



# LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

*Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs*

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Sociocultural Issues in Language Minority Education

## THE COMPLEXITIES OF LEARNING FOR LANGUAGE MINORITIES

Language minority students are characterized by having a dominant home language other than English and culturally diverse backgrounds. They might be receiving ESL support services if they have low language proficiency, or they might be in a regular classroom engaged in content learning with native English-speaking peers.

The language minority population has become increasingly diversified, meriting closer scrutiny. This *Bulletin* describes some characteristics of this population and suggests how teachers can frame their delivery of instruction.

### LANGUAGE MINORITY LEARNING CHALLENGES

The longstanding relief work of resettlement programs has been instrumental in literally growing generations of language minorities across U.S. communities since the early 1980s. This has now resulted in creating two principal school populations of language minority learners, each with distinctive learning profiles: foreign-born and U.S.-born.

Foreign born learners possess a host of variables impacting their potential for school success in the U.S.: age upon entry, cultural differences, trauma possibly

experienced transitioning from culture of origin, discontinued schooling resulting from the transitioning process, different conceptual formation in school of origin (e.g., memorization as opposed to problem-solving), varying family support for education, language differences, and amount degree of first language literacy. Any combination of the above language and cultural factors impacting negatively on the students will result in a delay in achieving academic success beyond the normal 4-7 years. *Foreign born learners aged eight and above generally possess a strong first language base for eventual transfer of their language abilities to English, given enough time and appropriate instructional support.*

Pre-school foreign born and U.S born learners are generally known as "generation 1.5", a term to explain characteristics of English language use which are often influenced by home language and residual issues of cultural orientation. Whereas older foreign born students' learning is influenced by multiple factors, the population of U.S. born are still impacted by first language influences in their home environments. *Moreover, if parents, through a lengthening stay in the U.S., begin to*

lose their dominant language, their children will be negatively affected linguistically and will experience higher and ongoing academic risk throughout their schooling.

## IMPACT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY ON SCHOOLING

It is important to stress that no language minority learners are alike in their linguistic and cultural adjustment to schooling. They may ultimately embrace U.S. culture and reject their home culture (assimilation); embrace both cultures (bicultural); or reject U.S. culture (alienation).

Culture and language, however, are connected. If there is an optimistic acceptance of U.S. American values, there is a stronger likelihood that language minority learners will gradually acquire and eventually attain sufficient language proficiency for academic success, given ongoing educational support. Conversely, alienation to U.S. culture fosters lack of motivation for schooling and a greater likelihood of "fossilization", i.e., entrenchment of language miscues that is highly resistant to instruction.

## GENERATION 1.5: NEW AND COMPLEX LEARNER PROFILE

The cultural and linguistic "in-betweenness" of early immigrants and U.S. born language minorities results can lend itself to highly varied outcomes *within* a family unit. The result can be multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multinational identity formation within immigrant families.

The following are some characteristics of generation 1.5 language proficiency:

1. **Strong aural learners.** While proficient listeners, these learners still don't hear language forms which are key to correct usage, such as articles (*a, an, the*), transition words, and complex verb tenses.
2. **Strong oral learners.** These learners are strong conversational users of English, conversant with idioms, slang, and general mono syllabic Anglo-Saxon high frequency

words. Academic vocabulary is a constant struggle.

3. **Reading and writing limitations.** Generation 1.5 exhibits inexperience as readers and writers as a result of first language borrowing, inconsistent instruction, lack of specific language interventions, and insufficient familiarity with print.

## GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

Whether in the mainstream or in self-contained classrooms, *language minority and other at-risk learners* can benefit from a more deliberate approach to language use in instruction:

1. **Know your students.** Accessing student files and having conversations with students and their families can reap *huge* benefits regarding what and how to teach.
2. **Write out content and language objectives of the day's lesson on the blackboard.** Posting *what* students will learn and *the kind of language they will use* helps to develop both metacognitive and metalinguistic understanding of the content.
3. **Model academic language when delivering your lesson.** Eliminate conversational language, slang, idioms, and abbreviated forms; use explicit language with academic vocabulary.
4. **Read to your students.** This may be the *only* access to complex language they receive when reading below grade level.
5. **Encourage student talk.** Talking about content fosters use of academic language.
6. **Engage students in frequent reading/writing tasks.** Practice with complex language and varied vocabulary is a must.
7. **Make reading-writing-speaking-listening connections.** This ensures a deepening saturation with language for learning content.

### Sources:

- De Anza (CA) College Faculty Directory: "Notes on Generation 1.5". September 2006.  
Roberge, Mark. "Who Are Generation 1.5 Students?" Spring 2005 NNETESOL Conference Keynote.