

# LANGUAGE and LITERACY

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? *How are oral language, literacy, and culture related?*
  - ? *How does literacy instruction need to be adapted for culturally and linguistically diverse students?*
  - ? *How does knowledge of language, including morphology and syntax, assist second language learners?*
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The term “literacy” in the strictest sense refers to the ability to make meaning from written code. Over the course of recent decades, however, views of reading have shifted from a focus on the mechanical aspects, or coding and decoding, of language to a broader interpretation of reading as “a strategic process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with text” (Braunger & Lewis, 1998, p. 6). Here we also take literacy to include the sociocultural context in which this construction of meaning occurs. Thus, in this section of *The Diversity Kit*, we define literacy as not only a multifaceted act of reading, writing, and thinking, but also as constructing meaning from printed text in a particular sociocultural context.

Some scholars have used the term “critical literacy” to refer to the ability to use language in all of its forms (including oral language use) as a tool for thinking, communicating, and challenging unequal power relationships among groups of people (Calfee & Nelson-Barber, 1991). The emphasis of both definitions is on using language to communicate and to make sense of the world, but the broader definition is more consistent with the notion of empowering students to participate in a democratic society and challenge the unequal power relationships within it (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Of course, in the Information Age, the range of print and media has expanded to include Internet communications and new types of graphics that require particular interpretive skills (Rafferty, 1999). Current definitions of the word literacy more frequently include proficiency with these new forms of media.

In this section of *The Diversity Kit*, we focus on learning to read and write and how that process is related to oral language proficiency. We also acknowledge that there are connections between high-level uses of written and oral language. Learning the discourse of the classroom entails acquiring what might be called “literate” or “formal” uses of oral language, which have much in common with the type of language that students will eventually encounter in print. Also, we cannot overlook the fact that literacy does not exist outside of a social context. That is, literacy refers to the ability to think and reason according to the norms of a particular society. Societal expectations for literacy determine (or at the least, influence) who becomes literate, how an individual becomes literate, and for what purposes literacy is used.

## Cultural Approaches to Literacy

There is a cultural foundation for learning to read and write. Literacy, which is highly valued in U.S. dominant culture, is not uniformly meaningful across cultural groups. For example, certain American Indian and Alaskan Native groups prefer to keep their

ancestral languages oral because of the social costs of having a written language (Kwachka, 1994). Among these costs are the erosion of traditional roles of elders (i.e., an individual can obtain information in a book rather than ask an elder) and the loss of oral traditions. These groups or “speech communities” typically have highly sophisticated oral strategies for organizing lengthy narratives, as well as social strategies that ensure transmission of cultural traditions and history. Particular individuals are responsible for understanding and remembering certain knowledge and passing it on to other appropriate individuals. When written forms of the language are introduced, they can disturb (and, in fact, permanently change) the culture of the group. Moreover, special oral skills that develop memory (use of rhyme and special storytelling strategies) may be lost when a speech community transitions to using written language.

Indigenous tribes of the Americas and elsewhere have been faced with a paradox: on the one hand, despite what they regard as the negative implications of written literacy, they know that certain languages may have a better chance of surviving if they are reduced from oral to written form in a process known as graphization (Cooper, 1989). On the other hand, graphization necessarily alters the patterns of language use traditionally used by the group. Further, groups that have chosen to record their oral language in writing will have distinctive patterns of literacy use, depending on the group’s needs. If the group is bilingual, people may choose to use certain forms of communication in one language and other forms of communication in the other language; this is a linguistic phenomenon known as diglossia. For example, in the Marshall Islands

of Micronesia, personal letters are most often written in the vernacular language, Marshallese. However, beyond elementary school grades, academic writing is conducted in English. Further, Micronesia also uses literacy in rich ways one might not consider in an American context. Examples include carved story boards illustrating legends or historical events (used to retell the story without actual text), tattoos that have explicit “textual” meaning, and petroglyphs, or drawings in stone that transmit ancient cultural history and content.

Teachers who want to draw upon students’ prior experiences and make connections to classroom literacy will want to explore



the culture-based literacy norms of their students. The vignette on page 56 illustrates how one teacher makes connections to her students' cultures. These immigrant Latino students come from Mexico and Central America, and their cultures are very collectivistic. In their homes, children learn to focus on shared success rather than individual success; cooperating to accomplish almost any kind of task is the norm.

## VIGNETTE: Class Books

Mrs. Amada Pérez, a Ventura, California third-grade teacher, had children create posters about themselves on 11"x17" paper as a homework assignment. She explained, "When they brought them back, I interviewed each child. They learned about each other. The collectivistic part is putting them together as a class book." She laminated the pages so that they would stand up to ongoing use by more than 20 students who took great pride in their joint product. On another occasion, she paired her third graders with first graders (they have a buddy arrangement) to collaborate on a single book based on a story they had heard called "If". Mrs. Pérez described what happened: "They drew on paper and cut out their drawings. They wrote a sentence on the computer—some in English, some in Spanish. Some of their pages illustrated things like 'If people could smell wind...,' 'If tables could have faces...,' 'If grass could be eyebrows...,' 'If my heart were a butterfly...,' 'If a whale could run in the park...,' 'If apples could eat trees...'. Reading the whole finished product as a group, they were in awe of each other's work."

(Adapted from Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, and Hasan, 2000.)

When Mrs. Pérez has her students make individual books and create an author's page about themselves, they inevitably portray themselves in the context of their whole family. Often, it is impossible to tell which person in the illustration is the child author. In their text, children tell about all of the members of their family. Should Mrs. Pérez instruct the children to focus only on themselves? If she did not understand the cultural origin of her students' behavior, Mrs. Pérez might think that the students had simply misunderstood her directions. This short, nonfictitious vignette illustrates how cultural values can permeate literacy in the classroom. The class books are symbolic of two values: collaboration and shared property. These values are not prevalent in mainstream American society; thus, there is a potential for conflict and misunderstandings, especially in a culturally mixed classroom where the teacher is not aware of these different orientations. In addition, the value of family is also reflected in the children's preference to draw their whole family on the author's page.

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### ***Oral Language as the Basis for Written Language***

Well-developed oral language proficiency provides the foundation for written language (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In fact, reading involves responses to visual symbols based on auditory language. Successful reading in any language depends on seeing print, hearing speech, and associating these with stored experiences (i.e., making meaning). Language development, therefore, is essential for proficient reading. As reading researcher Marilyn Adams (1990) has observed, "Children ... understand spoken language, and we depend on that. It is from speech and through speech that they must come to understand written language as well" (p. 221).

Whether in the first or second language variety, language provides labels for thoughts that can then be used to transmit and receive ideas, either through oral or written modes. This relationship between language and reading is well-documented. According to Snow et al. (1998), "Between 40 and 75% of preschoolers with early language impairment develop reading difficulties later.... [Even] those with mild-to-moderate language delays, who appear to overcome their spoken-language

difficulties by the end of the preschool period, remain at greater risk than other youngsters...” (p. 105). Thus, the importance of early language development cannot be underestimated.

## ***Elements of Literacy Proficiency***

The major elements of literacy proficiency are phonological awareness, vocabulary and prior knowledge, knowledge of discourse structures, knowledge of literary styles, and awareness of purposes for reading. Although these elements are not the only building blocks of literacy, we believe they are among the most important. In addition, teachers’ understanding of morphology and the syntax of a language can facilitate second language learners’ acquisition of English. The goal of this section is to provide an introduction from which teachers can proceed to identify areas they want to pursue in greater depth.

## **Phonological Awareness**

To read successfully in any alphabetic language, students must be able to distinguish among the sounds of the words they are reading and to hear the smaller units of the sounds that compose words. This has been referred to as phonemic awareness, a skill that is actually a component of phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is “the ability to attend explicitly to the phonological structure of spoken words, rather than just to their meanings and syntactic roles” (Snow et al. 1998, p. 111). To be phonologically aware is (at a simple level) to be able to detect patterns like rhymes or (at a more abstract level) to learn to hear the individual sounds (phonemes) in words. For example, a young reader must learn to hear “fog” as “f-o-g.”

At a more advanced level, reading successfully requires that the reader understand the relationship between words such as intervene/intervention or among words such as integrate/integral/integrity. At this level, linguists speak of morphophonological awareness. As unpronounceable as this word might seem at first, it is an illustration of an important concept: words are often composed of meaningful chunks (think of “beauti-ful” or “dis-connect”). The task for the developing reader is not only to hear words as composed of sounds but to perceive their underlying structure—their morphophonological structure. “Morpho” refers to “morphemes,” which can be words (beauty, connect) or the small pieces added to words (-ful, dis-) to make a particular meaning. So, to be morphophonologically aware (which is very important to being a good reader), children have to understand the sound-letter correspondence, how morphemes may be combined, and the relationship between the pronunciation and spelling of multimorphemic words.

For instance, a student who hears the word “protects” as “pratex” and writes it that way has a basic ability to analyze words phonetically, but he or she is missing a deeper morphophonological knowledge that goes beneath the surface of the word. “Protects” is composed of two morphemes that can be combined with other morphemes in many ways: pro-, and -tects (*provide, detect, etc.*). Moreover, a more developed reader-writer would know intuitively that “protects” is a verb, and verbs don’t usually end in -x. In the past, portions of reading texts and workbooks were devoted to structural analysis, which addressed many aspects of morphophonological awareness, including combining prefixes and suffixes with root words to change the grammatical category of a word (*work/working*). So, although there is a current emphasis on phonemic awareness in the reading literature, it should be understood as one piece of a larger set of skills.

Phonemic awareness is one of the most important predictors of student success in reading (Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). In fact, the vast majority of students who have difficulty learning to read have problems at the level of phonemic awareness (Snow et al., 1998). Such students may not readily hear all three sounds in “fog” but hear it only as an unanalyzed syllable. This skill—being able to figure out that spoken language is composed of phonemes, hearing the sounds in a word, and distinguishing between words based on the different sounds—helps children learn the letter-sound (grapheme-phoneme) correspondence needed to read and spell words. More important, phonemic awareness is essential to knowing how to use knowledge of letter-sound correspondence to identify new words. These skills are learned, and because they do

not develop naturally they should be explicitly taught. **Table 1**, on page 60, shows a series of phonemic awareness tasks that can be used to assess a student’s level of proficiency with this skill. They are listed roughly in order of difficulty. If a student cannot do any one of these tasks with relative success, he or she probably needs some specific intervention to improve phonemic awareness.

Preceding any of these tasks, a teacher should assess a student’s ability to recognize and produce rhyming words. Ability to detect and produce rhymes is a phonological skill that develops before grapheme-phoneme correspondence, and lack of



awareness of rhymes suggests that instruction needs to begin with earlier developing skills (rhyming, detection of numbers of syllables in a word). Many children can hear the beginning sound in a word (and perhaps associate it with a letter) but cannot break the word down into component sounds. Note that all of the tasks in **Table 1** are oral tasks that do not require knowledge of the alphabet. The letters within slashes (/s/p/a/, etc.) stand for sounds, not letter names.

**TABLE 1**

## Examples of Phonemic Awareness Tasks

TASK	EXAMPLE
<i>Word-to-word matching</i>	<i>Do pen and pipe begin with the same sound?</i>
<i>Sound isolation</i>	<i>What is the first sound in rose?</i>
<i>Odd word out</i>	<i>Which word starts with a different sound—bag, nine, beach, bike?</i>
<i>Sound-to-word matching</i>	<i>Is there a /k/ in bike? In bone?</i>
<i>Phoneme deletion</i>	<i>What word would be left if the /k/ sound were taken away from cat? What sound do you hear in meat that is missing in eat?</i>
<i>Phoneme counting</i>	<i>How many sounds do you hear in the word cake?</i>
<i>Blending</i>	<i>What word would we have if you put these sounds together: /s/ /a/ /t/ ?</i>

(Adapted from Stanovich, 1994)

## Print-Based Skills

Other related important predictors of reading success in English are knowledge of the alphabet and awareness of how print works—for example, that letters can be used to represent speech (Snow et al., 1998) and that words in English are written from left to right (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). However, a child may know the alphabet, the sounds that each letter represents, and that words are read from left to right but still get stuck trying to distinguish among individual phonemes in words.

## Vocabulary and Prior Knowledge

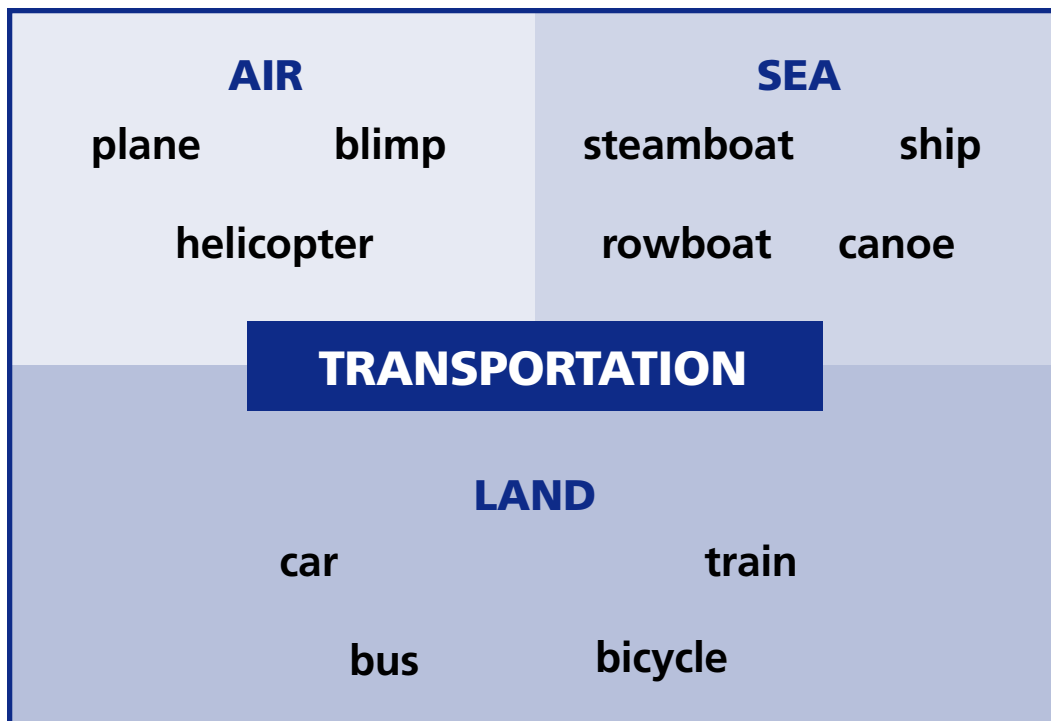
A second important component of literacy proficiency has to do with the skills required to understand ideas or concepts of language in order to gain meaning from reading. This is the area of prior knowledge and vocabulary development. These two areas are deeply intertwined: words represent concepts, and students' vocabularies are greatly dependent on their daily life experiences, reading, and instruction. For instance, a word like “butterfly” may evoke an image of an insect with large wings. Greater experience with butterflies (or more exposure in school) will likely lead to a more elaborated sense of the word's meaning (stages of development of the butterfly, habitats, geographical distribution, types of butterflies, etc.).

This combined factor, vocabulary and prior knowledge, is also a major predictor of success in reading and a primary determinant of reading comprehension for students learning to read English as a second language (August & Hakuta, 1997). “Reading comprehension is a process that involves the orchestration of the reader's prior experience and knowledge about the world and about language” (Bartoli & Botel, 1988, p. 186). Teachers should strive to help students build the background knowledge and vocabulary necessary to comprehend the reading. This can be accomplished through informal instruction, such as reading aloud to students; it can also be accomplished through direct, step-by-step instructional strategies for teaching key concepts and vocabulary in both pre- and postreading activities (e.g., semantic mapping). Semantic mapping is a simple technique that asks students to show (and learn from each other) relationships among words. An example of semantic mapping is presented on page 62.

*“Reading comprehension is a process that involves the orchestration of the reader's prior experience and knowledge about the world and about language.”*

## ACTIVITY: Semantic Mapping

With students, create a map of modes of transportation. Cluster together words related to types of land transportation, air transportation, and sea transportation. Can you expand the modes of transportation beyond the example presented below?



### DISCUSSION:

- Ask students how transportation may differ based on a region's geography. How do cultural norms and cultural considerations influence modes of transportation available? Uncommon modes of transportation, such as rickshaws, may be examples of this.

## Knowledge of Discourse Structures

A third component of literacy considers students' knowledge of different kinds of oral and written discourse structures. "Discourse" refers to any unit of oral or written speech that is longer than a sentence. As sentences get strung together, there is an expectation that the resulting discourse will be structured in a certain way, depending on its purpose. Reading and writing entail producing and comprehending extended stretches of oral and written discourse (often referred to as "text") that are organized in different ways. Readers who understand the structure of a text and are able to comprehend the text beyond each individual sentence tend to be more successful at reading (Meyer, 1977; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Stein & Glenn, 1979). In the Culture section of *The Diversity Kit*, we discuss the organization of stories or narratives and how culture influences not only narratives but also expository discourse such as argumentation and persuasion, description, and explanation (see Kaplan, 1988; Kochman, 1989).

Discourse structures most commonly used in the U.S. are not superior to other discourse structures; they simply differ from those that are more commonly used in other cultures. For example, an argument in which facts are presented first and a conclusion is then drawn is neither superior nor inferior to an argument in which an allegation is made and facts offered to support it. Students who have been exposed to different expectations for how text should be structured may not recognize the patterns of the stories or descriptions that are used in the classroom (or are expected in their writing). When students have difficulties reading English texts or writing according to accepted standards, teachers may wrongly judge that they are deficient in language skills or reading ability. The problem for teachers in assessing the writing of such students is that it is difficult to recognize patterns that are not familiar to the teacher. Teachers may see only the lack of something they expect to see, rather than understanding the pattern or structure produced by the student. Although teachers' familiarity with students' writing patterns tends to be overlooked in the literature on balanced literacy instruction, it is very important, particularly for English language learners who may come from different cultural backgrounds.

## Knowledge of Appropriate Literary Styles

A related area has to do with literary styles students may use in their own writing or recognize in the texts they read (Kaplan, 1988). A couple of brief examples will illustrate this issue. Vietnamese narrative style apparently emphasizes the importance of a story's setting. A Vietnamese American student who has been exposed to this

tradition may expend what a teacher considers a disproportionate amount of time describing the setting of a narrative—time the teacher feels should be used to develop the story’s plot or characters. Students from an Arabic writing tradition may appear to digress when they use elaborate description. In both cases, students and teachers may find themselves focusing on different elements of the text. These cases may result in inaccurate assessment of a student’s literacy skills, but they also provide an opportunity for student-teacher discussion about how literacy styles can differ and about what is expected of students in an academic setting.

It is not just immigrant students who may encounter conflicts between their own styles and the styles expected of them in school. According to Kochman’s research (1989), African Americans are more likely to follow the classical Greek pattern of arguing in a way that is logical but also employs an appeal to the emotions, revealing personal feelings about a topic. Dominant culture individuals tend to regard the emotional appeal as undermining the logic of the argument (which, of course, it need not), while their African American peers regard the elimination of emotion as insincerity. Because of these differences, the writing of students from different backgrounds may look quite different. In addition, literate oral discourse (giving a speech, for instance) could take very different forms but still be effective, depending on the audience.

### Purposes for Reading

Although we may not think of purpose as a reading skill, it affects a reader’s approach to any given text. Purposes for reading or writing may vary from person to person and from culture to culture. Students’ experiences within their families will have provided them with certain ideas about the purposes of reading. In some homes, reading may primarily serve religious purposes (reading the *Bible*

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or *Koran*, for example). Other purposes of literacy may be to keep up with the news, to make lists for shopping or planning, to seek out information, to keep and review records, to gain pleasure or escape. In addition, literacy may be valued in order to communicate with distant relatives or to complete tasks for one's job. Home exposure to specific genres of literacy may impact students' expectations for literacy use in school. However, it is dangerous to assume that a student's limited exposure to certain forms of literacy in the home means she will not be a proficient reader. All students can expand their reading repertoires through instruction and through exposure to and interaction with a variety of texts.

Uses of literacy and motivation are intertwined. Braunger & Lewis (1998) suggest that in order to sustain their engagement with text "children must be motivated to want to read for authentic purposes connected to their own lives in meaningful ways" (p. 33). Studies have shown that students aren't personally engaged in literacy activities when they are unable to make a connection between the text and their own lives. In these cases, students do not develop into mature readers (see Greenleaf, 1997). It should come as no surprise that students who are engaged, purposeful readers are more likely to succeed in school than those who are not (Morrow & Weinstein, 1986; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1990). If they are to be successfully engaged, students' cultural backgrounds and personal interests must be allowed to influence their choices for what to read and write.

### ***Second Language Issues in Acquiring Literacy***

Learning to read in English is likely more of a challenge for English language learners than for those who already speak Standard English as a native language. When learners from non-Standard English backgrounds encounter English print, link it to the sound patterns of their native speech, and seek meaningful references drawn from their cultural heritage, they may be unable to make adequate connections. At best, their reading skills may stop at the decoding level, and the written material may not make sense to them. To avoid these disconnects, teachers must build a broad basis of oral English, a foundation firm enough to support acquisition of the English writing system. However, this does not mean that writing instruction needs to wait until the student is fully proficient in oral English. Snow et al. (1998) suggest that "print materials may be used to support the development of English phonology, vocabulary, and syntax." However, they encourage postponement of formal reading "until an adequate level of oral proficiency in English has been achieved" (p. 325). In short, the richer the experiences students have in English, the more abundant will be the resources for thinking through English and extending that knowledge to reading in English (Thonis, 1981).

For students who have been using another language or dialect in the home, coming to school and learning to read using somewhat different phonemic patterns can be an exceedingly difficult and frustrating task. Such students would benefit from explicit instruction that helps them distinguish between meaningful sounds in one language or dialect and another. For example, the /sh/ sound is not present in the Spanish language, and first language Spanish speakers may confuse it with /ch/. The /r/ sound may be confused with English /d/ because of where the tongue is placed to make both sounds. English /th/, as in “they,” may also be confused with Spanish /d/. The Spanish /h/ sound is represented by “j” or “g,” and the letter “h” is actually silent; these differences will need to be addressed with students who have learned to read in Spanish.

Students who have mastered a language variety not spoken in school may not readily hear the differences between their own set of phonemes and those of the school dialect because these differences often do not interfere with face-to-face communication. Students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE, also referred to as Black Language or Ebonics), for example, tend to use /v/ for the /th/ sound in “mother” and /f/ for the /th/ sound in “with.” A teacher can point out these differences, which primarily affect spelling and not reading.

If students do not have the background knowledge to support comprehension of texts in English, teachers will have to help build that knowledge and the associated vocabulary. They may also need expanded experiences to develop their background knowledge. Thus, the development of both prior knowledge and vocabulary is also critical. Even when students do have the expected experiences and knowledge (and relevant vocabulary in their first language), they may not have the actual English vocabulary to express their knowledge. In this case, the task for the teacher (and peers) is to help the student match new vocabulary to prior knowledge.

Research shows that students who are literate in their first language can become proficient readers in the second language without learning to read from scratch in the second language (Cummins, 1981; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Fitzgerald, 1995; Krashen, 1996). Because most reading skills transfer, once oral language skills in the second language have been acquired, the task of learning to read again is unnecessary. However, these students need instruction in the specific, nontransferable skills: hearing the sounds of English, linking them to the symbols (letters) that represent them, learning English spelling patterns (which go beyond the sound-letter level), and understanding the different English terms for concepts they have already developed in the first language.

## VIGNETTE: Disproportionate Representation of English Language Learners

*Ms. Altchech teaches fourth grade. She observes that because many English language learners are mainstreamed into English-only instruction in fourth grade, there are suddenly many referrals for special education evaluations of these students. She recognizes that most teachers believe that phonemic awareness skills in Spanish will transfer readily to English. And while the general principle may transfer, the majority of students will likely need explicit instruction in English orthography (spelling conventions) and word analysis. In addition, English language learners' English vocabularies are not going to be equivalent to those of native English speakers. If they have not had prior experience with a concept (for example, ice fishing, hula dancing, keyboarding), they may also need to learn the ideas behind the new vocabulary.*

### DISCUSSION:

- **What can Ms. Altchech do to investigate her observation that English language learners are being overreferred to special education?**
- **How can she inform her colleagues of the information she finds?**
- **What can Ms. Altchech do to inform her colleagues of the relationship between oral language development and literacy for English language learners?**
- **How can she connect this with students' prior knowledge?**

## Knowledge of Morphology

Morphology refers to the study of the forms of words, including the structure of words themselves. Morphemes are the smallest functioning unit in the composition of words. That is, words are composed of one or more morphemes. Morphemes are considered to be either “free” when they can occur as separate words or “bound” when they must be attached to other words. For example, the word “cats” consists of two morphemes: the free morpheme “cat” and the bound morpheme “-s” that acts as a marker of plurality. Sometimes altering a free morpheme by adding or removing a bound morpheme results in a shift in the class or meaning of a word. For example, adding the bound morpheme “-ish” to the noun “sheep” results in an adjective. These morphemes are considered derivational because the new word is derived from a base word.

Knowing how language works and how words are comprised can facilitate the language acquisition process. Krashen’s (1982) Monitor Hypothesis, which was presented in the Learning a Second Language section of *The Diversity Kit*, is part of one broad theory of second language acquisition. This hypothesis suggests that knowledge of the rules of language helps second language learners to check or monitor the language they produce or their linguistic output. This can occur with both oral and written output. As with other aspects of language teaching and learning, a general understanding of the composition of words lends itself to the second language acquisition process. It is important that teachers understand how language works linguistically as well as functionally.

## Knowledge of Syntax

As with morphology, a general understanding of syntax on the part of both second language students and teachers is important in the process of language acquisition. Syntax refers to the rules that govern how sentences are formed in a language. This includes both the grammar and structure of a language. Syntactically, English follows a sentence construction that consists of subject + verb + object. An example of this structure is the sentence, “The children went to school.” In this sentence, “children”

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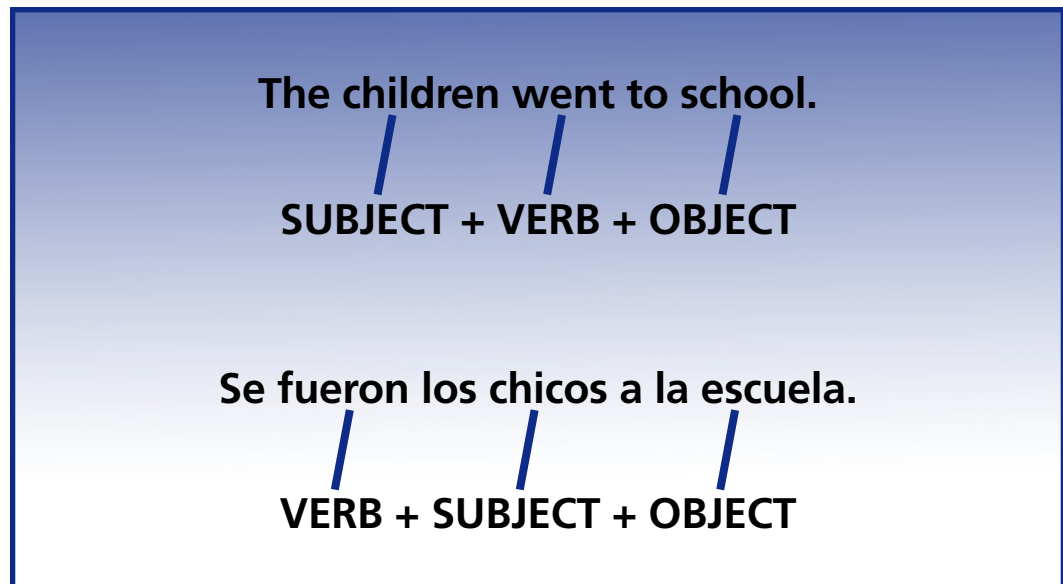
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is the subject, “went” is the verb, and “school” is the object.

The sentence structure of another language may differ from that of English. In Spanish, for example, sentence structure typically follows a verb + subject + object construction. Thus, a translation of the sentence above into Spanish would reveal a sentence structure that is different from that of English. The sentence would be “*Se fueron los chicos a la escuela,*” or literally “Went the children to school.” The difference in these two constructions is depicted in the sentence tree in **Figure 1**. Note also that the Spanish construction uses a reflexive verb (went/*se fueron*) in addition to a definite article (the/*la*) before the word school (*escuela*).

## FIGURE 1

### Sentence Tree



To take another example, adjectives in English generally precede the nouns they describe, as in the construction “the white cat.” However, in Spanish, as in other Romance languages, the construction is reversed, and adjectives generally follow the nouns they describe. Thus, the Spanish construction for the noun phrase above is “*el gato blanco*.” This translates directly to “the cat white.”

When an English language learner is acquiring English, he or she may refer back to the knowledge of syntax gained in the first language; until the rules and structure of English are acquired, students may apply the syntactic rules of their first language to the second language. It is important that teachers are aware of this in the process of second language acquisition. Teachers can explicitly teach their English language learners about the syntax of English while pointing out the syntactic differences among the languages of their students.

Knowing how languages function and how words may be used is perhaps the most creative aspect of language learning and teaching. Language is dynamic; new words are generated continually, and existing words are constantly deriving new meaning. It is important for teachers to recognize that language acquisition is more than just learning words.

In summary, learning a language consists of knowing the uses and meanings of that language, in addition to knowing how that language functions. Cummins (2001a) has proposed a framework consisting of three foci of language acquisition:

- Focus on meaning. This refers to making input comprehensible to second language learners.
- Focus on language. This refers to learners’ knowledge and awareness of the specific forms and uses of language, including a critical look at those forms and uses.
- Focus on use. This suggests that language can be used to generate new knowledge, address social realities and inequities, and create new literature and art.

Cummins suggests that these three dimensions of language can help guide pedagogy, which will enhance the cognitive and linguistic development of second language learners. He suggests further that these dimensions can lead to the growth of critical literacy skills. To understand the different dimensions of language, including its forms, meaning, and use, try the following activity.

## ACTIVITY: Critical Literacy

- 1. *Read through the local newspaper and find any article concerning culturally or linguistically diverse populations.*
- 2. *Identify words that appear to impact the message or tone of the article. For example, the phrase “influx of immigrants” contains the message that a community is faced with large numbers of immigrants. Based on historical demographic data, this may or may not be true. On a more subtle level, this message implies that the social and economic costs associated with immigrants are a burden to the community—a burden thrust on them against their will.*
- 3. *Use the article in your classroom or at a local community group to generate a list of loaded words from the articles brought in. Do members of the group understand the words and their associated meaning(s)? How do these words generate or reinforce existing stereotypes about members of the community?*
- 4. *Words can be analyzed for their various linguistic functions (semantic, phonemic, morphologic, and syntactic). What substitute words could be used in place of the loaded words to portray a more accurate description of the social reality?*
- 5. *Generate a new list of words that could act as substitutes. Rewrite the article using the newly generated words from the group.*
- 6. *Submit the group’s article to the local newspaper.*

When teachers have a strong understanding of morphology in addition to syntax, phonology, and semantics, second language learners will become more proficient in their ability to use and understand language.



## **ACTIVITY:** Exploring Literacy for English Language Learners

**Teachers can enhance learning opportunities for English language learners by using a variety of strategies that call for the use of language and literacy. Reflect on and discuss these points:**

- *Discuss views of literacy with a group of your colleagues.*
- *In their view and yours, what constitutes a good beginning literacy program for English language learners?*

## Different Orthographies

For students whose first language writing system is alphabetic and who have learned to read in that language, moving to English orthography (spelling conventions) may not be a huge leap. However, for those who have learned to read in a syllabic writing system (like that of Japanese, where a syllable like *ka* or *mi* is represented by a single graphic element), the leap is greater. Japanese, for example, uses a combination system, with some words written in symbols that stand for syllables (*hiragana* or *katakana*) and some written in *kanji* that represent whole words. *Kanji*, which are Chinese in origin, can be very complex, with many pen or brush strokes composing a single one. Such a system places an extremely high demand on memory but less demand on phonological and phonemic skills.

Even when a student's first language is written in an alphabetic system, we cannot expect students to make the transition to English reading without considerable explicit instruction (Escamilla, 1999). Perhaps the biggest sticking point for speakers and readers of languages that have fewer vowels is the complex vowel representation system in English: five letters represent 11 vowel sounds individually or in combination. The letter a alone stands for at least four sounds. Confusion can arise over differences in the sounds represented by the same letter; as mentioned, in Spanish the letter h is silent, unless it is combined as ch, and j is pronounced roughly like the

English h in many dialects (as is g before i or e). The vowels may present even more problems: the letter e in Spanish stands for a sound roughly equivalent to a long a (as in *bake*) in English, while the letter i stands for the long e sound (*keep*) in English.



In this chapter we have explored various aspects of language and literacy, including the relationship between oral language development and literacy. We have also considered the importance of vocabulary enrichment and connecting students' home knowledge and literacies to the academic environment. Finally, we have looked at how knowledge of language, including morphology and syntax, can assist U.S. second language learners in their acquisition of English.

By way of highlighting some of the issues we have introduced in this chapter, **Figure 2** shows the major components of reading proficiency and some literacy questions one might pose related to language and culture. Addressing the following questions should aid in planning instruction and interpreting student performance.

## FIGURE 2

### Key Questions About Literacy

COMPONENTS OF LITERACY PROFICIENCY	SAMPLE QUESTIONS RELATED TO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
<i>Phonological awareness</i>	<p><i>How much overlap is there between the phonemes of the student's first language and those of English?</i></p> <p><i>What are the possible ways for words to be structured (use of root words with suffixes, prefixes, or compounding)?</i></p> <p><i>Are children encouraged to "play" with language, to engage in rhyming games, etc., which would increase phonological awareness?</i></p> <p><i>What is the orthography (spelling system) of the student's first language like?</i></p>
<i>Vocabulary knowledge</i>	<p><i>What kind of vocabulary does the student have in his or her first language? in English? With regard to key words in an instructional unit or topic, does the student grasp the concepts represented by the words?</i></p> <p><i>How elaborate is the student's understanding of important words?</i></p>
<i>Prior knowledge</i>	<p><i>What experience has the student had with classroom topics?</i></p> <p><i>Is the topic at hand one he or she may have learned about at home or in another school?</i></p> <p><i>What personal experiences could be used as bridges to classroom topics?</i></p>

COMPONENTS OF LITERACY PROFICIENCY	SAMPLE QUESTIONS RELATED TO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
<i>Knowledge of oral and written discourse structures and strategies</i>	<p><i>What are the text structures of the student's home culture (i.e., narrative, exposition, formal, oral language)?</i></p> <p><i>How are they similar to or different from what is expected in the classroom?</i></p>
<i>Knowledge of literary styles</i>	<p><i>What are the written styles of the student's home language or culture? Is the student's writing influenced by those styles?</i></p>
<i>Purposes for using literacy</i>	<p><i>How is literacy used in the student's home or culture? How are those uses similar to or different from the purposes for reading in school?</i></p>
<i>Knowledge of morphology and syntax</i>	<p><i>How can students' prior knowledge about language, both oral and written, be tapped to facilitate second language learning?</i></p> <p><i>What areas and skills of first language seem to transfer to the second language?</i></p> <p><i>In what ways (e.g., word games, explicit teaching) can teachers expand students' knowledge of the functions and meanings of language?</i></p>

Ultimately, teachers who maintain high expectations for students, who value the knowledge and literacies that students bring to the classroom, and who link students' home languages to the English that is required in an academic context will be most successful in fostering an equitable and high-quality educational experience for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

In the following chapter on Language and Assessment, we explore different types of assessments, including authentic assessments, which may be used with culturally and linguistically diverse students. We encourage you to explore issues of language, culture, and human development in education by using *The Diversity Kit* in its entirety.

