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Enhancing Reading Proficiency in English Language Learners (ELLs): The Importance of Knowing Your ELL in Mainstream Classrooms

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Abstract

In this manuscript, the authors encourage classroom teachers and school leaders to learn about the home culture and language of the growing English learner population if they are to respond effectively to these students' language, literacy, and content learning needs. These funds of knowledge have been shown to help teachers adjust instruction in ways that permit students to engage more actively in language, literacy, and content learning tasks. In addition to offering recommendations for administrators and teachers working to improve literacy of ELLs within and outside the school setting, the authors share sample surveys that can be used to gather information about students' home, language, and educational background as well as reading habits and preferences.

Introduction: Vignette of an English Language Learner (ELL)

Monica is enrolled in Mrs. Taylor's third grade class at the local elementary school. Monica arrived from Mexico seven months ago when her mother and father decided to relocate the family in pursuit of jobs as well as better academic opportunities for the children in the family. Monica has one older brother attending the local high school and one younger sister enrolled in the same elementary school. Monica's parents registered for the free one-hour basic adult English classes offered at the local community center. In these classes, the parents learn basic interactions such as greetings, introductions, expressing likes and dislikes, as well as leave-taking expressions such as saying hello and good-bye. The third week after arriving in the United States, Monica's father secured a job in the construction trade and her mother was hired as a housekeeper for a local hotel chain. Since their jobs require very little English and their work schedule is hectic, the parents discontinued the English classes. The children, on the other hand, have more access to English in the schools and have surpassed the parents' conversational language ability. In the classroom, Monica can greet her friends, ask questions about classroom routines, converse about her daily activities, describe what she did yesterday and talk about what she will do over the weekend. Although Monica is making progress in learning English, she is still categorized as a student in the 73% of ELLs who score below the 'basic' reading level (Perie, Grigg, & Dohahue, 2005). Still, with modifications and targeted early literacy interventions (Farver, Lonigan, & Eppe, 2009), Monica has improved her literacy skills.

Monica fits the conventional profile many teachers and administrators have of ELLs in the United States. However, there is a danger of creating stereotypes, especially in educational contexts where we cannot claim to have a "typical" ELL student (Freeman & Freeman, 2003). In

fact, ELLs come to the United States from many countries, have a wide array of language and cultural backgrounds, experience varying academic realities in their home country and are situated across different proficiency levels of a continuum. Thus, it is important for teachers to consider the individual cultural and linguistic background of ELLs when planning instruction.

Monica is considered a Spanish native speaker, recent arrival, adequate schooling and at an emerging English proficiency level (Freeman & Freeman, 2003; OELA, 2008; TESOL, 2006) (see Table 1 for a summary of these characteristics). At school, Monica is reading texts at a guided reading level H (see Table 1). At home, Monica speaks Spanish with her family. Since her parents use only survival English common phrases and idioms, they cannot assist Monica, her brother, nor her sister with homework assignments.

Table 1

Portrait of Interacting Factors for ELLs in the United States

Native Language (OELA, 2008)	Academic Background (Freeman & Freeman, 2003)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spanish • Vietnamese • Chinese • Hmong • Korean 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate schooling • Limited or interrupted schooling • Lacking or no schooling 	
*Represent the top five languages for ELLs		
English Language Proficiency (TESOL, 2006)	Guided Reading Levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting • Emerging • Developing • Expanding • Bridging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level A • Level B • Level C • Level D • Level E • Level F • Level G • Level H • Level I • Level J • Level K • Level L • Level M • Level N • Level O • Level P • Level Q • Level R • Level S • Level T • Level U • Level V • Level W • Level X • Level Y • Level Z 	

Children who experience difficulty in the early grades fall further and further behind their peers (Stanovich, 1986). A growing body of research shows that effective literacy intervention programs can assist struggling readers (Clay, 1993; Hiebert & Taylor, 1994). In the mainstream third grade classroom, Monica is reading at a guided reading level H, which is typical for students at the beginning of grade one (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007) and expected from an ELL such as Monica. Monica's typically developing and native English speaking peers are reading at guided reading levels L- P (see Table 2).

Table 2

The Fountas & Pinnell Text Level Gradient for grades K-3 (2007)

	Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
Text Level A	X			
Text Level B	X	X		
Text Level C	X	X		
Text Level D		X		
Text Level E		X		
Text Level F		X		
Text Level G		X		
Text Level H		X	X	
Text Level I		X	X	
Text Level J			X	
Text Level K			X	
Text Level L			X	X
Text Level M			X	X
Text Level N				X
Text Level O				X
Text Level P				X

Monica recognizes and writes many high frequency English words such as *come, came, from, her, him, his, one, out, said, saw, she, that, there, they, was, went, were with*. She can change words to make them plural by adding *-es (dresses, crashes)*. Monica can take apart compound words (*bookcase, sunshine*). She is able to take apart words with double consonant letters in the middle (*letter*). With modified instruction, Monica can write two complete sentences about her reading. Monica's typically developing and native English speaking peers write one to two paragraphs independently. Monica works closely with her third grade classroom

teacher, Mrs. Taylor to improve in reading and writing. Monica also works with Mrs. Johnson, her *Leveled Literacy Intervention* teacher, for thirty minutes of daily literacy support. *Leveled Literacy Intervention* (LLI) is a scientifically-based system that is designed to prevent literacy difficulties (Pinnell & Fountas, 2008). Leveled Literacy Intervention is a small group, supplemental intervention designed for children who find reading and writing difficult. The goal of the intervention is to bring children to grade level achievement. Leveled Literacy Intervention is based on Fountas and Pinnell gradient of text difficulty (see Table 2 above). Each level of text places increasing demands on the reader, but the change is gradual. By engaging in intensively supportive lessons at each text level, young children, including ELLs, have the opportunity to expand their reading and writing abilities.

Monica is a hard-working student who is striving to achieve success academically. However, in order for her to make accelerated progress in reading and writing, she needs modified literacy instruction within a small group and individual literacy instruction from her Leveled Literacy Intervention teacher (Pinnell & Fountas, 2008). ELLs, like Monica, benefit from conversation with an adult and interaction with a very small group of children. Every Leveled Literacy Intervention lesson focuses on reading, writing, and phonics/word study.

Each Leveled Literacy Intervention lesson addresses some of Monica's specific language needs. In addition, ELLs benefit from reading large amounts of continuous texts, which are embedded daily Leveled Literacy Intervention lessons. Since Monica learned to read in Spanish while in Mexico and researchers have documented that there is a positive transfer from first language and second language skills (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995; Carpenter, Miyake & Just, 1994; Clarke, 1980; Cook, 1999; Eskey, 1998; Kern, 2000; Koda, 1993; Roberts, 1994), Monica's teachers, Mrs. Taylor and Mrs. Johnson, can help her transfer her reading skills and strategies from her first language to her second language. However, it is important to note that ELLs are not able to draw on their native language reading skills until they have first achieved a certain level of proficiency in their first language. The existence of the reading threshold level has been investigated in a number of studies, which have contributed to the overall growth of first-second language reading relationship research (Alderson, 2000; Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995).

Although reading processes are similar for first and second language, there are several important differences that account for the difficulty that ELLs face, for example, English language proficiency and prior knowledge related to the text. Should these resources be limited, reading entails a slower and more difficult process (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). When classroom and Literacy Intervention teachers are working with ELLs, they can implement specific teaching strategies within the following four categories: oral language, reading, writing, and phonics to further develop ELLs' literacy learning.

Supporting ELLs' Oral Language

It is critical for teachers to make literacy instruction highly interactive, especially for ELLs, using extensive oral language opportunities embedded into every lesson. For instance, when introducing books, teachers should use the language of the text in a conversational way and have children engage with the language in order to assist the understanding of syntax. ELLs need additional "wait and think" time. So teachers can say, "let's think about that for a minute" before calling for an answer. Another teaching strategy for supporting oral language is to paraphrase

and summarize for ELLs using high frequency words. For directions and instructions, teachers can repeat directions and/or instructions in several different ways, closely watching for ELLs' feedback to determine student understanding.

Supporting ELLs' Reading

Shared reading is an ideal teaching strategy to use with ELLs. Shared reading is a form of "reading along" (McGill-Franzen, 2006) with children that helps them move from the emergent stage of reading to more conventional reading of text. Shared reading is an effective classroom tool because it involves children in extensive language repetition and all students participate.

"*Shared Reading*" is a collaborative literacy learning activity based on the research of Don Holdaway (1979)" (Parkes, 2000, p.1). Shared reading in school emulates and builds from the child's experiences with bedtime or lap stories at home (Holdaway, 1979). The children in a group "share" the reading of the story with the teacher through the use of enlarged text (Parkes, 2000). According to New Zealander, Margaret Mooney (1990) children learn about reading by seeing and hearing reading in their everyday lives in much the same way they learn to talk. It is a step between reading aloud and children doing their own reading (Parkes, 2000).

A shared reading experience gives children a chance to practice language, learn the meaning of words, and use the sentence structures of English. Shared reading can be used to assist in literacy growth for ELLs as teachers provide reading opportunities that foster the early stages of literacy development. For example, teachers support children as they learn new words and relate the new words with words the children already know. During and after reading, teachers check with children to be sure they understand vocabulary and concepts.

Supporting ELLs' Writing

Teachers need to support ELLs so they practice composing, constructing and developing essential strategies for daily writing inside and outside of the classroom. Teachers can encourage ELLs to use drawing, especially at lower English proficiency levels, as a form of demonstrating comprehension of a story, or as a pre-writing activity to get their ideas for writing. Teachers can effectively support ELLs by surrounding children's independent writing with oral language. Teacher can talk to children and help them express their ideas in oral language before they write. Another useful teaching strategy is to provide time for ELLs to reread their writing and notice the nature of the ELL's English pronunciation as they engage in reading and talking. It is critical for teachers of ELLs to understand the meaning of words in the teacher's verbal path. For example, teachers might need to provide ELLs with additional support for their understanding of the concepts such as, *first*, *last*, *beginning*, and *ending* which native speakers of English might learn more quickly than ELLs due to repeated exposure.

Supporting ELLs' Phonics and Word Study

A broad view of phonics focuses on how teachers instruct children, which supports their knowledge of letters, sounds, and words as they create meaning when reading and writing. There

are key aspects of phonics learning: phonological awareness, letter knowledge, letter-sound relationships, letter formation, word structure, spelling patterns, and high frequency words (Ganske, 2000). It is essential for teachers to provide hands-on activities to give ELLs the opportunity to manipulate magnetic letters and work with high frequency word and letter cards with pictures. The high frequency word and letter cards with pictures will help ELLs form a core vocabulary of English high frequency words which is critical for reading, writing, and oral language development. When working with ELLs, teachers need to employ body language and gestures as well enunciate words.

Teachers should accept alternative pronunciations of words with hard-to-say sounds and present the written form to help children distinguish between them. For instance, *their* and *there*. Sounds and letters are abstract concepts and the relationships are arbitrary so additional support is often necessary for ELLs. In the next section, we describe the existence and importance of different factors that shape ELLs portrait inside and outside the classrooms.

Diverse Classrooms: An Array of Interwoven Factors

Knowing Your ELL

According to the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) Biennial report for the 2004-2006 school years, there are approximately 4,985,000 students identified as ELLs in public schools in the United States. Although nearly 80 percent of the students classified as ELLs speak Spanish as a native language, ELLs in the nation come from various language backgrounds. More than 400 different languages are represented with Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Hmong and Korean conclusively making up the top languages spoken by ELLs (OELA, 2008).

Before arrival in the United States, ELLs encounter varying academic experiences in their home countries and can be categorized into groups. Freeman & Freeman (2003) identified three groups, namely, ELLs with adequate formal schooling, ELLs with limited or interrupted schooling and ELLs lacking schooling. Students who enter the school system with strong literacy skills and content knowledge in their native language have what is considered adequate formal schooling. Other students who experience weak, interrupted, or limited schooling in their home country fall under this second category. A third group of ELLs consist of students who experience no schooling in their home country. Still, and beyond the three groups of ELLs identified by Freeman & Freeman, a fourth group of students are long term and/or heritage language learners with varying degrees of language skills in both their first and second language. According to Valdés (2001), heritage language learners are raised in homes where a non-English language is spoken, can speak or understand the heritage language and are to some degree bilingual in English and in the heritage language.

When Monica attended her primary school in Mexico, the curriculum emphasized language (Spanish in this case), mathematics, geography, as well as ecological knowledge and she performed up to par with her peers: thus she was categorized as working at grade level.

Second language development is a lengthy and complex phenomenon that requires time and fortitude on behalf of both student and teacher. ELLs must develop interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and academic language proficiency (CALP) in four communication domains: reading, listening, speaking and writing (Cummins, 1979). This concept was

empirically supported in a large-scale study conducted by Levin and Shohamy (2008). These researchers showed that “immigrants [Russian and Ethiopian immigrants to Israel in this study] require a substantial amount of years to reach achievement levels similar to those of students born in Israel in academic subjects” (p. 1). Subject areas in this study included mathematics and Hebrew, the academic language in this case, and learners necessitated between 5-11 years to catch up to their peers. As far as reading is concerned, Cummins (1981) claims that once reading ability is acquired in the first language it is available for the second language. The National TESOL Standards established five levels of proficiency--starting, emerging, developing, expanding and bridging--that underlie the language acquisition process and in turn assist teachers and administrators in determining and tracking ELL progress with language development (TESOL, 2006).

At the starting level, the ELL understands some words, relies on nonverbal clues and visual aids and can produce word level discourse. Specific to reading, ELLs at this level, and at the third grade like Monica, can match icons with individual words and can identify story elements using names of characters or places (TESOL, 2006). ELLs at the starting level obtain the meaning of text mostly through pictures, but are able to understand more than the one-word utterances they can produce. Teachers are encouraged to use pictures, body language, emphasize important words and paraphrase the story at this level.

A higher level of understanding coupled with a beginning of sentence level language production mark the emerging level of proficiency. Important to reading is the fact that at this level, ELLs can associate icons with phrases or short sentences and can categorize story elements using visual support of tools such as graphic organizers (TESOL, 2006). ELLs at the emerging level of proficiency continue to build foundational reading skills and may be able to construct meaning from the words themselves if they have background knowledge related to the text. The same strategies used in the starting level should be employed while guiding the student through phrases and short sentences.

At the developing level of proficiency, students begin to produce paragraph-length discourse as well as understand more complex speech when the teacher uses repetition of key concepts. The ELL can demonstrate reading proficiency by answering questions related to short or paragraph level discourse including announcements, invitations and memos. Additionally, the ELL can sequence the events in a story with text that is supported by pictures and a beginning, middle and end (TESOL, 2006). Thus, to enhance learning for ELLs at this level, teachers should “frontload” (Harper & de Jong, 2004) the reading in order to access prior and background knowledge and increase language understanding. Frontloading” entails eliciting and linking learners’ related background knowledge and highlighting key vocabulary prior to the activity at hand (Harper & de Jong, 2004)

The expanding level of proficiency is characterized by acquisition of most interpersonal communication skills used in every day communication; however, there is still a need to develop the specialized academic language required in most content areas. Particularly in reading, advanced ELLs can read independently but may have some difficulty with reading comprehension and fluency, although the ELLs can locate specific information within the text (TESOL, 2006). ELLs at this level may not understand decontextualized text because it is comprised of complex structures and/or contains specialized vocabulary, thus a focus on academic language and contextualizing of the text is encouraged. Lastly, at the bridging level,

ELLs can participate in most conversations dealing with academic concepts. With regard to reading, proficient ELLs can read and understand information that is written in a non-technical prose (TESOL, 2006).

Knowing Your ELLs' Literacy Portrait

A useful reading assessment for all learners (including ELLs) is a Running Record (Clay, 1993). A Running Record is an informal reading assessment that provides the teacher with specific information about the kinds of errors and self-corrections that students make while they are engaged in the reading process (Clay, 1993). By administering a Running Record and carefully analyzing the results, a teacher can determine the kinds of errors and self-corrections that students make, in addition to what they are attending to while reading (Clay, 1993). Classroom teachers often use running records for instructional purposes to assist them in their decisions about any of the following: 1) evaluation of text difficulty, 2) grouping of children, 3) monitoring progress of children and 4) observing reading difficulties with particular children. These decisions in turn serve as a formative assessment to determine future reading interventions. Running Records are administered one-on-one with a student and they can take approximately fifteen to twenty minutes depending on the length of the book and the strengths and weaknesses of the student's reading ability.

When we consider the interrelated factors of Monica's literacy portrait, Monica's native language is Spanish, her academic background involves limited or interrupted schooling in Mexico and she has demonstrated an emerging level of literacy proficiency. Additionally, Monica has been assessed by her classroom teacher, Mrs. Taylor, and by her Leveled Literacy Intervention teacher, Mrs. Johnson, using a Running Record. Both teachers determined she currently reads at Guided Reading Level H (see Table 2). With modified instruction, assistance and specialized strategies for ELLs from her classroom teacher, Mrs. Taylor, and her Leveled Literacy Intervention teacher, Mrs. Johnson, Monica can construct meaning from words in the text.

Knowing Your ELL's Language and Educational Background at Home

Apart from knowing and learning about an ELL's background as a learner and a student, it is important to include his/her family's language and educational background into the larger educational portrait. Home and school constitute critical contexts that influence and impact a child's development (Bromfenbrenner, 1986; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Aposteleris, 1997). Parental involvement is widely considered an important vehicle that promotes optimal and successful academic development (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Extensive research identifies a positive relationship between parental involvement, academic achievement, self-esteem values, and school retention rates (see Barton & Coley, 2007 for a review). Specific to ELLs, Farver et. al (2009) found that there is a relationship between ELLs' parental literacy involvement and children's scores on school readiness skills. The effects of parental involvement on a child's education are significant across all ethnic groups and all grade levels (Fan & Chen, 2001). Thus, it is important that parents participate in their child's education by means of communicating with school personnel, attending school-related activities and nurturing their child's behavior, all of which facilitate educational success (Epstein, 1986). As educators, we expect and assume parental involvement with the development of their child's education. However, we are barely aware of the realities that parents of ELLs face and their own educational background (Panferov, 2010).

Despite the increased efforts to raise awareness of the importance of parental involvement, low-income, limited-English proficiency, ethnic minority and immigrant parents are not often engaged in their children's educational experiences. Moles (1993) claims that parents from non-dominant backgrounds are more inclined to detach themselves from their children's educational involvement because of "... the limited skills and knowledge, restricted opportunities for interaction, and psychological and cultural barriers" (32-33). In the case of Monica's parents, their lack of English proficiency and little information about American school culture impede their effective parental involvement. In addition lack of transportation and long work hours often make it difficult for low-income immigrant parents to attend school-related events or appointments (Pena, 2000; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Improving and fostering English literacy skills in ELLs requires a serious consideration of innumerable interrelated out-of-school factors. These factors range from the parents' English language proficiency and education level to the family's income and cultural factors. All these factors affect students' performance and proficiency and should be integrated as part of a continuous assessment of students' development in both language and content areas. There are numerous potential questions that teachers may ask in this regard, for example:

- What languages are spoken in the home and community?
- Who are the members of the family and what characteristics of the family does the student value?
- How much formal education do the student's family members or parents/guardians have?
- Who reads and writes in the family, and for what purpose(s)?

Parent and student surveys can provide teachers with a detailed portrait of the families' language, educational cultural and reading background. Sample parent and student surveys are provided in Appendices A and B. Teachers can use the information they glean from the surveys to improve their work with parents and children from diverse backgrounds in the following ways: 1) including parents in curriculum development process, 2) conducting parent-teacher conferences, 3) involving parents and families in classroom and out of classroom activities, 4) sharing a skill or talent with the classroom or school community and 5) sharing knowledge about families' language and backgrounds to learn about students' identities and cultures. Schools should provide the parent surveys in different languages so that families feel comfortable filling out the information in their mother tongue languages. Volunteers, student organizations and/or communities should partner with the schools to make sure translators and/or interpreters are provided to families.

As of the Census 2000, forty percent of ELL parents are from Mexico. The remaining sixty percent have origins that span the globe including Europe, Caribbean countries, East Asia, Central America, South America, West Asia and Indochina. This diversity poses many opportunities and challenges for policy makers and program administrators who are responsible for assuring the success of children and their families (Hernandez, Denton, & MaCartney, 2008). An array of languages are represented, English and mother tongue language proficiencies vary, and families received differing educational exposure prior to their arrival in the United States. Hence, the combination of multiple factors portrays and results in a complex scenario that has direct implications for ELLs' language and academic development in school.

There is a wide range of scenarios regarding ELLs' parental English proficiency, educational background and family background. Some of those scenarios include families where at least one parent is not fluent in English or does not know/speak English at all. However, most ELLs have at least one member in the family who is integrated linguistically into the English speaking society via employment. In that case, that family member has access to English that enables her/him to have a working knowledge of English and successfully engage in interpersonal conversations.

Another scenario involves a considerable number of ELLs who live in linguistically isolated households, in which no one speaks English fluently. Monica is experiencing this scenario as an ELL. Children in these families experience higher degrees of isolation from English-speaking society and their performance in school is directly correlated with the exposure and linguistic aptitudes and attitudes within their home (Cosentino de Cohen, Deterdin & Clewell, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Both the children and their families feel inadequate and parents blame themselves for their child's academic failures. In a longitudinal study conducted by Valdés (1996) ten Mexican-born families were observed and interviewed about their work experiences, struggles to find housing, encounters with schools and educators, involvement in their children's education and their cultural values. Valdés' data show that parents did not feel competent enough to deal with school personnel. At the same time, many misunderstandings led them to believe that school personnel did not care about their children. Thus, it is necessary to promote dialogue between home and school so that educators empower parents to express and share their views and needs of their children's education.

Monica does not feel integrated or accepted at school with her peers. She is not fully aware of the reasoning behind the isolation but she strives to be "like one of them" (monolingual peers)". Monica's teacher, Mrs. Taylor, asks her parents or caregivers to document how much reading they do with their children at home each night using a Home Reading Report. Monica does not submit her Home Reading Report because she does not have anyone at home who can help her with reading in English. Monica's parents do not attend teacher-parent conferences or participate in Monica's school activities due to their constant fear and underprivileged situation as compared to other families. The result is a misperceived lack of interest and involvement in Monica's education. Monica's parents did not understand teachers who expected them to send Monica to school already knowing her ABC's, because they think that teaching ABC's is the responsibility of the teacher. Monica's parents think that their job is to shape Monica's behavior and the school's responsibility is focused toward academics. They firmly believe that they should not interfere with the school's agenda and instructions. Monica's teachers think that she is reserved and shy, partly due to her lack of English vocabulary. They notice that Monica does not raise her hand in class or speak in front of others. However, they may not know that this kind of independent action is not rewarded at home (Valdés, 1996).

As teachers, if we gain more insight and understanding about our ELLs' home environment and the educational backgrounds of their parents or caregivers, we will be more equipped to meet their academic needs at school. Hernandez et al. (2008) claim that some children in immigrant families just like those in native English speaking families have a father who holds a higher education degree. However, most children in immigrant families are three times as likely to have a father who has not graduated from high school.

Parents' educational backgrounds have been documented to influence their children's educational success at school (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto, 2005). Thus, parents whose education does not extend beyond the elementary level may be especially restricted in terms of adequate knowledge and the necessary experience to help their children to succeed in school. Immigrant parents often have high educational aspirations for their children, but may know little about the United States educational system. Consequently, parents with little schooling feel less comfortable with the education system as they are unable to help their children with school work and incapable of effectively interacting with teachers and education administrators.

In addition to considering the language and educational backgrounds that operate in the ELLs' family and home, we must also consider other social and economic characteristics (Jensen, 2008). While extensive social and economic variation exists amongst ELLs' families, many ELLs come from low-income families where resources and means, such as a computer or books, are scarce at home (García & Cuellar, 2006). Despite the increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged students in the United States school system, little is known about the needs and challenges that the parents of these students go through in their parental involvement (Hidalgo, Epstein & Siu, 2005; Vazquez-Nuttal, Li & Kaplan, 2006).

Although schools may promote reading practices at home and encourage reading in English and/or other languages, educators need to acknowledge the cost, in time if using the library and in money if purchasing, of accessing bilingual books. For example, Monica still remembers how much she loved the "Cenicienta" (English *Cinderella*) book that her mother used to read for her when she lived in Mexico. However, Monica's parents barely make enough money to cover their essential living costs each month and books are not in the top essential household needs.

It is imperative for teachers to consider the wide range of factors and diverse family scenarios when assigning homework to ELLs. Teachers can modify homework assignments such as the Reading Report described previously to meet the needs of ELLs like Monica. For instance, the teacher can send home a bilingual book with Monica so that her parents can read with her at home. The ESOL specialist in the school or district can assist in translating the letter from Mrs. Taylor to Spanish so that Monica's parents can read and understand the teacher's expectations for the Reading Report homework assignment. The translation of letters may not guarantee that the ELLs' parents can read the letter. In this case, other methods such as pictures to aid comprehension of the letter, the use of a literate native speaker and/or the use of simplified language, should be employed. It is critical for teachers to embrace ELLs and the diverse funds of knowledge and cultural capital (Moll & Greenburg, 1990) they bring to our schools and communities.

In order to account for the different cultural backgrounds and languages spoken in the mainstream classrooms, teachers can draw as well on the cultures and languages of their ELLs by reading *culturally relevant books* that improve reading instructions for all their students (Freeman & Freeman, 2008). Freeman & Freeman (2008) developed a *Cultural Relevance Rubric* to evaluate books so that all students in a classroom can rate books they read individually or as a whole class group (see Table 3).

Table 3

Cultural Relevance Rubric (Freeman & Freeman, 2008, 50)

1. Are the characters in the story like you and your family?			
Just like us.....			Not at all
4	3	2	1
2. Have you ever had an experience like the one described in this story?			
Yes.....			No
4	3	2	1
3. Have you lived or visited places like those in the story?			
Yes.....			No
4	3	2	1
4. Could this story take place this year?			
Yes.....			No
4	3	2	1
5. How close do you think the main characters are to you in age?			
Very close.....			Not close at all
4	3	2	1
6. Are there main characters in the story who are boys [for boys]/girls [for girls]?			
Yes.....			No
4	3	2	1
7. Do the characters talk like you and your families do?			
Yes.....			No
4	3	2	1
8. How often do you read stories like these?			
Often.....			Never
4	3	2	1

Informal Reading Conferences

Teachers can learn more about students' individual reading strengths and weaknesses if they implement informal reading conferences into their classrooms (Taberski, 2000). Informal reading conferences provide the teacher time to engage in one-on-one conversation with a student about his or her reading. These reading conferences can provide the teacher of ELLs with insights about their students' reading development and showcase their reading progress over time. Ideally, the teacher conducts a Running Record before s/he holds a reading conference with a student. As previously described, a Running Record is an informal reading assessment that provides the teacher with specific information about the kinds of errors and self-corrections that students make while they are engaged in the reading process (Clay, 1993). At a reading conference, the teacher discusses how he or she will modify reading instruction to help the

student reach the designated standards and curricular goals established by the state and their school district.

Informal reading conferences give teachers the opportunity to simultaneously assess and instruct students. For instance, when a teacher talks to a student during an individual reading conference, the teacher is engaging in ongoing learning and assessment. Examples of questions to use during an informal reading conference are located in a Reading Conference Chart (see Figure 1). When students engage in this type of reading conference, they learn how to further develop their reading and the conference provides teachers with information for future instructional decisions.

<p><u>Before the Reading Conference:</u> I explain to Monica that I want her to read with me because I know that she has been working hard on becoming a good reader.</p>
<p><u>During the Reading Conference:</u> I share with Monica what I am noticing about her reading. I want to determine how well she understands the concept of a story.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First, I ask Monica to go through the book and talk about the illustrations on each page. Monica hesitates and I ask her if she wants to talk/answer in Spanish. Monica smiles and she responds in Spanish and is ready to move on. I want to get Monica ready to read the book by activating her prior knowledge about the content of the book she is about to read. • This conversation about the illustrations will also support Monica's ability to comprehend the story. • I ask Monica to begin reading the book she just read with her guided reading group as I observe. Sometimes it takes Monica longer to read her guided reading book than her peers. • I highlight how she effectively read and implemented reading strategies such as re-reading and one-to-one correspondence while reading. • I highlight how it is important to reread a sentence when you come to a challenging word and to ask yourself the following question: Does my reading make sense?
<p><u>At the end of the Reading Conference:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I remind Monica to continue to monitor her reading and to make sure that she rereads the sentence from the beginning when she comes to a challenging word. • I remind Monica to ask herself if the reading made sense.

Figure 1. Reading conference chart.

This dynamic between teacher and Monica occurs in the case that the teacher is bilingual. In the case that the teacher is not bilingual, the teacher should employ the assistance of the ESOL specialist or/and an interpreter during the conference. If neither of these is available, Monica should be allowed to demonstrate her understanding in different ways, possibly through a picture representation and further explanation of the picture sequence.

Effective Assessments and Effective Teaching: Diagnose Reading First

Effective teaching is the key to sustained academic achievement for all students, especially ELLs at lower proficiency levels who may struggle with reading. Effective teachers

are able to differentiate reading instruction to meet the needs of each student at all proficiency levels and at every point in the educational continuum. Teachers must become knowledgeable about state mandated reading standards and they must conduct ongoing, informal reading conferences. The knowledge gleaned from informal reading conferences will help teachers tailor instruction to help all ELLs continue their English literacy growth.

Diagnosis becomes crucial in order to meet where our students are in terms of reading. Standardized reading assessment tests such as the Running Record serve as powerful tools to assess text difficulty, group children, monitor student progress and observe particular difficulties or strengths of individual students. Teachers may use the results of Running Records to plan reading instruction for both individual students and the entire class. More specifically, the results of Running Records allow teachers to prepare lesson plans that target key areas for students with weaknesses. Additionally, schools may use the test results to determine placement into specific reading programs. Overall, assessment tests like Running Records help teachers and schools to diagnose potential reading difficulties in learners. Once students are identified in terms of reading proficiency, teachers are able to push the existing reading proficiency to a higher level.

By understanding each ELLs home background through surveys, proficiency level in both language and content areas and her/his current reading ability from Running Records, teachers will be equipped with the knowledge to provide effective reading instruction and meet the unique needs of all ELLs. When individual reading conferences and excellent teaching exist in classrooms, ELLs will make consistent reading progress.

Recommendations for Implementation: Strategies for Schools and Teachers

Ensuring effective communication between the school and parents and caregivers is essential to meet ELLs' educational needs. Schools gain advantages when parents bring valuable human and cultural resources to schools by providing information about their children and by volunteering in the school's curricular and extracurricular efforts. The first recommendation for schools, then, is to establish a school climate that encourages growth in cultural responsiveness, sensitivity and appreciation to encourage ELL parents and caregivers to become involved in attending events such as parent-teacher conferences, family literacy night and other school related events. ELLs' parents will learn how schools function within the United States, and teachers can share effective reading strategies with parents and caregivers to support their children at home.

The second recommendation for schools is to provide critical resources to enhance communication between teachers and parents. Communication with a teacher can be intimidating for the parents of ELLs, especially if they are not comfortable with their own English skills. Parents play a key role in helping students reach their full academic potential. A school interpreter can be extremely useful to eliminate intimidation and to enhance understanding for parents of ELLs. Home-visit programs that require teachers and interpreters to visit the homes of ELL students should be given special consideration as a way to increase parental involvement. In this regard, school administrators should consider increasing the number of bilingual interpreters available to teachers and parents to enhance school-home communication. Spending time getting to know parents, seeing students in their home environment and hearing of the hopes, objectives and struggles of families may facilitate school-home interaction and result in an increase of

student academic achievement and social and emotional learning. The third recommendation for schools is to provide bilingual books in the various languages spoken in their community as well as wordless storytelling books. Reading in all languages will assist the ELL in succeeding in your classroom.

Teachers must also familiarize themselves with each ELL student by assessing language background, English proficiency level, educational experience and home resources. Language background should include an assessment of reading proficiency in the first language since reading exposure in the first language is important for the teaching of reading in the second language. This compiled information will assist teachers in developing modified lesson plans to accommodate ELL student needs. During the lesson, teachers should access background knowledge, assist the ELL in transferring literacy skills from their native language, present language in context, provide questions that assist the ELL in considering the text critically, use cognates, encourage ELLs to act out the meaning of words, use visual aids to illustrate meaning, frontload the vocabulary and guide ELLs to notice spelling of words and sentence construction. Additionally, we recommend that educators involve the parents of the ELL in the educational process as a way to empower them to have a voice in their children's educational development. For example, during open houses and parent-teacher conferences, we recommend that teachers use visual aids and English vocabulary that includes high frequency words and is free from jargon. We also suggest that teachers use body language, another useful strategy for communicating effectively with parents of ELLs. Last, but not the least, the authors also recommend that learners' home languages are given validity by their presence in the school, which improves the self-esteem of the learners, which in turn results in greater learning.

In summary, contemporary classrooms are increasingly populated by students with varying cultural, racial or socioeconomic backgrounds. Our schools belong to all of these diverse children and their families. In this regard, ELLs constitute a growing group within mainstream classrooms. Teachers and administrators need to be organized and prepared to address the academic needs of each student not only because federal and state legislation requires it, but because it is in the best interest of society and it is our obligation as teachers. Teachers who make a concerted effort to build relationships and understanding with all families and caregivers will become more knowledgeable about students' lives outside of the classroom and this will help teachers adapt the curriculum to meet students' interests. Teachers need to use their professional judgment to implement curricula that achieves the following objectives: 1) address students' individual and diverse literacy needs; 2) hold high expectations for students' individual, academic achievement; and 3) integrate students' home and family background. When teachers focus on meeting these three objectives they will be more successful at closing the achievement gap for all students.

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Appendix A

Parent Survey

Directions: We would like to know a little bit about your background and home reading routines. Please answer each question, either by completing the blank or by checking the appropriate box.

Parent's Language and Educational Background

1. What is your name?

2. How old are you?

3. What is your gender?

Male

Female

4. What is your relationship to the child?

Mother

Other: _____

Father

5. What is the highest educational degree you obtained?

Elementary

Other : _____

High School

Bachelor's

Graduate

6. Where did you obtain your highest educational degree?

United States

Other : _____

7. **What do you consider your native language?**
- Spanish Other: _____
- Vietnamese
- Chinese
8. **What do you consider your proficiency in your native language?**
- Native Speaker Other: _____
- Superior Years of experience with your native language (this includes at home in classes, extra-curricular) _____
- Advanced
- Intermediate
- Novice
9. **What do you consider your proficiency in your English?**
- Native Speaker Other: _____
- Superior Years of experience with English (this includes at home in classes, extra-curricular) _____
- Advanced
- Intermediate
- Novice

Child's Language and Educational Background

10. **What is your child's name?**

11. **How old is your child?**

12. **What is your child's gender?**

Male

Female

-

13. **If your child attended school in her/his native country, how long did s/he attend school there?**

0-2 years Other: _____

2-5 years

5-8 years

more than 8

14. **How long has your child attended school in the United States?**

0-2 years Other: _____

- 2-5 years
- 5-8 years
- more than 8

15. What language did your child first speak when s/he first talked?

- English
- Spanish
- Vietnamese
- Chinese

Other: _____

16. If your child has learned to read, what language did your child learn to read in?

- English
 Spanish
 Vietnamese
 Chinese

Other: _____

Parent's Literacy Habits and Involvement

17. How often do you read (approximately)?

- I do not
 1-3 times a week
 4-5 times a week
 everyday

Other : _____

18. Why do you read in your native language?

- I do not
 for business
 for pleasure
 for both

Other : _____

19. Why do you read in English?

- I do not
 for business
 for pleasure
 for both

Other : _____

20. What do you read in your native language?

- I do not
 magazines
 books
 newspapers

Other : _____

21. What do you read in English?

- I do not
 magazines
 books

Others : _____

newspapers

22. How often does your child see you reading (approximately)?

s/he does not

Other : _____

1-3 times a week

4-5 times a week

everyday

23. How often do you read with your child at home in your native language (approximately)?

I do not

Other : _____

1-3 times a week

4-5 times a week

everyday

24. What do you read to your child in your native language?

I do not

Others : _____

books

magazines

newspapers

25. How often do you read with your child at home in English (approximately)?

I do not

Other : _____

1-3 times a week

4-5 times a week

everyday

26. What do you read to your child in your English?

I do not

Others : _____

books

magazines

newspapers

27. How often do you take your child to the library?

I do not

Other: _____

1-3 times a week

4-5 times a week

everyday

Appendix B

Student Survey

Directions: Please answer each question by checking the appropriate box.

Child's Language and Educational Background

1. What is your name?

-

2. How old are you?

-

3. What language did you first speak when s/he first talked?

English

Others: _____

Spanish

Vietnamese

Chinese

4. If you can read, what language did learn to read in?

English

Others: _____

Spanish

Vietnamese

Chinese

5. If you attended school in your native country, how long did you attend school there?

0-2 years

Other: _____

2-5 years

5-8 years

more than 8

6. How long have you attended school in the United States?

0-2 years

Other: _____

2-5 years

5-8 years

more than 8

Child's Reading Habits

7. How often do you read by yourself at home (approximately)?

- I do not
- 1-3 times a week
- 4-5 times a week
- everyday

Other : _____

8. If you read by yourself at home, what do you read?

- books
- magazines
- newspapers

Others : _____

9. If you read by yourself at home, what language do you read in?

- English
- Spanish
- Vietnamese
- Chinese

Others: _____

10. How often do you read with your parents at home (approximately)?

- I do not
- 1-3 times a week
- 4-5 times a week
- everyday

Other : _____

11. If you read with your parents at home, what do you read?

- books
- magazines
- newspapers

Others : _____

12. If you read with your parents at home, what language do you read in?

- English
- Spanish
- Vietnamese
- Chinese

Others: _____

13. What do you like to read? Give an example.
