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Using Students’ Native Languages in the Classroom:

Rationale and Strategies for Monolingual Teachers

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Abstract

The number of English Language Learners in American public schools is increasing every year, yet these students are not achieving academic or English proficiency as measured by standardized assessments. Researchers have documented the use of students’ native languages as a valuable academic resource tool for English Language Learners. Research shows that when teachers incorporate students’ native languages into classroom instruction, students increase their metalinguistic awareness, learn more academic content, increase their English proficiency, and have more well-developed identities and self-esteem. However, incorporating students’ native languages into the classroom can be very difficult in multilingual classrooms or in classrooms in which the teacher only speaks English. Furthermore, it is a political and emotional debate due to its roots in Americanism and English as a national language. However, the use of students’ native languages can influence the success of English Language Learners in our school system. Therefore, finding strategies that allow teachers to incorporate students’ native languages into the classroom, even when the teacher does not speak the language, is a vital issue for educators today. This paper addresses the benefits of incorporating students’ native languages into daily classroom instruction, methods and strategies for using students’ native languages, and an example of using students’ native languages in a small-group setting.

**Rationale**

In the 2003-2004 school year, American public schools provided English language learner (ELL) services to over 3.8 million students (United States Department of Education, 2006). The 2000 Census projects that by the year 2030, ELLs will constitute approximately 40 percent of the K-12 population in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2000, as cited in Brooks & Karathanos, 2009, p. 47). The number of children who do not speak English as a first language is increasing, and these students are enrolling in the American public school system; however, they are not achieving academic proficiency as measured by standardized assessments. For example, the 2005 national assessment showed that 46 percent of fourth-grade ELL students failed to achieve basic levels in mathematics, and 73 percent of ELL fourth graders performed below the basic level in reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Additionally, many of these students are not graduating from high school, which shows that public schools are not adequately preparing students to succeed in school or pass graduation exams. Fry (2003) states that foreign-born Hispanic students are twice as likely to drop out of high school compared to Hispanic students born in the United States. Much of this statistical difference can be contributed to English acquisition: Latino students who “do not speak English well” drop out at a rate of 59 percent, compared to those who speak English well drop out at a rate of 15 percent (p. 4). These statistics show the urgent need to develop instructional frameworks that meet the specific needs of ELLs so that these students can acquire English, obtain academic proficiency, and succeed in school.

**Influence of Politics**

According to Petrovic (1997), the education of ELLs and immigrants is closely tied to issues of nationalism, immigration, and multilingualism, which all are very political and controversial (cited in Rolstad, Mahoney & Glass, 2005, p. 573). Politicians and educators frequently debate the use of students’ native language(s) (L1) in the classroom (Lucas & Katz, 1994). As Brooks and Karathanos (2009) note, the United States has a long history of controversy related to English immersion. One of the leading perspectives on ELL education is rooted in the monolingual principal, which emphasizes using only English to help students learn to think in English without any interference from their L1 (Cummins, 2009, p. 317). Those who support the monolingual principal believe that using students’ L1 prevents them from learning English. Furthermore, some individuals who hold this idea also believe that English should be the national language of the United States. Therefore, those who adamantly affirm the components of the monolingual principal support instructional policies that ban the use of the L1.

The United States government, at local, state, and federal levels, influences the use of students’ L1 in the classroom. For example, some states, (i.e. California, Arizona, and Massachusetts) do not allow educators to use any languages other than English in public schools. This belief system is also revealed at the federal level through the passage of the English Acquisition Act, which replaced the Bilingual Education Act in 2002. The English Acquisition Act emphasizes English rather than bilingual or dual-language instruction. Furthermore, Crawford (2004) states that the act created new accountability measures that pressure schools to transition students to mainstream education classes as quickly as possible (cited in Rolstad et al., 2005, p. 573).

However, many researchers disagree with this perspective, theoretically and fundamentally. Individuals on the other side of this debate base their argument in Cummins’ Linguistic Interdependence Principal, which states that there is an underlying cognitive foundation that is common across all languages, and this underlying structure allows individuals to transfer academic, literacy-related, or cognitive knowledge from one language to another, despite differences in surface-level features of languages (Cummins, 2007, p. 232). Those who support Cummins’ model believe that a foundation in the L1 allows students to acquire knowledge in their second language more readily, and they see bilingualism as an asset and valuable resource (Reyes & Asuara, 2008; Martinez-Roldan, 2005; Serna, 2009). They strongly argue that research does not support prohibiting students’ L1 from the classroom (Huerta-Marcias & Kephart, 2009, p. 94; Cummins, 2007, p. 225).

From these very polar perspectives, it is clear that ELL education is controversial, and incorporating the use of students’ L1 is at the height of that controversy. As Cummins (1989) summarizes, “The bilingual education debate is more strongly based on political than pedagogical considerations.” (p., 39, as cited in Lucas & Katz, 1994, p. 537), and most schools focus on the acquisition of English as opposed to the development or maintenance of bilingualism (Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994). However, the emotional nature of the debate demonstrates the need to use research to inform educational policies and instructional practices to ensure that ELLs are receiving effective academic and English instruction (Lucas & Katz, 1994, p. 542).

**Transfer Between Languages**

To develop background understanding about the topic of incorporating students’ L1 into classroom instruction, it is important to summarize the literature regarding the transfer of literacy and academic knowledge between languages. In 2006, August and Shanahan published a synthesis of empirical research regarding literacy development in ELLs, and their preliminary research indicates that phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, fluency, decoding skills, vocabulary knowledge, and word-reading skills transfer between English and Spanish. Furthermore, Cummins (2007) states there are five major types of transfer between languages: conceptual ideas, metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies, pragmatics, phonological awareness, and specific linguistic elements (p. 233). As stated previously, Cummins’ Lingusitic Interdependence Principal explains that while surface aspects of languages are different, there is an underlying cognitive and academic structure that is common across all languages, and it supports the transfer of knowledge and literacy-based skills between languages (Cummins, 2007, p. 232). In summary, research suggests that cognitive and academic skills can transfer between languages, and knowledge and skills that are known in one language can be used in the second language. Therefore, the evidence of transfer suggests that students’ L1 can be used successfully in classrooms to promote the academic achievement and English language knowledge of ELLs. With the understanding that the L1 can be a tool for ELLs, this paper will discuss the specific ways the L1 enhances students’ knowledge in a variety of areas, as well as specific ways teachers can incorporate students’ L1 into classroom instructional practices.

**Justification for Using L1**

**General Support for the Use of the L1**

Extensive research on language and academic development for ELLs shows that valuing and utilizing students’ L1 as a resource is critical for their school success. Research indicates that using students’ L1 provides them with greater access to academic content, advanced cognitive growth, and greater development of their English language skills (Karathanos, 2009, p. 617). Freeman and Freeman (1993) explain that while the idea that incorporating more English into ELLs’ educational experience to increase their English skills is logical, it is not supported by research. They state, “The most effective way for bilingual students to develop both academic concepts and English language proficiency is through their first language” (p. 553). Cummins (2007) explains this phenomenon through the idea that instruction for ELLs needs to activate and build upon students’ prior knowledge explicitly; when educators ignore the use of students’ L1, they are not allowing students to use their current knowledge as a resource because much of this information is encoded in their L1 (p. 231). Youngquist and Martinez-Griego (2009) elaborate by describing that when teachers immerse students in English, they are ignoring students’ current literacy development; therefore, they believe that good teaching builds upon students’ strengths in their L1 (p. 94).

Brooks and Karathanos (2009) state, “Children who receive academic instruction in both their first and second language perform better linguistically, cognitively, and academically in their second language” compared to students who only receive instruction in English (p. 48). Classroom observation data reports that the incorporation of students’ L1 into instruction is an effective practice (Lucas & Katz, 1994). It is clear from these current researchers that using students’ L1 does not hinder their academic achievement or attainment of English language skills (Reyes & Asuaea, 2008). Instead, the use of students’ L1 allows students to use what they already know as a building block for new learning. Furthermore, documented persistent use of students’ L1 by teachers, despite laws that attempt to restrict instruction to English-only, supports the idea that the L1 is a useful resource for ELLs attempting to master both English and academic material (Seng & Hashim, 2006).

**Influence on English Acquisition**

Research consistently demonstrates a correlation between many different aspects of native language skills and English oral proficiency (Roberts, 2008; Paratore et al., 1995). Research findings show that second-language proficiency is one of the best predictors of English proficiency (Lucas & Katz, 1994). In addition, there is a correlation between native language literacy and English literacy: students with L1 literacy typically acquire English literacy faster than students without L1 literacy (Dong, 1998).

As stated previously, students can transfer their knowledge about one language to their knowledge of a second language; therefore, when ELLs use two languages, they are able to scaffold their learning environment to make English comprehensible (Martin-Beltran, 2009). In a case study, Cummins (2007) shows how students can work together to scaffold each other’s English production and vocabulary. He describes three girls who were composing an English story but discussing their ideas in Urdu. They helped one another move from spoken Urdu to written English, thereby supporting English language development. This teaching strategy allowed students to draw on their L1 concepts and knowledge, to express themselves completely, to participate fully in the academic task, and to learn more English. Furthermore, Cummins (2007) states that when adults are allowed to develop their ideas and write in their L1 at first and then translate that writing to English writing, they produce compositions that are considerably more well developed than their usual writing (as cited in Strhmeyer & McGrail, 1998). These examples demonstrate how using students’ L1 can enhance their English acquisition and ability to succeed in school by using the L1 as a scaffold for productively using English.

In another example, Roberts (2008) demonstrates that a native language home storybook reading program with preschoolers can increase ELLs’ knowledge of English vocabulary. In the study, one group of parents read storybooks to their children in their native languages at home, and the teachers read the English versions at school. In another group, the children only heard the books read in English, at home and at school. Preliminary results showed an increase in students’ English vocabulary knowledge for students whose parents read the books in their native languages. It is important to note that the increase in English vocabulary knowledge was only found during the first trial; in the second trial, the native language storybook reading was still as effective as the English storybook reading, but it was not more effective. Therefore, more research needs to document the success of native language storybooks for increasing ELLs’ English vocabulary. However, the study did provide evidence of at least equal effectiveness, if not greater, for acquisition of English vocabulary through native language reading.

Furthermore, multiple studies show that cognates can increase students’ English vocabulary. Cognates are words that have the same root in two different languages, have a similar meaning, and usually have similar spellings. Cummins (2007) states that there are thousands of words that have cognate relationships with English words, particularly in romance languages such as Spanish and French. If students learn to identify and use cognates, they can expand their vocabulary knowledge in multiple languages. Additionally, using cognates is a reading strategy that strong bilingual readers use to help them understand texts (Jimenez, Garcia & Pearson, 1996). Therefore, cognates provide both a way to increase the academic proficiency of ELLs, as well as a way to increase their English vocabulary.

Students who are allowed to use their L1 in the classroom are more willing to experiment with English because the availability of their L1 provides them with a sense of security and validates their identity and culture (Auerbach, 1993). Furthermore, research reliably finds that literacy in ELLs’ L1 does not interfere with English literacy but instead supports English language skills (Serna, 2009, p. 93). Therefore, knowing that native language instruction can contribute to ELLs’ English vocabulary, English writing, English reading strategies, and overall engagement with English, educators should incorporate L1 learning strategies into their classroom to help students acquire English proficiency, a definite goal of ELL education.

**Academic Benefits Associated with Using L1**

As stated previously, using students’ L1 can allow ELLs to connect content they already know in their L1 to new knowledge they are learning in English. The use of the L1 connects students’ cognitive schemas to new learning and allows for learning of academic content that is not necessarily possible, or as complete, when students are not allowed to use their native language (Cummins, 2009, p. 318). In addition, ELLs are required to learn English and academic content at the same time. Often the language demands create educational environments where ELLs receive a watered-down curriculum because teachers cannot incorporate both English knowledge and difficult concepts into their instruction (Carreira, 2007, p. 149). This situation affects their ability to succeed in school. Therefore, many researchers advocate for the use of students’ L1 to help them achieve academic proficiency equivalent to their native, English-speaking peers (Huerta-Marcias & Kephart, 2009, p. 89). However, this does not mean that all instruction is in students’ L1. Rather, the L1 is a tool for learning. The L1 allows students to work at a higher level and helps them transfer knowledge from their L1 to English (Huerta-Marcias & Kephart, 2009; Youngquist & Martinez-Griego, 2009).

For example, Lucas and Katz (1994) demonstrate that when students discuss content in their L1 after it is presented in English, they are able to interact more effectively with the new knowledge, have more sophisticated discussions about the content, and have greater access to their prior knowledge and experience, all of which increase their overall academic knowledge. Carreira (2007) states that in order for any student to obtain academic success, he or she needs to focus on the higher-order thinking skills associated with the content (p .149). By allowing students to use their L1, teachers help ELLs use higher-order thinking skills to process and explain ideas that they cannot verbally state in English. In another example, Brooks and Karathanos (2009) explain that when ELLs are allowed to paraphrase English texts in their L1, their reading comprehension increases, and they are able to make personal connections with the text (p. 50). Rolstad et al. (2005) confirm this research on the use of students’ L1 to increase academic achievement in their meta-analysis. They state that using students’ L1 is superior to English-only methods in regards to increasing ELLs’ academic achievement in English (p. 290).

Seng and Hashim (2006) completed a case study of four ELL students in which they attempted to learn about the use of the L1 when reading an English text. In the study, the researchers utilized collaborative groupings, in which students read a text in English and then discussed it in their L1. The results of their study showed that all of the students’ used their L1 as a reading comprehension strategy to help them understand the English text. The students specifically used their L1 for translation, paraphrasing, questioning, guessing, making inferences, and word recognition. Additionally, the students’ used their L1 to understand word-level and sentence-level vocabulary and figure out the meanings of unknown words. In this study, Seng and Hasim (2006) developed collaborative groups where students could discuss the text in their L1. They found that students used their L1 to resolve vocabulary and conceptual difficulties and to check their comprehension of the text. In summary, this study shows that students’ use of their L1 helps them comprehend English texts; express their questions, thoughts, and reactions to the text in an environment where they are understood; and remove emotional barriers that can inhibit students from fully interacting with the text. This information shows that the use of L1 can be used in English-based classrooms to increase the academic achievement and comprehension of ELLs. In summary, research shows that incorporation of students’ L1 can have positive effects on their academic achievement (Araujo, 2009; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Carreira, 2007; Brooks & Karathanos, 2009; Rolstad et al., 2005; Huerta-Marcias & Kephart, 2009; Youngquist & Martinez-Griego, 2009).

**Use of L1 on Identity and Self-esteem**

ELLs suffer from isolation, depression, and feelings of otherness, and much of this is because the English-only movement sends a very clear message to students: their native languages and cultures are not welcome in schools (Arias, 2008, p. 43). Valenzuela (1999) suggests, “Rather than building on students’ cultural and linguistic knowledge and heritage to create biculturally and bilingually competent youth, schools subtract these identities from children to their social and academic detriment” (p. 25, as cited in Carreira, 2007, p. 149). Students’ perception of themselves, their identity, and their self-confidence can be enhanced when schools validate and incorporate ELLs’ L1 into the classroom culture (Ritter, & Arrasmith, 2000, p. 18). When students’ native language(s) are legitimized in school, their subordinate status as a minority group can be challenged, which in turn supports students by valuing them, their home lives, and their cultures (Cummins, 2009; Auerbach, 1993). Furthermore, the incorporation of ELLs’ native languages gives their L1 a more comparable status to that of English, which increases their self-esteem and identity (Auerbach, 1993; Lucas & Katz, 1994).

It is also important to identify issues of family tension that can arise with immigrant students and their parents. Many times when families move to the United States, a child’s role changes because children typically acquire oral English proficiency faster than adults. Children often become interpreters for their families, which carries a lot of responsibility that can be overwhelming for children (Campey, 2002). Therefore, it is important that schools do not give students the impression that they must choose between assimilation to American culture or segregation into their native culture (Arias, 2008, p. 43). Many times students’ home relationships depend on knowledge of their native languages. Schools do not want to devalue ELLs’ native languages because that shows a lack of appreciation, value, and respect for students’ identities and home cultures (Ritter & Arrasmith, 2000, p. 17). By recognizing and valuing ELLs’ home languages, schools can help students develop healthy self-concepts and identities and ultimately increase their willingness to learn and use English in school.

**Influence of Culture**

As indicated above, incorporating ELLs’ L1 can allow them to draw upon the knowledge that they have in their L1 and then move forward, using this background knowledge as a springboard for academic and language learning. However, it is extremely important to realize that language and culture are intricately connected and using or prohibiting students’ L1 has effects beyond the immediate use of language. Cummins (1996) states, “When students’ language, culture, and experiences are ignored or excluded in classroom interactions, students are immediately starting from a disadvantage. Everything they have learned about the world up to this point is being dismissed as irrelevant to school learning…students are expected to learn in an experiential vacuum” (p. 2-3, as cited in Brooks & Karathanos, 2009, p. 47). When teaching all students, it is important to connect new learning to concepts and ideas students already know; for ELLs, this often means that instruction needs to utilize their culture as a key resource. When students connect what they already know to new material, they accelerate their learning of English and academic content (Dong, 1998).

Many researchers note the expansive benefits of creating multicultural, multilingual classrooms that embrace students and allow them to be active participants in school. When teachers incorporate and build upon students’ languages and cultures, they send a powerful message to students and families that multiculturalism and multilingualism are valuable assets to the school and community (Brooks & Karathanos, 2009, p. 50). Furthermore, classrooms that value the diversity ELLs bring allow students to explore different cultures and traditions through social studies, languages, drama, and art, which ultimately contributes to the development of more tolerant and culturally rich classrooms and schools (Campey, 2002).

When schools and classrooms prohibit students’ use of their L1, educators create a linguistic and cultural prejudice against ELLs, which can affect their school success (Rodriguez-Valls, 2009, p. 116). Programs that subtract students’ first language are very negative; instead of viewing students’ cultural and linguistic resources as problems, educators and policy-makers need to capitalize on the language, skills, and cultural-richness that students bring to the classroom (Ritter & Arrasmith, 2000, p. 19). This allows teachers to expand the current experiences of ELLs to help them succeed in school and apply what they are learning to their daily lives.

**Cognitive Benefits of Bilingualism**

A final point that shows the importance of incorporating students’ L1 into the classroom is the research that consistently documents the cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism. Cummins (2007) states that research convincingly shows the enrichment of metalingusitic awareness for bilinguals. Individuals who are bilingual have more mental flexibility, more well-developed concept formation, more complex analytical strategies, greater sensitivity to language structure, and better phonological skills (Ritter & Asuara, 2008; Paratore et al., 1995; August & Shanahan, 2008; Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994). Because bilingualism, compared to monolingualism, is associated with many cognitive advantages, educators who continue to develop students’ L1 allow them to develop a deeper understanding of language and literacy (Martin-Beltran, 2009; Cummins, 2007). Furthermore, because the United States is a “melting pot” of cultures and languages, bilinguals can have economic and social benefits (Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994). When ELLs enter English-only schools and classrooms and begin to lose their primary language skills, they lose an opportunity to develop linguistic and economic resources that are extremely valuable in our global economy (Laman & Sluys, 2008). Therefore, by incorporating ELLs’ native language(s) into American schools and classrooms, educators are providing students with cognitive and economic benefits that outlast their public school experiences.

**Cautions**

While all of this research documents the usefulness of incorporating students’ L1 into the classroom, no researchers would argue that it should be used to the exclusion of using English. Researchers agree that the primary language input should be English, since our goal is to help these students achieve English proficiency (Cummins, 2009; Cook, 2001; Kharma, & Hajjaj, 1989; Brooks & Karathanos, 2009; Turnbull, & Arnett, 2002; Schmidt & Gakeun, 1997). Comprehensible input is essential for students to acquire English proficiency, and students need opportunities to interact with native English speakers, read in English, and write in English to help them acquire knowledge of the English language (Schmidtt & Gakeun, 1997, p. 28.; Brooks & Karathanos, 2009). Therefore, while utilizing the L1 can be a very beneficial strategy, research does not support using large quantities of the L1 (Cook, 2001, p. 413). Instead, the L1 should be used for specific purposes in helping students succeed academically, socially, and linguistically in their acquisition of English. However, it should not be overused in the classroom or else educators will prevent their students from succeeding in American schools.

**Strategies**

Knowing that incorporating students’ native languages into the classroom in order to accelerate ELLs’ English acquisition, increase their academic knowledge, and provide healthy identity formation is valuable research. However, it is not enough to know that it is effective or beneficial. Educators need to know how to put this research into practice, and this is an area where there is very little research. Research shows why using students’ L1 is beneficial, but there is very limited research that provides research-based practices for using them in the classroom. Nevertheless, the goal for this paper is to find practical ways monolingual teachers can use to incorporate students’ L1 into the classroom, even in classrooms where there are multiple native languages, which is often the case in many schools.

**Teacher Attitudes**

Before describing different ways educators can use students’ native languages in the classroom, it is important to describe teacher attitudes towards using the L1 in the classroom. This information, primarily collected from surveys, is useful because it reflects teachers’ willingness to use the arguments presented in this paper, as well as the strategies that follow, in their daily practice. It is important for teachers to understand the value of using students’ L1 in the classroom if policy makers and researchers want the information to be applied in the classroom setting.

Mahmoud (2006) found that many teachers are fearful of using the L1 in the classroom because it limits students’ exposure to English (p. 29). Carless (2008) also found in his survey that many teachers feel guilty when they use students’ L1 (p. 332). However, Mahmoud (2006) also comments that this stereotype against using the L1 in the classroom is slowly eroding because educators and policy makers are learning that the L1 is a very useful resource to help ELLs learn academic content and English.

On the other hand, Lucas and Katz (1994) found that many teachers, even in English-only environments, are supportive of using students L1. They also found that the more experienced teachers incorporated ELLs’ L1 into the classroom more frequently (p. 550). This finding suggests that teachers are willing to use students’ L1 in the classroom and that many teachers believe it is beneficial for students. They see positive results from using the L1 in their classrooms on a daily basis. Therefore, with this knowledge, it appears logical that as teachers learn more about the usefulness and effectiveness of using students’ L1 in classrooms, many will be willing to incorporate students’ native languages into their practice at some level, which makes providing useful and research-based practices for this type of instruction both timely and necessary.

**Background on Research of Strategy Instruction**

It is important to begin with acknowledging the fact that many of the instructional practices that include students’ L1 in the classroom are completed in the context of bilingual education research. In bilingual classrooms, students and teachers typically speak the same L1, which makes it much easier to include students’ L1 in daily instruction. However, in many educational settings, it is not feasible to have bilingual teachers for every language. Furthermore, even in situations where most students speak the same L1, it is not always possible to find bilingual teachers. Caledron (1996) states that every state has a shortage of bilingual teachers. Every year, California needs to hire an additional 20,000 bilingual teachers, and Texas needs 14,000 more (p. 205). Therefore, even in contexts where bilingual education is feasible, it is not always possible. When it is possible, research repeatedly reports better outcomes for students; however, because bilingual education is not a reality for many students and not possible for monolingual teachers, researchers must identify ways monolingual teachers can incorporate ELLs’ L1 into the classroom. Lucas and Katz (1994) state that their findings show that monolingual English speakers or teachers who do not speak the native languages of all of their students can still effectively incorporate students’ L1 into the classroom (p. 558). ELL teachers do not have to be multilingual; instead, they can create learning experiences that promote and utilize native language scaffolding among students (Huerta-Marcias & Kemphart, 2009). Thus the rest of this paper will address ways monolingual teachers can use students’ L1.

**When to Use the L1**

As stated previously, the research on incorporating students’ L1 into the classroom does not advocate for using students’ L1 consistently. Rather, there is a large consensus that much of the instruction needs to be provided in English in order to help students learn more English. While research does not indicate an appropriate amount of L1 to use, Huerta-Marcias and Kephart (2009) suggest that the use of students’ L1 be in alignment with the goals of a specific lesson and the context of that lesson (p. 95). Many researchers have analyzed when bilingual teachers use students’ L1, and they have found that it is used for specific purposes and in systematic ways (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Mahmoud, 2006). Therefore, students should be encouraged to use their L1 when it meets the larger learning objectives, and teachers should create uses for the L1 that are intentional and specific (Carreira, 2007, p. 153).

**Classroom Culture**

It is very possible that students could come into a teacher’s classroom with the belief that native languages are not allowed in school (Hayes, Rueda, & Chilton, 2009, p. 146). Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to create a classroom that is welcoming of students’ diverse cultures and languages. Youngquist and Martinez-Griego (2009) encourage teachers to learn a few key phrases in every language represented in the classroom to show students that they value their L1 (p. 95). In addition, students know their L1 is valued when the environmental print in the classroom and school reflects students’ native languages through multilingual displays, bulletin boards, posters, and notices (Freeman & Freeman, p. 554; Paratore et al., 1995).

Teachers can convincingly show students and parents that diverse languages are valued through direct and explicit conversations. For example, Leone (1995) provides an example in which an ELL teacher frequently commented how important it was for her students to be “smart” in two languages; they needed to be able to listen, speak, read, and write in both the languages they knew (p, 597). This same teacher also encouraged students to think about the benefits of bilingualism by asking her students, “Why is it good to know two languages?” or “Why is it fun to read in Spanish at home?” (p. 597). In both of these circumstances, the classroom teacher is explicitly valuing students’ development in two languages and encouraging the students to think about the benefits of bilingualism.

**Common Strategies for a Variety of Contexts**

Beyond the actual classroom and school environment, researchers describe some strategies teachers can use throughout the day and in a variety of academic subjects that allow students to use their L1 in productive ways. For example, researchers encourage teachers to rely on students who have a common L1 and different levels of English proficiency in a variety of settings and contexts (Iddings, Rosko, & Rampulla, 2009, p. 60; Lucas & Katz, 1994, p. 548; Florez, 2000, p.3; Paratore et al., 1995). This allows students to scaffold their use of English for each other, and it allows them to use their L1 as a resource to understanding the learning objectives and classroom demands. For example, Leone records an instance where a teacher would ask students to explain instructions in the L1 for an assignment if the teacher knew that some students did not understand the task (Leone, 1995, p. 596). Lucas and Katz (1994) comment that for some beginner ELL students, having a peer to translate academic content and classroom activities may be the only way for that student to gain access to the school curriculum (p. 369). Therefore, one way to use students’ L1 in the classroom is to create situations where students are welcome or encouraged to use their L1 with their peers.

Teachers can also encourage ELL students to use their L1 for academic reasons in collaborative groups (Brooks & Karathano, 2009, p. 49). Arias (2008) explains that whole-class discussions can be intimidating for ELLs, so small-group lessons that maximize student participation allows ELLs the opportunity to become involved in the lesson. Additionally, if ELLs are in homogenous language groups, they can use their L1 to scaffold their learning (p. 40). Arias (2008) specifically recommends using homogenous language groups when the academic task is particularly challenging (p. 40). This allows students to use their L1 productively to understand academic content and use higher-order thinking skills.

However, Florez (2000) states that teachers need to talk with students about the use of the L1 in the classroom. Teachers need to explain to students their expectations and also ask students what their expectations are (p. 4). As stated earlier, the L1 is used most effectively when it is utilized for a specific purpose. Teachers can create this type of environment when they are explicit with their students about the expectations and intentions for using the L1. Furthermore, collaborative or small groups do not guarantee that students will use their L1. Therefore, if a teacher’s goal is for students to use their L1, the teacher needs to make this clear to students (Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994, p. 533).

**Reading Comprehension**

Reading is a part of every school’s curriculum and a part of every subject. Students are required to learn to read in early elementary school, and from the beginning of school, they must read to learn. Therefore, a lot of research has focused on how to increase students’ reading comprehension when they are reading texts in English but do not yet have mastery of the English language. Iddings, Risko, and Rampulla (2009) describe a study in which Mexican American students discussed an English text in Spanish (p. 53-57). The study found that when students discussed texts in their L1, they were able to reach a more sophisticated and refined understanding of the text. The use of their L1 allowed them to work together and use higher-order thinking skills to understand the content of the text. Mahmoud (2006) states that he has observed an increase in student performance and comprehension when ELLs summarize English texts in their L1 (p. 30).

In a very unique approach to increasing ELLs’ comprehension, Paratore et al. (1995) propose allowing students to listen to the text in the L1 while reading the text in English. They state that studies show this instructional technique helps increase students’ comprehension because they see the English print, but hear the text in their native language (p. 5). However, for this to be possible, teachers need to find dual language books and volunteers to read and record themselves reading the book. If this is feasible, it can be a useful strategy for increasing ELLs’ reading comprehension, especially for difficult texts. Additionally, if dual language books are available, teachers can send them home and ask parents to read them to their children. Then, the teacher could read the same book in English. Roberts (2008), as noted previously, found that this practice can enhance students’ native language and English vocabulary, at least for Hispanic, preschool children (p. 119-122).

Paratore et al. (1995) also recommend allowing students to respond to literature through journal writing in their L1. They state that when students are allowed to use their L1, they can focus on comprehension rather than English proficiency, which gives teachers a greater understanding of students’ comprehension. Furthermore, they advocate the use of other bilingual students, a parent, or volunteer to help translate the students’ work so the teacher can assess the child fairly (p. 5).

Brooks and Karathanos (2009) provide different reading comprehension activities students can complete in their native language to enhance understanding. For example, they explain a method where students read a text and record the different connections they make to the text on sticky notes, known as “coding the text.” However, to make this strategy more meaningful for ELLs, they encourage teachers to tell the students to write their connections in their L1; this helps students make meaningful connections to the text by actively processing the text (p. 49). In a similar but more verbal activity, they tell students to stop reading every five minutes and discuss the text with a partner in their L1 (p. 50). During these discussions, students can summarize the text, make connections, or work through difficult portions of the text. When students have limited English proficiency, using the L1 allows them to explain their personal, cultural, and previous background knowledge connections clearly.

In a different study, Freeman and Freeman (1993) document how a teacher provided research material for students in their L1 and in English. This teacher did not tell students which resources to use, but she found that the ELL students often chose books in their L1 at the beginning of their research. As they learned more about a topic, they began to use more English sources (p. 554-555). This observation could be adapted to encouraging students to read about topics, especially those that students have little background knowledge about, in their native language before reading or discussing them in English. This strategy would help increase the global reading comprehension of students and would not limit the language input to only the L1. Rather, it would build upon the L1 as a strategy to learn more English.

In summary, there are a variety of ways to make reading materials more accessible and comprehensible for students by utilizing their native languages. Teachers can group students so they can discuss texts in their L1, or provide texts in the L1 to help increase overall reading comprehension. It is important to note that reading comprehension is the goal in all reading, so teachers need to use strategies that allow students to access the content of the material.

**Writing**

Because English writing requires production of the English language, researchers have documented different ways teachers can scaffold writing activities for ELLs, and these activities allow students to draw upon their L1. Almost all of the researchers agree that it is extremely beneficial for students to write in pairs or small groups with students who speak the same L1 (Carless, 2008; Cummins, 2009; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Manyark, 2008; Palmer et al., 2006; Schmidt & Gakuen, 1997). Studies suggest allowing students to write in their L1 first so that they can write what they want to communicate. Then, they can use peers to help them translate their ideas into English, which scaffolds their knowledge and use of English and ultimately increases their English language acquisition and production (Cummins, 2009, p. 319). This strategy also helps to build students’ confidence in writing (Dong, 1998). In another example, Palmer et al. (2006) describe how a teacher encourages students to use their limited knowledge of English to begin writing in English. The teacher asks students to write in “limited English,” which is using English words with the L1 syntax, or “mixed language,” which is a mix of English and L1 words (p. 15). These two strategies allow students to use what they know about language structure to complete writing activities. Additionally, Lucas and Katz (1994) suggest allowing students to tell their stories in the L1 and then, once they know what they want to say, they can work on translating those stories into English. In summary, there are a variety of ways teachers can combine students’ knowledge of English and their L1 to help them succeed in class writing activities and develop and expand their English language proficiency.

Besides writing in the L1 as a foundation for writing in English, teachers can also encourage students to write in the L1 as a means to an end. For example, teachers could ask students to write at least one journal in their native language. Not only does this validate students’ bilingualism, but it could also be crucial for helping students develop and maintain native language writing skills (Pease-Alvarez, & Winsler, 1994, p. 533-534). In addition, Cummins (2007) explains that when students write bilingual books and share them on the internet, students are more engaged with literacy and develop a healthy sense of self (p. 230). Teachers can also publish these bilingual books and L1-only books and incorporate them into the classroom library (Paratore et al., 1995, p. 7). Cook (2001) suggests that teachers can use e-mail to encourage students to write in their L1. Teachers can develop “pen pals” where students communicate with people in their L1 (p. 411). All of these activities allow students to write about their personal experiences and share their knowledge in multiple languages, which helps them further connect with the curriculum. Ultimately, they are using their cultural and linguistic knowledge in school (Laman & Sluys, 2008, p. 266).

**Students as Experts**

Teachers can capitalize on students’ strengths as bilingual and biliterate individuals in the classroom and school. For example, students can learn to share their L1 with others by creating multilingual word walls and multilingual thematic word lists, presenting on the differences in native language greetings and body gestures, and labeling classroom items in the different languages represented within the classroom (Brooks & Karathanos, 2009; Florez, 2000, p. 6). Students can also help teachers create newsletters and brochures for parents with important information about the school and classroom events (Carreira, 2007, p. 157). These activities provide students with an authentic reason to write in the L1 and allow students to write for a real audience.

Palmer et al. (2006) describe how a classroom teacher helps ELLs and native-English speakers work with one another and learn from one another through a teaching technique she named the “Rosetta Stone Technique.” In this activity, the teacher creates columns on chart paper of every language represented in the classroom, and she writes everyday English words in the English column. Then, the students add words from their languages to the respective columns. They create this list of words throughout the year, and it allows students to see their L1 posted in the classroom and be a part of creating knowledge about their L1. It encourages active participation from all of the students, while also fostering English language skills (p. 112).

Freeman and Freeman (1993) describe a technique they observed a teacher use to incorporate students’ L1 into the school curriculum. The teacher created a cross-age tutoring program where older students, the “teachers of tomorrow,” are paired with a younger student, and both students speak the same native language. The teacher instructs the “teachers of tomorrow” only to speak in the L1. She tells them, “English is all around. You are the experts for the younger kids who need primary language instruction.” (p. 557-558). Leone (1995) describes a similar activity where students of different ages are paired up together, and the older student reads to the younger student in the L1 (p. 594). Researchers and teachers document that these programs support native language development and help children view bilingualism as important and valuable (Paratore et al., 1995, p. 4; Freeman & Freeman, 1993; Leone, 1995).

These different learning activities allow students to use their L1 in schools to develop bilingualism in younger students and respect for multilingualism and multiculturalism throughout the school climate. These activities position students as knowledgeable, valuable resources as opposed to the typical view of ELLs, which puts them in a deficit place where they are lacking something, namely English.

**Volunteers**

Researchers document the effectiveness of bringing paraprofessionals, volunteers, and parents into the classroom to work with children in their L1 and to help translate. Youngquist and Martinez-Griego (2000) conducted a study in a preschool, and the classroom teachers found that the inclusion of a native-language speaker into the classroom for an hour a day made a difference in the maintenance of ELLs’ primary language skills (p. 96). Parents and community members can be valuable assistants in ELL classrooms because they can provide valuable L1 support for students. They can read with students in the L1, they can help students write in the L1, and they can help translate students’ writing for teachers (Araujo, 2009 p. 18; Freeman & Freeman, 1993, p. 557; Karathanos, 2009, p. 617).

**Resources**

It is crucial for students to see their native languages reflected in classroom materials and to have access to books in their L1. The Multiliteracies Project (www.multiliteracies.ca) provides lists of dual language books, and can be a good resource for finding books in students’ L1. However, for some native languages, it can be very hard to find children’s books in that language. Brooks and Karathanos (2009) recommend finding adults, older ELL students, and community volunteers to write fiction and nonfiction books to add to the classroom library (p. 49). Besides books, teachers can include newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, government documents, newsletters, and medical pamphlets in students’ L1. Additionally, students can write and publish books in their first language to add to the multilingual books in the classroom (Leone, 1995, p .598; Freeman and Freeman, 1993, p. 557; Brooks & Karathanos, 2009). In lower elementary classrooms that utilize centers, children can bring in food containers and other household items that are in the students’ L1 (Leone, 1995, p. 598). In summary, it is important for students to have access to materials in their L1, and there are a variety of ways to obtain these different forms of literature. However, as Freeman and Freeman (1993) note, merely having these resources is not enough. Children need to be taught and encouraged to use them, and parents and community volunteers can be important contributors in helping students read and write in their L1 (p. 557).

**Bilingual Dictionaries**

Research consistently supports ELLs using bilingual dictionaries to help them increase their English vocabulary (Cummins, 2009, p. 319; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Palmer et al., 2006). Bilingual dictionaries are more effective than monolingual dictionaries or learning from context and can be extremely valuable resources for ELL students (Cummins, 2009, p. 319). Cook (2001) states that 85 percent of students think that bilingual dictionaries are useful (p. 418, as cited in Schmitt, 1997). Therefore, bilingual dictionaries can be very effective ways to include students’ L1 in the classroom, while also working to improve their English language knowledge and success in the curriculum. However, teachers must show students how to use bilingual dictionaries and ways to navigate the dictionary. They must encourage children to use them if they want students to use them effectively and consistently.

**News of the Day**

Manyak (2008) describes a daily instructional activity that teachers can use to support students’ use of English, while also building upon their native language skills. In this activity, students share something with the class, a piece of “news” from their lives. The students are allowed to use English or their L1, which enables all students to participate. In order for the teacher to engage with the students who share in their L1, the teacher allows other students to translate their peers’ news into English. Then, the teacher writes the news in English to help build all students’ English proficiency. However, because the students establish the topic, the teacher’s language is more comprehensible. The scaffolding provided by the topic initiation and peer translation gives students with limited English proficiency the ability to respond to English questions asked by the teacher and to participate in this activity. Furthermore, this activity allows students to bring their home lives and out-of-school knowledge into the classroom, which enables the teacher to learn more about her students and then connect the curriculum to their lives. In summary, the News of the Day activity allows students to tell, write, edit, and read about the events in their daily lives and develop their English proficiency through an activity that also values their native language.

**Videos**

Technology provides numerous resources for teachers, and studies show that incorporating students’ L1 through videos is an easy and feasible way for monolingual teachers to support ELLs’ academic and English development. Freeman and Freeman (1993) suggest using videotapes in students’ L1 to provide background knowledge on classroom topics (p. 558). On the other hand, Cook (2001) suggests using English videos with L1 subtitles to help ELLs develop English proficiency through the scaffolding provided by their L1 (p. 418). These two examples show how teachers can incorporate students’ L1 to help students develop necessary academic knowledge, while also developing their knowledge of English.

**Translation**

Translation is a skill that is unique to bilingual and multilingual individuals, and it involves a variety of different components and skills that teachers can build upon in school. Many bilingual youth translate and interpret for their parents and family members (Orellana, 2008; Cummins 2007). Therefore, translation can be a powerful way for educators to bring students’ out-of-school literary practices into the classroom and capitalize on students’ abilities as translators to teach important academic concepts. Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between children’s translation experiences and their academic performance, academic self-perception, and positive value of biculturalism (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003, p. 15; Arias, 2008). Valuing translation shows students that their ability to translate is an important and useful social skill.

Many educators analyze the literacy practices involved in translation and have found that often, translation requires students to summarize or paraphrase texts in English and then convey those ideas in new words (Orellana, 2008; Uzawa, 1994). Researchers demonstrate that this task is very similar to the school-based practice of summarizing, retelling, and paraphrasing written texts (Orellana, 2008, p. 51-52). Arias (2008) extends the idea of translation and states that translation requires students to choose the appropriate diction for the genre, topic, and context. Additionally, Arias (2008) explains that students must use appropriate social norms, choose the appropriate form of communication based on the audience, navigate cross-cultural awareness, assume familial roles and responsibilities, and monitor metalinguistic awareness.(p. 43). Furthermore, research shows that most ELLs rarely translate word-for-word; instead, they restructure their output based on the structure of the L2 (Uzawa, 1994, p. 130). All of these skills show that translation is a complex process and involves many skills and sources of knowledge. However, many students do not recognize the knowledge and skills inherent in translation. Therefore, teachers need to help students identify and use these skills in school (Martinez, Orellana, Pacheco, & Carbone, 2008, p. 430). Knowing all the processes involved in translation, teachers can utilize the mental processes required to translate as a way to help students apply their current knowledge to new situations and contexts.

While researchers are still exploring the idea of using translation in the classroom, they do provide some suggestions for capitalizing on this strength and knowledge. For example, Orellana et al. (2003) state that teachers can help students paraphrase textbook instructions. This strategy will help ensure that students know what the task requires, and it could help students develop metalinguistic awareness as they work with others to decipher, paraphrase, and translate the meaning of the instructions (p. 32). In another idea, researchers explain that teachers can ask students to paraphrase passages in a text. This strategy allows ELLs to apply the skills involved in translating to a school-based practice, where they put someone else’s words into their own words (Martinez, Orellana, Pacheco, & Carbone, 2008, p. 423). Orellana et al. (2003) also suggest asking students to translate portions of a textbook for their family and then to reflect upon this experience. This not only enhances their academic knowledge of the topic, but it also encourages them to think critically about the text and rephrase it in their own words.

Researchers also document how ELL students often use translation to help them comprehend texts (Seng, & Hashim, 2006, p. 30). Seng and Hashim (2006) found when using their L1, ELLs’ primary purpose was for translation. They explain that students use translation to check their comprehension of a portion of an English text. Brooks and Karathanos (2009) found that paraphrasing English texts in the L1 increased ELLs’ reading comprehension. However, it is very important to note that word-for-word translating does not increase ELLs’ comprehension (Brooks & Karathanos, 2009). Word-for-word translating is very burdensome and takes a very long time, so students lose the meaning of the text. Additionally, when students focus on word-for-word translating, they begin to over-focus on the language rather than the meaning of the text (Brooks & Karathanos, 2009, p. 50; Schmidtt & Gakuen, 1997, p. 27). Therefore, teachers need to help students learn to paraphrase texts in their L1 or translate important words, and they need to emphasize the importance of not translating every word.

Translation can also help students acquire English (Cummins, 2007, p. 227). As in the “News of the Day” strategy, translation allows students to help one another make English comprehensible and allows students to practice using English at a slightly higher level than their current abilities (Manyak, 2008; Uzawa, 1994, p. 129). Furthermore, it allows students who speak very little English to participate in classroom activities, which ultimately affects ELLs’ academic and English knowledge (Cummins, 2007, p. 236).

In summary, translation can be a very effective strategy for ELL students because it capitalizes on their out-of-school language practices and allows them to transfer linguistic awareness to academic exercises. Translation helps students acquire both academic knowledge and English language proficiency by making English more comprehensible. However, it is important to note that students come to school with a wide variety of translation experiences, and not all students act as translators for their families or in their communities (Martinez et al., 2008, p. 424). Therefore, before incorporating this strategy into the classroom, teachers need to ask students about their translating experiences in order to inform daily classroom instruction and to learn about students’ specific skills.

**Young Interpreters**

Borrero (2009) describes a school-based program called Young Interpreters that utilizes students’ strengths as bilinguals and engages them in the translation process. Young Interpreters is a program for seventh- and eighth-grade students at a public school in California. The goal of the program is to improve students’ English and Spanish language skills, increase the school’s ability to welcome monolingual parents and students, and teach students the value of bilingualism. Students choose to enroll in the program, they attend class twice a week, and the classes alternate between using Spanish and English. During the class, which meets throughout the school year, students discuss their out-of-school translation practices, learn strategies that are crucial for interpretation, and discuss key terms needed to interpret for families and students. The students used what they learned in class in different school activities. They serve as interpreters in parent-teacher conferences, welcome families to the school, and give tours to new students.

When the school evaluated the program, which was implemented for the first time in 2004, the students enrolled in Young Interpreters “significantly outscored” other seventh- and eighth-grade ELLs not enrolled in the program on the English language arts section of the test (p. 61). The program allowed students to practice paraphrasing and summarizing skills, and it taught them to use language for real purposes. This program, which continues today, shows that translation can be a powerful tool to help ELLs connect their home and school cultures. Furthermore, it is a skill that teachers can capitalize on to increase the metalinguistic awareness of students and to show students the value of their bilingualism. In summary, Young Interpreters shows that schools can use students’ L1 abilities for authentic purposes and in the process, help students learn their L1, English, and more advanced language skills. All the while, schools are valuing students’ culture and home literacy practices.

**Parents**

Research shows that immigrant students’ home cultures are critical to their academic success and their overall well-being. Carreira (2007) explains that ELLs who are connected to their home culture are more likely to experience academic success (p. 159). Therefore, it is very important for students to remain connected to their home culture, and researchers identify parents as a valuable resource for helping students maintain this connection. Araujo (2009) explains that one of the best ways for teachers to incorporate their students’ cultures into the classroom involves creating partnerships with parents and families (p. 188).

Researchers and educators provide valuable strategies for utilizing parents as effective language and cultural resources for students. For example, many researchers note the importance of explicitly educating parents on the importance of native language development (Youngquist & Martinez-Griego, 2009; Araujo, 2009; Palmer et al., 2006; Rodriguez-Valls, 2009). Many immigrant families desire for their children to learn English, so they stop speaking the L1 in the home and begin using limited English (Younquist & Martinez-Griego, 2009, p. 92). As stated throughout the paper, language and literacy skills in students’ L1 are valuable tools for learning English; therefore, encouraging parents to continue developing and preserving students’ L1 is very important. Furthermore, by telling and showing parents the value of the L1, teachers help parents feel connected to the school culture, which in turn leads to more parental involvement and increases student achievement (Araujo, 2009, p. 119).

In addition to teaching the value of L1 literacy, educators can promote it by providing L1 resources for families. Roberts (2008) found that 84 percent of family caregivers prefer to read storybooks in the L1 (p. 117). Furthermore, in his study, he found that the caregivers in the L1 storybook group read significantly more than the ELL parents in the group that read English storybooks. These examples show the value of giving children books in their L1 and encouraging them to take the books home and read them with parents and siblings. Leone (1995) suggests assigning questions for students to answer with parents. The questions should relate to class topics and readings, but they should also interest parents. The goal of these questions is to engage parents and students in language-based practices in authentic communication settings (p. 603). This activity, which can be used in conjunction with books students read with their parents, allows students to develop and maintain L1 literacy skills, and it engages parents in their students’ education.

Researchers provide other ways to help encourage parental involvement in schools and make sure parents feel that they are welcome. For example, Campey (2002) suggests that schools provide translators for parent-teacher conferences, translate school documents, and explain school expectations to families in their L1. Additionally, Paratore et al. (1995) suggest providing a multilingual school newsletter that explains how parents can support students’ reading and writing in home and at school. These ideas help parents support their children’s academic achievement in school and show them the value of L1 literacy.

In summary, research agrees that parents are important contributors to students’ overall academic success. However, many culturally and linguistically diverse students are intimidated by school events. Therefore, it is vital that schools create welcoming environments that encourage and welcome parents and show families the value of L1 literacy and home cultures. Together, these practices help students’ academic achievement, bilingual development, and English acquisition.

**Assessments**

Many issues exist when discussing the assessment of ELL students because academic tests in English often suggest that the difficulty is due to a lack of English language knowledge rather than a lack of academic knowledge (Paratore et al., 1995, p. 7). The extent of this paper is not to analyze assessments for ELL students. Rather, the goal of incorporating this segment is to encourage educators to think about the different issues of assessing ELLs and ways they can help address some of these difficulties within the classroom.

Paratore et al. (1995) describe the many different sets of knowledge ELLs must have in order to succeed on English academic tests. To begin, if the test is an English-only test, students must have the ability to understand the questions, and then they must have the productive English skills necessary to demonstrate their understanding. However, beyond the specific language barriers, ELLs must also understand the social and cultural aspects of the assessment, the modes of thinking the test requires, and the way language is used on the test (p. 8). They continue to explain that many times background knowledge predicts test success more than students’ abilities to comprehend texts.

Because of these issues, as well as many others, researchers describe a few ways teachers can assess ELLs more fairly and reliably. For example, Mahmoud (2006) believes that educators should accept answers in students’ L1 because that is the language that most clearly shows what students understand and where they are having difficulty (p. 30). In order for monolingual teachers to do this, they could ask older students, school translators, parents, or community volunteers to translate students’ written work. He also suggests that teachers ask students to paraphrase an English text to their L1 and then have someone who is bilingual in that student’s L1 and in English back-translate the student’s work into English. This information can provide teachers with important information about students’ vocabulary knowledge, sentence-level comprehension, and global comprehension (p. 32-33). Palmer et al. (2006) explain that ELLs normally understand more English than they can produce. Allowing students to retell stories in their L1 provides a better assessment of their reading comprehension (p. 12-13). Therefore, in their study, they described how a teacher used bilingual paraprofessionals to help assess students’ reading comprehension. Finally, Paratore et al. (1995) state that when assessing students’ reading skills and comprehension, teachers should use texts that reflect students’ cultures and experiences (p. 8). This practice prevents teachers from obtaining inaccurate perceptions of students’ literacy skills due to differences in ELLs’ background knowledge.

While this section is brief, it provides educators with important ideas to consider. Mainly, many ELLs often cannot succeed on academic assessments when they are required to use English. Many times students know the content or understand the text but they cannot express this in English. Therefore, if educators allow students to explain their understanding in the L1 and provide culturally relevant assessments, then educators can have more valid information about students’ knowledge.

When thinking about the assessment of ELLs, educators also need to consider assessing students’ native language abilities. Many of the recommendations throughout this paper assume that students are fluent speakers in their L1. However, Pease-Alvarez and Winsler (1994) state that surveys show, at least for the Hispanic population in the United States, that families rarely use Spanish beyond the second or third generation of immigrants. Furthermore, some first- and second-generation children lose their ability to speak and understand Spanish at an early age (p. 508). Therefore, while research encourages teachers to utilize students’ L1 as a valuable linguistic tool, it is important to know that some students may not be fluent in their L1. Because of this confounding issue, Lucas and Katz (1994) state that for educators to successfully incorporate ELLs’ L1 into the classroom, they must assess students’ L1 abilities, specifically their literacy skills (p. 364). There are many standardized tests that allow schools to assess students’ L1 skills, and it is important for teachers to obtain this information to know how to use students’ L1 in the context of academic learning.

In addition to assessing students, Brooks and Karathanos (2009) suggest that teachers assess their use of students’ L1 in the classroom since research identifies the importance of the L1 when educating ELLs. They provide four different general questions teachers can think about in regards to their teaching practice.

1. What does the teacher do to encourage students to use their L1 as a learning tool?
2. Reflect upon the different ways the teacher provides L1 materials and resources for ELL students, specifically the ways the teacher provides these tools to help students learn new content.
3. Observe ELLs and notice if they are actively engaged during classroom instruction.
4. Are students’ cultures and languages are represented in the classroom through books, posters, or student work?

These questions are important for educators to analyze because they help teachers reflect upon their incorporation of the L1 as a tool for ELLs to learn academic content, to perceive bilingualism and biculturalism as a positive resource, to maintain their L1, and to know they are valued in the school and classroom.

**Future Research**

Specific research that analyzes strategies and instructional tools for monolingual teachers to use in multilingual settings is extremely limited (Turnbull, 2002; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Roberts, 2008; Mahmoud, 2006). There is little empirical evidence that evaluates different practices teachers can use in the classroom to utilize students’ L1 effectively. Furthermore, the ELL population is extremely diverse; this not only makes reliability and validity for assessments difficult to determine, but it also makes instructional strategies difficult to generalize (Wolf, Farnsworth & Herman, 2008). Therefore, researchers need to work to determine how teachers can use students’ L1 in the classroom to help them succeed academically, to help them gain English proficiency, and to help them become confident, bilingual individuals who contribute to the United States’ overall benefit.

However, as stated previously, the highly emotional and political components of incorporating students’ L1 into the classroom makes this type of research controversial but even more important. The more evidence educators, politicians, and teachers have, the more possible it is for teachers to provide students with research-based instruction that supports their learning. In summary, researchers need to study instructional practices empirically to determine how, to what extent, when, and how often they should use students’ L1. This will allow educators to take the knowledge about the importance of utilizing students’ L1 and actually implement it in the classroom.

**Example of Implementation**

Please see attached DVD for clips of the lesson.

NOTE: Two students are involved in the lesson, but due to legal issues, I could not show their faces. Therefore, the video shows me teaching and the side profile of one student.

**Lesson Background**

This semester I have been working with two fourth-grade struggling readers twice a week. They are both from Mexico and speak Spanish at home. I chose to implement a strategy I learned from my research into my personal teaching. My goal for this project is to use what I am learning from the research. I do not merely want to have knowledge about a topic, but I want the knowledge to influence my instructional practice. However, I am not conducting research; I am not comparing the effectiveness of two different strategies. Rather, I am practicing using what I learned in my research, such as ways of using students’ native languages in the classroom to influence their English language development, academic knowledge, cognitive skills, and identity development. Furthermore, I chose to use a reading strategy since my degree is in Reading Education. In summary, I am utilizing the research on incorporating students’ L1 into the classroom to inform my teaching. I have videotaped and transcribed parts of the lesson to show how teachers can implement the L1 into their instruction, to reflect upon the usefulness of using the L1, and to examine students’ reading comprehension.

As stated in my paper, Iddings, Risko, and Rampulla (2009) describe a study in which Mexican American students discussed an English text in Spanish (p. 53-57). The study found that when students discussed texts in their L1, they were able to reach a more sophisticated and refined understanding of the text. The use of their L1 allowed them to work together and use higher-order thinking skills to understand the text. Therefore, I am choosing to use this strategy in my lesson. I am going to introduce the idea of students using their native language to help them learn and understand a text.

I chose to use the text, *Miss Nelson is Missing* by Harry Allard, because the text is slightly above the students’ current level, and it requires readers to make inferences. I did not want to choose a text that the students could read and completely understand in English because that defeats the purpose of using a native language to aid in comprehension. I also wanted the students to be able to read the text. If they could not decode enough words, they would not have anything to discuss because they would not have any understanding of the text. Therefore, *Miss Nelson is Missing* seemed to be an appropriate text because discussion about the text should help students make inferences, and it is slightly above their level so the students will need to discuss it to understand it.

For the actual lesson, I am not going to interrupt students. Rather, I am going to let them read the text with each other and discuss it when they want. If they are not using Spanish or are not talking about the text as they are reading it, I am going to encourage them to use Spanish to help them talk about the book and about what is happening. After the students read the book, I am going to ask them to retell the story to me. Then, I am going to show them a Spanish version of *Miss Nelson is Missing*. While trying to plan my lesson, I have found many children’s books recorded in different languages on www.youtube.com. I think that www.youtube.com can be a very valuable resource for finding videos and recordings that connect to the classroom curriculum and use students’ native languages. After I show the Spanish video, which retells *Miss Nelson is Missing* in Spanish through pictures and includes some English subtitles, I am going to ask the students if they learned anything else from the video or if the video helped clarify anything. This will allow me to observe how utilizing resources in students’ native languages can impact their understanding. Both Freeman and Freeman (1993) and Cook (2001) state that educators can use videos that incorporate students’ native languages to help increase their academic and English development. Therefore, I am going to use this instructional strategy in my lesson and observe how it affects students’ overall comprehension.

At the end of the lesson, I am going to ask the two students to reflect on the usefulness of speaking in Spanish to understand the text. I think that this reflection time will provide valuable data not only to me about how I can change my instruction to make it more effective, but also to students about using their native language in the context of English reading. Then, with the data from the videotape, students’ conversations in Spanish, their retelling, the influence of the Spanish video, and their reflections, I will reflect upon my incorporation of Spanish into my teaching practice. I have completed the following lesson outline to provide more information and to serve as a guide when watching and thinking about the lesson.

**Lesson Procedures**

*Introduction*

1. Introduce the idea of using Spanish to help understand the text.
   1. “Because you know Spanish, you can use what you know in Spanish to help you read in English and to understand books in English.”
   2. “Brayam, do you remember the other day when you asked me what comprehend means? Well, comprenden is a Spanish word that means the same thing. Comprenden and comprehend look the same- so you could use your knowledge of comprenden to help you know the word comprehend in English.”
   3. “You can also talk about books in Spanish to help you understand them better. Because you know Spanish better, sometimes it is easier to think about a book in Spanish. This helps you know what the book is about.”
2. “Today, I am going to give you both a book called *Miss Nelson is Missing*. This is a book about a class of students. The children do not listen to the teacher until they get a substitute teacher. Then everything changes.”
3. “I want you to read the book, and talk about it with each other, and I want you to talk about it in Spanish. I am not going to help you read this book. Instead, I want you to use your knowledge of Spanish to help you read and understand the book. Some of the parts of the book are a little confusing. Make sure you read it and talk about it together and in Spanish.”
4. “After you read the book, I am going to ask you to tell me everything you remember about the book. So, as you read and talk about it in Spanish, I want you to make sure you understand what the story is saying.”
5. “Do you remember what we said is the most important part of reading?” (understanding or knowing what you read).
6. “Good! So I want you to use Spanish to help you understand the book.”
7. Students will read the book.

*Retelling*

“Now, I want you to tell me everything you remember about the book. Pretend that I have never read the book, and you are telling me everything. You can tell me what you remember together, since you read it together.” (I will use a retelling scoring form to note what they know about the story.)

*Video - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCbOSh7CEx8*

1. “Now I have a movie that some kids made of the story *Miss Nelson is Missing.”*
2. “The movie isn’t the exact same as the book, but it tells the same story. It is in Spanish. I want you to watch the movie and see if you can learn anything extra from it or see if it helps you understand more of the book.”
3. Students will watch the video.
4. “Did the movie help you understand anything else? Is there something new that you would add when you were telling me the story and what you remember?”

*Reflection*

1. “Thank you for working so hard and for using your Spanish to help you read.”
2. “Did you like using Spanish to help you understand the story?”
3. “Do you think it helped you understand the story?”
4. “When was using Spanish the most helpful? Do you remember a part of the story that talking in Spanish really helped you know what the book was saying?”
5. “Did you want to use English instead?”
6. “Do you like using Spanish at school?”
7. “Do you think using Spanish at school can help you learn?”
8. “Tell me one time when using Spanish really helped you understand the story? Would you have been able to understand the story if you used English instead?”

**Reflection from Lesson Implementation**

When reflecting on the effectiveness of the lesson, I wonder if these students needed to use Spanish to help them understand the text or if they could have understood and expressed themselves equally in English. At the end of the story, the author implies that Miss Nelson and Miss Viola Swamp are the same people. The children quickly make this discovery and say excitedly in English, “She’s the witch!” In addition, student 1, when discussing the text in Spanish, begins to use both English and Spanish and says, “she is sick…está enferma.” This is a direct translation and shows that he can express his same thoughts about the text in English. In another example, at the end of the book, I asked the students to summarize what they had read in Spanish and then retell the story in English. Student one says, “Es todo lo que se trata de da una leccion, todo el libro”, and student two rephrases this statement as well. Then, when I asked the students what the book was about, the student one replied, “It’s all about teaching a lesson to the kids, ” which is a translation of what he said in Spanish. From these examples, I am not sure if the students actually needed to use Spanish to help them understand. When I asked them to reflect on using Spanish, they said it was helpful, especially in the middle of the story and when they were figuring out that Miss Nelson was the bad teacher (see Appendix for students’ responses to reflection questions). However, I question their statements and wonder if they could have arrived at the same understanding in English.

With this reflection from the lesson, I think that it might be helpful to provide higher-order thinking questions for students to discuss in Spanish. These types of questions require students to explain their reasoning, which could be more difficult for them to do in English. However, asking students to summarize a text in Spanish, when they can summarize it in English, does not seem like it increases their academic knowledge or English proficiency. As stated in the research paper, the goal for ELLs is still to teach them English. Using students’ L1 is a tool to help them increase their academic and English knowledge; however, native languages need to be used strategically and purposefully (Cummins, 2009; Cook, 2001; Kharma, & Hajjaj, 1989; Brooks & Karathanos, 2009; Turnbull, & Arnett, 2002; Schmidt & Gakeun, 1997). Therefore, for these two specific students, I do not know if using Spanish positively increased their comprehension of the text or their English language skills. It does not mean that using Spanish did not help some, but I do not know if the task was difficult enough to require the use of Spanish. I think they could have learned equally as much with some scaffolding from the teacher. In summary, when reflecting on the lesson from this perspective, I learned that it is important to know the level of students’ English proficiency. With that knowledge, I can make decisions on how to incorporate students’ L1 to achieve maximum academic and English learning. In this particular lesson with these two students, the activity did not appear to maximize their Spanish as a tool for learning because I think they could have completed the same task in English. As the students said when they reflected on the use of Spanish at school, “We have to keep learning English.”

However, the lesson definitely was effective in the two following different areas of learning: students’ engagement and affective domain. Throughout the lesson, the students were extremely engaged, especially during the Spanish video. They were excited about reading the text and enthusiastic about discovering who Miss Nelson was in the story. I have been working with these students since January, and in this lesson, they were much more engaged than normal. Therefore, I think that using Spanish helped increase their active participation in the learning activity. Additionally, I asked the students if they liked using Spanish, and they said they did. However, I also asked the students if they wished they could have used English when reading the text instead, and they said they liked using both Spanish and English. I think these responses show the importance of creating a classroom culture that values students’ contributions in both the native language and English. Teachers can create a classroom culture that encourages students to use and learn English, while still valuing the L1. Giving children the freedom to use English and their L1 could encourage them to take risks using English. However, the choice to use the L1 also provides a safe environment where students can demonstrate their understanding and knowledge. One thing I think is interesting is that I asked the students if they think using Spanish at school can help them learn. Student one said “no”, and student two said “kinda,” and then they agreed on the “kinda” answer. These responses show me that teachers must instruct students how to use their native language and show students how their L1 can be a valuable resource. As Cummins states, cross-lingual transfer is a normal part of bilingual development, but it can develop haphazardly and randomly if teachers do not instruct students on how to utilize their knowledge to help them learn English and academic content (Cummins, 2007, p. 231). Therefore, if teachers want students to use their L1 as a valuable learning tool, they need to show students how to use the L1 to help them learn and teach students the value of their L1.

In my lesson, I discovered how teachers have to teach students to use their L1. I began my lesson with an introduction of how Spanish can help them learn and then left students to use Spanish throughout the reading of the text. However, I quickly observed that if I did not guide students to use Spanish, they were not going to stop and discuss the text. Therefore, I prompted them at various critical points throughout the story to use Spanish. On one occasion, student one used Spanish spontaneously to comment on the book, but other than that, the students primarily spoke in English and only stopped to discuss the book when I asked them if they wanted to stop. Therefore, when teaching this lesson, I learned that teachers must show students when it is useful to use their L1 and how to use it. This instruction definitely requires scaffolding and modeling, but it could be very beneficial for students to learn when and how to use their L1 as an academic resource.

In summary, I used the previous research as the basis for one lesson where I incorporated students’ native language, Spanish, into my instruction. I allowed students to discuss the text in Spanish, and I had them watch a Spanish video about the text. I observed that student engagement was high, and the students had positive reactions to using Spanish. The students enjoyed using Spanish and English and developed a deep understanding of the book, which I witnessed when they began telling me the moral of the story in their retelling. However, I also learned that it is not beneficial merely to tell students to use their native language. Instead, the activity needs to demand that students use their L1 for a specific purpose and as an academic tool. As a teacher, I want all of my students to learn English, which means creating activities where students can use English successfully. Therefore, activities that incorporate the L1 are important, but teachers need to make sure students know the purpose of the L1 in the activity. For instance, in my lesson, I could have adapted my lesson to use the L1 for higher-order thinking questions instead of basic summaries because the students appeared to be able to summarize the text in English. Finally, I learned the importance of teaching students how to use their L1 as a tool to increase their English skills and academic knowledge. The two students in my group appeared ambivalent about the usefulness of Spanish in school. Therefore, teachers need to teach students explicit ways they can use the knowledge they have in their L1 and their bilingual language skills and the value of these skills. Overall, this lesson allowed me to apply some concepts I learned from my research to my actual teaching practice and then to reflect upon the different components of L1 use in the classroom. Through this experience, I think I have gained a greater awareness of the complexities involved in incorporating students’ native languages in the classroom, which further validates the need for more research to guide monolingual educators’ use of the L1 in bilingual and multilingual classrooms.

**Conclusion**

Research shows that the use of students’ L1 can increase ELLs’ academic knowledge, English proficiency, metacognitive awareness, identity, and self-esteem. However, due to the political nature of immigration and English as a national language, many educators and policy-makers do not desire to use languages other than English in the American public school system. Yet, ELLs are not succeeding in the school system because they are not learning English or meeting content standards. Therefore, educators and politicians need to develop research-based ways to teach ELLs; schools need to provide these children with the best education possible, regardless of one’s opinion on the importance of a national language.

Researchers show some effective practices monolingual teachers can use in their classroom to incorporate the use of ELLs’ L1. Examples include allowing students to work in homogenous language groups, providing a variety of L1 resources, inviting parents and community members into the classroom, using translators so that students can write in their L1, using bilingual dictionaries, and teaching students to be translators. While these practices may require extra time for planning and implementation, research shows the valuable and positive outcomes for students who need to learn to use their L1 as a tool for learning.

I chose to use this research and to test its effectiveness in my practicum setting. I encouraged students to discuss an English book, *Miss Nelson is Missing*, in Spanish, their native language, and I gave them a movie to watch that summarized the story in Spanish. In this experience, I learned that incorporating students’ L1 into the classroom is not enough. Teachers need to be purposeful and use the L1 for activities that students cannot complete in English. As the students in the video said, “We still need to learn English.” This statement shows the importance of teaching students to use their L1 as a valuable resource for learning English and academic content but also the importance of not haphazardly using the L1. ELLs still need to learn English, and as most researchers agree, the primary language of input should be English. In summary, educators need to use different strategies to incorporate students’ L1 into the classroom so that ELLs can succeed in school by learning both academic content and English. However, future researchers need to determine the most effective strategies for using the L1, and when, how often, and to what extent teachers should use the L1 to maximize student learning.

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Appendix

Student responses to reflection questions on using L1

T: Do you like using Spanish to help you understand the story?

S2: Yes – “because we could understand the whole story”

T: Do you think it helped you understand the story when you got to talk in the story?

S1/S2: Yes

T: Why do you think it helped you understand more than talking in English?

S2: Because sometimes we don’t know what it is talking about so we can understand it in Spanish

T: When was using Spanish the most helpful?

S1: In the middle

S2: When Miss Nelson was the witch, I mean the bad teacher.

T: Did you wish you would have used English instead or did you like using Spanish?

S2: I like using both.

T: Do you like talking in Spanish at school?

S1/S2: Yes

T: Do you think using Spanish at school can help you learn?

S1: No, kinda

T: How do you think it could help you at school?

S2: It could help you because you could understand the word or book or something.

T: Tell me one time when talking in Spanish really helped you understand the story?

S2: At my old school

S1: When I was in third grade

T: So now do you think you know enough English that you don’t have to use Spanish?

S2: A little bit…

S1: We have to keep learning English.

T: Teacher (Emily Ryan)

S1: Student 1

S2: Student 2