How long does it take to learn EAL alongside the curriculum? Instructional and theoretical implications of the international research

Jim Cummins
University of Toronto

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Goals and Outline of the Presentation

Goal 1

Review and integrate international research findings regarding length of residence (LOR) and school attainment among immigrant-background students;

Goal 2

Articulate theoretical concepts that help explain English learners' academic trajectories

Goal 3

Highlight the immediate practical implications of these findings for school policies and pedagogies;

Goal 4

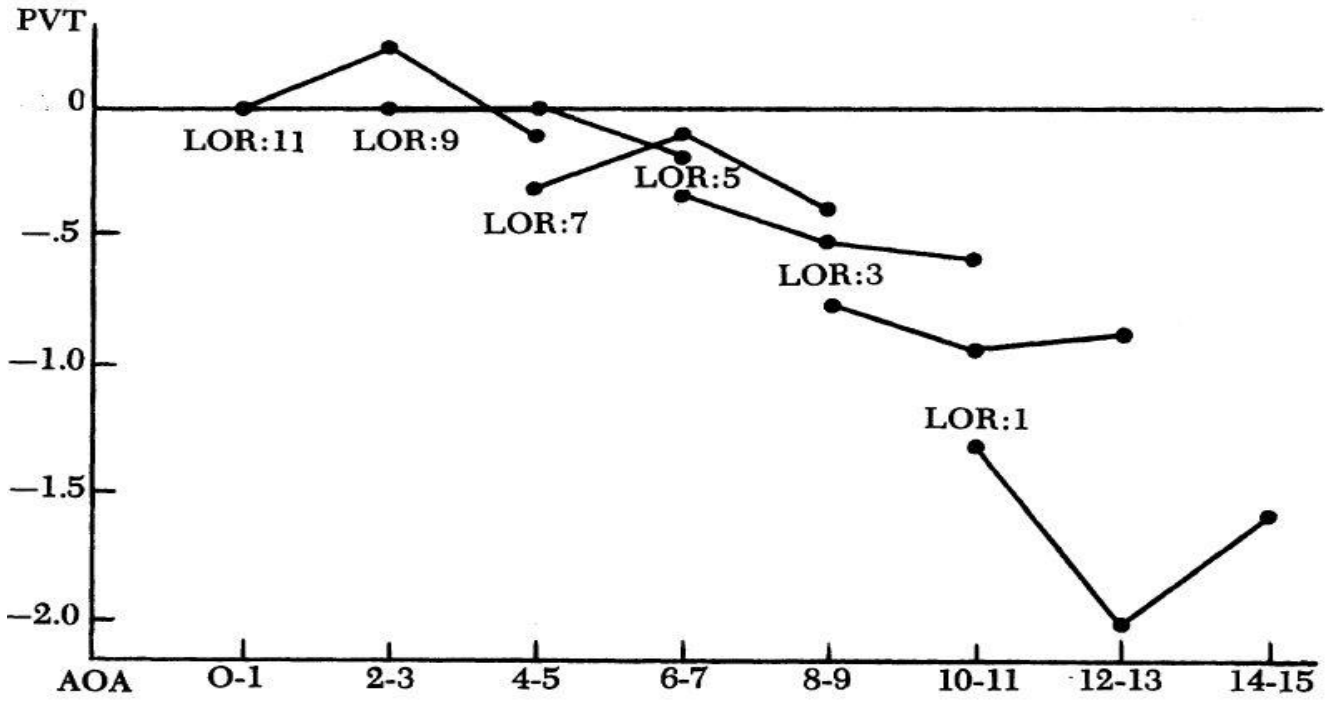
Highlight 25+ years of research that shows the potential of language-friendly pedagogy which engages students' multilingual repertoire as a strategy to accelerate their acquisition of academic English and subject matter content.

Part 1. Research on English Learners' Academic Catch-Up Trajectories

Cummins' (1981) reanalysis of data from the Toronto school district involving more than 1,200 immigrant background students who spoke English as an additional language showed an average academic catch-up trajectory of 5-7 years.

Consistent findings in California

After three years of English-only instruction that resulted from Proposition 227, only **12 percent** of English learners in California had acquired sufficient academic English to be re-designated as English proficient (Parrish, Merickel, Perez, & Linquanti, 2006).



PVT = Picture Vocabulary Test; LOR = Length of Residence; AOA = Age on Arrival

Two reasons:

1. **Complexity of academic language;**
2. **Catching up to moving target.**

Consistent findings have been reported by numerous international studies over the past 45 years.
These studies also highlight considerable variability within these typical or average trajectories

- Collier (1987) – USA
- Klesmer (1994) – Canada
- Collier & Thomas (1989) – USA
- Gándara (1999) - USA
- Hakuta et al. (2000) – USA
- Levin & Shohamy (2008) – Israel
- Creagh et al. (2019) – Australia
- Thompson (2017) – USA

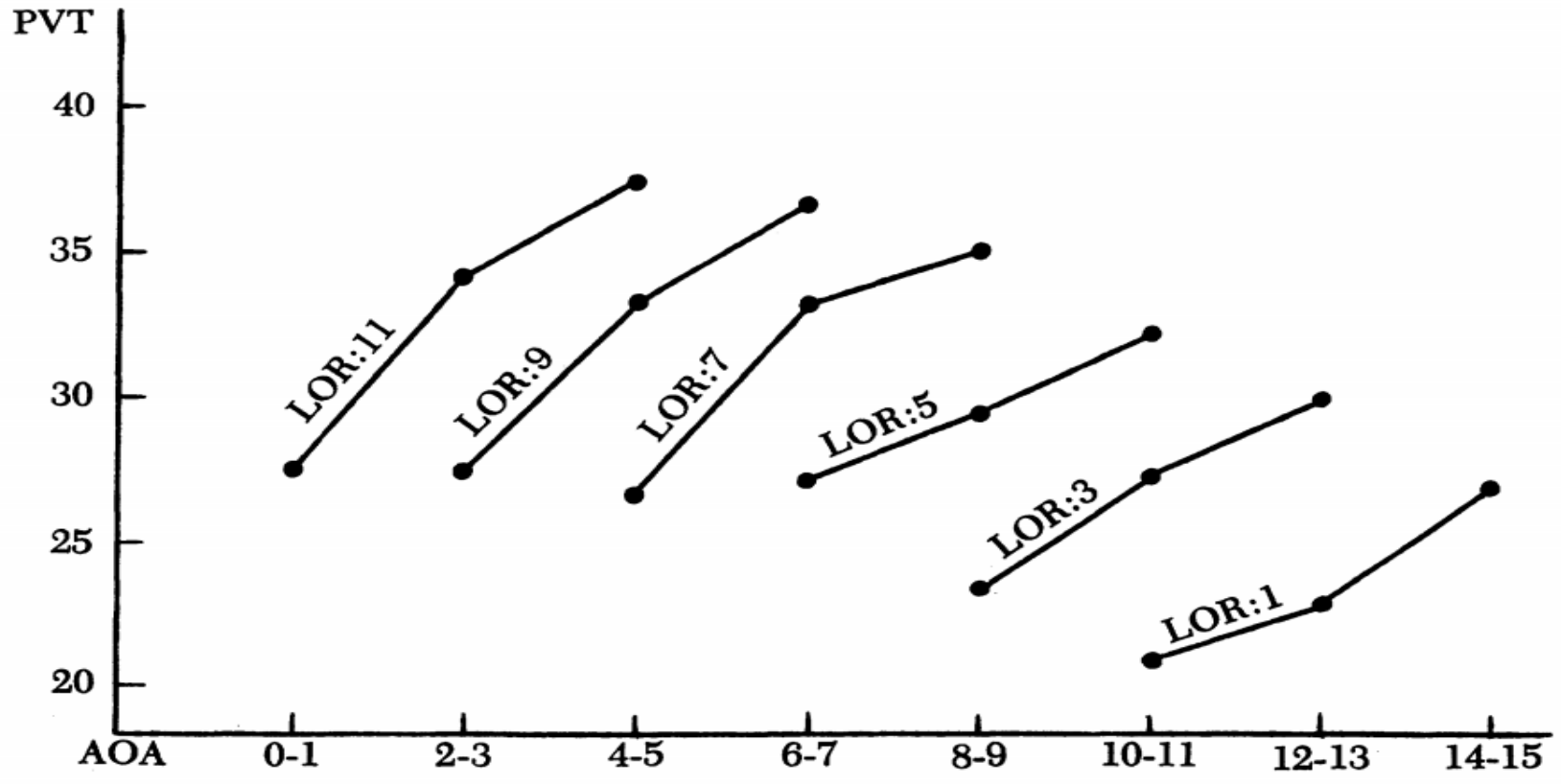
- OECD PISA findings show major differences in academic performance among immigrant-background students across different countries;
- For example, minimal overall differences in countries such as Australia, Canada, Ireland, UK, but major differences in countries such as USA, and most European continental countries (OECD, 2010).

Sources of variation

- SES/poverty
- L1 previous education and literacy development
- Age on arrival (AOA)
  - AOA of c. 7/8 - 10/11 optimal compared to younger and older AOA students (2-4 years LOR to attain parity with native English speakers) (Creagh et al., 2019; Thomas & Collier, 1989)
- Country of origin
- Refugee or asylum seeker status
- Discrimination based on racialized stereotypes
- Quality of support and instruction at school
- Societal/school language (e.g., in Canada, immigrant-background students in Quebec perform less well than those in English-speaking provinces).

Despite greater challenges in catching up academically, within each LOR group older learners acquire vocabulary more rapidly (in absolute terms) than younger learners.

Age on Arrival, Length of Residence, and PVT Raw Scores



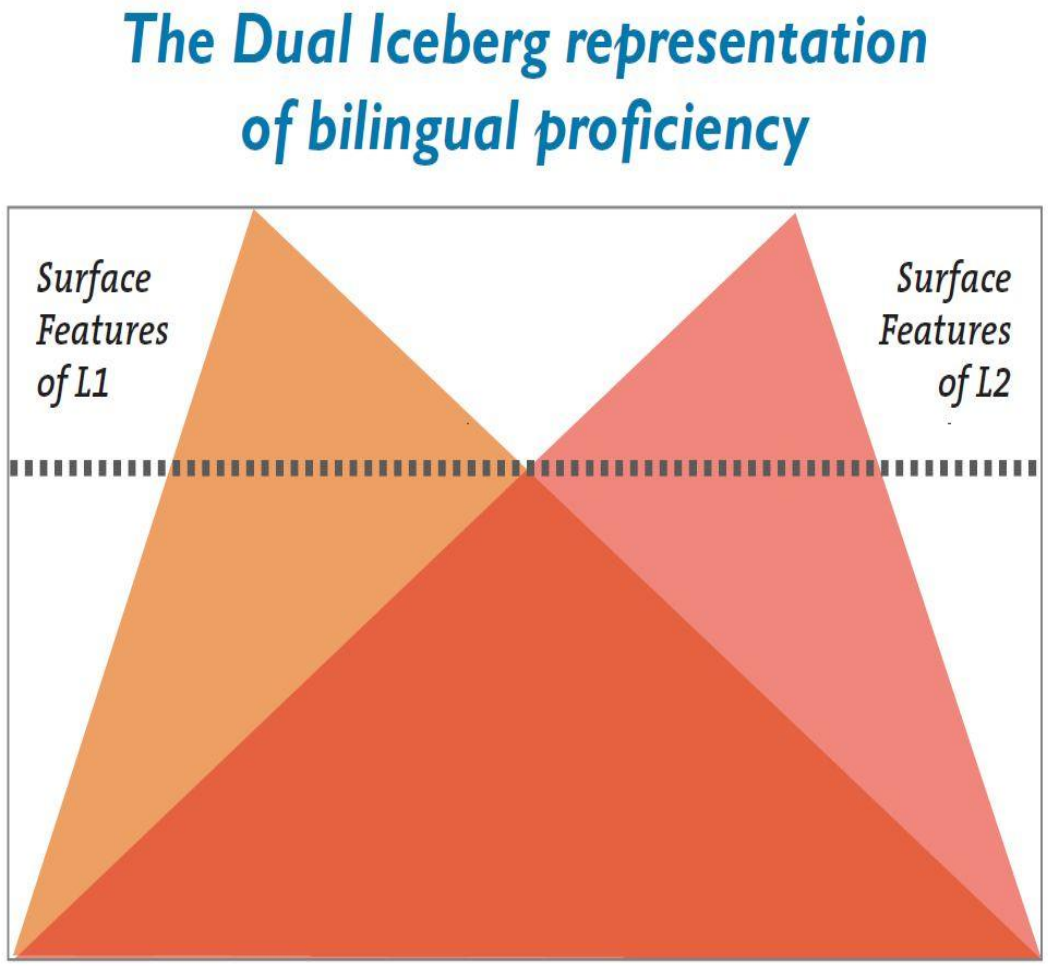
Learners who arrived at ages 14/15 acquired more English vocabulary in 1 year than those who arrived at ages 4/5 acquired in 7 years/

Older students have more advanced cognitive and L1 literacy skills than younger students.

Part 2

Theoretical Concepts Useful in Interpreting these Findings (Cummins, 2021)

The Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) hypothesis highlighted the reality of transfer across languages (e.g., conceptual knowledge)



- Bilingual children transfer **concepts**, **language learning strategies, and linguistic knowledge** (e.g., cognates) across languages when development of literacy in both languages is promoted in the school context.
- For newcomer students, this highlights the importance of building on the linguistic, cultural, and conceptual knowledge they bring to the learning context.
- This implies teaching for two-way crosslinguistic transfer.

A Crucial Distinction in Interpreting EAL Learners' Academic Trajectories

Conversational Fluency (BICS)

- The ability to carry on a conversation in familiar face-to-face situations;
- Developed by the vast majority of native speakers by the time they enter school at age 5;
- Involves use of high frequency words and simple grammatical constructions;
- Students learning the school language typically require 1-2 years to attain reasonable fluency in everyday situations.

Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

- Includes knowledge of less frequent vocabulary as well as the ability to understand and produce increasingly complex written language;
- Frequent use of passive voice and nominalization (e.g., acceleration) which are rarely used in conversation;
- Because academic language is found primarily in books and printed texts, extensive reading is crucial in enabling students to catch up;

Social Studies Vocabulary (Grade 5 Unit on the American Revolution)

Because of their origins in Latin (and Greek) sources, most of these words have cognate relationships with similar words in languages such as Spanish.

amend **annexation** **bombarded**	**boundary** **colonist** **cavalry**	**compromise** **commerce** **constitution**	**consultation** **convention** **convince**
declaration **dissolved** **dynasty**	**independence** **induced** **inference**	**perpetual** **petition** **preamble**	**ratify** **rebellion** **representatives**
resolution **revolt** **revolution**	**sentiments** **siege** **skirmish**	**statement** **surveyor** **sustain**	**traditions** **treaty** **tyrants**

Key Linguistic Features of Book Language
(based on Larson, 2025; Nation et al. 2022)

- **Lexical Density and Vocabulary Breadth:** Books, even those written for preschoolers, introduce more words—and more **unique** words—than everyday conversation.

- **Vocabulary Sophistication:** More abstract and emotionally sophisticated words;

- **Content-Heavy Language (Nouns and Adjectives):** Book language is dense with descriptive nouns and adjectives that build conceptual understanding.

- **Morphological Complexity:** Words in books often contain multiple morphemes—roots, prefixes, and suffixes—that signal meaning and grammatical function.

- **Syntax and Sentence Complexity:** Several research studies have shown that sentence structures in children's picture books were significantly more complex than those used in child-directed speech.

Part 3

Implications for School Policies and Classroom Instruction

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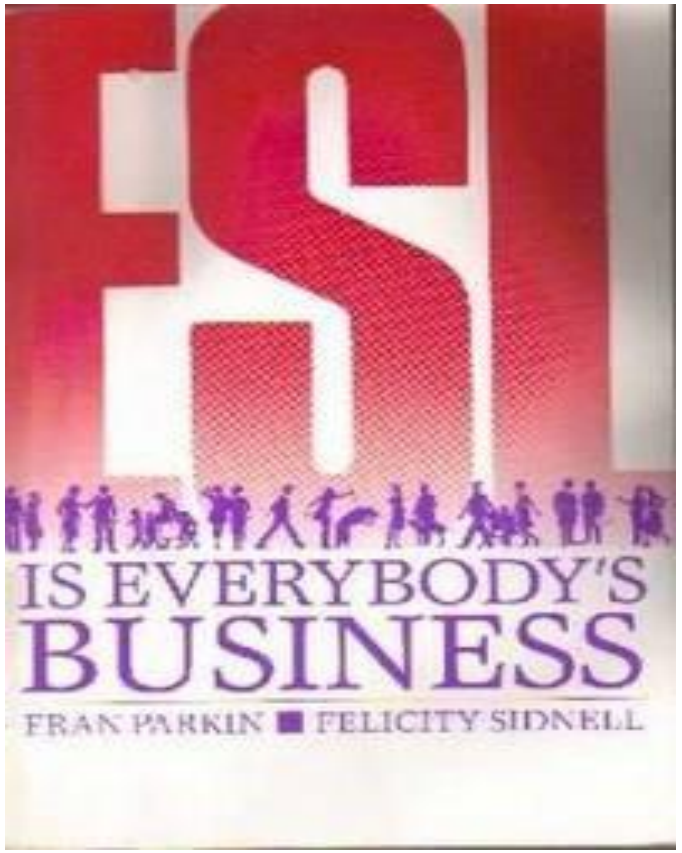
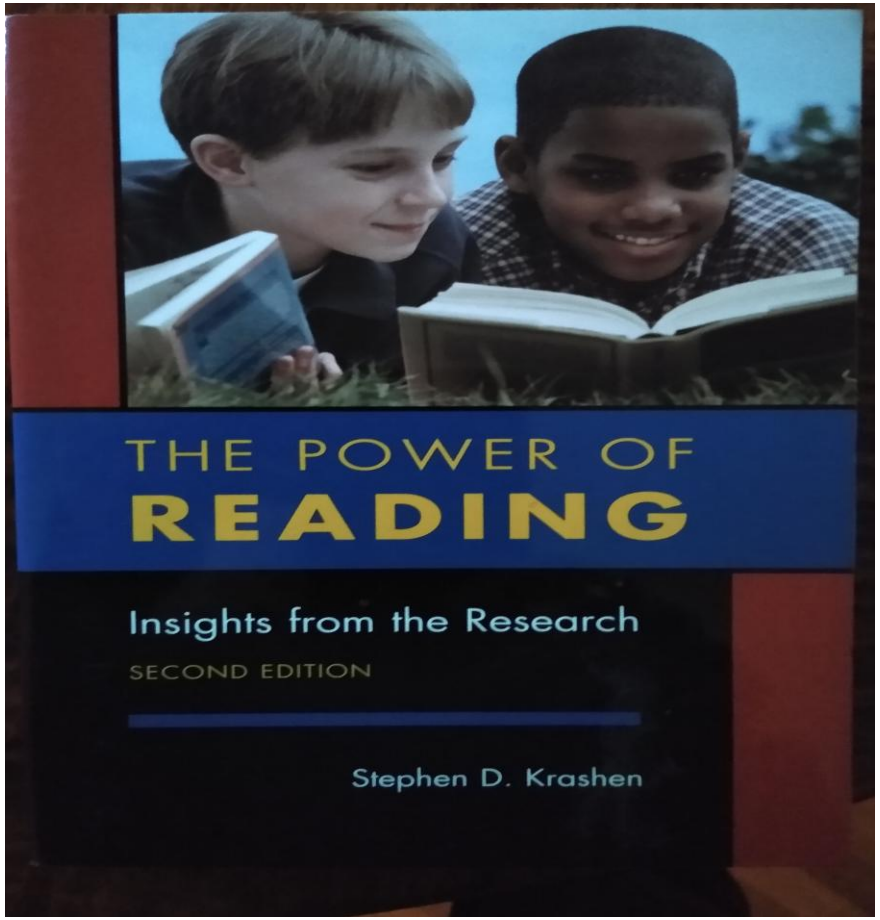


Since its initial articulation in the late 1970s, the distinction between BICS and CALP has influenced both policy and practice related to the instruction and assessment of second language learners. It has been invoked, for example, in policy discussions related to:

- The amount and duration of funding necessary to support students who are learning English as an additional language.
- The kinds of instructional support that English learners need at different stages of their acquisition of conversational and academic English.
- The inclusion of English learners in high-stakes testing mandated by state or national educational jurisdictions; for example, should immigrant-background students be exempt from taking high-stakes tests and, if so, for how long – 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 years after arrival in the host country?
- The extent to which psychological testing through the school language of immigrant-background students for diagnostic purposes is valid and ethically defensible.

(Cummins, 2021, p. 57)

Promoting active and sustained literacy engagement at school (and at home) is a crucial component of effective instruction for *all* students, but especially for students who are learning the school language



In order to promote strong literacy achievement among linguistically diverse, low-income, and marginalized group students,

schools must create an ecology of literacy engagement in our schools and classrooms

- Students from low-income backgrounds experience significantly less access to written language in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods (e.g., public library access) than is the case for higher-income students (Duke, 2000; Neuman & Celano, 2001).

- **An extremely large body of research demonstrates a *causal relationship* between literacy engagement and literacy achievement for both native-speakers and second-language speakers of the school language (see reference list for multiple reviews).**

- John Guthrie (2004: 5) cites large-scale international research as showing that students

"whose family background was characterized by low income and low education, but who were highly engaged readers, substantially outscored students who came from backgrounds with higher education and higher income, but who themselves were less engaged readers. Based on a massive sample, this finding suggests the stunning conclusion that engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education, and income".

- OECD (2010) – there is about a one-third overlap between the negative effects of SES and the positive effects of literacy engagement on reading achievement. In other words, schools could potentially push back about one-third of the negative impact of SES if they could get low-SES students actively engaged with literacy from an early age.

Part 4

Evidence-based Claim:

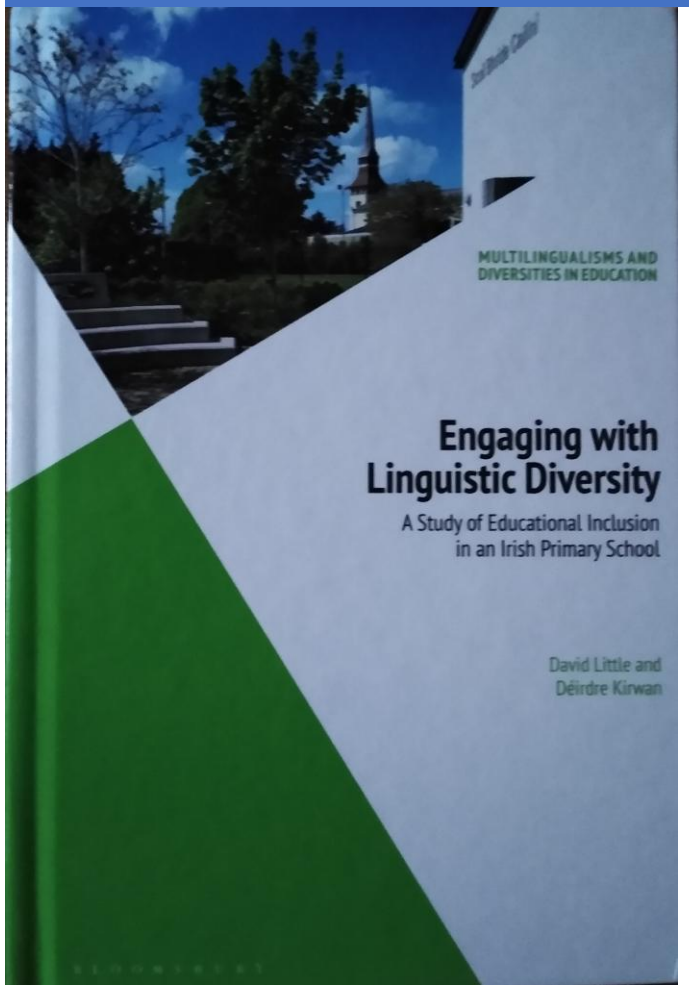
English learners will make faster academic progress and learn English more rapidly when classroom instruction shifts from an English-only orientation towards a language-friendly orientation that actively engages students' multilingual repertoire

Creating Dual Language Books: Insights from Multilingual Learners

Kanta (Grade 7 student from Pakistan – wrote Urdu-English book with 2 classmates)

- And how it helped me was when I came here in grade 4 the teachers didn't know what I was capable of.
- I was given a pack of crayons and a coloring book and told to get on coloring with it. And after I felt so bad about that--I'm capable of doing much more than just that. I have my own inner skills to show the world than just coloring and I felt that those skills of mine are important also.
- So, when we started writing the book [*The New Country*], I could actually show the world that I am something instead of just coloring.
- And that's how it helped me, and it made me so proud of myself that I am actually capable of doing something, and here today [at the Ontario TESL conference] I *am* actually doing something. I'm not just a coloring person—I can show you that I am something.

Scoil Bhríde (Dublin—80% multilingual pupils)
One of the Most Inspiring Examples of Language-Friendly Pedagogy



Fintan O'Toole: Schools with immigrants producing tomorrow's Irish speakers

Fintan O'Toole, Irish Times, November 26, 2019

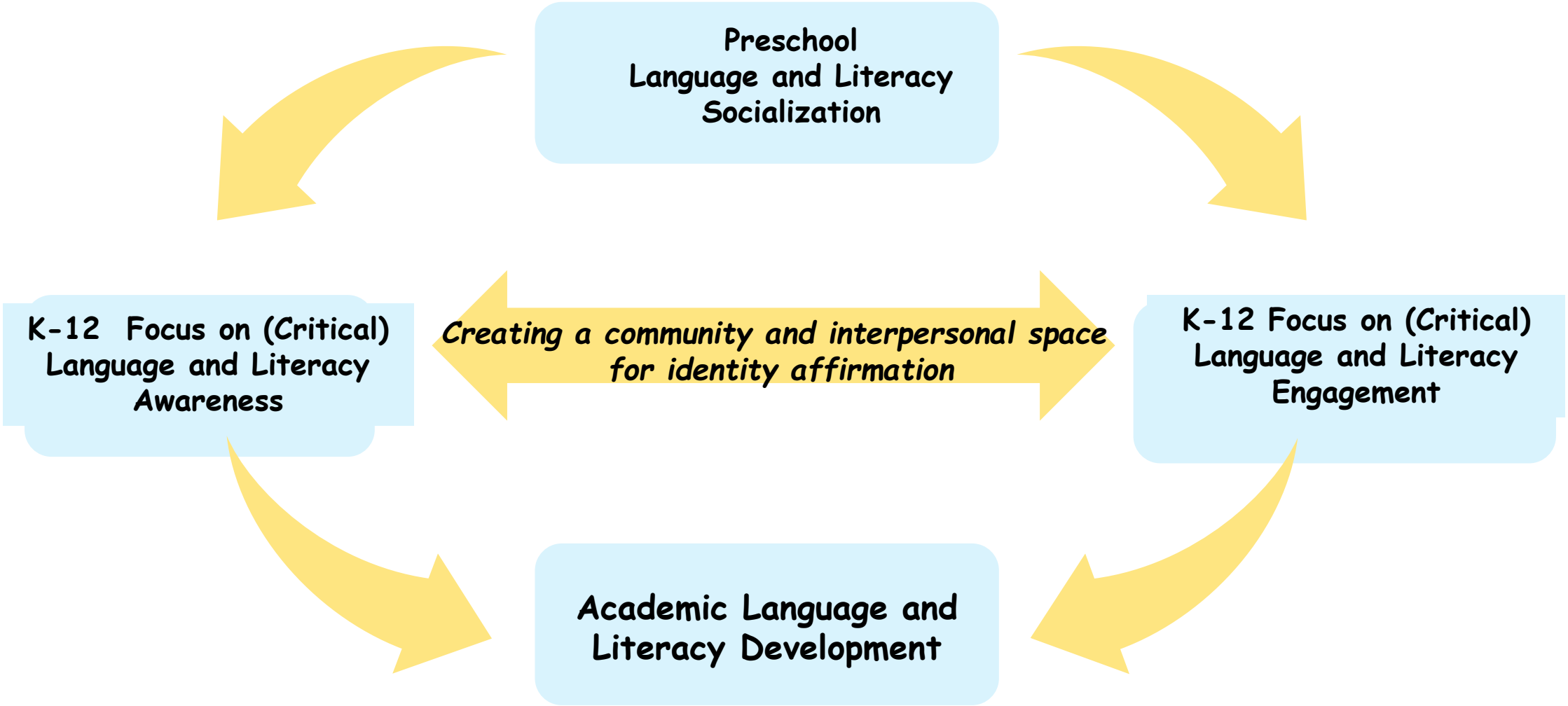
- Imagine a classroom in which half a dozen children are retelling an Irish legend in half a dozen other languages, translating, inquiring, playing with the infinite diversity of words. What a fabulous educational experience that must be – working-class kids getting a daily course in applied linguistics that would be hard to match at university.

Little & Kirwin, 2022, p. 286:

"When introducing and discussing new concepts, teachers routinely ask EAL pupils to contribute words from their home languages for purposes of comparison and contrast. This has a strong positive impact on the development of pupils' English vocabulary.

For example, fractions are introduced in Third Class, when pupils are 8+ years old. One teacher did this by associating *fraction* with *fracture* and eliciting synonyms (*break*, *split*).
She also asked for words for *break* in other languages. A Romanian pupil offered *rupt*, which others were quick to link to the *eruption* of a volcano, *interruption* and *disruption*."

Creating an Instructional Ecosystem Framed by Language Awareness, Literacy Engagement, and Identity Affirmation



Emmanuelle Le Pichon & Ellen-Rose Kambel (2022). The Language Friendly School: An Inclusive and Equitable Pedagogy, *Childhood Education*, 98:1, 42-49

The overall vision of the Language Friendly Schools Movement is as follows:

As *educators*, we should be working as a whole school community to transform our schools *into Language-Friendly* ecosystems

- where students' languages are recognized and affirmed,
- where all students can expand their identities as they become aware of how language works in our heads, our families, and our societies,
- and where students can begin to use their entire multilingual repertoire for powerful (identity-affirming) purposes.

(languagefriendlyschool.org)

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