

Fluency and the English-Language Learner

by Calvin L. Gidney

Learning how to read and write can be likened to climbing a mountain while wearing a backpack. The mountain itself represents all the complexities of learning to be literate in English, with its difficult, often contradictory spelling system, coming to understand the diverse relationships that hold between letters (graphemes) and the sounds of spoken language (phonemes). This mountain faces *all* children who would become literate in English. In order to climb to the summit of this reading and writing mountain, all children need instruction, a guide who can help them navigate the trails to the top. Teachers and caregivers serve this essential function because without them, children could not become literate.



Bilingualism

First, we need to distinguish between different types of bilingualism. Bilingualism is a very broad and somewhat vague term that can be applied to any children who regularly use more than one language in their daily lives.

However, some children carry more bricks in their backpack, which means that climbing the mountain of literacy will be a more arduous journey. It means that they will need some special attention, some special ‘equipment,’ if you will, to help them make it up the reading and writing mountain. Bilingual children, especially those children whose dominant language is not English, are in this group of children.

First, we need to distinguish between different types of bilingualism. Bilingualism is a very broad and somewhat vague term that can be applied to any children who regularly use more than one language in their daily lives. Now this does not mean that a child must speak both of these languages with equal ability—that would be much too strict a definition of bilingualism that would

exclude many who regularly use more than one language. It is enough that children *regularly* use, either productively or receptively, more than one language. Believe it or not, children with *equal* abilities in two languages are in the minority: most bilingual children have one language which is their dominant language—the one in which they feel most comfortable, the one which they prefer to speak. Typically, this dominant language is the language of the community in which they have lived for the longest time.

Another important distinction we need to make is between bilinguals who acquire two languages *simultaneously*, and those who acquire one language, then the other, or *successively*. Many immigrant children fall into the latter category—they may have first acquired a language other than English first,



The Fluency Learner

Bilingual children, especially those whose dominant language is NOT English, may not be able to distinguish all the distinctive sounds of English and so, will find it more difficult to master English literacy skills..

and only later been exposed to English. The distinction between simultaneous acquisition and successive acquisition has some important consequences for teachers. Children in the first category may be more balanced bilinguals: their ability in both languages might be closer to equal. Children in the second category (successive acquisition) are more likely to have a dominant language.

Now that we've made these important distinctions, let's examine some of the added obstacles to literacy that bilingual children may face—the “bricks” that are in their backpacks:

Different Sound Systems

The sound system of every language, or its *phonological system*, is unique. Each

language uses a subset of the sounds that are part of all human languages, and each language groups these sounds in different ways. Learning to read in English and other languages that use an alphabetic system requires children to understand the relationship between letters (*graphemes*) and the distinctive sounds (*phonemes*) of a language. Bilingual children, especially those whose dominant language is NOT English, may not be able to distinguish all the distinctive sounds of English and so, will find it more difficult to master English literacy skills.

Let's look at an example of this. In English, we distinguish between the sounds /ē/ as in the word *beet* and /i/ as in *bit*. This is a very useful distinction in English and many words are distinguished just by these



The Fluency Learner

If ELLs have already become literate in their native language, teachers must recognize that, in all likelihood, they have acquired a different spelling system.

two sounds (e.g. *chip* ~ *cheap* /*hit* ~ *heat* / *lick* ~ *leak*, and many more). It so happens that the sound in ‘*bit*’ is relatively rare in the world’s languages and so many languages, like Spanish, do not have this sound. That’s why many Spanish speakers who are learning English have difficulty both in *making* (production) and *understanding* (comprehension) the sound. Now imagine that you are a child whose dominant language is Spanish yet you are expected to become literate in English. It will be very difficult, if not impossible, for you to grasp the difference between words such as *chip* and *cheap* if they sound the same to you!

That’s why teachers of English-language Learners (ELLs) must make sure that these children can first *hear* the distinctions between English phonemes before trying to

teach them to read or spell them. Most native English speakers, and some simultaneous bilinguals will not need this extra type of instruction—they’ve been using English their whole lives and so learned to distinguish *heat* and *hit* in infancy. It is less important that ELLs correctly produce the sounds since often a person can distinguish between two sounds without being able to reproduce that difference.

Different Spelling Systems

If ELLs have already become literate in their native language, teachers must recognize that, in all likelihood, they have acquired a different spelling system. This means that, once faced with English, they will have to learn a distinct set of spelling ‘rules.’ For example, both English and French have the /sh/ sound, the sound in the word



The Fluency Learner

Children who are literate in syllabic systems may have more difficulty dividing words into phonemes than those children who have already mastered an alphabetic writing system.

ship. However in French, this sound is written *ch* (as in *chateau* or *chef*, both French words). Another example is the /ô/ sound in the English word *father*—in Spanish, that sound is represented by the letter *a* (as in *padre*, Spanish for *father*) but in many varieties of American English, this sound is represented by the letter *o* (as in *hot*, *not*, or *pop*). As you can imagine, this may be a source of confusion for ELLs trying to become literate in English. As a teacher, you should be aware that some reading difficulties will arise from this orthographic mismatch and, whenever possible, you should familiarize yourself with the most common problems your students face.

Different Writing Systems

In some cases, children may have first acquired a language with a different writing system from English. We can think of three

types of writing systems: alphabetic, syllabic, and logographic. Many languages, such as English, French, Russian, Arabic, and Hindi, employ alphabetic writing systems. This means that letters of the alphabet correspond to phonemes, or distinctive sounds in a language. Children who have become literate in an alphabetic language before entering an English-language classroom already understand the alphabetic principle of sound-symbol relations and so will be able to transfer their knowledge to learning to read in English.

Of course, some languages use different alphabets. The English language uses the Roman alphabet. Languages such as Arabic, Hebrew, and Korean use other alphabetic systems. This notwithstanding, if a child has already learned to read in one of these languages, she will understand how alpha-



bets work.

Some languages, such as Japanese or Amharic (spoken in Ethiopia), use *syllabic* writing systems. In languages such as these, symbols represent entire syllables rather than individual sounds. For example, in Japanese, the syllables KA, KE, KI, KO, and KU would each be represented by a different symbol rather than by two symbols, as in English. Children who are literate in syllabic systems may have more difficulty dividing words into phonemes than those children who have already mastered an alphabetic writing system.

A third writing system is called logographic. Chinese and Japanese both use this writing system. In logographic systems, symbols do not represent phonetic elements of words. Rather, they are like ‘pictures’ of the words they represent. To be literate in Japanese, a child has to learn about 1,800 of these characters, which in Japanese are known as *kanji*. Children who have first learned to read in these systems will need

the most amount of support in acquiring the alphabetic principle and may have difficulty with both syllable segmentation and phoneme segmentation.

Different Words

Of course, speaking different languages means that a child uses different words for objects. The very nature of bilingual proficiency means that many bilingual children *code mix*—they weave both of their languages together in speech. An example of this might be: “*Marisol, ¿ya viste donde puse los **paper clips**? Los necesito para el **mailing** que hago.*” (“Marisol, did you see where I put the PAPER CLIPS? I need them for the MAILING that I’m doing”) This type of mixing is typical of much bilingual speech because being bilingual usually also means being bicultural—living in two cultural worlds—and bilingual language is a reflection of this. In terms of learning to read, this may mean that the lexicon, or mental vocabulary, of ELLs might not be as broad as monolingual children. As a reading teacher, make sure that



ELLs have a rich and varied vocabulary in English. Of course, you should do this for ALL students, but ELLs might need a bit more attention in this area.

Reaching the Summit

Although it might be a more difficult journey, it is possible for a bilingual child to become an outstanding reader in English.

As their guide (teacher), you should remain aware of the extra ‘bricks’ that they’re carrying in the backpacks and make sure that you provide them with the necessary equipment to reach the top!



REFERENCE LIST

Gidney, C. and Dobrow, J. (1998) The good, the bad, and the foreign: The use of dialect in children's animated television. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. (May, 1998) pp. 105-119.

Wolf, M., Gidney, C., Goldberg, A., Cirino, P., Morris, R., & Lovett, M. (1998). The question of a second core deficit in developmental dyslexia. *Special Issue of Reading and Writing*; Editors: Z. Breznitz & D. Share.

Gidney, C. (under review). Additive connectives in the narrative discourse of African-American children: Towards a new taxonomy. *Journal of Child Language*.

Fluency Formula



About the Author

Chip Gidney is an Associate Professor at Tufts University specializing in linguistics, dyslexia in African-American children, and teaching reading to the English-language learner. He received his Ph.D.

degree from Georgetown University. Chip is a former lecturer at the District of Columbia Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology; former research assistant and consultant at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C.; and has taught in middle school in Ecuador. Chip has published several articles in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* and *Journal of Child Language*. Chip is also a language advisor on Scholastic's new PBS children's television show *Maya and Miguel*, currently in development.

