

# English Language Learners in Canadian Schools: Emerging Directions for School-Based Policies

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*This article attempts to provide ESL teachers, school administrators, and policy-makers with a concise overview of what matters in promoting academic success among learners of English in Canadian schools. We review research focused on bilingual and biliteracy development, the nature of academic language, and the roles of societal power relations and identity negotiation in determining the academic achievement of English language learners (ELL). On the basis of this research, we propose the Literacy Engagement framework that identifies literacy engagement as a major determinant of literacy achievement for ELL and non-ELL students. In order to enable ELL students to engage with literacy, the framework highlights the importance of teachers scaffolding meaning, connecting with students' lives, affirming student identities, and extending their awareness and knowledge of language across the curriculum. The application of the framework is illustrated with reference to the literacy and academic learning experiences of two ELL students in the Toronto area.*

*Cet article tente de fournir aux enseignants, administrateurs scolaires et décideurs en ALS un aperçu concis de ce qui compte dans la promotion de la réussite académique chez les apprenants de l'anglais dans les écoles au Canada. Nous passons en revue la recherche portant sur le développement du bilinguisme et de la bilittératie, la nature de la langue académique et les rôles des rapports sociaux de pouvoir et la négociation de l'identité dans la détermination du rendement académique chez les apprenants de l'anglais. À partir de cette recherche, nous proposons le cadre « Literacy Engagement » (implication dans la littératie) qui identifie l'implication dans la littératie comme facteur déterminant majeur du rendement dans ce domaine chez les apprenants de l'anglais et d'autres apprenants. Le cadre fait ressortir l'importance pour les enseignants d'étayer le sens, d'établir des liens avec le vécu des étudiants, d'affirmer l'identité des étudiants et d'étaler leur conscience et leurs connaissances de la langue dans tous les domaines du programme d'études. Nous illustrons la mise en œuvre du cadre en faisant référence aux expériences relatives à la littératie et à l'apprentissage académique de deux apprenants de l'anglais dans la région de Toronto.*

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In recent years, it has become common for European educators and policy-makers to visit Canadian schools and provincial Ministries of Education to explore reasons for the much better academic performance of Canadian “im-

migrant” students in comparison to the significant academic gaps in most European countries between “native” and first- and second-generation “immigrant” students. These differences have emerged in the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) implemented since the year 2000 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) intended to generate a “report card” for OECD-member countries regarding the effectiveness of their education systems.

The OECD concerns itself with education because of the well-documented relationship between education and economic productivity in a knowledge-based society. OECD projections suggest that a 1% increase in adult literacy levels would translate into a 1.5% increase in a country’s gross domestic product, which, in Canada’s case, would amount to \$18 billion annually (Coulombe, Tremblay, & Marchand, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising that the relatively poor literacy performance on the PISA tests by 15-year old first- and second-generation immigrant students in many of the more affluent European countries (e.g., Germany, Belgium, Denmark) has given rise to intense debate about how to improve students’ literacy skills (see Appendix for relevant data extracted from the PISA reports).

The PISA data reveal that students’ performance tends to be better in countries such as Canada and Australia that have encouraged immigration over the past 40 years and that have a coherent infrastructure designed to integrate immigrants into the society (e.g., free adult language classes, language support services for students in schools, rapid qualification for full citizenship). In Canada (2003 assessment) and Australia (2006 assessment), second generation students performed slightly *better* academically than native speakers of the school language. Some of these positive results in both countries can be attributed to selective immigration that favors immigrants with strong educational qualifications. Socioeconomic disparities are also less in these countries than in countries such as the United States and Germany where there is a significant achievement gap between low and higher socioeconomic status students.

Societal attitudes towards cultural, linguistic, racialized and religious diversity are also at play. Canadian educators tend to refer to first-generation immigrant students (those born outside of Canada) inclusively as New Canadian or Newcomer students while students born in Canada to immigrant parents (referred to as second-generation immigrants in OECD reports) might be referred to as “immigrant-background” but rarely as “immigrant”. By contrast, the term “immigrant” is used to refer to multiple generations of students from immigrant backgrounds in many of the European countries characterized by widespread school failure among students of immigrant background. In these countries, diversity is less accepted as a legitimate characteristic of society, and students from certain racialized backgrounds (e.g., Turkish students in Germany) retain their ex-

clusionary “immigrant” status over multiple generations. Citizenship is considerably more difficult to obtain in these countries than is the case in Canada or Australia, reflecting societal attitudes and national policies designed to curtail increasing diversity.

Despite the positive outcomes relating to the academic achievement experienced by many groups of linguistically diverse students in the Canadian context and the real commitment by Canadian educators to promote student achievement, there are significant gaps in provision within Canadian education in relation to linguistically and culturally diverse students and communities. In the first place, the relatively strong performance of immigrant-background students in the Canadian context should not obscure the fact that certain groups of students (frequently those from refugee or low-SES backgrounds) *do* experience academic difficulties (McAndrew, 2009; Watt & Roessingh, 1994, 2001). In addition, there are significant gaps in the extent to which coherent policies have been formulated at all levels of the educational system to address the implications of linguistic diversity for instruction. Many educators who work with bilingual students and English language learners (henceforth bilingual/ELL students) have had little preparation either in teacher education or through professional development to equip them to teach effectively in contexts where linguistic and cultural diversity is the norm. Similarly, there is little expectation or requirement that educators who assume positions of responsibility (e.g., school principals or vice-principals) are familiar with the knowledge base relating to effective instruction for bilingual/ELL students.

In this paper, we attempt to address the lack of coherent policies in relation to the education of bilingual/ELL students across Canada. Specifically, we focus on the emergence of a knowledge-base within the Canadian context over the past 30 years and illustrate how the empirical research and theoretical constructs that constitute this knowledge base intersect with classroom practice and the lived realities of bilingual/ELL students. My Our goal is to highlight the implications of the research and theory for policy at multiple levels of the educational system. We will not attempt to review all of the relevant Canadian research (the other papers in this special issue provide a comprehensive overview of a range of empirical findings) but rather to select some examples that have been influential in shaping current understandings of what classroom teachers, school administrators, and provincial policymakers need to know in order to orchestrate instructional practices that are truly effective in enabling all students to succeed academically. Our discussion of the issues adopts a narrative rather than expository tone as we are reflecting on our personal experiences as researchers and educators and the ways in which our shared understanding of the issues has evolved.

## Evolution of a Set of Theoretical Constructs

The relationship between theory and practice is two-way and ongoing: observations of instructional practice or any set of phenomena generate theory as a means of understanding the deeper structure of this practice. The resulting theoretical constructs then act as a catalyst for new directions in practice, which then informs theory, and so on. Theory and practice are infused within each other. Theoretical claims or frameworks that integrate these claims are not valid or invalid, true or false; rather, they should be judged by criteria of adequacy and usefulness. *Adequacy* refers to the extent to which the claims or categories embedded in the framework are consistent with the empirical data and provide a coherent and comprehensive account of the data. *Usefulness* refers to the extent to which the framework can be used effectively by its intended audience to implement the educational policies and practices it implies or prescribes. Our claim is that the theoretical constructs and frameworks we describe are both adequate and useful, and we make this claim with the purpose of inviting critical dialogue which will further refine our collective understanding of the issues.

The theoretical constructs I (Cummins) have proposed since the late 1970s fall into three broad categories: (a) bilingual development, (b) the nature of language proficiency, and (c) societal power relations and identity negotiation in schools. These constructs form a deep structure underlying the Literacy Engagement framework (Figure 1) (Cummins & Early, 2011), which attempts to capture the core knowledge base relevant to effective instruction for bilingual/ELL students. This framework is envisaged as a useful starting point for collaborative inquiry among educators interested in developing school-based language policies.

## Bilingual Development

In an attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction between early studies (1920s to 1950s) reporting lower cognitive and academic performance among bilingual students and more recent studies (1960s and 1970s) highlighting the potential cognitive benefits of bilingualism, I hypothesized that the level of bilingual proficiency that students attained mediated the effects of bilingualism on their cognitive and academic development (Cummins, 1976, 2000). Specifically, I proposed two thresholds of proficiency that students needed to attain (a) to avoid the potential negative consequences of instruction through a weaker language, and (b) to experience the enhancement of cognitive and linguistic functioning that knowledge of two or more languages confers on the developing child. In other words, the *threshold hypothesis* argued that educational treatment interacts with students' developing academic language proficiency to produce positive or negative educational and cognitive outcomes.

With respect to the lower threshold, bilingual/ELL students, who are not supported in acquiring academic proficiency in the language of instruction, are likely to fall progressively further behind their peers in literacy development and overall school performance. Often there is little opportunity for these students to develop literacy skills in their home language (L1), and thus they emerge from school without strongly developed literacy skills in either of their two languages. By contrast, when bilingual/ELL students are strongly supported in acquiring the language of instruction and encouraged to develop L1 literacy skills (either in school or home), an increasing amount of research suggests that they experience enhancement of cognitive and metalinguistic functioning (e.g., Bialystok, 2006).

This theoretical work was expanded into the emerging debate on the merits or otherwise of bilingual education. Bilingual programs for minority group students, implemented on a limited scale in contexts such as the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, had become highly controversial. Despite there being no empirical evidence to support their views, opponents of bilingual education argued that dilution of the instructional time between minority students' L1 and the dominant language (L2) would inevitably result in adverse consequences for L2 academic development. To counter this argument, I proposed that literacy-related concepts and skills in L1 and L2 are *interdependent*, or manifestations of a common underlying proficiency, such that academic knowledge and skills transfer across languages under appropriate conditions of development (e.g., educational support for both languages) (Cummins, 1978, 1979). This transfer of concepts and literacy-related skills is evident in bilingual programs such as the 50% English and 50% international language programs implemented since the mid-1970s in Alberta and to a lesser extent in the other prairie provinces. The interdependence hypothesis explains the fact that instruction through a minority language exerts no adverse consequences on students' academic development in the majority language despite considerably less instructional exposure to the majority language. This holds true for students from both minority and majority language backgrounds in various kinds of bilingual programs and in a wide variety of sociolinguistic contexts.

The threshold and interdependence hypotheses together highlight the benefits of encouraging bilingual/ELL students to maintain and expand their L1 skills as they acquire L2. In a highly multilingual social context, it is difficult to provide bilingual education opportunities for all groups but, as we discuss later in this paper, *it is possible for teachers to implement bilingual instructional strategies that encourage students to use their L1 as a cognitive tool and feel proud of their multilingual abilities.*

## **The Nature of Language Proficiency**

During the same period as the threshold and interdependence hypotheses were being elaborated (late 1970s), I also proposed a distinction between two

dimensions of language proficiency—*basic interpersonal communicative skills* (BICS) and *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP). Since then, I have used the acronyms BICS/CALP interchangeably with the terms *conversational fluency* and *academic language proficiency*. I have also distinguished *discrete language skills* to refer to rule-governed aspects of the language (e.g., sound-symbol relationships) that are amenable to explicit instruction.

The initial BICS/CALP distinction derived from an analysis of more than 400 teacher referral forms and psychological assessments carried out on students who were learning English as an additional language in a western Canadian city. It was clear from the data that students quickly gained conversational fluency in English but took considerably longer to catch up to grade expectations as reflected in classroom literacy performance and verbal components of cognitive ability tests.

Subsequent research has shown that very different trajectories are involved for bilingual/ELL students to catch up to their peers in different dimensions of English proficiency. Specifically, it usually takes only about 1-2 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 bilingual/ELL 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 have reported that second language learners usually require at least 5 years (and sometimes much longer) to catch up to native English speakers in academic English (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1981; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

The extended trajectory for the development of academic language proficiency derives from two sources: (a) the complexity of academic language, and (b) the fact that English language learners are attempting to catch up to a moving target, namely, native-speakers of English whose academic language and literacy skills are increasing progressively from one grade level to the next. The complexity of academic language reflects (a) the vocabulary load in content texts that include many low frequency and technical words (typically of Latin and Greek origin) that are almost never used in everyday conversation (e.g., predict, photosynthesis, sequence, revolution), and (b) increasingly sophisticated grammatical constructions (e.g., passive voice) that again are almost never used in everyday conversational contexts.

When we understand the nature of academic language, it becomes obvious why *literacy engagement* has emerged as a consistently strong predictor of reading achievement among both bilingual/ELL and native-speakers of the target language. Logic dictates that literacy engagement is crucial for the development of academic language proficiency because academic language is found primarily in printed text rather than in everyday conversation. Bilingual/ELL 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 during the past 30 years (reviewed by Guthrie, 2004; 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 is mediated by reading engagement (OECD, 2010). The implication is 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.

In summary, in order to accelerate bilingual/ELL students' academic language development, it is crucial to ensure that they become strongly engaged with reading and writing (and ideally other forms of cultural production, such as video creation) from the earliest stages of English acquisition in school.

### **Societal Power Relations and Identity Negotiation in School**

In the mid-1980s, my perspective on the achievement of minority group students expanded beyond considerations related to bilingual development and the nature of language proficiency to incorporate issues related to societal power relations and teacher-student identity negotiation (Cummins, 1986, 2001). Despite the fact that the influence of societal power relations on the educational experiences of marginalized group students is clearly evident in the historical record (e.g., the educational experiences of First Nations students in Canadian residential schools), current educational policies in Canada and elsewhere make virtually no mention of power relations as a relevant variable affecting bilingual/ELL students' academic achievement. The construct of *identity* is also absent from most discussions of school improvement. Yet these constructs are clearly at play in all aspects of educational organization and teacher-student interactions. For example, until recently it was a common practice in Canadian schools to advise parents of bilingual/ELL students to use English in the home if they wanted their children to succeed academically. No empirical evidence supported this practice, but it was a clear message to parents and students regarding the lack of legitimacy of their languages, cultures, and identities within the school.

Extensive research has been carried out by sociologists and anthropologists on issues related to ethnicity and educational achievement (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; McCarty, 2005; Ogbu, 1978, 1992; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). These studies point clearly to the centrality of societal power relations in ex-

plaining patterns of minority group achievement. Groups that experience long-term educational underachievement tend to have experienced material and symbolic violence over generations at the hands of the dominant societal group. A direct implication is that in order to reverse this pattern of underachievement, educators, individually and collectively, must challenge the operation of coercive power relations in the classroom interactions they orchestrate with minority or subordinated group students.

I suggested a distinction between coercive and collaborative relations of power which corresponds to the two major dictionary definitions of the term *power*, namely (a) exercising power over another and (b) being enabled or empowered to do something. The construct of coercive relations of power was defined as the exercise of power by a dominant individual, group, or country to the detriment of a subordinated individual, group, or country. This process is subtractive—the more power one individual or group gets, the less is left for others. By contrast, collaborative relations of power are additive—the more power that accrues to one partner in the relationship, the more that is available for others to share. Based on this distinction, I defined *empowerment as the collaborative creation of power*. The implication of this analysis is that any educational reform that seeks to close the achievement gap between dominant and marginalized group students will only be effective to the extent that it challenges the operation of coercive relations of power within the school and classroom. Thus, instructional practices that construct diversity as a resource and affirm bilingual/ELL students' linguistic and personal identities (e.g., the creation and web-publication of dual language books) are repudiating the implicit devaluation of identity in the school and wider society.

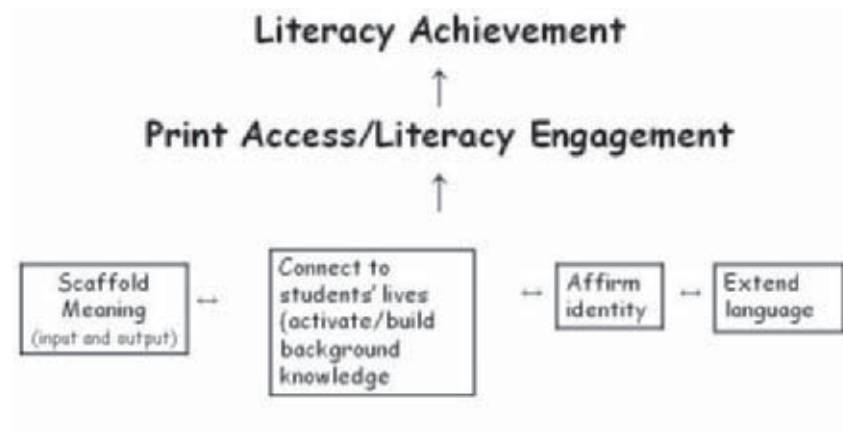


Figure 1. The Literacy Engagement Framework.



## The Literacy Engagement Framework

The Literacy Engagement framework (Figure 1) posits print access/literacy engagement as a direct determinant of literacy attainment. Print access and literacy engagement are two sides of the same coin—without abundant access to books and printed materials in home or school, children are unlikely to engage actively with literacy. As noted above, the relationship between literacy engagement and achievement is strongly supported by the empirical research. In the OECD's PISA studies, engagement in reading was assessed through measures of time spent reading various materials, enjoyment of reading, and use of various learning strategies.

The framework specifies four broad instructional dimensions that are critical to enabling all students (and particularly those from socially marginalized groups) to engage actively with literacy from an early stage of their schooling. Literacy engagement will be enhanced when:

- students' ability to understand and use academic language is scaffolded through specific instructional strategies (e.g., use of visual and graphic organizers, development of learning strategies, enabling students to use their L1 to clarify content [e.g., through discussion, dictionary use, or L1 electronic or text resources]);
- instruction connects to students' lives by activating their background knowledge which is often encoded in their L1;
- instruction affirms students' academic, linguistic, and cultural identities by enabling them to showcase their literary accomplishments in both L1 and L2; and
- students' knowledge of and control over language is extended across the curriculum through instructional strategies such as encouraging them to compare and contrast L1 and L2.

There is a large degree of consensus among researchers and educators about the relevance of scaffolding instruction, activating and building background knowledge, and extending students' knowledge of how language works. However, despite extensive empirical evidence, policy-makers to this point have largely ignored the roles of literacy engagement and identity affirmation. Similarly, there has been minimal acknowledgement that bilingual/ELL students' L1 has any role to play in promoting overall academic growth.

The potential usefulness of the Literacy Engagement framework as a lens through which to view instructional practice can be illustrated with reference to the experience of three grade 7 bilingual/ELL students from Pakistan (Leoni et al., 2011). About six weeks after her arrival in Canada from Pakistan, Madiha Bajwa, authored with two of her friends, Kanta Khalid and Sulmana Hanif, a bilingual Urdu-English book entitled *The New Country*. The 20-page book "describes how hard it was to leave our country and come to a new country". Both Kanta and Sulmana had arrived in Toronto in grade 4 and were reasonably fluent in English but Madiha was in the very early stages of English acquisition.

The three girls collaborated in writing *The New Country* in their “mainstream” grade 7/8 classroom in the context of a unit on the theme of migration that integrated social studies, language, and English as a second language curriculum expectation. They researched and wrote the story over several weeks, sharing their experiences and language skills. Madiha’s English was minimal but her Urdu was fluent; Sulmana and Kanta were fluent and reasonably literate in both Urdu and English. In composing the story, the three girls discussed their ideas initially in Urdu, with Madiha, a full participant, but wrote the initial draft in English. They received feedback and support from their teacher (Lisa Leoni) based on the English draft. When the English draft was finalized they collaborated in translating it into Urdu.

This example illustrates how the distinctions captured in the Literacy Engagement framework are frequently fused in classroom practice. Despite her lack of English, Madiha was enabled to become actively engaged with literacy as a result of the teacher having opened up the classroom space to include students’ L1 as a resource for learning. Students’ literacy production was scaffolded by enabling them to use the knowledge and literacy skills they had in their L1 to generate their ideas collaboratively and then transfer these ideas to L2 in the writing of the dual language story. Their L1 provided a stepping stone to more accomplished performance in English. The topic they chose connected directly with their lives as immigrants to a new country. Their dual language story also showcased their literacy and creative talents in both languages and increased their awareness of how language works. For example, in reflecting on the process, Kanta observed that you couldn’t translate directly across languages because things you could say in three words in Urdu would require five words in English.

In a “normal” classroom, Madiha’s ability to participate in a grade 7 social studies unit would have been severely limited by her minimal knowledge of English. She certainly would not have been in a position to write extensively in English about her experiences, ideas, and insights. However, when the social structure of the classroom was changed in simple ways that permitted her to draw on her L1 concepts and literacy, Madiha was enabled to express *herself* in ways that few second language learners experience. Her home language, in which all her experience prior to immigration was encoded, became once again a tool for learning. She contributed her ideas and experiences to the story, participated in discussions about how to translate vocabulary and expressions from Urdu to English and from English to Urdu, and shared in the affirmation that all three students experienced with the publication of their story as a hard copy book and on the World Wide Web (<http://www.multiliteracies.ca/index.php/folio/viewProject/8>). The fact that instruction was conducted in English and the teacher did not know Urdu or the other home languages of students in her multilingual classroom was not an impediment to the implementation of bilingual instructional strategies.

*The New Country* is an example of what we have termed *identity texts* (Cummins & Early, 2011). Students invest their identities in creating “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. When students share identity texts with multiple audiences (peers, teachers, parents, grandparents, partner classes, the media), they are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences. Although not always an essential component, technology acts as an amplifier to enhance the process of identity text production and dissemination.

In the following sections, we go “inside” classrooms in an attempt to document further how the theoretical constructs incorporated in the Literacy Engagement framework can be used both to interpret classroom practice and to generate new insights about “what works” in promoting bilingual/ELL students’ academic development. Initially, Rania Mirza discusses the intersections between scaffolding and identity negotiation in the experience of a bilingual/ELL student from Pakistan. Then Saskia Stille highlights some of the complexities entailed in implementing apparently straightforward instructional strategies like “connecting to students’ lives” in the case of students who have emigrated from zones of war and social conflict.

### **An Illustration of How Effective Instruction Affirms Students’ Identity**

As an ESL teacher in an Ontario school board with a large number of culturally and linguistically diverse students, I (Mirza) have been concerned that insufficient attention is paid in educational policies to the intersections of identity and academic achievement in schools. I have been convinced that in order to teach the whole child in our increasingly diverse school systems, we need to connect with students’ lives outside of school and value the academic knowledge and cultural experiences they bring to the school.

What follows is an account of my attempt to assist one bilingual/ELL student to showcase her true literacy capabilities by encouraging her to use her L1 as a cognitive tool to extend her knowledge of academic content and English language proficiency. This student entered grade 7 with limited English, but she was quite literate in Urdu as a result of schooling in her native Pakistan. When she first arrived at the school, she joined my ESL class in a withdrawal setting for several language periods a week. I was excited to welcome this bright-eyed, inquisitive girl who was confident, full of energy, and eager to learn new ideas and to make new friends. Our school was a new environment for her, and the transition into this unfamiliar space was made easier for her by the fact that I am of Pakistani descent and fluent in Urdu. All of her teachers observed that she took a keen interest in class and diligently completed her homework to the best of her abilities.

In the following academic year, I no longer taught at this school, but I returned to it as a volunteer to support the grade 7 and 8 newcomer bilingual/ELL students I had grown so fond of in the previous year. When I began to visit the ESL class, I noticed a change in the student who had been so engaged the previous academic year. She appeared shy and withdrawn. Subsequent visits revealed no change in her demeanour. What had happened to her? A diary activity I initiated with the students opened a window into her experience.

One day after working with the bilingual/ELL students during a language lesson, I sat down with a small group and asked how they felt coming to school every day. At first, their responses were limited to “good”. I continued to probe. I asked them how they felt in their content area classes, around their peers, and their teachers. This sparked a sense of curiosity in them. They were eager to know why I was making these inquiries. I told them that I wanted to understand what it was like for them living in a new country and being in an education system where there were many new challenges because I had not had that kind of experience.

The discussion continued with a slow admission of the fact that they occasionally felt frustrated in class when they could not understand some parts of the lessons taught in content area subjects. This tension was heightened when they were familiar with concepts in their L1, but experienced difficulty expressing their thoughts in English. They reluctantly admitted that sometimes they felt isolated from their peers because they could not understand their jokes or parts of their conversations. This often left these new language learners feeling embarrassed amidst the explosion of laughter that their “friends” shared at their expense.

After this brief discussion I asked the students to record their thoughts and feelings in a diary for a week. I encouraged them to write in their L1 and then to try to translate their ideas into English. I provided the students with support only at the very beginning of the task through the group discussion outlined above. This was because I was interested in seeing what the students would come up with by themselves with minimal teacher assistance.

Initially, the student whose demeanour had changed from one year to the next came up with very short entries that did not fully explain her thoughts (Figure 2). I was quite shocked when I read her writing. Although her English writing had improved somewhat, I was convinced that it was not at the level she was capable of. What made matters worse from my perspective was that her Urdu writing had deteriorated. Her sentences in English and Urdu consisted of very basic ideas and vocabulary. Her work had incomplete sentences and spelling and grammatical mistakes. The student that I remembered was always eager to do her best, but now I was staring at work that was riddled with errors in her native language.

I suppose many teachers would have been pleased to see some improvement in her English writing from the previous year, but I was not. Her writ-

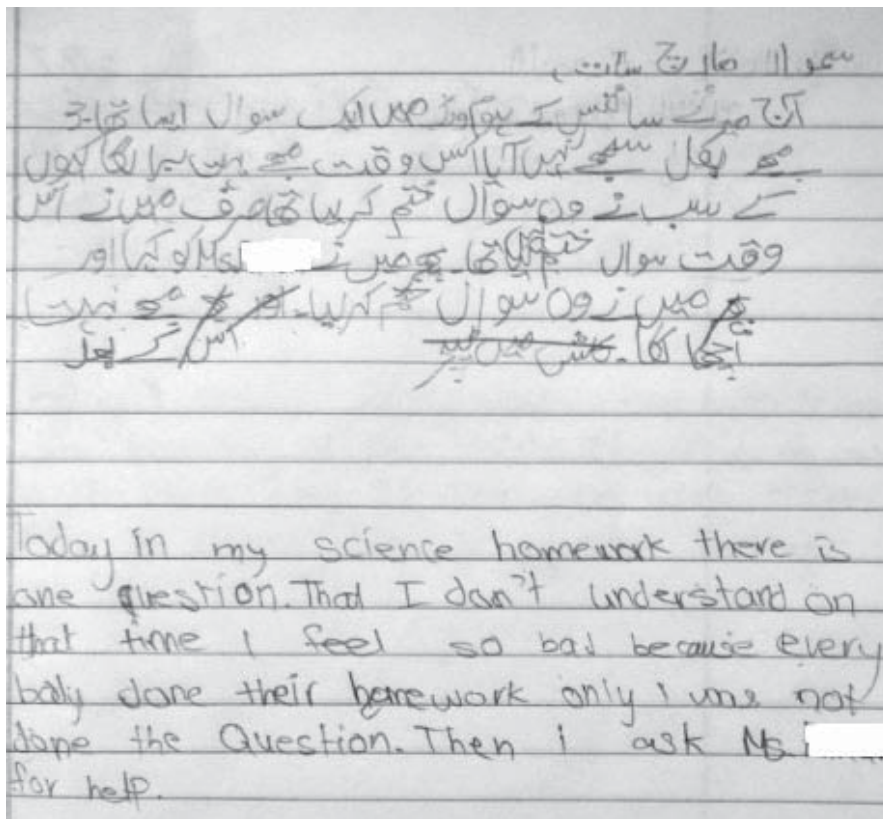


Figure 2. Initial Student Diary Entry in Urdu and English.

ing in English had only basic improvements and they were at the expense of her Urdu literacy skills. I was disheartened because I knew that progress in one area did not have to mean a weakening in the other.

After expressing my concerns to her ESL teacher, I learned that this student was having a hard time fitting in with her peers. She looked different (now observing Hijab), did not sport the latest popular clothing fashions, and spoke basic English with an accent. This was enough to keep her excluded from her peer group. Additionally, coming from Pakistan, there was a mismatch between her cultural experiences and those common among North American teenagers. She did not listen to Justin Bieber or admire the fashions of Kim Kardashian. Instead, she had Pakistani equivalents that she was interested in, but dared not speak of, for fear of being further ostracized.

This learner's deteriorating Urdu skills were symbolic of the undermining of her Pakistani identity. When she first arrived at the school, she was eager and relieved to speak with me in Urdu. Now, almost a year later, even when

I asked her, she was quite reluctant to speak in Urdu. She was determined to explain herself solely in English, even at the risk of staying silent. I found it tragic that she would rather stay silent than use her L1 to facilitate communication. It seemed as though she was embarrassed to use Urdu now embarrassed to be herself. I believe that she was reluctant to use her Urdu language and literacy skills with me because she wanted so desperately to fit in with everyone at school, and fitting in, as she saw it, meant actively engaging in the erasure of her language.

For me, it was upsetting to see this once confident student losing vital aspects of her identity and becoming invisible at school, so I decided to do something about it. I saw this as an opportunity to create an environment to affirm her identity, with the hope of increasing the confidence with which she engaged in her schooling.

I asked her to work on the same diary task, but this time I provided her with greater assistance. I knew that she was able to explain her thoughts in much greater detail than she had previously demonstrated, so I asked her to expand on one of her entries based on a science class experience. I told her that she did not have to worry about translating her writing into English. I wanted her to focus on her thoughts as they were encoded in her L1. I was also curious to see if the removal of the expectation to translate her work into English would enable her to write more freely and in greater detail in Urdu.

Before she started the task this time, she and I chatted about the ideas that she wanted to recount in her diary entry. I encouraged her to speak in Urdu during our discussion. This dialogue proved to be very useful in eliciting greater clarity in her ideas. As she began to provide me with more details, I found her switching from English to Urdu. I do not think it was a conscious decision. She just naturally transitioned into her L1.

Once again, the spark was back in her eyes as she quickly used both Urdu and English to recount what happened in her science class and how she felt about it. She also chose to extend her thoughts by explaining how she would instruct if she were a teacher. I was eager to see what our dual language brainstorming session would enable her to produce in writing.

The result was a final product that was much clearer and more insightful than her original work (Figure 3). It was a piece that she was proud of. Although this version was still not error free in her Urdu writing, there were vast improvements. Her use of vocabulary and the types of sentences that she formed showed signs of sophistication. She even taught me a new Urdu word!

Afterwards, we worked together on the English translation (Figure 4) by drawing parallels between Urdu and English. This cross-language transfer enabled her to merge her existing knowledge with new learning. Specifically, this approach proved to be quite useful in teaching new vocabulary and highlighting sentence structure and grammatical rules.



Monday, March 7

Today in my science homework, there was one question that I didn't understand at all. At that time I became very embarrassed, because everyone else had finished that question. I was the only one who had not finished that question, because I didn't understand that question. After that, I asked Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ for help. Then, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ took the hard words out of this question and asked me the question (again). After this, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ showed me pictures to help me understand (the words) and after that I understood. Then I became very happy, because I understood that question very well.

If I were the teacher, I would show the students in science class a lot of pictures to help them to understand better, because I think that students understand pictures better than words. They understand best with pictures and words.

If I were the teacher, I would give the students options. For example, I would tell the students the things that we would have to cover in a unit, and then besides this, I would ask them what else they would like to learn about in this unit. I would give the students this option, because I would want to know what things they would want to learn about. And I would teach them. It wouldn't take them very long, because they would be interested in these very things.

It's great when teachers use their students' ideas in class. It's fun when this type of learning takes place in school.

Figure 4. English Version of Scaffolded Diary Entry.

In this particular instance, I was fortunate to share the same L1 as this learner. Most often, I teach ESL students whose L1 I do not speak. In these instances, I seek the assistance of colleagues who might share the same languages as my learners, including other educators at the school and school board community liaisons and interpreters. In addition, I use resources such as dual language texts, electronic translators and visual aids to meet the needs of my linguistically diverse learners. I use these resources also to engage parents in school and classroom conversations, as parental involvement plays an integral role in a child's success at school. Use of such measures helps to create an environment that allows students to see themselves reflected in the fabric of the school. By actively taking steps to connect to students' lives and build on the "funds of knowledge" they bring to school, educators can get a more accurate sense of their students' past and potential accomplishments. Educators should be aware that there is active pressure on newcomer students to assimilate into mainstream society and to become just like their perception of "everybody else". It is not something to be ignored or taken lightly, as it often results in the erasure of students' beliefs, language, culture, traditions in essence, their identity.

### Through the Lens of the Literacy Engagement Framework

This example shows clearly that the academic work that bilingual/ELL students produce in class may reflect only a fraction of what they are capable of. When classroom instruction opens up the space for learners to use the full



repertoire of their cognitive and linguistic tools and feel confident about the legitimacy of using their L1 for academic purposes, then academic performance can increase dramatically. In a context of “English-only zone” instruction that unintentionally marginalized students’ L1 knowledge and cultural experiences as largely irrelevant, this student’s academic performance and confidence diminished in a relatively short period of time. By contrast, when the student’s L1 was used as a scaffold to support academic engagement, the student wrote considerably more and engaged in critical and insightful thinking about what constitutes quality instruction for bilingual/ELL students. In this case study, it is clear that teaching for transfer from L1 to L2 can scaffold students’ academic engagement and connect with their lives. In addition, it is evident that bilingual/ELL students’ identities can be affirmed when teachers make the effort to showcase their intellectual, linguistic, and academic accomplishments and talents.

### **Dilemmas of Connecting to Students’ Lives: “I came here because this is a safe country.”**

Drawing upon a collaborative action research project involving university-based researchers and elementary classroom teachers, this personal narrative (by Saskia Stille) illustrates how the central concepts in the Literacy Engagement framework are woven together in actual classroom practice. The project underscored the richness of knowledge and experience that the students brought with them to the classroom and highlighted how students’ cultural and linguistic resources and personal histories found expression through multiple modes of representation in classroom-based literacy activities. However, it also demonstrated the complexity of negotiating identities within multilingual classroom contexts.

The setting for this project was an elementary school in a large Canadian city. The project took place in two English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) classes for fifth grade students. The students in the classes were newcomers to Canada, having arrived within the past six months from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mexico, and Bulgaria. All the children spoke a language other than English at home and most spoke three or more languages. The teachers and I were interested in finding out what might be possible if we worked together with the students to bring all of their talents and creativity to bear on language and literacy activities in the classroom. We pursued this goal by supporting students in creating “identity texts” that drew on the full range of their cultural knowledge and linguistic abilities (in English and their L1) and which were designed to accelerate their engagement with literacy.

We assisted students in creating digital storybooks using *Desktop Author* electronic publishing software. The texts were based on language experience stories that students wrote about themselves, including topics such as *All*

*about me, My home country, and My journey to Canada.* Although instruction within the classroom was in English, we explicitly recognized students' knowledge of other languages by encouraging them to create home language versions of their stories and to publish their work as dual language texts. Many students chose to write their stories first in their L1 and then translate into English, which helped them develop concepts and formulate ideas for their writing. This resulted in stories that were not only longer but also richer and more representative of their experiences than text that they could have written in English at that time. Students worked with classmates from the same language background, parents and/or other community members on the translation of their stories, adding a social dimension to the project and engaging others beyond the classroom. This process of translating demonstrated to the students that teachers were not the only sources of knowledge in the classroom; other important people in their lives had legitimate contributions to make to their learning and instruction.

The digital storytelling process comprised several stages of production. The teachers and I introduced an expanded range of children's literature to the classroom, including commercially published dual language books. Many of these books addressed issues that the students were dealing with in their own lives, including migration, learning a new language, and difficulties making new friends. These issues prompted class discussion and engaged the students in dialogue and reflection about authentic social realities that connected to their lives. Students then wrote and illustrated their own stories and created cover art using plasticene, which served to mobilize their experiences as content. The students typed their stories and/or took digital images of their writing, art, and illustrations which were uploaded and combined to create multimodal digital texts. At the end of the project, students presented their texts to parents, administrators, and other students in the school library, sharing and displaying their work for others to see.

The digital storytelling software generated an attractive and professional looking version of the students' texts. Creating these digital texts offered students a virtual space in which to negotiate understanding of their migration experience and to construct themselves as emerging experts in that world. The students' articulation of their experiences offered insights into the complexities of migration, highlighting blind spots in the teachers' and my understandings of their experience. The text of one of the students in the class, Asad, illustrated for me the ways in which incorporating the full range of learners' cultural and linguistic resources opened up discussion of deeper and more complex issues than the teachers and I had expected. Asad was a ten-year old boy whose family had recently come to Canada from Pakistan, after living in a camp for refugees from Afghanistan. Asad spoke Pashto, Urdu, and English and was engaged in the project because, as he said, he "enjoyed working on challenging projects". Asad had experience with tech-

nology in his home country, explaining that he had helped his uncle take apart and reconstruct used computers.

Asad's story, called *My journey to Canada*, drew upon his experiences as a refugee, offering a critical interpretation of his experiences of war and conflict. His story began with a picture of the Canadian flag and the Pakistani flag. He wrote "hello" and "goodbye" beside the flags. The second page of his text was a picture of his family that he had drawn. The written text introduced each person and described the *shalwar kameez* that they wore. His story continued with other images from Pakistan, including pictures of a beautiful public garden and the local market. The last page of Asad's text illustrated a number of weapons, including an AK-47, a hand grenade, and a tank. These illustrations were very detailed, in contrast to other pictures in his story such as the picture of his apartment building in Canada where he did not even draw a door.

When the teachers saw Asad working on this picture of weapons, they were shocked. Their reaction was unsurprising considering district guidelines associated with school safety, which prescribe teachers' responses to displays of weaponry. The teachers asked "Why are you drawing pictures of weapons?" and "Who said you could put this in your story?" Asad responded, "No one did. I wanted to. That is why we left Afghanistan." I invited the teachers to read what Asad had written to accompany this picture. Figure 5 shows Asad's picture of weapons and the text he wrote to explain the illustration.

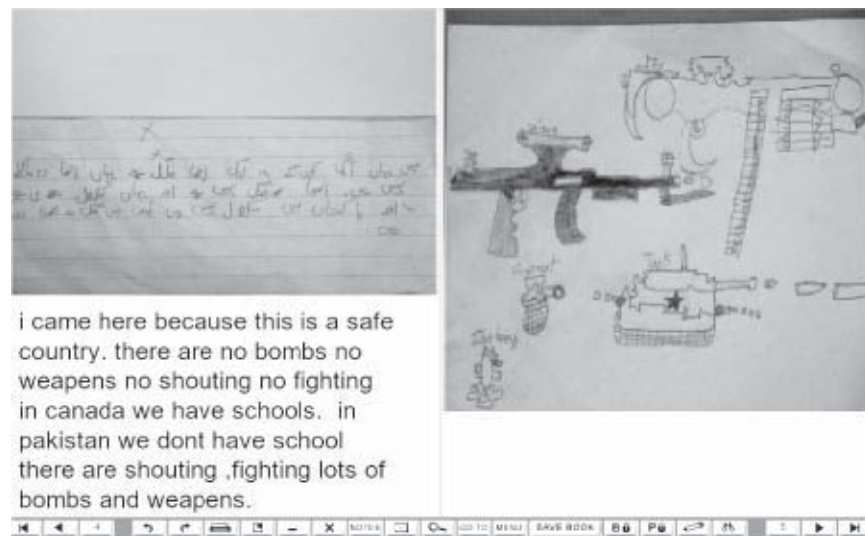


Figure 5. A page from Asad's story.

After reading and discussing Asad's story, the teachers decided that he should change the title of his story to "My home country". Although he originally wanted his story to begin with a picture of the Canadian and Pakistani flags, they had him move that picture to the last page of his story. They also asked him to move the picture of weapons to the second page of his story, now appearing after the picture of his family wearing *shalwar kameez*. These changes remade Asad's narrative into a story about Pakistan, not a story about his journey to Canada as he had intended.

Asad's story is at once hopeful, problematic, and insightful. He juxtaposed images of weapons with images of public parks where children play, revealing an emerging sense of consciousness about his existential realities. Writing himself into the social world of his school community, Asad brought global issues of migration to a local context. His process of story writing demonstrated that literacy is not a neutral tool with universal applications (as implied by provincial standardized tests).

### **Through the Lens of the Literacy Engagement Framework**

From the perspective of the Literacy Engagement framework, the digital story writing project engaged students directly in the creation of dual language texts; they also read or listened to relevant stories that they could use as models in thinking about their own writing; even though neither the teachers nor I spoke students' languages, we employed bilingual instructional strategies that encouraged students to transfer knowledge and literacy skills across languages; students' identities were affirmed as a result of the message that their languages were viewed as legitimate cognitive and personal tools within the classroom; and students' background knowledge was connected to curriculum objectives and welcomed into the classroom.

Asad's story demonstrated his clear understanding of why his family had immigrated to Canada. It also showed that he was capable of writing and drawing at a higher level of performance when encouraged by someone or engaged by the subject matter. However, his engagement in cultural production generated a story and images of weapons as part of his background experience which were seen by the teachers as problematic in light of school board policies and expectations. The teachers' reactions suggest that certain types of stories, and the experiences that they express, are allowed in school while others are constituted as illegitimate for school-based literacy activities. The process and final product of Asad's story writing raise complex issues that are as much ethical as pedagogical related to the implementation of the Literacy Engagement framework (Stille, 2011).

## Conclusion

We have attempted to encapsulate the core instructional knowledge base related to the education of bilingual/ELL students within the context of the Literacy Engagement framework. We have also discussed how this framework evolved from research focused on bilingual and biliteracy development, the nature of academic language, and the roles of societal power relations and identity negotiation in determining the academic achievement of marginalized group students. The six components of the framework (including what we mean by literacy achievement) need to be unpacked in much more detail in relation to specific educational and social realities. We envisage this “unpacking” process as a central part of school-based language policy development, with the framework acting as a catalyst for collaborative inquiry among educators.

Our claim with respect to the framework is that it accurately and coherently reflects the empirical evidence relating to the academic development of bilingual/ELL students. It accounts for the demonstrated relationship between literacy engagement and literacy attainment. This relationship, in turn, reflects the nature of academic language which is found primarily in two places: classrooms and printed text. The framework also acknowledges the legitimacy of students’ L1 as a cognitive tool and a repository of concepts, learning strategies, and knowledge of the world. We have attempted to illustrate how students’ L1 can play a significant role in scaffolding the development of English academic skills and extending their awareness of language and literacy. Finally, we have examined how teachers have the power to choose instructional strategies that challenge the implicit devaluation of students’ language, cultures, and identities in the school and wider society. When teachers open up the instructional space to connect curriculum to students’ lives and affirm their identities, students’ academic engagement increases and performance in English becomes more accomplished.

The framework highlights two dimensions—literacy engagement and identity affirmation that have been largely omitted from current policies designed to increase educational effectiveness. These dimensions are also absent from consideration within many teacher education programs across Canada and internationally. Part of our claim is that current policies and teacher education programs are inadequate to the extent that they fail to take account of the data supporting the central role that literacy engagement and identity affirmation play in supporting student achievement.

The usefulness of the Literacy Engagement framework will be judged by educators who attempt to use it. It is not in any sense static or fixed; rather, it is intended to be modified and extended according to the realities of particular educational contexts. It explicitly reflects our conviction that theory is relevant only to the extent that it remains in two-way dialogue with practice.

## The Authors

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Rania Mirza has been teaching for 9 years in the public education system in Ontario, Canada. She has completed her Master of Education at the University of Toronto with a focus in Second Language Education. Her research focuses on practical approaches to affirming identities in multi-lingual classrooms, language learning among minority groups and bilingual education.

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## Appendix

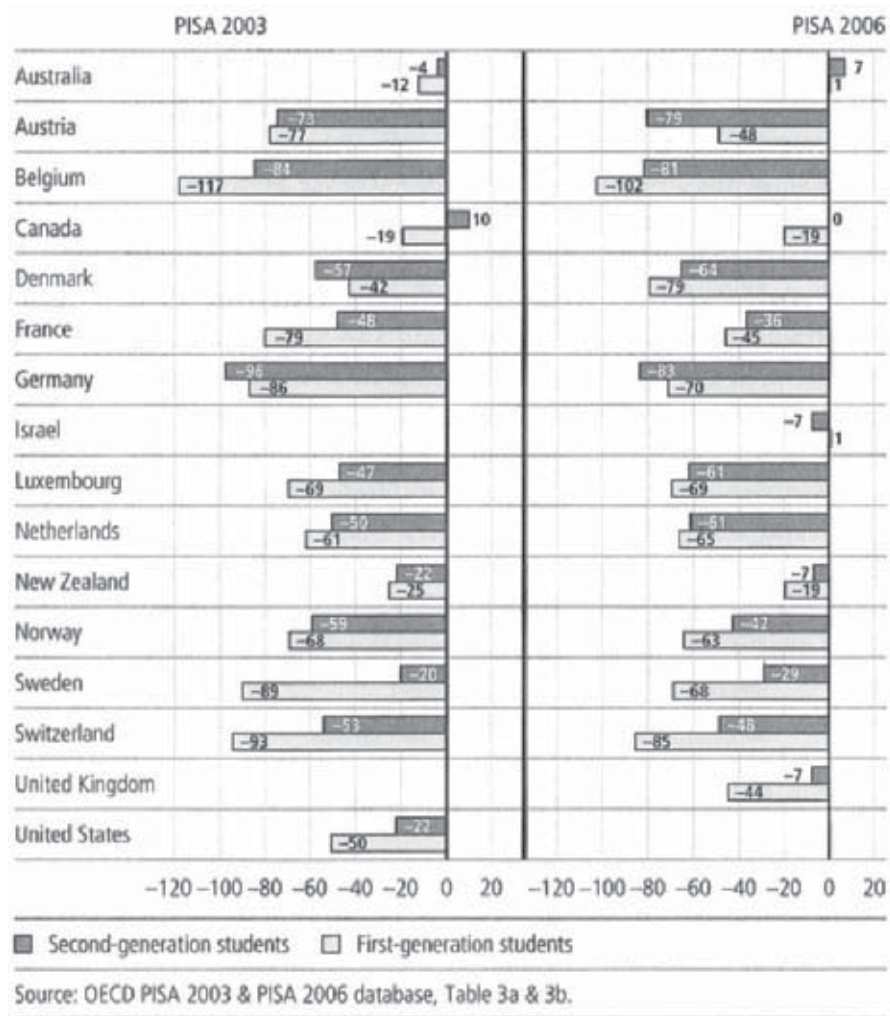


Figure 1. PISA Reading scores 2003 and 2006 (from Christensen & Steglitz, 2008, p. 16).