Who Is Learning Language(s) in Today’s Schools?

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U.S. schools traditionally serve students who bring rich cultural and linguistic resources. The past three decades have brought an upsurge in linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom not experienced since the 1920s (Capps et al., 2005). Often culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students bring resources that may go undetected or underutilized by mainstream teachers. Language arts educators have been asked to examine current instructional practices to build upon the heterogeneity of students and the resources they bring to learning (Gutiérrez, 2001; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 2000). Educators are to look to pedagogical practices which connect to students’ local cultural and linguistic knowledge and practices (funds of knowledge), personal experiences, and varied ways of showing their abilities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Zentella, 2005), rather than students’ language designation. Ultimately, good instruction begins with knowing one’s students. This chapter paints a demographic portrait of language learners, illustrating the complexity of issues underlying the resources they bring and their achievement patterns. We focus on English Learners (ELs) in particular—language minority students who require linguistic support in English—as they represent the fastest growing segment of the student population.

Demographic Trends¹: In the U.S, in Our Public Schools

In 2008, 74 million children aged birth to 17 comprised 24% of the total U.S. population (Federal Interagency Forum, 2009). That same year, 20% of the U.S. population over the age of 5 reported speaking one or more languages other than English; the most common being Spanish (61.9%) and Chinese (4.4%) (Terrazas & Batalova, 2009). In addition, between 1970 and 2000, the population of school-age children speaking Spanish at home doubled from 3.5 to 7 million, while those who spoke Asian languages tripled from 0.5 to 1.5 million (Capps et al., 2005). Without a doubt, our schools contain multiple languages and literacies; what may not be as evident is that ELs negotiating two or more languages may bring linguistic abilities distinct from those of their monolingual English-speaking peers. Language(s) play a defining role in the development and negotiation cultural and linguistic identities (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004). Among ELs, variation occurs in the development and ability to use their home language(s) and English. In addition, immigration occurs across the grades and across the life course, with greater numbers of first generation ELs in secondary schools (44%) than elementary (24%) (Capps, et al., 2005). Although it may take 5 to 7 years to develop literacy in a second language (Collier, 1987), not all ELs enter in kindergarten; it is critical to explore language(s) and literacies in the lives of EL students in the context of the elementary and secondary education demands they encounter.

Although the majority of children live in two-parent households, 67% in 2006 (Federal Interagency Forum, 2009), the patterns vary greatly by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES). In addition poverty, also associated with race/ethnicity, presents one of the biggest challenges for 17% of school-age children shaping where families live, the schools children attend, the resources allocated to schools, and student mobility (Plantly et al., 2008). Forty-three percent of households experiencing poverty reported housing that was physically inadequate, crowded, or cost more than half the family income. Additionally, regardless of ethnicity, single-mother households were more likely to live in poverty (43%) than two-parent households (9%) (Plantly et al., 2008). Latino/a and Black children are more likely than their White counterparts to come from low-income families (26% and 33%, respectively, compared to 10% for Whites and single-mother households (Capps et
Although poverty rates across all ethnicities have decreased from their 1995 peak of 21% among school-age children (Planty et al., 2008), the current global economic recession threatens to reverse this trend. National trends in poverty and household composition coincide with a numerical increase in children in the United States, and increased diversity among youth. Currently, the youth population is comprised of 22% Latina/o, 15% Black, 4% Asian, and 5% “all other races” (Federal Interagency Forum, 2009). Perhaps the most significant population growth has been among Latino/a children, a 9% to 22% increase in the share between 1980 and 2008. It is projected that by 2021 one in four U.S. children will be of Latina/o origin (Federal Interagency Forum, 2009). Linguistic diversity has increased as well; 20% of the U.S. population 5 years and older spoke a language other than English at home in 2008, with 66% reporting speaking English “very well” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a). Of the other-language speakers, 62% spoke Spanish and 38% spoke another language (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a).

Nowhere is the shifting racial and ethnic distribution of the United States more evident than in K–12 public schools. Over 47.5 million K–12 students enrolled in U.S. public schools in 2008, adding public prekindergarten enrollment increases the total by 2.7 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b). Public school enrollment will likely continue to rise through 2017, reaching an estimated high of 54.1 million students, with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students comprising the fastest growing segment (43%) of the K–12 student population, a 12% increase over the last two decades (Planty et al., 2008). In 2006, 57% of students enrolled in U.S. schools were White, down from 78% in 1972, while Latinas/os increased to 20%, Blacks to 16%, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Natives, and students of more than one race together to just over 7% (Planty et al., 2008).

Although the past three decades show evidence of an increase in CLD student enrollment across the U.S., the distribution has varied by region. The South and West enroll more CLD students than the Midwest and Northeast; the Midwest enrolls the fewest and the West the most (CLD enrollment exceeds Whites by 10%). Regional variation occurs among the CLD population as well; Latinas/os student numbers exceed those of Blacks in the West, while Black enrollment exceeds that of Latinas/os in the South and Midwest (Planty et al., 2008). In addition, the proportion of students who speak a language other than English at home is increasing faster than the general K–12 population. Between 1995 and 2005, enrollment of language minority students designated ELs by the public schools grew by 56% while the entire student population grew by less than 3% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2007). Research indicates that many ELs have not been well served by the U.S. educational system (Callahan, 2005; Harklau, 1994a; Valenzuela, 1999), suggesting a need for research to better understand EL instruction and achievement.

### English Learners in U.S. Schools: Characteristics, Experiences, and Needs

ELs represent a diverse group of K–12 students nationally at various stages of learning English. The lack of a uniform identification process presents perhaps the greatest challenge to defining the EL population and ultimately meeting student needs; states and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) have specific definitions of what it means to be designated an EL, whereas the U.S. Census reports the number of individuals who speak languages other than English in the home, with adult respondents reporting English-speaking ability within the household. State education agency (SEA) definitions draw from student’s English oral proficiency, as well as academic competency (test scores and grade-level achievement) (Ragan & Lesaux, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). As a result, Census data may underreport EL numbers compared to state and school district reports. For example, 2000 SEA EL numbers prove 15% higher than those of Census 2000. The 2006 Survey of U.S. SEAs reports enrollment of over 5 million ELs, double the 1990 enrollment (NCELA, 2008). The EL representation varies with ethnicity as well; in 2007, 64% of Asian and 68% of Latina/o children spoke a language other than English at home, compared to 6% of White and 5% of Black children (Planty et al., 2008).

Not surprisingly, Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese lead the list of non-English languages spoken by ELs in U.S. schools (Capps et al., 2005).

Of the overall U.S. population, 12% is foreign-born or first generation (35 million); 11% is second-generation with at least one of foreign-born parent (31 million), and 77% is third-plus generation, children of U.S.-born parents (226 million) (Dixon, 2006). Among the school-age population, these numbers are lower for first generation (5%) and higher for second-generation (22%) (Planty et al., 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b). First- and second-generation children of immigrants represent the majority of the EL population. Prior research suggest that the generational status and the country of origin of students makes a difference in their educational trajectories with second-generation students achieving at higher levels than first generation or third-plus generations (Dixon, 2006; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Student background characteristics, including parental education level and socio-economic status also play a role. Research found lower levels of achievement and higher levels of retention among Central American and Mexican-origin immigrant children compared to other immigrant groups (Dixon, 2006). While immigrant and language minority students may present linguistic, academic and social challenges to our schools, they also bring vast resources in their transnational ties and ready access to multiple linguistic supports.

Children of immigrants comprise the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. youth population—one out of every five children is born to immigrant parents (Levitt & Waters, 2002). Primarily from Asia and Latin America (Ruiz-de-
Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000), today's immigrant parents are documented and undocumented; their children are either foreign-born as well (first generation), or U.S.-born second generation. As immigrant parents leave their countries of origin for a number of reasons—economic, familial, political, and religious—the educational trajectories of immigrant children in U.S. schools often reflect their parents' immigration context.

Although important, the demographic information regarding CLD students, especially ELs, illustrates general trends yet tells us little about the unique issues and challenges shaping ELs' identities and resources. In the following section, we discuss two critical constructs key the EL experience: (a) immigration, citizenship, and transnationalism, and (b) language(s) and literacies. Together, cultural and linguistic factors contribute to the heterogeneity of EL experiences and the importance of these factors in shaping ELs' academic and linguistic trajectories.

**Immigration, Citizenship, & Transnationalism: Shaping the EL Experience**

ELs, frequently children of immigrants, simultaneously draw from the culture of the home and their parents, as well as that of the school (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001); in many cases their social and academic development also draws from transnational experiences—where they remain connected and strongly influenced by two countries (Sánchez & Machado-Casas, 2009). ELs in public school classrooms draw from a range of immigration experiences; they can be refugees, migrants (U.S. born or foreign-born); temporary visitors, or immigrants (documented or undocumented foreign-born immigrants, or U.S.-born children of immigrants). As we identify each student groups’ defining characteristics, we highlight challenges associated with each status and provide examples of resources or “funds of knowledge” that said learners may bring to the classroom (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

**Refugees.** Individuals who were forced to flee their countries of origin for political and/or economic reasons and were granted legal entry and support services in the United States are considered refugees. Since the 1980s, more than 1.8 million refugees have resettled in the United States (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2005), many of whom experienced traumatic events (e.g., bodily harm, death of loved ones, and/or long-term experiences in temporary refugee camps). Many refugee experiences may present challenges to children's adaptation to U.S. schools; however, they also bring a wealth of information about global events gained through lived experiences, events often unfamiliar to many of their classmates. The geographic and personal transition may prove unsettling to refugee students, now tasked with handling the vast differences between their origins and their present situation; a classroom where they must sit still for an extended period of time (Birman, 2002). Refugee experiences overcoming extreme conditions often result in resilience and survival skills that may go unrecognized in the contemporary classroom.

**Temporary Visitors: Human Capital.** Individuals with temporary U.S. residency due to employment and/or educational pursuits (e.g., exchange or international post-secondary students) comprise one type of temporary visitor. Japan, South Korea, China (including Taiwan), India, and Germany send the most human capital temporary visitors (Batalova, 2006). Many visiting families generally display strong efforts to maintain the home language and literacy abilities of their children as well as social and professional connections. These patterns are supported by the grade-level continuous schooling common among children of visiting families.

**Temporary Visitors: Migrants.** A second type of temporary visitor, migrants, are workers motivated by economic survival who move following available agricultural or fishing/poultry opportunities. Foreign-born or U.S.-born immigrants, students from migrant families often experience interruptions in their schooling as their families pursue employment across states and regions. Interrupted schooling can lead to gaps in language and academic content, especially among foreign-born migrants who may have difficulty speaking English. Migrant life brings economic challenges that require children to work and bear family responsibilities at the expense of school attendance (Salinas & Fránquiz, 2004). Yet, many migrant students demonstrate high levels of responsibility, translate for their parents, and possess knowledge of their families’ trade—such as the names, geographic locations, and planting and harvesting seasons of different crops.

**Legal Status.** Although immigrants who enter the country legally may face struggles acquiring English and adjusting to U.S. schools their integration may be facilitated by the stability of their legal status, a security lacking among the undocumented, constantly aware of the threat of deportation. Legal status may speak to immigrants' access to strong social networks and supports which facilitate navigation of the complex U.S. immigration process. Immigrant youth whose parents or who themselves entered the country without legal documentation face perhaps the most daunting social, academic, and personal challenges to their educational trajectories. For undocumented children, their entry into the country may have been filled with risk and danger, or they may have entered so young that the U.S. has become the only home they know. An estimated 11.9 million undocumented immigrants lived in the U.S. in 2008, a figure more or less stable since 2006 (Passel & Cohn, 2009). In 2008 it was estimated that 5.5 million children in 2008 had at least one undocumented immigrant parent (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Many undocumented immigrants report witnessing and or surviving traumatic events in their journeys to the United States (Valdez, 2006). Once here, their presence is tenuous; they remain aware that exposure could mean a return to their home and separation from family members. Thus, many learn to navigate the United States and its systems, often declining social supports so as not to call attention to themselves. Undocumented adolescent ELs...
not only must persevere to succeed in high school, but upon graduation, they must also determine what, if any, higher education or employment options are available.

Transnationalism. Due to the relatively low-cost technology and communication tools available such as the Internet, texting, email, cell phones, and low cost airfares, transnationalism is relatively prominent among immigrant youth today (Sánchez & Machado-Casas, 2009). Thus, even U.S.-born second-generation children who have never visited their parents’ countries of origin may be raised in homes where the home countries’ values, languages, and people are very visible (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). For example, Yi (2009) found that online community provided a critical social context in which Korean American adolescents engaged in transnational literacy practices and constructed transnational identities. Also, Sanchez (2007) found that adolescent girls’ transnational learning communities build dual local cultural knowledge, cultural flexibility, and notions of global citizenship tied to an awareness of the social disparities in society. Transnational experiences represent untapped resources for ELs in U.S. schools, as do students’ linguistic experience as members of multiple language communities.

Primary Language Development. Bilingualism research has explored simultaneous language development among children from birth to age 3, and sequential language development within educational settings (Bialystok, 2001). Whether a child experiences sequential or simultaneous bilingualism, each language is used with different people, in unique contexts, and for distinct purposes, leading to variation in proficiency across contexts and languages, with competencies evolving over time (Baker, 2006). ELs born in the United States often quickly develop conversational proficiency in English, but take longer to develop the academic English proficiency necessary to master the core content. In the early grades, children continue to develop their primary language skills, even as they acquire English. It is during this time that complex language skills such as syntactic and semantic systems, inference, and figurative understandings are acquired (Crutchley, 2007). Older children and adolescents who enter the U.S. system already having developed literacy in the primary language, must transfer these understandings to English while developing the English proficiency necessary to master academic content.

LI and English Acquisition. The rate at which ELs develop conversational and academic English proficiency often depends on how much the primary language (L1) is allowed to continue to develop. Research has shown that a strong base in the primary language not only facilitates the acquisition of English and additional languages, but also continued and parallel gains in the primary language (Cummins, 1981). In particular, Thomas and Collier (1997, 2002) found that children who developed high levels of primary language proficiency while acquiring English demonstrated comparable levels of academic success and literacy compared to native English speakers after 4 to 7 years of schooling. In contrast, children schooled in an English-only context from an early age took 7 to 10 years to approximate the academic success of their native English-speaking peers. In fact, many may never reach this point; that approximately 60% of secondary ELs in California have been in the state’s schools more than 5 years (Callahan, 2005) suggests that many ELs schooled in English-only never acquire the skill set necessary to exit EL status.

Despite such evidence, many schools continue to advocate earlier and greater exposure to English for ELs, signaling a preference for English; a message reinforced with the passage of English-only legislation in California, Massachusetts, and Arizona. Immigrant ELs’ language choices quickly shift to English in such contexts; however, there are powerful consequences to these shifts. Wong-Fillmore (2000) documents the Chen family’s immersion in an English school environment across the course of a decade. English-only instruction ultimately resulted in language loss and cultural distance for all four Chen children, negatively influencing their identity formation and relations with Chinese family members. For one son, these processes culminated in his decision to drop-out of high school, highlighting the critical importance of primary language maintenance for academic, economic, and societal reasons.

Benefits to Bilingualism. Bilingualism itself brings multiple advantages including linguistic and metalinguistic abilities; cognitive flexibility; heightened concept formation, divergent thinking, general reasoning, and verbal abilities; better problem solving and higher order thinking skills (Bialystok, 2001; Hakuta, 1986). Two unique linguistic abilities exhibited by bilingual ELs are oral codeswitching and language interpreting/broking (Baker, 2006). Oral codeswitching or the switching between languages is typical in bilinguals varies with the context and content of the conversation, and with the language skills of the individuals involved. Code switching tends to be used purposefully by highly proficient bilingual ELs able to use the full extent of their linguistic resources (Meisel, 2004). ELs use oral codeswitching to: emphasize a point, substitute a word, express a concept for which there is no equivalent, reinforce or clarify a request, express identity, recount a conversation in its original language, interject, inject humor, signify a change in attitude or relationship, exclude people from a conversation, or discuss a subject based principally in the other language (Baker, 2006). Many ELs also demonstrate language interpreting/broking—translating a conversation for parents and others, simultaneously negotiating responses (Valdés, 2003). The benefits to bilingual ELs of participating in language interpreting/broking include, but are not limited to: improved status within the family, early maturity, personal initiative, family closeness, metalinguistic awareness, paraphrasing skills, and character formation (Baker, 2006). Overall, primary language development simultaneous with English acquisition brings many advantages to ELs that are overlooked in the classroom.
Bilingual ELs’ Literacies. ELs often possess a range of literacy skills across the primary language and English. Primary language literacy can be a major advantage in terms of linguistic and content area achievement (Collier, 1987). However, the schooling and background knowledge ELs have prior to entering U.S. schools helps determine students’ literacy levels and academic achievement (Callahan, 2005). Some ELs enter U.S. schools with age and grade-level skills, while others have limited or no literacy due to limited prior schooling experiences, interrupted schooling, and other circumstances (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Even when schooled primarily in the United States, ELs may not have sufficient academic preparation for post-secondary success. Callahan (2005) found that 98% of the EL students she sampled had not enrolled in the coursework necessary to apply to a 4-year university. The academic content provided to high school ELs, more than their English language proficiency, appears to determine their overall achievement; prior research exploring the secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) context (Dillon, 2001; Ek, 2009; Harklau, 1994b, 1999; Katz, 1999), suggests a need to improve ELs’ literacy experiences.

Adolescent ELs continue to develop academic English proficiency throughout secondary school, simultaneously mastering core content in English, all the while being held to the same accountability standards which presume academic literacy in English (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). In fact, while proficiency in English certainly influences ELs’ performance in U.S. schools, prior research suggests that academic preparation and track placement play a greater role in predicting their academic success (Callahan, 2005). Likewise, some first generation ELs, schooled in the home country, nonetheless struggle to transition into the U.S. secondary school system. These ELs may lack content area knowledge, or the content itself may be specific to the U.S. context, new and unfamiliar to the immigrant EL. Background knowledge is critical to the development of new knowledge and understanding; its absence is especially problematic in middle and high school where content area gaps may constrain attainment and achievement.

New Literacies and the English Learner Literacies are embedded in social practices that include ways of acting, thinking, and speaking, as well as the use of various non-linguistic symbols and tools (Gee, 2007). Explorations into multiple literacy practices have produced insights into the complexity involved and the abilities gained in becoming literate in two or more languages (Gee, 2007; Hornberger, 2003; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000). Recognizing students’ multiple literacies requires acknowledging the range of meaning-making strategies ELs explore with different forms of texts and tools—books, musical instruments, Web-based data, video cameras, canvas, or even social networking venues like Facebook. As access to technology has increased, more ELs are using the Internet, reading its contents, sending emails, instant messaging, text messaging, listening to music, and watching videos for large segments of their day in and out-of-school settings (Espinoza, Laffey, & Whittaker, 2006). The wide range of out-of-classroom literacy experiences of the growing bilingual EL population merits exploration.

Linguistic Skills and Strategies. Interrelated language processes that can develop in a parallel fashion with one enriching the other (Moll & Dworin, 1996; Reyes, 2006), bilingualism and biliteracy shape the academic and social development of immigrant ELs. Moll and Dworin (1996) argue no single path to developing biliteracy exists; ELs’ pathways to biliteracy are shaped by students’ histories, learning and social contexts, and opportunities to use each language. Despite these multiple pathways, literacy development among ELs exposed to two languages maintains several key characteristics (Valdez & Fránquiz, 2010). For example, prior research points to the bidirectionality of bilingualism and biliteracy between parents and students, and students and their peers (Dworin, 2003; Reyes, 2006); interliteracy where linguistic elements of the primary language are applied to a second (Gort, 2006); strategic codeswitching, the purposeful alternation of languages for instructional purposes (Gort, 2006); use of codeswitching as a routine language practice (Reyes, 2006); and spontaneous biliteracy when literacy is developed in the second language for which you are not receiving instruction (De La Luz Reyes, 2000). ELs able to access linguistic resources for academic and personal purposes demonstrate each, if not all, of the aforementioned characteristics.

Bi-Literacy Resources. EL students who gain English proficiency at school while maintaining the primary language are often asked assume greater responsibilities on behalf of their families and communities. Reflecting their complex literacy skills, they may be asked to go with family members to various appointments with doctors, landlords, social services, etc., to translating written materials for family members from English to the home language as well as paraphrasing the content of information provided to the family in English (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carillo, & Callazo, 2004; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003). Many ELs assist their families in other ways as well, working to contribute financially, caring for younger siblings, cooking and cleaning when their parents go to work, and getting their school work done. Gained from these experiences are maturity, responsibility, and organizational and decision-making skills. ELs bring these resources gained in out-of-school settings into their schools and classrooms. A beginning level EL may have limited English skills compared to classmates, but at home may be the only one who can speak any English.

Reflections and Conclusions
We wrote this chapter to emphasize the importance of knowing the whole student; it is not sufficient to know an EL’s language proficiency level, but a good teacher will know
her prior academic preparation, her family characteristics, her out-of-school skill-set, as well. The engaged teacher will ask; Who is my student? How can I best nurture her gifts and highlight her resources? ELs are not a monolithic population; educators cannot assume that all ELs share the same needs, backgrounds, and perspectives. De La Luz Reyes (2000) found that the teacher’s ability to set up a respectful environment which fostered both languages allowed the development biliteracy among the young ELs. EL achievement can only be enhanced with a renewed focus on student’s histories, language, experiences, and values in classroom activities (Au, 1993; Fránquiz & Reyes, 1998). Literature exploring funds of knowledge in Latino/a ELs’ homes, communities, and classrooms (Gonzalez et al., 2005); the range of language and literacy practices exhibited by Latino/a families (Zentella, 2005); and ELs’ varied expressions of language and literacy practices (Purcell-Gates, 2007) all reflect the depth of knowledge available to educators from ELs and their families.

There is no doubt that many ELs face daunting challenges, especially high school age immigrants and refugees with limited prior schooling. Yet, Newcomer and similar programs designed to facilitate the secondary experience, staffed by committed educators, programs that combine closer contact and follow-up with these students, and promote academic and linguistic rigor hold promise (Boyson & Short, 2003; Short, 2002). Educators need to talk with and know their students, especially ELs who come with unique linguistic and academic profiles. Educators have the ability to help students discover and utilize linguistic resources and abilities, to assist them as they learn to make associations between their lived experiences and the academic material presented to them. For the growing EL population, it is a journey worth taking.

Notes
1. The demographic data available to describe the U.S. school-age population, student enrollment information, and English Learner populations vary considerably in the way those reporting the data define their populations and in how and when they collect their data. Thus, these demographic datasets and reported findings present some challenges and limitations, particularly in their ability to be compared with each other. Therefore, we have attempted to use these data in ways that complement each source’s contributions to the topic described providing a general, if imprecise, representation of the demographic trends.
2. We use culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students to refer to students who are identified as non-White and includes students who may speak languages other than English at home.
3. In accordance with prior immigration literature (e.g., Rumbaut & Portes, 2001), we define generational status as follows: first generation: student is foreign-born; second generation: student is U.S.-born with at least one foreign-born parent; third-plus generation, both student and parents are U.S.-born.

References