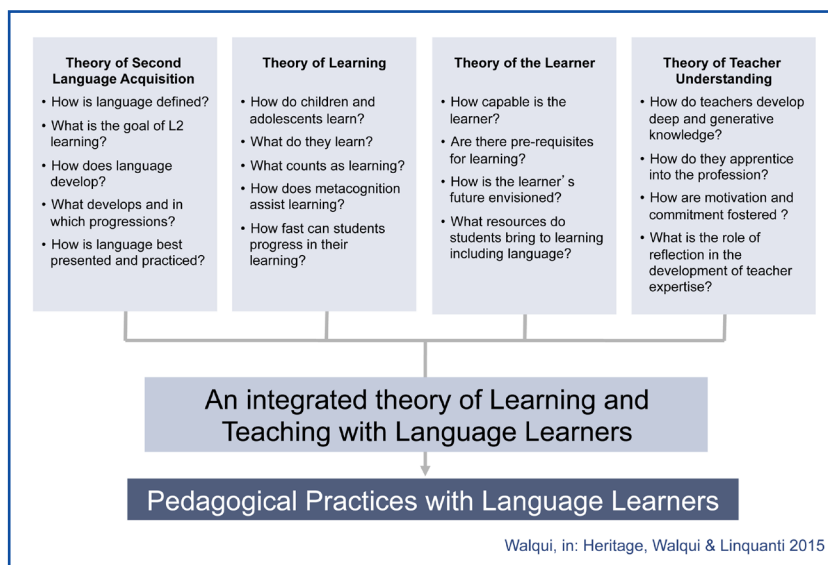
Transformation of the education of ELLs/MLLs thus requires that we begin to reconsider the quality and nature of tasks in which these students are typically involved in our classrooms. We need to shift towards more complex, interactive and carefully constructed activities that lead students into realizing their full capacity and contributions in the academic and civic circles in which they will reside. Practices which emphasize isolated consideration of verb forms do not engage students in substantive intellectual development, which involves the simultaneous development of conceptual, analytical, and language practices.

The role of theories

A theory is a set of interrelated and consistent statements that explain the reasons why we do something. Each statement fits within an integrated framework (the theory) in coherent ways. Theories are important because they help us describe what we do in consistent ways. People who adhere to a theory use the same terms to refer to the same specific ideas. Theories also help us explain why things happen or don't happen. Consequently they can help us predict what will happen if we engage in a particular action or set of actions.

Theories in education can provide reasons (why we do what we do) and value (what we can expect to happen if we do something) concerning our pedagogical practice. Thinking about the theoretical viewpoints behind our practice can transform our educational endeavors from ones in which we simply follow routines set by others (without understanding the reasons for these actions) to ones in which we select and enact invitations for students to participate in learning activities deliberately. Our “deliberateness” comes from our advance thinking about what needs to develop in students’ understandings as well as about the uniqueness of the individual students (their prior experiences and knowledge, their interests, strengths, and needs). Theories also enable us to understand, repair, or reframe what did not work out as we expected.

The chart on the right presents four theoretical domains that play an important role in teachers’ pedagogical decisions, and which in turn help to reveal what theories guide teachers’ actions. If we read the chart from bottom to top, the graph explains that whenever we observe a particular teaching practice, what we see is a manifestation of the teacher’s integrated theories, beliefs, and understandings that explain the basis of her actions. These theories include the teacher’s belief and understanding about how second languages develop (including what it means



to know a language); about learning in general (including how learning progresses in specific disciplines); about learners (including their existing strengths and skills); and about how teachers learn (including how professional practice involves continuous learning). A particular teacher's theories might also be revealed in her responses to the questions posed. What is important is the extent to which a practitioner's theories are founded on what is known about learning, about language learning in particular, and about teaching and learning in general. Equally important is the coherence of these theories. If, for example, a teacher has one theory of learning and a theory of learning second languages that is inconsistent with the first theory, her instruction is likely to be working at cross purposes, and students are less likely to grow academically.

In the example of teaching described earlier in this brief, we might conclude that the teacher who assigns the fill-in-the-blanks activity apparently would define language as form with an emphasis on grammar, especially if this is the typical type of task given to students in her classroom. Such practice would reveal a theoretical stance that what counts as having learned the language is students' ability to produce grammatically correct sentences—or even more minutely than that, to know what the correct form of the verb is that goes with a specific sentence.

By contrast, if a teacher defined language as action with an emphasis on purposefully understanding and exchanging ideas, then learning languages would involve learning ways of getting ideas across, getting things accomplished, where participation and support for accomplishing that are pivotal. A teacher or school with this theoretical understanding would contend that, in the process of learning, students will not initially produce grammatically perfect language. Furthermore, these teachers would understand that, if students are heard and their participations are valued, then they will be more willing to self-correct through the process. When learning is defined more like the process of apprenticing into a skilled action, then—like an apprentice—students are perceived as moving gradually into a community of practice where they are recognized as legitimate participants and wherein their expertise in the particular practice they are learning unfolds over time. Both teachers and students understand that their current development will keep approximating the norms of the target culture (literary, mathematical, scientific, or any other) as they engage in the practice of using the language in context for the purposes for which it is meant.

Theoretically, then, in this conceptualization of language, learning is seen as a process of apprenticeship, in which students do not accomplish mastery at first, but rather grow into it over time. Through apprenticeship, English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners are socialized into the practices that characterize disciplinary engagement in English, adding to the repertoire of other community practices they already possess in their native languages. Learners are seen in this theoretical frame as building on skills and knowledge from their prior language experience, and teachers are seen as engaging in learning themselves as they discover students' needs and provide support that helps them move from apprenticeship to autonomous mastery of skills they can apply without support.

This brief example demonstrates how important theoretical understandings are to determining practice. Educators considering how to strengthen the quality of teaching for ELLs/MLLs will find it provocative and productive to reflect on their own and other experts' theories concerning how second languages are learned, how learning happens in general, what students bring to learning, and how teachers themselves learn and develop as expert professionals. The briefs that follow this introductory brief will provide further opportunities for exploring solid theoretical foundations upon which the development of quality teaching for ELLs/MLLs can be re-thought and strengthened in schools.

We close this brief with an example of how this rethinking took place in one school in Austin, Texas. In the illustration, the teacher and the school solved a persistent learning challenge by reconsidering their thinking about how students learn, how language develops, what learners bring to the process, and how teachers learn. In accordance with these theoretical perspectives, they changed existing practice in coherent ways and enabled students to succeed at a task that was all along clearly within their potential.

Replacing outdated for promising future-oriented theories: An example of change

After attending a professional development institute on quality instruction for English Learners alongside all other members of her school leadership team, Stacia Crescenzi, the Assistant Principal at Lanier High School in Austin, Texas, agreed with her principal that the best way to encourage and support colleagues at the school in changing their theoretical stances and practices, they each needed to teach one class. The leadership institute they attended had presented the idea of a future-oriented developmental theory of learning whereby teachers developed students' potential building on what they knew, but working on their zone of potential development with deliberate supports offered by the teacher. Chief among the changes proposed was the notion that students learned best in interactions with each other. If this was the case, then, the leaders at Lanier assumed, teachers would also learn best in interactions with each other. In the proposed work, leadership would model how the implementation of coherent instructional practices unfolded over time. They would also open their classes to colleagues in the school to observe and jointly problematize ongoing implementation.

What Ms. Crescenzi did	Changes in Praxis and their Theoretical Rationales
<p>Ms. Crescenzi chose to teach the Remedial Writing class which was required for students who had not passed the writing portion of the STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness). In Texas, students can take the STAAR starting in 9th grade because passing this test is a requirement for graduation from high school. The majority of the students who had to take this class had taken the course three times, and most of them had been labeled English Learners for more than 7 years.</p> <p>To address multiple issues, Ms. Crescenzi engaged in several deliberate actions. First—with the support of her principal—she decided to turn the course from mandatory to elective. Given her extensive knowledge of psychology, she decided to build the course as an exploration of issues in psychology that would be appealing to teenagers. She then actively “recruited” specific students to enroll in the course, promising that they would find the course fascinating, that with her guidance and support they would do well in this course, and as a result they would be prepared for the writing test.</p> <p>The themes and readings she selected for the class were interesting, complex, and relevant. The lessons she designed built on students’ everyday knowledge and she built in structures that scaffolded their thinking to facilitate their movement toward increasingly more academic and sophisticated engagements with text and with each other. Every lesson presented multiple opportunities for students to interact with classmates, in focused and sustained ways.</p> <p>Sometimes students were grouped at their level of development, sometimes with more advanced peers, and at other times with students who needed more support than they did.</p> <p>Furthermore, Ms. Crescenzi “engineered”¹ some of the articles she used by, for example, dividing them into their main episodes, labeling them, and inserting questions for students to pay attention to as they read the specific section of the text. In this way she helped students develop an awareness of what good readers do as they read texts.</p>	<p>Theory of the Learner The school’s theory of the learner changed from one of “po-brecito” students who needed to be remediated to one that proposed that these ELLs needed the intellectual challenge of ambitious and rigorous curriculum.</p> <p>Theories of learning and second language learning The focus of the lessons changed from decontextualizing language learning to the simultaneous development of concepts, analytic skills and language.</p> <p>Theory of the learner The decision to allow students to elect the course rather than be required to take it was based on a recognition that learners need to feel a sense of ownership and pride in their learning rather than feeling stigmatized by having to take a remedial course.</p> <p>Theory of teaching The teacher assumed that her role was to support and prepare the students to achieve what she knew they could.</p> <p>Theories of learning and second language learning Lessons were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centered on ideas and practices that were relevant to students and highly interesting to them - Linked thematically, analytically and linguistically across the curriculum - “high challenge, high support” student engagement because the teacher understood learning as apprenticeship - designed to build from students’ strengths to rapidly develop their potential - deliberately scaffolded - sometimes conducted in more homogeneous and sometimes in more heterogeneous groups - composed of authentic texts, amplified texts, and engineered texts - designed so that each student had a role which contributed to the knowledge of the group and to joint utilization of new ideas

¹ See accompanying brief in this series about *Text Complexity* for definitions of text engineering and an elaboration of one of the strategies Ms. Crescenzi used as part of a theoretically coherent approach to the new practice.

What Ms. Crescenzi did	Changes in Praxis and their Theoretical Rationales
<p>Ms. Crescenzi used a variety of jigsaw activities in her class because they provided authentic opportunities for her students to “become experts” at certain aspects of a theme and to then report their knowledge to classmates who did not have this expertise. In turn these peers had knowledge of other aspects which complemented the understanding that was being built in a group.</p> <p>When other teachers visited Ms. Crescenzi’s class, she would listen to their comments and suggestions to then discuss with them how she was going to incorporate ideas that were consistent with her view. When she thought the suggestions were not appropriate, she invited colleagues to discuss whether they were coherent with the approach being taken by the school, providing reasons for their response.</p>	<p>Theory of teacher learning Educators are always in the process of developing their understanding by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - collaborating with each other - making their practice public - reflecting alone and reflecting collaboratively - not considering any lesson “perfect’ or “done.”

The results of Ms. Crescenzi’s efforts paid off for her students and her colleagues. Students passed the test and were able to graduate. The staff at Lanier established a learning community, where peers made their practice public, supported and challenged each other—in the same way that they worked with their students—and as a consequence contributed to realizing the ideal of equity in quality for English Learners and all other students.

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