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Research
Into Practice

Teaching Multilingual Students

By Dr. Jim Cummins

The terms "multilingual" and/or "multilingual language learners" (MLLs) are increasingly used by educators to describe students from immigrant backgrounds who are in the process of learning the language of instruction at school. The term "multilingual classrooms" is used to describe classrooms that have significant numbers of students who speak a variety of languages and are learning the language of instruction.

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Dr. Cummins's research focuses on literacy development in educational contexts characterized by linguistic diversity. In recent years, he has been working actively with teachers to identify ways of increasing the literacy engagement of learners in multilingual school contexts. He has contributed to numerous educational programs over a period of 25 years, focusing on building in ELL supports to make academic content accessible to a wide range of students.

Why do we use the term "multilingual"?

The goal of using a "positive" term such as "multilingual" is to define students in terms of their talents and potential linguistic accomplishments (speakers of multiple languages) rather than in terms of what they lack (proficiency in the school language). Students whose multilingual identities are affirmed in this way perceive that teachers have high expectations for them to succeed in school. In response to these high expectations and the support they receive from teachers, students are likely to engage actively with learning. By contrast, when students' identities are implicitly defined by their current limitations in the school language (e.g., by labels such as "English-as-a-second-language students") or by terms that may have negative connotations in the wider society (e.g., "migrant students"), their confidence in their own academic abilities may be undermined and, as a result, they may engage less actively in learning.

What are the causes of educational success and failure?

In many countries, multilingual students from immigrant backgrounds perform less well in school than students from non-immigrant backgrounds (OECD, 2010). This is true both for students born outside the host country (first-generation immigrants) and students born in the host country (second-generation immigrants). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) identified several major factors that contribute to multilingual students' underachievement. Among these are the ***challenges multilingual students experience in learning a new language*** and, in an English-speaking context, catching up to native English-speaking students in school subjects such as science, mathematics, and social studies. Schools that have formulated clear

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instructional goals for teaching curriculum subjects to multilingual students as well as strategies for including students fully in the life of the school are more likely to be successful in helping students meet these linguistic and academic challenges than schools that have not formulated coherent policies.

> "Students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to perform significantly better when they attend schools with a socially balanced intake."

Social disadvantage is also associated with underachievement. Many newly arrived families are struggling economically and live in neighborhoods that are largely populated by other immigrant-background families. As a result of this concentration, children often attend schools with large numbers of socially disadvantaged students who are also learning the language of instruction. This means that they have less opportunity to interact socially with students who are native speakers of the school language. A consistent finding of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to perform significantly better when they attend schools with a socially balanced intake than when they attend schools with many students who are also from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

A third set of factors that influence students' school achievement in many countries is rooted in ***patterns of discrimination in the wider society.*** Historically, negative stereotypes about certain minority groups have given rise to discrimination in jobs, housing, and educational opportunities. The effects of discriminatory attitudes and social structures are evident in the large-scale school failure of students from Indigenous communities in countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, as well as the experience of groups such as African Americans and Hispanics in the United States. Hostility towards immigrant communities among some sectors of society in many European and North American countries has increased in recent years and this hostility in the wider society can influence what happens in schools. However, teachers have the power to challenge and reject discriminatory attitudes and structures that may exist in the wider society. When teachers communicate to multilingual students that they can succeed in school and when they provide appropriate instructional supports to make this happen, they are also simultaneously repudiating the negative stereotypes about immigrant communities that exist among some members of the wider society.

How can schools and individual teachers support multilingual students?

International research on the education of multilingual students has highlighted six overlapping sets of instructional strategies that respond directly to the causes of educational disadvantage among linguistically diverse, socially disadvantaged, and marginalized students. These strategies are:

- Scaffold comprehension and production of language.
- Reinforce academic language across the curriculum.
- Engage students' multilingual repertoires.
- Maximize literacy engagement.
- Connect with students' lives and the knowledge, culture, and language of their communities.
- Affirm students' identities by enabling them to use their language and literacy skills to carry out powerful intellectual and creative academic work.

These instructional strategies intersect as they respond to the causal factors, or opportunity gaps, contributing to multilingual students' underachievement. For example, a number of projects carried out in Canada and elsewhere have encouraged newcomer students to write in their home language about topics that connect with their lives and then translate this writing to English. These projects not only engage students' multilingual repertoires and affirm students' identities as creative writers with multilingual talents but also scaffold students' learning of the school language as they collaborate with other students and adults to translate their writing from their L1 to the school language. This translation process was supported by various human and technological resources

depending on what was available in different contexts (e.g., teachers or educational assistants who speak community languages, parents with some fluency in the school language, other multilingual students, community volunteers, and even technological resources such as Google Translate™). The ways in which one elementary school (Thornwood Public School in the Peel District School Board) engaged students' multilingual talents can be viewed at https://spark.adobe.com/page/fQLZZPiY8LORx/. The six instructional strategies are briefly described below.

1. Scaffold comprehension and production of language

The term "scaffolding" is frequently used to refer to the ways in which teachers provide additional supports to help multilingual students understand instruction and engage actively in learning. Scaffolding strategies include the following:

- *Graphic organizers* such as Venn diagrams, flow charts, etc.
- *Visuals in texts* such as photographs, drawings, diagrams, video clips, etc.
- *Demonstrations* such as modeling for students how to make sense of a text while reading.
- *Hands-on experiences* such as science experiments.
- *Collaborative group work* such as completing a graphic organizer.
- *Encouraging L1 use*, for example, writing initially in L1 as a means of transferring knowledge and skills from L1 to L2.
- *Learning strategies* such as planning tasks, visualization, grouping/classifying, note-taking/summarizing, questioning for clarification, etc.
- *Language clarification* through teacher explanations, providing examples, dictionary use, etc.

2. Reinforce academic language across the curriculum

The language of textbooks and classroom instruction is very different than the language we use in everyday conversation. Academic language includes far more low-frequency words (e.g., *photosynthesis, hypothesis,* etc.) as well as grammatical constructions (e.g., the passive voice) that we rarely use in casual everyday interactions.

Research carried out in several countries (e.g., Canada, Israel, United States) shows that although multilingual students may acquire reasonable fluency in using the school language for everyday conversational interactions within about 2 years of exposure, it typically requires *at least* 5 years for students to catch up academically. A major reason for this is that they are catching up to a moving target—students who are native speakers of the school language are increasing their literacy and general academic skills every year, and thus multilingual students must "run faster" in order to bridge the gap.

Students' progress will be accelerated when *all* teachers systematically draw students' attention to language and take every opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the school language across curriculum subjects.

3. Engage students' multilingual repertoires

The term "translanguaging" is increasingly being used to refer to instructional strategies that encourage students to use their home language (L1) as a cognitive tool to support their learning. Extensive research has demonstrated positive relationships between students' L1 conceptual development and their level of attainment in the school language (Cummins, 2001). When multilingual students come to school with a strong conceptual foundation in their L1, they develop stronger literacy skills and knowledge of academic subject matter content in the school language. Thus, teachers should never advise parents to switch to English in the home because many parents are likely to lack fluency in English and might consequently expose their children to poor models of the language and communication that is less conceptually rich than communication in their stronger home language. Instead, it is much more helpful to encourage parents to (a) spend quality time interacting with their children, (b) expose them frequently to stories and books, and (c) stimulate their intellectual curiosity about the world. The stronger students' L1 develops in the home, the better they will perform in learning English and succeeding academically in school.

"Students' progress will be accelerated when ***all*** teachers systematically draw students' attention to language."

Case studies carried out in multiple countries over the past 20 years have demonstrated that multilingual students' L1 can play a significant positive role in promoting achievement, even in contexts where many languages are represented in the classroom and the teacher does not speak these languages (Cummins & Early, 2011). The following strategies are some of the ways in which teachers can encourage students to use their entire multilingual repertoire in their learning:

- Each day, teachers invite one or two students to share a word from their home languages with their classmates and explain why they chose that word and what it means. Over time, students and teachers learn a variety of words and expressions in different languages.
- Examples of students' work in their home languages and in the school language are prominently displayed in school corridors and at the school entrance. This reinforces the message that students' diverse languages are both personal and educational assets.
- Students write and publish online dual language or multilingual stories or projects. Older multilingual students can write dual language stories for younger students to read.
- Across subject areas, teachers encourage students to conduct research online in their home languages for class projects.

4. Maximize literacy engagement

Extensive research (e.g., OECD, 2010) suggests that students who engage actively with reading develop significantly stronger reading skills than those who engage less frequently with reading. Research has also documented that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds experience significantly less access to print and opportunities to engage with literacy in their homes and neighborhoods than students from more advantaged backgrounds. An obvious reason for limited print access in children's homes is that parents who are experiencing economic difficulties don't have the money to buy books and other cultural resources (e.g., smartphones, tablet computers) for their children, and many may not be highly literate in their own languages. The OECD findings suggest that schools could "push back" about one-third of the negative effects of social disadvantage by ensuring that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds become actively engaged with reading and other literacy activities from an early age.

> "Encourage multilingual parents to tell stories and read to their children from an early age in their home language."

Teachers can promote a culture of literacy engagement in their schools by implementing the following strategies:

- Ensure that schools serving multilingual students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have well-stocked libraries, ideally including books in relevant community languages, in addition to English, that students can take home to read with their parents.
- Encourage multilingual parents to tell stories and read to their children from an early age in their home language (and English if parents are fluent).
- In the preschool and early grades of primary school, read and dramatize engaging stories to students on a daily basis.
- Create a community of readers within the classroom where students discuss fictional and non-fictional books, connect stories and ideas to their own lives and interests, and explore the deeper meanings of what they are reading.
- Encourage students to write in a variety of genres and display examples of students' English and L1 writing in the classroom and on school corridor walls.

5. Connect instruction to students' lives

Effective instruction for multilingual students connects to students' lives by activating their existing knowledge and building background knowledge as needed. Learning can be defined as integrating new knowledge and skills with the knowledge and skills we already possess. Therefore, it is crucial to activate students' preexisting knowledge so that they can relate new information to what they already know. In the case of recently arrived multilingual students, their

background knowledge is encoded in their L1. Thus, a significant goal of instruction is to help them transfer what they already know in L1 to the school language.

Connecting instruction to students' lives also involves getting them excited about learning. An example of how this excitement about learning can be generated is the mathematics unit on data management taught by teacher Tobin Zikmanis to his grade 5 students in a highly diverse primary school near Toronto. Working in groups of 3 or 4, the students carried out a survey of the languages spoken by all the students in the school and then entered the data into a spreadsheet program that generated various ways of displaying the data (e.g., pie charts, bar graphs, etc.). Zikmanis describes how students became so engaged with the project that he had difficulty persuading them to go out for recess. Students' engagement derived not only from discovering the power of mathematics to uncover new realities but also from the fact that they were discovering new information and insights about their own collective linguistic accomplishments.

6. Affirm students' identities by enabling them to use language in powerful ways

How can schools counteract the negative effects of stereotypes that devalue the identities of students from marginalized social groups? If, as the research suggests, identity devaluation undermines students' engagement with learning, then identity affirmation must be part of the solution. A first step is for teachers and school leaders to examine their own school policies and practices by collectively reflecting on the following questions:

- Does the school acknowledge multilingual students' languages as intellectual and cultural resources?
- To what extent do teachers attempt to connect instruction with students' lives and extend their intellectual and imaginative horizons?
- Does the school view itself as a multilingual space where students' projects and writing (e.g., dual language books) are displayed prominently around the school?
- To what extent does instruction actively engage multilingual students in higher-order thinking and creative inquiry into social issues?

These questions are all part of a larger question: *"What is the image of the student that we are sketching in our instruction?"*

Conclusion

The instructional strategies discussed in this article are all supported by research and have been implemented successfully in a wide variety of contexts. ***The effectiveness of these instructional strategies will be enhanced when they are implemented on a schoolwide basis.*** Development and implementation of this kind of school-based language policy will require opportunities for professional learning among teachers and, in the long term, a rethinking of priorities within university-based teacher education programs.

> "The effectiveness of these instructional strategies will be enhanced when they are implemented on a schoolwide basis."

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