

# LITERACY ENGAGEMENT

## Fueling Academic Growth for English Learners

*Jim Cummins*

The construct of *literacy engagement* has not figured prominently in recent U.S. debates about educational policy in general or reading instruction in particular. My goal in this article is to present the case for considering literacy engagement as a primary determinant of literacy achievement for both English learners (EL) and underachieving students generally. More specifically, the research evidence suggests that schools can significantly reduce the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage by ensuring that students have access to a rich print environment and become actively engaged with literacy.

The case for literacy engagement as a primary determinant of achievement is both logical and empirical. Logic dictates that literacy engagement is crucial because academic language is found primarily in printed text rather than in everyday conversation. Thus EL students' opportunities to broaden their

vocabulary knowledge and develop strong reading comprehension skills are likely to be greatly enhanced when they have abundant access to printed texts and engage actively with these texts.

The empirical case derives from numerous research studies carried out over the past 30 years (reviewed by Krashen, 2004; Lindsay, 2010), together with findings produced more recently by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD). PISA data from large-scale surveys of 15-year-old students in countries around the world show that (a) reading engagement is a stronger predictor of reading achievement than socioeconomic status (SES) (OECD, 2004), and (b) approximately one third of the relationship between reading achievement and SES




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is mediated by reading engagement (OECD, 2010a). Unfortunately, these data have been largely ignored by policymakers in the United States and elsewhere.

### **Recent Educational Policy Debates in the United States**

According to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in testimony delivered on March 9, 2011, before the House Education Committee, 82% of U.S. schools are unlikely to make Adequate Yearly Progress in 2011. These data added fuel to the flames of educational acrimony at a time when there is intense debate about the extent to which U.S. schools are “broken” and what should be done to fix them.

One view, most prominently expressed in the 2010 film *Waiting for Superman*, attributes the problems of U.S. education to the influence of “bad” teachers who cannot be held accountable (and fired) because they are protected by teacher unions. The proposed solutions involve eliminating unions’ right to collective bargaining, expanding nonunionized charter schools, and using high-stakes standardized tests to measure not only the progress of students, but also the effectiveness of teachers and the teacher education programs that certified them.

Opposing this perspective are a large majority of educational researchers (e.g.,

Berliner, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010) who dispute the blanket generalization that U.S. schools are failing and highlight instead the fact that underachievement is concentrated in schools serving low-income and racially/culturally marginalized students.

Proponents of this view suggest that policies enacted during the past decade under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation have done nothing to close the achievement gap between social groups because these policies have been largely evidence-free, despite proclaiming themselves “scientifically proven.” These researchers argue that school improvement will result from a greater focus on equity rather than the punitive use of high-stakes standardized tests. Their skepticism about the efficacy of intensive standardized testing to improve achievement is consistent with the OECD (2010b) finding that “PISA does not show the prevalence of standardized tests to be systematically related to performance” (p. 50).

The evidence-free nature of current educational debates is particularly obvious with respect to policies concerning EL students. These students pose an awkward dilemma for policymakers who envisage expansion of the use of standardized tests to enforce accountability.

Under NCLB, EL students have been exempted from testing only in their first year of learning English. After that

period, their scores are interpreted, along with the scores of other students, as reflective of the quality of instruction in a particular school. As outlined in the next section, the expectation that all EL students should be performing at grade level after one year of learning English is totally without empirical foundation.

### **English Language Acquisition: What Are We Talking About?**

Although we commonly talk about “learning English” as if “English proficiency” were a unitary construct, we can all intuitively recognize some clear distinctions within the notion of English proficiency. These distinctions are apparent regardless of whether we are talking about native speakers of a language or second-language learners.

Specifically, we know that *conversational fluency* is quite different from *academic proficiency* in a language. The fast talkers in our classes are not necessarily the best readers. We also know that there are major differences in the way we acquire decoding skills and the processes involved in acquiring the low-frequency vocabulary that is central to the growth of reading comprehension (Cummins, 2000).

Very different trajectories are involved for EL students to catch up to their peers in each of these dimensions of proficiency. Specifically, it usually takes only about one to two years for students to become reasonably fluent in conversational English, which is characterized by high-frequency vocabulary and common grammatical constructions.

The same time period is typically required for many EL students in the early grades to acquire basic decoding skills in English to a level similar to that

of their English-speaking classmates (Lesaux & Geva, 2006). However, research studies conducted in several countries show clearly that second language learners usually require at least five years (and sometimes much longer) to catch up to native English speakers in academic English (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1981; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

These trajectories have major implications for policy and classroom practice. For example, Proposition 227, passed in California in 1998, was premised on the assumption that one year of intensive English instruction would be sufficient to enable EL students to integrate into mainstream classrooms with minimal additional support. In fact, research on the effects of Proposition 227 found that after three years of instruction, only 12% of EL students in California had acquired sufficient academic English to be redesignated as English-proficient (Parrish et al., 2006).

These data illustrate the magical thinking underlying the provisions of NCLB in regard to EL students and some of the reasons why 82% of schools are supposedly failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress. However, they also raise a crucial question: To what extent might the implementation of evidence-based rather than evidence-free policies accelerate the acquisition of academic English among EL students?

### Literacy Engagement: Assessing the Evidence

The role of literacy engagement was not examined in depth in either The National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000) or the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006). However, other reviews of the research have highlighted its relevance (e.g.,

Guthrie, 2004; Krashen, 2004, in press; Lindsay, 2010). Guthrie (2004), for example, pointed out that the construct of *literacy engagement* incorporates notions of *time on task* (reading and writing extensively), *affect* (enthusiasm and enjoyment of literacy), *depth of cognitive processing* (strategies to deepen comprehension), and *active pursuit of literacy activities* (amount and diversity of literacy practices in and out of school). He cited the PISA data 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. (p. 5)

The OECD (2004) authors were careful to point out that “engagement in reading

can be a consequence, as well as a cause, of higher reading skill, but the evidence suggests that these two factors are mutually reinforcing” (p. 8).

Lindsay’s (2010) meta-analysis of 108 studies similarly concluded that print access plays a causal role in the development of reading skills. He summarized the findings as follows:

Separate meta-analytic procedures performed on just those effects produced by “rigorous” [(quasi)-experimental] studies suggest that children’s access to print materials plays a *causal* role in facilitating behavioral, educational, and psychological outcomes in children—especially attitudes toward reading, reading behavior, emergent literacy skills, and reading performance. (p. 85)

The more recent PISA findings (OECD, 2010a) confirm these trends. Engagement in reading was assessed through measures of time spent reading various materials, enjoyment of reading, and use of various learning strategies. Across OECD countries, reading engagement was significantly related to reading performance, and approximately one third of the association between reading performance and students’ socioeconomic background was mediated by reading engagement.

This latter finding can be attributed to the fact that students from lower income communities have significantly less access to print in their schools and homes than is the case for students from middle-income communities (Duke, 2000; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Without access to print, literacy engagement is unlikely.

### Instructional Implications

The fact that academic language is found primarily in texts and that print access/literacy engagement is strongly related to the development of reading comprehension implies that schools



must ensure that EL students (and underachieving students in general) are given ample opportunities and encouragement to read extensively across a range of genres.

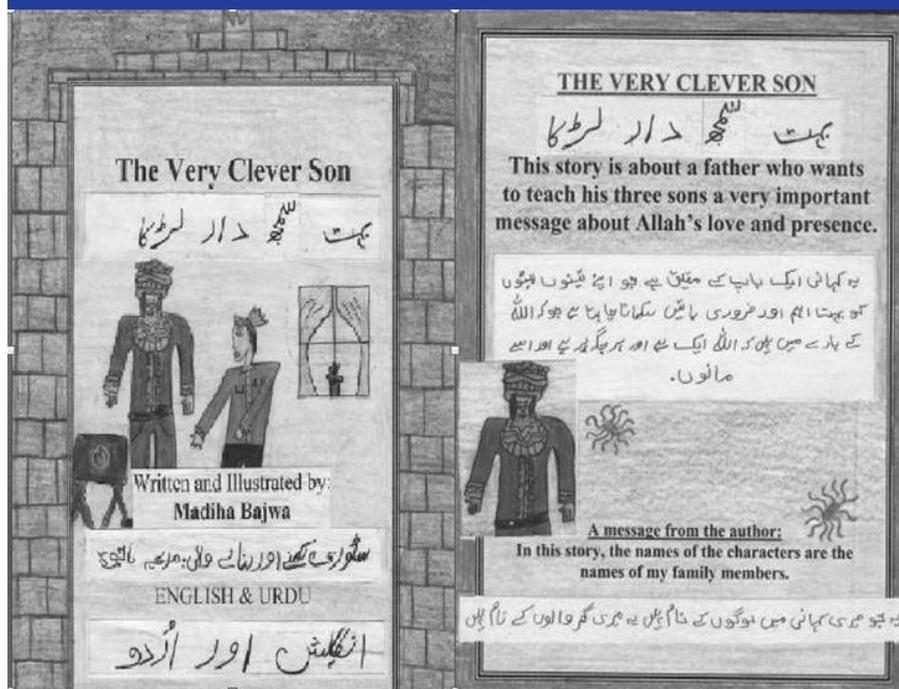
Thus an administrative priority should be to ensure that school and classroom libraries are well stocked with engaging books (see Krashen, in press). Print materials (in either students' home language or English) should be sent home on a regular basis for students to read with their parents (see Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982, for evidence of the significant impact of this strategy in multilingual school contexts).

From the day students walk into kindergarten, they should be given daily opportunities to listen to and discuss stories (e.g., from Big Books). In reading stories to students, teachers can also focus on developing the reading strategies that will later be highly functional as students interpret written texts. For example, the kindergarten teacher might pause her reading to ask students, "What do you think is going to happen next?" In this way, EL and other students who may have had only limited access to print in their homes can be socialized at a very early age into using interpretive strategies such as prediction that will support reading comprehension in later grades.

It is important for teachers to understand that sustained engagement derives at least as much from the social interactions around books and ideas as from the individual cognitive processes involved in isolated reading. Thus teachers should encourage parents to talk with their children about the books that they read together.

Similarly, within the classroom, animated discussions and debates about the social and moral issues embedded in both fictional and expository texts should be the norm rather than the exception.

Figure The Front and Back Cover Pages of Madiha's Identity Text



These kinds of classroom discussions also fuel engaged writing. Students can upload their individual or collaborative book reviews to one of the many websites that host such reviews and compare the extent to which their reactions to and evaluation of books they have read are similar to or different from those of other students.

EL students are often implicitly or explicitly defined by what they lack (i.e., their limited English proficiency). This is why creative writing (in English and/or the home language) that is shared with multiple audiences (e.g., through school, community, or international websites) is particularly significant for students from EL and/or marginalized communities.

These *identity texts* (Cummins & Early, 2011) enable students to showcase their intellectual, literary, artistic, and multilingual talents in ways that challenge the devaluation of their cultures and identities

in the school and wider society. Students invest their identities in the creation of these texts, which can be written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form. The identity text then holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light.

An example of an identity text is shown in the Figure. Madiha's dual-language identity text, written when she was in grade 8, is based on a folk tale she learned in her native Pakistan and expresses the importance of her religion to her identity. The full story can be read at [www.multiliteracies.ca/index.php/folio/viewProject/8](http://www.multiliteracies.ca/index.php/folio/viewProject/8).

In conclusion, in an era of widespread educational cutbacks, it is even more crucial to implement rational and evidence-based policies. There is overwhelming research evidence that literacy engagement is

crucial to sustained growth in reading comprehension. Therefore, educators who are committed to promoting academic achievement for all students should ensure that EL and low-income students have the same opportunities and incentives to engage actively with literacy as their more economically advantaged peers.

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