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ABSTRACT

It is argued that limited-English-proficient (LEP) readers, like all readers, process print with the intent to comprehend it, and all readers bring different background knowledge that influences how they derive meaning from text. Cultural influences are extremely significant in determining background knowledge, both cognitive and social. The majority culture may bias print towards the minority language culture, and if the LEP reader lacks the same cultural perceptions as those intended in the majority-language text, his interpretations of meaning may be considered misinterpretations. As a consequence, many LEP students are labeled as underachievers when their achievements are simply colored by their minority language culture. The educational community must make a greater effort to understand that LEP readers often bring their own culturally-influenced meaning to the interpretation of English-language text. (MSE)

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LEP Readers: Culturally Influenced Meaning
or Underachievement
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Abstract

LEP readers, like all readers, process print with the intent to comprehend it. All readers bring different backgrounds to print. Those various backgrounds influence how they derive meaning from print. Cultural influences are extremely significant to a reader as he processes print. Culture impacts a reader cognitively and socially. The majority language culture may bias print towards the majority language culture. Should an LEP reader lack the same cultural perceptions as intended by the majority language print, his interpretations of meaning may be considered misinterpretations of meaning. The consequence is the mislabeling of the LEP student as an underachiever; whereas, his reading performance has not been underachievement but an achievement colored by the minority language culture. Some serious considerations must be made by the educational community to understand the reading performance of LEP students.

LEP Readers: Culturally Influenced Meaning
or Underachievement

Reading is the experience of interaction with the world in print. Interactions also outside of print always convey meaning, which becomes a framework for further building upon and expansion of meaning through reading. Simply stated, interactions in one's culture influences how a reader perceives what he reads. Reading is a matter of interpreting print through culture's eyes. Culture influences the meaning by which the world is understood. "Reading is a matter of making sense of print, ..." (Smith, 1988, p. 201). LEP readers, like all readers, filter print through prior knowledge, experience, and feelings; however, different cultures provide different ways of knowing the world, other kinds of experiences not experienced in all cultures, and a range of emotions restrained or exhibited when prompted by stimuli from prior experiences. "Cultural literacy is the ability to construct meaning in reading. Moreover in theory, a person can be functionally literate but culturally illiterate (e.g. reading without meaning)" (Baker, 1993, p. 202). An LEP student may be erroneously classified and considered as an underachiever in Reading because he

is culturally illiterate in the language in print, L2. That is to say, his culture provides him meanings which color his interpretations of print, but those meanings are different from the majority language. In order to better understand how culture can influence the reading comprehension of LEP students, the roles of cognition and social interaction must be understood. An educational system, cognizant of these roles, perceives literacy of LEP students as culturally influenced and not as a matter of underachievement.

The Role of Cognition

Reading is a problem-solving experience made possible by cognition. It is dependent upon cognitive development. Reading is a linguistic process involving skills made operative by several factors--- perception, inference, categorization, generalization, and memory. In addition, psycholinguists observe that cognitive schemata, which control meaning derived from print, develop from infancy and continue to establish the essential framework of cognition. Hernandez (1991) defines a schema as "...an 'abstract knowledge structure derived from repeated experiences with objects and events' (Garner, 1987, p. 3) which must be

activated in order for learners to comprehend text" (p. 94). In other words, it could be said that we have in our heads what the world is like. Smith (1988) calls this concept "the theory of the world in our heads" (p. 188). Each individual develops his own personal schemata, but these schemata, already in place, influence the development of other schemata. That is to say, schemata develop out of each other, and propositional inferences follow logically and necessarily during the reading process. Consequently, comprehension of print is influenced by the cognitive schemata of the reader. LEP readers bring to print culturally developed schemata which influence their interpretation of print. Their prior knowledge leads them to make predictions about print, which may result in meaning not predicted by others who are proficient in English. On the other hand, a lack of knowledge about the context of print may prevent LEP readers from making a prediction or predictions. The impending results lead misguided instructors and educational systems to mislabel LEP students as underachievers. Those misinformed leaders fail to recognize that literacy learning is a "reflection of language and

culture" (Hudson-Ross, 1990, p. 110). Teachers who have been successful with low achievers recognize that students must "...learn to see what they know to get to what they don't know" (Pinnel, 1990, p. 18). A reading crisis occurs when the teacher fails to use learning strategies which help to determine what an LEP reader may not know especially when "...the set of expectations about particular objects and events expressed in text may not be culturally sensitive to the actual experiences of these students. That is, text that refers to experiences such as getting an allowance, going camping, or going to the high school prom may not be a part of the students' life experiences" (Hernandez, 1991, p. 94). At this crucial point Carrell and Eisterhold (1988) observe that ESL readers possess cultural schemata which do not correspond to an American way of life. In order to prove that cognitive schemata culturally influence meaning Lallas (1982) conducted a survey of thirty Filipino bilingual students attending elementary and secondary schools in the United States. The story, "The Old Man, His Son, and the Donkey," was read aloud to the students at both levels. Following the reading the students were asked

questions about the story. Results revealed that the high school students interpreted the story based upon Filipino culture, while the elementary students interpreted the story in light of American culture. Obviously, prior knowledge of living in the Philippines influenced the high school students; whereas, the younger students, having less familiarity with the Philippines than with the United States, interpreted the story the way an American would. A study was completed by Miller, Malone, and Karmelita (1992) on the cultural differences in the understanding of mathematics vocabulary by secondary students from two dominant cultures in Western Australia. Aboriginal students were seen as lower achievers because they lacked the vocabulary necessary to the reading comprehension of terms associated with mathematics. Finally, Pritchard (1990) studied sixty proficient eleventh grade readers (thirty from the United States and thirty from Palau). The students were given culturally familiar and unfamiliar passages to read; then, they were asked to report on the kinds of strategies they used to interpret the passages. Next, the students were asked to retell the passages. Pritchard reported that differences of

student interpretations were the result of cultural familiarity or unfamiliarity. When background knowledge was lacking the students used previously learned comprehension strategies to provide meaning for them as they read. Implications are that English proficient students use strategies to intervene in the absence of prior knowledge or when the necessary cognitive schemata are lacking. Can one conclude then that English proficient students also may have difficulties in reading comprehension when prior knowledge is lacking? Yet, they may not be mislabeled as underachievers as LEP students may be. When English proficient students succeed while having difficulty arriving at meaning of print and when LEP students do not succeed while having similar difficulty, could a significant difference between the two be that the English proficient student has been taught successful reading strategies and that the LEP student has not been taught those strategies? To answer these questions, the focus must be on understanding the causes for reading difficulty, and an LEP reader must be understood as approaching print through his culture's eyes. Culturally developed schemata, which

hold his concept of the world within himself, provide the window through which he reads and interprets print; ergo, culturally influenced meaning results.

Cultural Influence and Social Implications

Environment largely shapes students' perceptions and attitudes towards education. Many times students may ask, "Why do I need to know this?" because of many factors. They may ask this question because there is no caring parental support and encouragement. In fact, their home may out of economic necessity focus on survival on one end of the spectrum and at the other end on "hard work," which provides the necessities of life, while viewing academic skills like reading as mere frills not needed for survival. Those who focus on survival have no opportunity to do anything but work; the second group may find recreation in the form of watching television as a means of escape from reality. Homelife becomes a matter of allowing television personalities to do the thinking for their spectators. The viewers reason, "Why read when one does not have to read?" This group wants to do more than just survive, and the easiest way to achieve the "better life" is not the easiest at all. It is estimated that the dropout

rate of forty-one percent of Hispanics can be attributed to their economic problems (Hill, 1989). Obviously, they are dropping out at a certain level of reading proficiency which negatively impacts their economic success throughout their lives. The "better life" dream becomes a nightmare; however, another demon of the night--- just as subtle and equally or more devastating--- is what causes an LEP student to fail although he remains in school for twelve-plus years. He may fail the Exit Exam. Why does he not succeed? Again, one might say that contributing factors leading to failure is twelve-plus years of curriculum and an exam lacking cultural sensitivity to the LEP student. In addition, social factors occurring throughout the twelve-plus years of school impact LEP students. There is no doubt that "...communication difficulties (in the classroom may exist between students and teachers) ...even after students have acquired the basics of English if the student and teacher are following different sociocultural rules about how to use language..." (Peregoy and Boyle, 1993, p. 10). The LEP student may be labeled "slow learner" in Reading because the student fails to respond to print in a

manner appropriate to a teacher's frame of reference for measurement of reading comprehension. A teacher may demand immediate answers when the student may need more time to formulate an answer, or a teacher may have pre-set answers to questions which hinder and discourage student responses. Then, a teacher must recognize the kind of foundation that can be built upon the LEP student's past literacy history. Some LEP students may bring to the classroom more literacy background than others. Some have parents who have read to them at an early age. Others lack this experience. If all students are treated the same, some will lose out on critical stages of reading development perhaps never to be recovered. "Someone must do the learners' reading for them until they are able to read a few things for themselves, and they are ready to learn to read by reading" (Smith, 1988, p. 216). Just because an LEP student is in high school does not mean that his teacher should not read to him and should not assist that student in reading. The teacher plays a social role in enabling the student to do on his own with what he now needs assistance. "...Learning traverses from a social (interpsychological) context to

a personal (intrapsychological) context. Reading intervention approaches, such as those developed by the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii (Caffee et al., 1981; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), the work of Palincsar & Brown (1984), Palincsar (1987a) and the work of Zetlin & Gallimore (1983) have lent empirical support to the importance of assisted performance in reading" (Hernandez, 1991, p. 92). Since Hawaiian students learn more effectively the way they socialize with siblings and their mothers, Jordan (1983) observes that this learning strategy is the most effective one to be used by teachers of Hawaiian students. Social behavior at home directly affects their learning behavior at school. Successful reading experiences of Hawaiian students require peer-learning or cooperative learning. On the other hand, the identical kind of social experiences, which enhance learning for Hawaiian students, are hindrances to Navajo students until some adaptations are made for Navajo culture (Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp, 1987). Chinese classrooms include too many students to permit cooperative learning within the classroom; however, outside the classroom students cooperatively accomplish academic tasks required for

learning (Hudson-Ross, 1990). One can imagine how an LEP Chinese student might feel if expected to complete a cooperative reading task within the classroom setting; likewise, one should recognize how Hispanic LEP students feel when they learn best cooperatively and yet are required to follow an education void of or with limited cooperative experiences. No doubt LEP students are not identical. From group to group there are variations, and there is variety within minority language groups (Baratz-Snowden and Duran, 1987). Such variability provides challenges to the educational community. Recognition of those variables and developing learning strategies appropriate to LEP students is essential to literacy instruction.

Cultural Influence and Considerations for Teachers

In light of the cognitive and social implications of culturally influenced meaning brought to the reading experience by LEP students, it would appear that a teacher faces insurmountable obstacles when considering how to teach reading to each individual student. Actually, however, the teacher does not have to dart into a closet to clothe himself in a blue suit and a red cape before entering the classroom. Instead, "Teaching may be

summed up as 10 percent inspiration, 5 percent motivation, and about 85 percent perseverance" (Hill, 1989, p. 77). Hill continues, "Reading success ...is based on having materials that are relevant to students regardless of their ethnic or racial affiliation" (p. 66). Moreover, he emphasizes that "To teach minority students successfully, teachers must acquire communication skills in languages the students know best. Where applicable familiarity with Spanish, ghettoese, Vietnamese, pidgin English, Gullah, Tex-Mex, and native American dialects can be helpful to academic progress in the classroom" (p. 43). Perhaps Hill's emphasis could be stronger here. Instead of saying that familiarity of languages of students can be helpful to academic progress, what should be said is that familiarity of languages of students is essential to understanding how students bring culturally-influenced meaning to print. How can there be quality of education and effective teaching unless there is culturally linguistic sensitivity to the cultures and languages of students? It is an outrage for LEP students to be written off as underachievers in Reading or in any other academic area when in reality underachievement to cultural and linguistic sensitivity

occurs on the part of many educational systems. Minority students in some of the largest states in the United States compose fifty percent or more of student enrollment in public schools. The challenge is here. It is inane to perceive limited English proficiency as a problem or as a negative condition when in reality it is an educational focus. The real problem is not limited English proficiency but how educational systems perceive limited English proficiency. For LEP readers to become successful readers, then administrators and teachers must provide their educational vision with a new focus. First of all, educators must recognize that "...cultural heritage is discovered and internalized in reading" (Baker, 1993, p. 202). This process, Baker says, can result in "assimilation and integration." However, the use of print culturally sensitive to LEP students will help them not only to internalize their own culture but will enable all students in the classroom to be exposed to other cultures through a curriculum that promotes multi-cultural literacy. Besides this, reading programs in which educators have involved parents of LEP students in the reading programs of their schools have found that not only has adult literacy occurred but so has the

reading proficiency of their children (Simich-Dudgeon, 1987). A variety of classroom strategies can be used in the classroom: (1) sheltered English in which instruction is "...organized around content" (Peregoy and Boyle, 1993, p. 32), (2) " an environment with low anxiety, meaningful communicative context, and L1 literacy as the foundation for L2 skill development (Cochran, 1985), (3) methods sensitive to the cultural schemata of LEP readers, such as the Language Experience Approach and the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity, (4) the development of vocabulary, (5) reading assessment in light of the student's culture (6) awareness of language differences and effective ways of developing ESL proficiency (Anderson and Barnitz, 1984), (7) instruction which involves various student learning styles--- especially those which are dominant in the classroom (Hirst and Slavik, 1989), (8) what students conceptualize about reading, (9) the cultural influence of homelife, (10) a flexible understanding of reading behavior, and (11) a determination of the dominant group to which the LEP is most responsive--- parents or peers (Field and Aebersold, 1990). These strategies are not considered

to be exclusive, but they may serve as a survey of methods found to be successful in teaching Reading to LEP students.

The continued increase of Minority students in public school populations, coupled with at-risk factors of being limited in English proficiency, requires a new focus in reading instruction by the educational establishment. No longer can the influence of culture upon interpretation of print be ignored. No longer can LEP students be assessed "underachievers" because their culture influences the meanings they derive from print. For LEP readers to succeed, perceptions of educators will have to change, and new teaching strategies will have to be used. Previously stated, the challenge is here. Successful methods are being used in some areas of the educational arena. Those areas recognize the influence of culture upon LEP readers, but other areas still remain bogged down in a quagmire of mislabeling and misconception. Those educators who accept the challenge of leading LEP readers to success by recognizing that they bring culturally-influenced meaning to print understand that reading is a cognitive and social process indelibly

marked by culture. "It is in the public school this nation has chosen to pursue enlightened ends for all its people" (Hill, 1989). It is the enlightened educator who recognizes the influence of culture upon the LEP student and whose end is to use that knowledge to enlighten the LEP student to read with success.

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