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Nancy L. Commins and Ofelia B. Miramontes

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# ADDRESSING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY FROM THE OUTSET

Nancy L. Commins  
Ofelia B. Miramontes

*Schools of education typically prepare their prospective teachers to work with amorphous “average students”—who are by implication middle class, native, English speaking, and White. They are then given some limited opportunities to adapt these understandings to students with diverging profiles—children of poverty, second language learners, and students of color. The authors argue that given the changing demographics of public schools, initial teacher education should be based on the understandings that teachers typically do not receive until the end of their programs or in add-on endorsements. They should be prepared from the outset to work with the wide diversity of language, culture, and class that they are likely to meet in public schools. Ten recommendations are presented for “What Every Teacher Should Do” to work effectively in the linguistically and culturally diverse settings they are likely to encounter.*

**Keywords:** *linguistic diversity; prospective teachers; second language learners; bilingual education; teacher preparation*

Our job as educators is to ensure that each and every child who enters school receives opportunities to develop to the fullest extent of her or his abilities. Across the nation in urban, suburban, and rural settings, schools with a homogeneous English-speaking population are disappearing as more and more students from language backgrounds other than English enter their doors. The resulting linguistic diversity not only reflects those students who do not speak English but also comprises the entire range of students found in today’s public schools. It includes monolingual speakers of English, monolingual speakers of dozens of other languages, and the multiple profiles of language proficiency and bilingualism in between.

Schools of education typically prepare their prospective teachers to work with some amorphous “average student”—who is by implication middle class, native-English speaking, and

White. Then they are given some limited opportunities to adapt these understandings to students with diverging profiles—children of poverty, second language learners, and students of color. We suggest that initial teacher education should, instead, be based on the understandings that teachers typically do not receive until the end of their programs or in add-on endorsements—that the new “norm” is precisely the wide diversity of language, culture, and class that teachers are likely to meet in public schools.

This increasingly complex cultural and linguistic landscape brings with it changes and challenges that very often are viewed negatively. Although teachers may claim (and believe) that they treat all students equally, all too often their conscious and unconscious attitudes toward different cultures can result in very different academic outcomes for students

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from differing backgrounds. Today's teacher candidates should all have the kinds of experiences that will allow them to identify the set of beliefs and assumptions they hold about teaching and learning and about the children with whom they will interact.

Responding to the range and the ability to work in the most challenging learning situations should be at the core of all preparation. It is vital for teachers to gain specific skills and strategies. It is also critical that they develop the appropriate mind-set to embrace the richness that diversity brings and to see in it the strength we need to move confidently into the future. To accomplish these educational goals, new teachers must acquire a clear understanding of community needs, concerns, and issues and embrace collegial collaboration. We propose that to address linguistic diversity from the outset, the following recommendations for "What Every Teacher Should Do" should be incorporated into the fabric of all preparation programs.

*Examine beliefs regarding an academically literate person.* We live in an era when mandated accountability measures equate academic success with a single score on a high-stakes test. The emphasis on test scores causes the public and unfortunately, many educators to lose sight of teachers' fundamental role in preparing children to become independently functioning adults. In the course of our day-to-day work, we have taken to asking those around us what it means to them to be an academically competent, literate being in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Individually and in groups, respondents invariably say that at minimum, the definition of *academic success* begins with basic skills in reading, writing, and math, as well as knowledge of the sciences, nature, and history. Academically competent individuals can think critically, analyze and synthesize information, infer meaning, and solve problems. In addition, they are curious, have high expectations of themselves, and strive to achieve. They understand that their actions have consequences, show flexibility in new situations, and become lifelong learners. They are prepared to participate actively in the civic life of their society, keep up with political and technical changes, and it is

hoped, help make the world a better place. Finally, academically competent beings have the confidence to go forth into a diverse and changing society. They are adept at working with, living among, learning from, and caring for people different from themselves. They respect cultural differences and embrace multiple perspectives.

These descriptors, although not exhaustive, define the kinds of outcomes that we should be preparing all teachers to accomplish with their students. Test scores do not figure in these descriptions. And although to prosper in the United States clearly requires English proficiency, no one ever describes these outcomes as solely the purview of English ability, as fluency in English does not, in and of itself, embody academic competence.

Prospective teachers need opportunities to reflect on the role that language and culture play in an individual's development. They must understand and embrace that the qualities of mind described above can be developed through any language or dialect. If anything, the definition of what it is to be *literate* is enhanced for the bilingual individual whose skills span languages and cultures (Grosjean, 1989; Shannon & Shannon-Gutiérrez, in press). Understanding primary language inputs and interactions is critical to creating a sound instructional program for all students, whether delivery of instruction is solely through English or instruction in a language other than English is provided as well.

*Focus on equity and creating a climate of belonging for all students.* Part of the challenge of working in linguistically diverse schools is how to accommodate the various groups that such schools bring together. When asked what they most need to meet this challenge, teachers invariably reply "instructional strategies." However, teachers must come to understand that all the best strategies will likely be insufficient if they are employed in a setting where students do not feel valued or have the confidence that they can succeed.

Building a positive climate is relatively easy when teachers and students are from similar backgrounds and share common experiences and expectations. In developing our own class-

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rooms, each of us will reflect personal beliefs about students and learning. Examining our biases and the biases of those around us helps us better create environments in which all students are seen as having talents and strengths that can enhance both their education and the community in general. In addition, developing an understanding and genuine respect for the important role family and culture play in each of our lives helps teachers recognize the importance of these elements in the lives of their students.

*Organize instruction to build on the relationship between students' learning in their first and second languages and value what they bring with them from home.* Second language learners of English are students who live in bilingual worlds. They are called on daily to use two languages as tools for interaction, for communication, for negotiating daily activities, and for learning. Too often, however, educators overlook the fact that whether or not second language learners receive primary language instruction in school (which is rare), they are always learning through both their languages from parents, other family members, and the media. If respected and used effectively, all this input can support their academic development in school.

Monolingual speakers of any language from infancy learn not only a language but also how to use this language to think. When something new is learned it is added to a reservoir of concepts, schema, understandings, and skills developed through this first language. For their entire life they continue to add to and access their concepts only in their first language.

For those who by choice or by circumstance have the opportunity to develop more than one language, their developmental pathway is more complex. In the beginning, one language is usually linked to development, bonding with family, learning to think critically, and learning to negotiate and communicate with others. As a second language is acquired, both languages become available to the learner as tools for adding to their knowledge base and thinking skills. Second language learners do not need to create a separate new reservoir of concepts. Once they know and understand something in one lan-

guage or context, they can learn to express it in another. In the field of linguistics, this is conceptualized as common underlying proficiency (Cummins, 1979; Oller, 1980).

To use all of their resources, students will need to learn to transfer what they already know to new situations as they also acquire new knowledge. This does not happen through translation, simply saying words twice, or explaining repeatedly in a language that is not understood. It does occur through careful planning and much active involvement in school activities. Teachers can act on these understandings by making intentional connections across settings and contexts, for example, connecting what students read and write about during literacy instruction with topics from the content areas. In this way students are more likely to be able to build on what they have learned in one part of the day to understand what is happening in another. Chances increase that they will be able to repeatedly hear and practice new vocabulary, language structures, and concepts with which they must become fluent in their second language.

It is particularly important that all parents are viewed as partners in the development of academic competence. We take for granted that in the homes of native English speakers, parents reinforce instruction through their children's first language. Especially in all-English programs, it is important to proactively enlist the parents of second language learners to also help their children build background knowledge and schema through their first language. Teachers must become comfortable advocating that families consciously add to students' conceptual reservoir using the language they know best. Parents can and should be asked to talk to their children in their primary language about whatever they are learning. In addition, the entire school community will need to constantly reaffirm for parents that it will help their children's thinking and learning in English more if they talk with them about these ideas in their home language.

*Become familiar with learners' prior language and literacy experiences.* Second language learners inhabit a linguistic world in which they often

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know and can say some things in English but know and can say other things only in their home language. Therefore, these students present many language profiles that usually represent a different range of proficiency in each language. They may have greater strength in one language or the other depending on the topic under discussion. Proactive support can help students to fill in language and knowledge gaps leading to fluency and academic proficiency. To plan well, teachers need to know how to discover/uncover who learners are and what they bring to their instruction.

The kinds of instruction from which students benefit will vary depending on whether they have already developed academic and literacy skills in their first language. It is therefore critical to carefully assess students' academic and literacy skills in their primary language—whether or not their language will be used in instruction. It will be necessary to use multiple forms of outreach and assessment to come to know the learners, to document where they are when first encountered, and to document the growth that they make.

*Become familiar with the opportunities and constraints of different groupings based on language proficiency.* Any sound instructional design should purposefully plan for the grouping and regrouping (and regrouping again) of students. Today's teachers need to become particularly adept in this area. In linguistically diverse schools, teachers will find themselves working with three different groups of students (native language, linguistically heterogeneous, and second language groups), each of which provides necessary opportunities for the students and places particular demands on the skill sets of their teachers.

Native language groups in which everyone—teacher and students—are fluent in the language of instruction are the easiest and most comfortable instructional settings. Currently most teachers are prepared precisely to work in this setting—native English-speaking teachers working with native English speakers in their native language. When students work in their primary language, they can most readily access their conceptual understandings and back-

ground knowledge and teachers can employ a wide variety of strategies. Through creative planning, native language grouping for languages other than English are often possible and can increase opportunities for success.

Linguistically heterogeneous groups in which second language learners of English are learning side by side with native speakers are increasingly common as more second language learners attend U.S. schools. Such mixed groups are the most challenging for teachers because instruction must be both comprehensible to the second language learners and sufficiently demanding for the native speakers.

Heterogeneous language groups can provide second language learners with many opportunities for "authentic" communication in English not available in other settings. However, if teachers use strategies geared mainly to the needs of the native speakers of English, some aspects of the instruction may be beyond the grasp of even advanced second language learners. The group that is least proficient may be left out completely. When most of the group is actively participating, teachers may be reluctant to slow down or stop to explain concepts and vocabulary in depth to a small group of students or even realize that they need to do so.

Even when second language learners can understand their lessons in the heterogeneous group, attempts to speak English are frequently thwarted by the more proficient native English speakers who easily out compete them for the floor in whole-group question and answer sessions and discussion groups. In addition, second language learners' need for extra practice with vocabulary, sentence structures, and meaning cannot be satisfied if they are always in a group with native speakers.

Second language groups provide students opportunities to work on aspects of language not needed by native speakers. They can focus on their English language learning needs without having to compete with students who are already proficient in English. This increases risk taking and allows them to better respond to their instruction. They develop a sense of security that can lead to faster progress and to the formation of powerful and important relations

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with both school personnel and their peers. A major challenge in this setting is making sure the richness of the full curriculum is available to students. In second language groups, teachers can overcompensate for students' lack of language proficiency by watering down the curriculum to make it more "accessible" instead of working to make challenging concepts understandable.

Which is the best grouping? In a linguistically diverse school, no one grouping is best. Each is necessary for success because what can be accomplished in each grouping differs. To ensure students' success, it may be necessary to group and regroup them across a set of teachers so students can receive all the kinds of input they need to learn language, literacy, and content.

*Make a firm commitment to standards-based instruction that is focused on, and driven by, the needs of students.* In schools with second language learners, there is a tendency to see the "real" curriculum as the mainstream curriculum for native English speakers. In this view, something else other than the real or important learning is happening in English as a second language or bilingual program. This should not be the case. No matter in what program students find themselves, a common curriculum should guide the planning for all learners in a grade level, content area, school, or district. The strategies that teachers use to deliver the curriculum in a comprehensible fashion and how they link to students' background knowledge are what make the information accessible to all students.

Operating on the principle that all students have the right of equal access to the knowledge embodied in the curriculum implies that teachers will have to differentiate instruction to ensure success. It is unfortunately still all too common that teachers conduct lectures to the whole class, have students read the grade-level textbook chosen for the topic or subject, and then answer questions at the end of the chapter as their only mode of instruction. If the goal is to ensure that all students experience success with the material, then teachers must be prepared to employ multiple teaching strategies that address different learning styles, language proficiencies, and levels of literacy develop-

ment (Gregory & Chapman, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999).

*Analyze instructional activities to account for language proficiency.* Teachers need to know that part of meeting the challenge of linguistic diversity is accounting for both the language and the content demands of instructional activities. When planning for native English speakers, it is easy to overlook how every activity depends on certain linguistic competencies, understandings, and vocabulary knowledge. Because we take language for granted, we often assume that second language learners understand the content and are also able to talk freely about it. We forget that the English proficiency of native English speakers reflects complex levels of development from early childhood to school age.

Far more than learning lists of new words, second language learners have to learn both the *content* as well as the *modes of expression* for that content. Each of these aspects calls for distinct strategies that require planning (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). All teachers can and must identify the language demands of instruction by examining the instructional activities and asking, What are the features of language that students need to understand and be able to use to accomplish this activity successfully? It is then necessary to provide students with time to prepare—time to practice the structures and grammar of English—as well as guidance in how to express this information appropriately in English. This is not the sole responsibility of English as a second language or bilingual teachers. It needs to be accounted for in everyone's instructional planning.

*Account for the differences in literacy development in first and second languages.* Although many fundamental aspects of good literacy instruction do hold true across settings, teachers need to understand that strategies defined as "best practice" for students learning to read in their first language may have limited success when they are used to teach reading to second language learners (Bernhardt, 2003; Escamilla, 1993; Grant & Wong, 2003). By focusing on the commonalities instead of the differences in liter-

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acy instruction, teachers too often miss critical aspects of what second language readers need. Especially when teachers have experienced success working with native speakers, they can easily feel that they need only to slightly adjust what they are doing to meet the needs of those who do not speak English. Minor adjustments, however, are generally not enough for any particular practice to work well for students learning to read through a language they do not yet understand or speak well.

Most immigrant children in this country are in all-English programs. This means that their formal schooling happens through their second language only, whereas their early learning has been in a different language. Teachers must carefully consider that second language students will require much more extensive attention to language development than is required for native speakers. At every level, especially for those learning to read solely through their second language, additional steps need to be taken before students can handle text in the same way as native speakers (Gibbons, 2002).

Every comprehension strategy, for example, depends on a fund of concepts, vocabulary, and grammatical knowledge that will help readers make sense of the text in front of them. The names of the letters of the alphabet are far less important for them at the beginning stages of reading than developing a repertoire of language, vocabulary, and concepts in the second language that will allow them to understand what they are reading about. It will also be easier to learn to read and derive meaning when students already have had extensive practice in talking about and understanding the big ideas and vocabulary represented in the text.

*Use the physical environment to help create meaning-based instruction.* An important aspect of meaning-based instruction in a linguistically diverse environment is how the physical space in the room is used. In any good classroom, it should be apparent to students from the physical environment the topics they are learning about, the expectations for their behavior, and the main guidelines for how to accomplish their work. Many teachers embrace the understanding that students thrive in a print-rich environment where good readers

of the language will be able to make use of the print that surrounds them to know what to do. "Print rich," however, does not equate to "meaningful" if students cannot understand what the print says. Even if second language learners are able to decode the print, they still may not be able to derive any meaning from what is posted.

The key in a linguistically diverse environment is that teachers always mediate understanding by relating text, visual imagery, and oral discussion about important concepts. Although some think that to modify instruction in this way to account for understandings of language acquisition is an additional burden, in reality, most adaptations intended for second language learners will enhance instruction for all students.

*Use strategies that increase comprehension through opportunities for interaction.* All teachers need to know that there are many, many strategies they can use to make instruction more accessible to their second language students. These are guided by two major tenets. First, provide comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). Do whatever is necessary to make lessons accessible. Always ask yourself, How can I make the instruction and the materials I am using understandable? How do I know students really understand the material?

Second, create opportunities for practice and interaction. To become fluent in a language requires a lot of practice. Words and phrases need to be heard and repeated often, in a variety of contexts, and on a variety of topics and issues before they are mastered and become part of the students' own vocabulary. Students need many opportunities to talk aloud and converse with others regarding instruction. It is crucial to model new language for students and create a learning environment that invites active participation so that second language learners will have knowledge of how to respond, a step not generally needed for native language speakers.

## CONCLUSION

Our very future depends on the commitment of the adults who choose to dedicate their

careers to the education of children. What teachers do and how they do it in the context of their particular school makes a difference in student outcomes. To succeed, all educators need to proactively account for the complex interactions of language, culture, and context (Commins & Miramontes, 2005). Teachers need to make sure that what goes on inside their classrooms is part of a coherent framework and an articulated plan that connects all the adults in the building (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997). Such a plan respects individual teacher's talents and knowledge and applies them within a system that is driven by the needs of the students. If teacher education programs are truly to prepare educators that can meet the diversity that characterizes the nation's public schools, they must embed into their structures constant opportunities to reflect and act on these fundamental understandings.

## NOTE

1. This question has been posed several dozen times to a variety of audiences with whom the authors have worked. These have included students in graduate classes, school faculties during professional development sessions, administrators in leadership academies, and parents at literacy workshops. Although not intended as a research project, the responses, documented through notes and chart papers, have been consistent across all groups.

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- Nancy L. Commins has worked with linguistically diverse students in a variety of capacities during the past three decades. Her roles have included classroom teacher, university professor, program director, and school district administrator. She is coauthor of Restructuring Schools for Linguistic Diversity: Linking Decision Making to Effective Programs (Teachers College Press, 1997) and Linguistic Diversity and Teaching (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005). Currently she is an independent consultant assisting schools and districts in their efforts to improve instruction for linguistically diverse populations. She is affiliated with the Bilingual ESL Network at the University of Colorado-Denver.*
- Ofelia B. Miramontes was the associate vice chancellor for diversity and associate professor of education at the University of Colorado-Boulder. Her past publications include Linguistic Diversity and Teaching (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), Restructuring Schools for Linguistic Diversity: Linking Decision Making to Effective Programs (Teachers College Press, 1997) and Ethics of Special Education (Teachers College Press, 1992), as well as numerous articles and book chapters. She was a pioneer and leader in the field of bilingual education who influenced countless teachers and students during her career. She died on June 29, 2005, after a 4-year battle with breast cancer.*