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Dispelling the Myth of "English Only": Understanding the Importance of the First Language in Second Language Learning

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Throughout the world, learning two or more languages is the norm and not the exception. Calculations about the exact number of people who speak two or more languages across the globe vary. However, estimates of bilinguals in the world range from 50% and upwards, depending on the country and the location within a country (European Commission, 2006; Grosjean, 2014).

Ironically, although the United States (U.S.) is recognized as a "nation of immigrants," the population as a whole has not been successful at learning and maintaining languages other than English. Drawing on 2011 Census data, Grosjean (2012) estimates that roughly 80% of the U.S. population is monolingual. When people do acquire more than one language, the contexts in which individuals take on that second language can vary considerably. Accordingly, Valdés and Figueroa (1994) distinguish between two categories of bilinguals: elective and circumstantial. *Elective bilinguals* are those bilinguals who choose to learn a new language through foreign language courses or by living or traveling abroad. The high school student taking French, the child in a dual immersion program, or the college student living abroad for a semester are all examples of elective bilinguals. For elective bilinguals, the new language they are learning is not critical to their survival in society. Instead, elective bilinguals are selecting to add another language to their linguistic repertoire in a context in which their home language is the dominant language and the language of prestige[1].

By contrast, *circumstantial bilinguals* in the U.S. are individuals who find themselves in a situation in which they must learn another language in order to survive. The family language spoken by circumstantial bilinguals is not the majority language, the language of prestige. Thus, in order to participate economically and civically in the new society in which they find themselves, circumstantial bilinguals must acquire the dominant language. Very often, societal pressures to add the dominant language, coupled with the low prestige of the native language (L1), leads to marginalization or even total loss of the native language in favor of English.

In the case of the U.S., the education of English Language Learners (ELLs)/Multilingual Learners (MLLs), who can be considered circumstantial bilinguals, is heavily influenced by larger political issues, such as anti-immigration sentiment. ELLs/MLLs' education is further affected by the misconception by some Americans that promoting languages other than English poses a threat to the status of English – and to the society. Stemming partially from these political concerns and partially from misunderstandings about how a second language is acquired, students have traditionally been discouraged from using their first language in the classroom (and recently several states have even passed laws forbidding it[2]). Because language is tightly tied to identity and family, the subordination of home languages to English often causes students personal, cultural, and familial tensions. It also can lead to a phenomenon known as "subtractive bilingualism" where the ability to communicate in the home language is severely diminished or forgot-

[1] Linguistic prestige refers to the social value and respect that members of a society place on a particular language or dialect as compared to other languages and dialects.

[2] Voters have passed English-only education laws initiatives in Arizona in 2000 (S. Swiat, personal communication, March 22, 2017) and in Massachusetts in 2002 (S. Hughes, personal communication, March 6, 2017). A similar law had been passed in California in 1998, though it was repealed by voters in 2016 (Leigh Law Group, 2017).

ten, resulting in the loss of a valuable resource to the individual as well as to our society (Ruiz, 1984). Contrary to the myth that "English only" is the one and only path to successful English acquisition, research on language learning shows that it is beneficial to a student to continue using the L1, and that the L1 can be used as an effective scaffold in a classroom in service of the students learning the subject being studied — as well as of learning English. In this brief, we offer background on the importance of fostering continued use of the L1. We then provide a select set of instructional strategies that will help students strategically use their L1 to access texts and participate in activities while they are simultaneously learning English. In so doing, teachers can build into lessons in systematic ways, powerful opportunities for students to simultaneously develop conceptual knowledge and skills in a discipline while they are expanding sophisticated understandings of both their L1 and English, the new language.

What are the Benefits of Bilingualism?

Speaking two or more languages not only offers obvious practical benefits, but it is also an asset in an increasingly globalized world. The ability to speak, read, and write in two or more languages is a unique advantage in the job market, as local and global demands for employees who speak two or more languages continue to increase. Furthermore, a review of the research shows that bilingualism has numerous cognitive, social-emotional, and academic benefits as well. What follows is a review of a few of the benefits of bilingualism that go beyond finding a job.

A. Cognitive Benefits

Research examining the cognitive effects of bilingualism confirms its multiple benefits, including:

- Cognitive flexibility: Cognitive flexibility is the brain's ability to transition thinking about one concept, dimension, or task to another. The quicker you can make mental shifts, the greater your level of cognitive flexibility. For example, imagine you are getting ready to play a Bridge game with a group of friends, when the host announces a change in plans. Rather than play Bridge, you'll be playing Poker. Mentally, you need to shift gears to transition from the language and rules of Bridge to those of Poker. The quicker you can make this shift, the greater your cognitive flexibility. Those who struggle with this mental shift have poor cognitive flexibility, are more "rigid" in their thinking, and struggle to adapt to changes in their environment. By contrast, greater cognitive flexibility allows one to adapt more easily to unfamiliar or unexpected situations.

  Studies show that being bilingual has a positive impact on cognitive flexibility in children (Engel, Cruz-Santos, Tourinho, Martin & Bialystok, 2012). This increased cognitive flexibility appears to begin as early as two years of age (Pouline-Dubois, Blaye, Coutya & Bialystok, 2011), and possibly as early as infancy (Kovacs & Mehler, 2009). The cognitive flexibility associated with bilingualism continues into adulthood, with studies showing that, although such flexibility tends to decrease as we age, bilingualism may actually decrease the rate of decline (Gold, et al., 2013).

- Creativity in problem-solving: Several studies comparing monolinguals to bilinguals reveal that bilinguals tend to approach problem-solving tasks in ways that are more flexible and creative than monolinguals (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2006). Some researchers believe this increase in creative problem-solving may be due to bilinguals' ability to choose between languages and the cognitive flexibility that may develop as a result. Recent research shows that the problem-solving advantages that bilinguals demonstrate emerge as early as two years of age (Crivello, et al., 2016).

- Advanced metacognitive development: Metacognition refers to higher order thinking and includes having an awareness of one's own thinking and learning. For example, the mental processes employed when planning how to approach a learning task, monitoring comprehension, and then assessing progress towards the completion of the task are all metacognitive in nature (Livingston, 1997). Metacognition has also been associated with higher intelligence levels (Borkowski, Carr, & Pressley, 1987; Sternberg, 1986). Studies examining the cognitive impact

of bilingualism show that knowing and speaking more than one language supports cognitive development, including metacognition (Ransdell, Barbier, & Niit, 2006; Vorstman, De Swart, Ceginskas, & Van Den Bergh, 2009).

- Increased metalinguistic awareness: Research finds that bilinguals demonstrate increased metalinguistic awareness; that is, the ability to intentionally think about, reflect on, use knowledge about, and manipulate language (Hakuta & Diaz, 1985). Studies show that bilingual speakers who are highly proficient in both languages display greater metalinguistic awareness than monolinguals (e.g., Bialystok, Majumder & Martin, 2003; Campbell & Sais, 1995; Galambos & Hakuta, 1988). A simple example of metalinguistic awareness is the understanding that a Spanish bilingual has that "tomato" is the English word for "tomate" and further, that these two words are cognates (i.e., they share similar spelling, meaning, and pronunciation). It is believed that through the process of learning two or more languages, each with their own forms and grammatical structures, bilinguals develop an explicit understanding of how language works because they see the variance between two different language systems. Furthermore, they develop a recognition that words are symbols that represent underlying concepts. Increased metalinguistic awareness also prepares bilinguals to learn additional languages more easily than their monolingual counterparts.

- Delay of age-related mental decline: Recent research that examines the impact of lifelong bilingualism reveals that bilinguals not only tend to maintain better memory as they age, but the onset of dementia and Alzheimers is delayed by four years in functional bilingual adults (Bialystok, Craik, Klein, & Viswanathan, 2004; Bialystok, Craik, & Freedman, 2007; Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012; Schroeder & Marian, 2012.)

B. Social-Emotional Benefits

In addition to the cognitive benefits of knowing and using more than one language, there are also social-emotional benefits. Some of the social-emotional benefits of bilingualism include:

- Positive self-concept: One's home language is an essential element of one's identity. When a teacher provides the space and support to develop and maintain the L1, s/he conveys to the student that his/her culture and heritage is valued. Research investigating the social-emotional impact of maintaining the native language among immigrant adolescents reveals increased positive adjustment to the new culture and fewer signs of depression (Liu, Benner, Lau & Kim, 2009). Numerous studies examining the impact of native language instruction and maintenance of the L1 show that bilingual youth with these supports experience increased self-esteem and are more likely to form a stronger sense of ethnic identity, even among third-generation children of immigrants (Chinen & Tucker, 2006; Mills, 2001; Shibata, 2000; Wright & Taylor, 1995).

- Connection to family and community: When a student's native language is maintained, critical links to the family, community, and culture are upheld and enriched and thus also contribute to a child's positive concept of self. Research demonstrates that maintaining the native language positively impacts social interactions and relationships with other home language speakers (Cho, 2000). Bilinguals who develop their native language have a deepened understanding of cultural values, manners and ethics -- which further solidifies their relationships with family and community (Cho, 2000).

- Effective communication/Ability to see multiple perspectives: Effective communication requires one to attend to a wide spectrum of constantly changing information, including both verbal and non-verbal cues that occur in any given interaction. Physical cues such as body gestures and eye gaze, situational cues such as the topic and context in which a communication act takes place, as well as verbal cues such as prosody, intonation and pauses must all be correctly interpreted and responded to in order for communication to flow and not break down. For bilinguals, there is an additional layer of information to monitor and respond to appropriately, that

of language choice. Studies show that bilinguals tend to be more sensitive to this information as compared to their monolingual peers (Nicoladis & Genesee, 1996; Yow & Markman, 2011). Research examining effects of bilingualism during the elementary school years further demonstrates that interpersonal skills increase more rapidly among bilingual students as compared to their English monolingual peers from kindergarten to fifth grade (Han, 2012).

C. Academic Benefits

In addition to the metacognitive and social-emotional benefits of bilingualism, research also reveals its academic benefits. In general, higher proficiency levels in the native language are associated with reaching higher English language proficiency levels, improved academic achievement, and higher academic aspirations (Lee, 2002; Oketani, 1997). Additionally, higher proficiency of a bilingual in the native language has been linked to higher math scores and higher overall GPA attainment (Collier & Thomas, 2004). Research also shows that L1 use during prewriting has a positive impact on bilingual students' final written products in the L2 (Yigzaw, 2012). Research on bilingual Latino students further demonstrates that they not only maintain higher achievement scores and GPAs in later years of schooling, but they also maintain higher educational expectations as compared to their English dominant Latino peers (Golash-Boza, 2005).

How Can I Support the ELLs/MLLs in My Classroom?

Given the abundance of research demonstrating the benefits of bilingualism — not only economically, but also cognitively, emotionally, and academically — it makes sense that the characteristics of effective schools include a staff with a clear knowledge and understanding of bilingualism and second language development (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). However, the reality remains that there are 4.5 million K-12 ELL/MLL students in the U.S., most of whom are in classrooms with teachers who are more than likely unable to communicate, much less provide instruction, in a language other than English, and who have received very limited training on the topic of second language development (Snyder, de Brey & Dillow, 2016). Teachers might even feel bad or guilty for allowing L1 use in their classrooms because of misunderstandings cited earlier in this brief. On this point, we turn to the distinction that Richard Ruiz (1984) first made about the role of native language use in the education of ELLs/MLLs. We propose that if teachers can view students' L1 as a resource, as opposed to a problem, they can leverage their ELLs/MLLs' use of native language as a learning resource in the classroom.

It is with these perspectives and research findings in mind that we now highlight a few ways teachers can support students' strategic use of their L1 to access grade level curriculum and texts while they simultaneously learn English. The intent of these strategies is not to replace one language with the other. Rather, it is to promote students' abilities to use both languages to support and deepen understandings of subject matter, strengthen academic interactions with their peers in and out of the classroom, and develop their linguistic abilities themselves in the process. This integration of the L1 thereby invites and encourages bilinguals to apply all their linguistic resources to communicate effectively (Garcia, 2009).

When is it Appropriate to Support Students' Use of their L1?

We view students' L1 as a communications tool that, like any other tool, can be used judiciously to support ELLs/MLLs' learning. Three factors to consider about that use in instruction are the number of speakers of the L1, efficiency, and learning effectiveness (Cook, 2001). In making decisions about when it is appropriate to invite and support students' use of their L1, two questions to ask are: First, can a task be completed more efficiently through the L1 than the L2? Second, will learning English and content matter be better supported by using the L1 with the L2 for a given task? Here, we outline three ways in which judicious use of students' L1 can serve as a facilitative tool to learning English and that can help to develop a deeper understanding of content.

1. L1 to negotiate specific challenges through meaningful peer-to-peer conversations: Teachers increasingly recognize the value of incorporating peer-to-peer conversations in their instruction. Common names for this pedagogical scaffolding structure include "Think-Pair-Share," "Partner Talk," and "Turn and Talk." Learning is a social venture, with dialogue essential for learning to occur (van Lier, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). These structures provide a prime opportunity for the strategic use of students' L1 as they dialogue in their L1 in response to a topic or question posed in English. The teacher may then ask students to do their best to communicate their partner's response in English. Additionally, the teacher can invite students' use of L1 to express their questions about content, form or meaning and to respond to such questions posed by the teacher.

2. L1 to support collaborative work: The L1 can be used by students to collaborate more efficiently with peers in tasks that require them to engage with text comprehension or production. A teacher can structure a task so as to encourage sustained interaction among student pairs or small groups. By allowing students to use their L1 while they discuss the content, reflect upon the task at hand, and negotiate an appropriate response to the task, a teacher allows her ELLs/MLLs to draw on their linguistic resources in order to successfully collaborate and make meaningful contributions linguistically, conceptually, and academically. A teacher can then choose to ask students to share out the results of their discussion in English and/or to develop/translate the final product in English. It is important to let students know this requirement in advance so that they can collaboratively prepare for this step.

3. L1 to support pre-writing: Several opportunities present themselves when considering the use of students' L1 during the writing process. During the pre-writing phase, students may be invited to brainstorm and record their brainstorm notes in either their L1 or English. During the writing phase, depending on her students' ELL/MLL levels, a teacher may choose to welcome the student to write their ideas in the L1. Another choice may be for students to discuss their ideas with a peer or small group in the L1 and, once they reach consensus, collaboratively produce a written product in English.

These are three instructional spaces in which a teacher can strategically invite students' judicious use of the L1 as a learning tool and resource for deepening understanding of the content, as well as of English. Such deliberate use of the L1 encourages and enables ELLs/MLLs to contribute linguistically, conceptually, and academically in meaningful ways in the classroom – defying the myth that English only is the best route to learning.

While we highlight just three spaces for strategic L1 use, there are many more. The key for teachers is to consider those instructional moments in which action or communication is essential. By allowing and supporting in purposeful ways students' use of their full repertoire of languages, teachers enable ELLs/MLLs to demonstrate their understanding of subject matter and what they can do with language, such as identify a text's central idea, use evidence from the text to support inferences, or explain mathematical patterns (Grosjean, 2016). It should be reiterated that the most powerful impact of L1 use in classrooms will not result from random use by teachers or students of the L1; rather, these deliberate uses need to be purposefully implemented by teachers to maximize the L1's support as a tool to help students process information and communicate.

The ultimate goal is for teachers to support ELLs/MLLs' access to subject matter and English language development while simultaneously advancing their ability to understand and use their own knowledge and language in purposeful ways. A teacher need not be bilingual in order to appropriately support students' use of their L1 in the classroom. However, what is required is careful planning by teachers, in-depth understanding of students, and awareness of what students can do with selected languages, in addition to their full repertoire of languages (Grosjean, 2016).

We hope you found the ideas in this brief informative and useful. Please see our other briefs for additional information on pedagogical issues related to the effective instruction of ELLs/MLLs.

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