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Focus: Early Learning

Recalibrating Readiness and Instruction Based on Strengths of English Learners –

Implications for Early Childhood Education Research and Practice

by Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D.

Much of the current research on early education of poor and minority children – although well intentioned – is biased and focused on family and children's deficits and maladaptations as the causes for the lack of academic readiness and underperformance of a significant number of children in this country (Cabrera 2013; Robledo Montecel, et al., 1993).

Research is remiss in studying the effects of educational policies and practices that are detrimental to the performance of a large segment of the student population, primarily minority children, students from low-income families and English language learners. When schools use this research to inform interventions, they consequently fall short of creating an optimal learning environment for children and neglect to foster their intellectual and social well-being.

Cabrera explains that this deficit-oriented research overly emphasizes the "negative effects of inadequate economic and social resources and an elevated rate of behavior problems, decreased social competence, and lower rates of school success among these children" (2013).

The research needs a new asset-based approach to poor and minority children and their families. Schools should acknowledge these assets in their plans for a quality educational program and other interventions that lead to children's optimal academic and social growth. In this article, we emphasize the need to redefine *readiness* to integrate the strengths bilingual children bring to the classroom, and detail the need to adjust instruction to enhance their academic engagement and performance.

For example, efforts to improve children's readiness for school have profound implications for the quality of education that can be afforded in programs like Head Start, that cumulatively serve millions of children ages birth to 5, a student population that is projected to grow significantly. A report by the Office of Head Start at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reveals that, in the 2012-13 school year, 30 percent of participants were from families that primarily spoke a language other than English at home. Twenty-five percent of participants were from families that primarily spoke Spanish at home (Office of Head Start, 2014).

What Research Says about Bilingualism that Must Be Addressed in Curricular and Instructional Decisions

Learning and *transfer of knowledge* refer to key processes in education that are manifested in the teaching process and become integral parts of an instructional plan. *Learning* refers to a knowledge-building process, while *transfer* involves using pre-existing knowledge in new contexts. Research on the effects of bilingualism reveals that *(cont. on Page 2)*

"Children need places that are safe, that are nurturing, that welcome their families, that welcome their culture and their language and have them really be able to learn and prepare themselves for life."

– Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

(Recalibrating Readiness and Instruction Based on Strengths of English Learners, continued from Page 1)

a child's ability to learn and transfer knowledge is enhanced when it is factored into the instruction (Zelasko & Antunez, 2000). In particular, these findings on the benefits of bilingualism generally have an impact on our understanding of language acquisition and learning processes that include phonological processing, syntactical awareness, working memory, morphological awareness, semantic processing and application.

Pedagogically speaking, the cognitive and social benefits of being bilingual represent a set of strengths that curriculum coordinators and teachers should factor into the teaching and learning processes. An effective teacher will build on these cognitive and social strengths when planning and delivering instruction first, by assessing the level of bilingualism that children bring to the classroom and plan accordingly to ensure greater engagement of these children in the learning process. A caveat, however, to be considered in making instructional decisions is that research findings also reveal that the level of bilingualism affects the quality of these cognitive and social benefits (Zelasko & Antunez, 2000).

Implications for Further Research

With the knowledge that already exists about the benefits of bilingualism and the cognitive processes of language acquisition and learning, the next step is to identify and commit to research the impact that these benefits have on the instructional process. The identification of the research question to be addressed may be based on an informed decision or inference about the potential positive impact that a finding (disposition to challenges, cognitive flexibility for complex tasks, greater receptivity and adaptability, etc.) can have on the teaching of learning objectives. In this case, how do findings on the benefits of bilingualism affect the teaching of critical learning objectives whose cognitive processes could be enhanced by a child's level of bilingualism.

The instructional implications are many and range from timing of the learning objective (when), delivery mode (how as it relates to delivery of instruction in a cultural and linguistic context), length of instructional time and assessment strategies. Research must focus on studying these inferences and supplying teachers with research-based strategies that build on the cognitive and social benefits of being bilingual.

Key learning objectives that will be positively affected by five major findings on the benefits of bilingualism have been identified for further study. The table above delineates the five major findings and the learning objectives identified from Head Start competencies and, for example, the Texas standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills).

Research on bilingualism is a work in progress and continues to provide valuable insights into its

(cont. on Page 6)

Positive Relationship between Research Findings on Bilingualism and Selected Learning Objectives

Selected Research Findings	Sample Learning Objectives for Children
Children who are bilingual have minds that are cognitively active and flexible (Zelasko & Antunez, 2000)	• Match language to social contexts • Identify and sort pictures of objects into conceptual categories
Children who are bilingual are better at switching between tasks (Wisehart, et al., 2014)	• Follow two- to three-step oral directions • Engage in exercises that require various steps or tasks
Children who are bilingual are prone to adjust more easily to environmental changes (Marian & Shook, 2012)	• Use language for different purposes • Use descriptive words to describe an object or topic
Young bilingual children "consistently show a semantic preference suggesting they reach a semantic development two to three years earlier" (Ianco-Worrall, 1972)	• Combine more than one idea using complex sentences • Separate words within a sentence
Bilingual children show a greater ability to identify grammatical and syntactical errors at an earlier age (Bailystok, et al., 2005)	• Exhibit pre-reading related skills • Share information and ideas by clearly using the conventions of language

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Margarita's Necklace – Beads, Patterns and Algebraic Thinking for English Learners

by Juanita C. García, Ph.D., and Rosana Rodríguez, Ph.D.

To make sure that bilingual/bicultural students have the skills they need to be college- and career-ready, success in algebra matters. All too often, however, teachers of young children do not have the resources they need to know how to integrate language learning and mathematical literacy.

Teachers can inspire interest and concrete skills in mathematics while simultaneously building language proficiency. The ability to identify, describe and foster algebraic reasoning in the early grades through language can help promote STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and foster skills in algebra specifically.

Algebra is not just computation with variables that begin with whole numbers, then fractions, then decimals. Students should be able to create equations that describe numerical relationships, reason abstractly, practice solving problems in more than one way, and justify and communicate their thinking.

Children as early as kindergarten benefit from practicing the skills and building comprehension and knowledge that lead to mastery in algebra. Because of their innate inquisitiveness, young children are natural-born scientists and mathematicians. Inherent in children are curiosity, creativity, collaboration and critical thinking-concepts that are at the heart of STEM (Chesloff, 2013). Highly effective teachers of English learners play a vital role in nurturing these natural behaviors for STEM learning that children bring.

El Collar de Margarita ~ Margarita's Necklace is one of a number of stories that comprise IDRA's comprehensive *Semillitas de aprendizaje*, bilingual supplemental early childhood materials based on the art of storytelling and story reading. (see Page 7) This culturally-relevant story entices children to learn to create different patterns, similar to the protagonist in this charming story who comes from a family of artisans. In her home, the family members work the *chaquira*, the fine art of intricate beadwork used to create lovely necklaces, bracelets and rings. Margarita learns how to work with patterns and begins to craft a marvelous necklace.

The story inspires children to create their own patterns. It can be used effectively by teachers as a springboard to encourage children to explore and analyze patterns, count, and make predictions that are essential skills in developing math literacy, thereby increasing their ability to identify, describe and foster algebraic reasoning in the early elementary grades.

Describing and understanding patterns, numbers and operations also can contribute greatly to language development. And by introducing the mathematical concepts of patterns and predictions through culturally-relevant children's stories, teachers can facilitate a connection with content. This vital connection between language and mathematics builds on children's knowledge and provides additional opportunities to think in particular ways that result from analyzing relationships between quantities, noticing structures, studying change, generalizing and analyzing patterns, and learning to recognize and generate predictions, and form mathematical equations and algebraic rules.

Stories that are reflective of history, language and culture can be powerful stimulators to set the stage that excites STEM interest. Additionally, this approach can support early learners in sharing values, introducing new ideas and vocabulary, and catalyzing children to learn more about mathematics in the world around them.

Through interactive and engaging STEM learning experiences, children develop mathematical concepts through and with language. This essential foundation helps students construct a concrete understanding of key concepts in mathematics, allowing for future learning of more abstract ideas and more advanced algebraic thinking.

(cont. on Page 4)

Fostering young children's interest and excitement in STEM can begin in the bilingual classroom through the dynamic use of stories, language and algebraic thinking.

(Margarita's Necklace – Beads, Patterns and Algebraic Thinking for English Learners, continued from Page 3)

Using the *Semillitas de aprendizaje* culturally-relevant bilingual children's stories can support exploration of key math processes, such as recognizing, describing, extending and translating patterns that encourage children to think more globally and algebraically.

Why Algebra Matters

Algebra is recognized and often called the "gatekeeper" subject for college and career readiness. It is used across professions ranging from electricians to architects to computer scientists. It is increasingly a path to success in our globally competitive economy. When children make the transition from concrete arithmetic to the symbolic language of algebra, they develop abstract reasoning skills necessary to excel in math and science.

Juanita Copley writes: "Mathematics is the science and language of patterns. Thinking about patterns helps children make sense of mathematics. They learn that mathematics is not a set of unrelated facts and procedures; instead, recognizing and working with patterns helps young children predict what will happen, talk about relationships, and see connections between mathematics concepts and their world." (2000)

What Teachers Can Do

Highly effective teachers of English learners know the importance of math literacy and learn how to integrate language learning across disciplines. They understand the importance of fostering interest in STEM fields and increasing minority representation in these critical fields that will play an expanding role in our nation's workforce and economy.

Excellent teachers of English learners encourage language and literacy, encourage early interest and success in math and language, inspire critical thinking skills/deeper learning, and develop mathematics inquiry and proficiency. They are familiar with and integrate the five strands of mathematical proficiency adopted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics:

1. **conceptual understanding** – the big picture of learning mathematics where concepts are connected to previous math learning;
2. **procedural fluency** – the step-by-step calculations of solving problems;
3. **strategic competence** – solving a problem in more than one way;
4. **adaptive reasoning** – reflecting, justifying and communicating thinking; and
5. **productive disposition** – the relevance and value of mathematics.

These five strands are interconnected and must all work together for mathematical proficiency.

Unfortunately, in many classrooms, step-by-step calculations or procedural fluency take a dominant and exclusive role in math instruction, limiting potential for student learning. But additional resources and strategies have been developed, such as those through IDRA's Math Smart! professional development for teachers of English language learners. Grounded in scientifically-based and best-practices research in mathematics teaching and English learning, IDRA's Math Smart! model focuses on increasing mathematical proficiency for all students while deepening teacher content knowledge. At the core is the understanding that all children have an innate, natural sense of mathematics – which is a shift away from a traditionally deficit view to a valuing and asset perspective of students' knowledge and potential. Combining these Math Smart! best-practices approaches with IDRA's *Semillitas de aprendizaje* stories can be a powerful combination in promoting critical thinking and connecting language learning to content areas.

Effective teachers of English learners who are knowledgeable in language and mathematical proficiency and who know how to effectively use tools to inspire STEM through the use of culturally-relevant educational supports can open doors to more equity, access and excellence in education for all students.

Resources

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Juanita C. García, Ph.D., is an IDRA consultant. Rosana Rodríguez, Ph.D., is an IDRA consultant. Comments and questions may be directed to IDRA via email at comment@idra.org.

Meet Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D.

IDRA Chief of Operations

This year, the *IDRA Newsletter* is highlighting our staff's varied and diverse talents and backgrounds. Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D., is IDRA's Chief of Operations. In addition to his impressive work in education spanning pre-K through higher education, Dr. Villarreal has always been drawn to public and community service, a family legacy left by his parents, who were restaurant business owners. They instilled a strong work ethic and sense of collaboration, community, cooperation and leadership, as they encouraged their children to become engaged in their family business and in civic engagement. These early experiences influenced Dr. Villarreal's decision to pursue a double major in business and government for his bachelor's degree. The importance of multi-sector civic engagement and leadership grew, as he was expected to take over and lead the family business. However, this expectation gave way to another career and lifelong vocation when he was offered a teaching position in his hometown. His passion for equity, access and excellence in education grew exponentially into lifelong and distinguished leadership in this arena that is nationally recognized. He has taught students from third grade to the university level and served as an elementary school principal and a district director of secondary curriculum. He has also overseen compliance with *Lau* regulations with the Office for Civil Rights. Dr. Villarreal is a national leader in school program management, curriculum development, and facilitating innovative models for school change. His deep understanding of family, community and multi-sector engagement further broadened his horizons into the jewelry business, and in owning stores in Seguin, San Marcos, and San Antonio, another interest which he shares with his wife, as he continues to build a business legacy. He continues passing his impressive skills to his children, all of whom own and are leaders in the business world.

Early Childhood Literacy Connections When Using Cognates

by Sulema Carreón-Sánchez, Ph.D.

English language learners comprise a fast-growing population that has a number of implications for classroom instruction. In the United States, 4.7 million students – 10 percent of the student population – are English language learners (ELLs). Teachers choose instructional strategies and tools based in part on the age and level of English language proficiency of their students. A recent encounter that I experienced in a classroom demonstrates the importance of cognates in the early elementary classroom setting.

One morning, I had the privilege of going to a bilingual classroom to read to students. Typically in a bilingual classroom, students' proficiency levels will range from beginner to advanced high levels, as identified by the state. Unaware of the specific proficiency levels of students, I selected a bilingual book. As I began to read the story in Spanish, some students were responding to the questions in Spanish. But I noticed that some other students were not responding. So I began to read in English. I continued to ask questions in English, and some students responded in English. I decided to read each page, first in Spanish and then in English. Then we had a class discussion.

One student proudly told me that he was nervous because in a few weeks he was going to be in a spelling contest. As we talked, I learned that he could easily spell words in Spanish, but words in English would prove to be challenging for him. He said the English words seemed confusing, and he could not remember how to spell them.

I asked, "Do you think you know how to spell those words in Spanish?" Proudly, he answered, "Yes, those are easy." So I suggested the following: First think of the word in Spanish, look at it visually, than try to spell it in English. The boy's eyes lit up. "I think I found a way to remember the English words!"

I returned to the book and as a concluding activity I pointed out several cognates in the story, giving students a tool to connect Spanish to English.

Aida Walqui and Leo van Lier highlight the concepts of "playground and classroom languages" (2010). The term *playground language* refers to words used by children in social environments when they want to belong when playing games or making friends. It is simple language used to be a part of the class or group. The term *classroom language,* or *academic language,* refers to words teachers use to teach and is focused on classroom lessons. Using cognates can help with building academic language by transferring common words in meaning, spelling and pronunciation.

IDRA and others' research have identified a variety of factors that are related to the achievement gaps of students, including limited access to high-quality preschool instruction, inequitable school funding, low quality curricula and instruction (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010).

Educators are familiar with the idea that strong vocabulary development leads to successful building of academic language. Moreover, this vocabulary bank grows and becomes a resource for students connecting to the funds of knowledge. Moll, et al., define *funds of knowledge* as "the historically-accumulated and culturally-developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (1992).

Montelongo & Hernández state that the background of bilingual students with their funds of knowledge puts them at an advantage over English-only speakers for acquiring academic vocabulary (2013). This knowledge can assist with literacy and success of second language learners.

Cognates are words in two languages that are common in meaning, spelling and even pronunciation. Colorín Colorado has identified 30 percent to 40 percent of English words have a *(cont. on Page 6)*

The background of bilingual students with "funds of knowledge" puts them at an advantage over English-only speakers for acquiring academic vocabulary.

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Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity

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(Early Childhood Literacy Connections When Using Cognates, continued from Page 5)

related word in Spanish (2007). Montelongo & Hernández emphasize that "Spanish cognates are an important category of vocabulary words" (2013). The authors identified more than 20,000 such cognates as identified in academic vocabulary words deriving from the Latin and the Greek languages. Examples of some cognate in mathematics are: function – función; formula – formula; triangle – triángulo. Examples of science academic words are: calculate – calcular; comparison – comparación; investigate – investigar.

Jiménez & Gámez (1996) found that just using cognates is not enough, "Direct instruction is required" to show students how to make connections. When students use cognates in early grades, they can begin to make the connections to math, science, social studies and reading and can continue the connections as they progress through school. The scaffolding of academic words will be extended between advanced high school courses and will act as a spring board to college readiness. As a result, students will have a tool for future use to increase the learning of unfamiliar English words.

Montelongo & Hernandez (2013) stress that it is essential that students continue to develop their Spanish vocabulary to take full advantage of the cognates. Thus, for example, when reading a story to children in a bilingual classroom, the reader can incorporate vocabulary activities using cognates to help students build a rich vocabulary and make connections to their first language.

While having fun and supporting classroom learning, a classroom teacher may observe and learn through one's modeling of how important these strategies can be for ELL students no matter what the proficiency level is. Technology today provides a variety of ways to use cognates as a resource. Some websites offer titles of books and will go to the extreme of identifying specific types of cognates within the story. School districts can begin gathering their targeted vocabulary per grade level or per content area and begin their cognate banks.

Resources

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(Recalibrating Readiness and Instruction Based on Strengths of English Learners, continued from Page 2)

cognitive and social benefits. We, as educators, must be aware of these advantages and integrate them into our instructional practice. The need for pedagogical research that focuses on children's strengths and for teachers to conduct action research are in greater demand now than ever. In an upcoming issue of the *IDRA Newsletter*, we will address other assets and strengths that bilingual children, in particular, bring to school.

Resources

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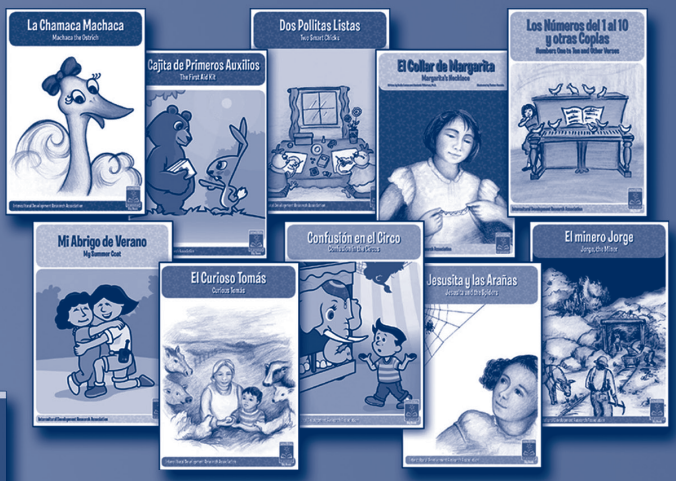

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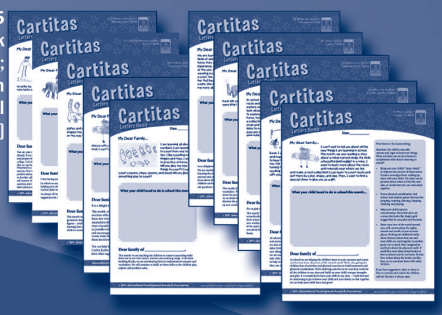

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