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Connect Students' Background Knowledge to Content in the ELL Classroom

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> *"Diversity is the one true thing we have in common. Celebrate it every day."*
>
> — Anonymous

Introduction

I often listen to books on tape with my children while I do errands and drive them to their activities. When my daughter was four years old and we were listening to a story, she said, "Mom, when I listen to the stories, I see pictures in my head. Do you see the same pictures?" This was a thought-provoking question for a number of reasons. First, she was describing what good readers do — visualize the story as they read while the details add up to a mental picture. Second, I was reminded that we all create mental pictures while reading, and that our pictures may vary greatly. For example, when my children and I read the Harry Potter books, we discussed our different ideas about what Harry, Hermione, and Ron looked like. (Now that I've seen the movie, I can't seem to remember what I thought they looked like!)

Perhaps what is most interesting about the visualization that takes place as we read, is that the pictures in our minds reflect our own experiences. We connect what we read to our context, and we comprehend new ideas more deeply if we can relate to them.

In a 1979 study on cross-cultural comprehension, subjects from the U.S. and India read letters about an American and an Indian wedding and recalled them following interpolated tasks. When subjects read the passage about the wedding from their own culture ("the native passage"), researchers observed the following behaviors: subjects read the passage more rapidly, recalled a larger amount of information, and produced more culturally appropriate elaborations of the content. When the subjects read the "foreign passage" about the other culture's wedding, they read the passage more slowly, recalled much less information, and produced more culturally-based distortions. The results indicated that cultural context influences comprehension, and that this phenomenon occurs regardless of an individual's background. (Steffensen, Joag-Deve, & Anderson, 1979).

Although this study is 30 years old, I believe the premise holds true. It makes sense that if I were to read passages on both American and Indian weddings, I would recall more details from the American wedding because I've experienced it many times, and I would probably be able to produce a more detailed description of the event because it it more relevant to my experience.

What are the implications of this idea for teachers who must help a diverse student body retain valuable information about a variety of subjects? While a single teacher may not be able to represent as many cultural perspectives as he/she may like, teachers can enhance their curriculum using a variety of resources in order to make the material more culturally relevant and accessible. Here are some ideas to get started:

1. Learn about your students' backgrounds and find culturally relevant resources to teach content.

One of the important steps of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol model (SIOP) of teaching content to ELLs is to build students' background knowledge before teaching content by linking concepts to students' personal, cultural, or academic experience. Dr. R. Cipriani-Sklar, Principal of the Fairview School in Corona, NY, offers this suggestion in Random House's *RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers* magazine:

> **"Tap into Students' Background Knowledge.** Students need to connect with literature on three basic levels: text to text, text to self, and self to the world. All students bring something to the classroom. Becoming familiar with the backgrounds and/or prior knowledge of ELL students allows a teacher to engage students in literacy experiences that connect with their diverse backgrounds, thereby building on this knowledge."

How to tap into this background knowledge if it's very different from your own? You can start by researching your students' native countries, cultures, and educational systems. You may even want to study the historical figures, musical and artistic traditions, geography, and biodiversity of these countries so that you can connect your lessons to something that the students already know.

You can also find ways for your students to contribute their own cultural experience in the classroom. This may mean asking students to show how a topic connects to their lives or to give an example of a particular idea as they would experience it in their native country. Students can bring music or art from their culture and describe its significance and meaning to their classmates. Students can also interview their parents in order to learn more about their memories and experience. ELLs may find this valuable because even if they speak their native language with their parents and are surrounded by their culture at home, they may not have had an opportunity to talk to their parents about their parents' life experiences and values.

These strategies will work in mainstream classes as well. For example, if U.S. students are studying civil rights in the 1960's, they may remember information better if they relate it to historical and cultural information shared by family members.

One word of caution if you plan to ask students to contribute their experiences to the class, as noted by Dr. Cynthia Lundgren and Giselle Lundy-Ponce in a recent article about culturally responsive instruction:

> "**Consult more than one internet or library source and do not expect a student to be your sole "ambassador" or resource for finding out about a whole culture or ethnic background**. Multiple sources are always a good idea for formulating knowledge about a particular subject.
>
> **More importantly, do not put a particular student on the spot without asking them beforehand if they are comfortable sharing information with the whole class.** Each student is an individual and their experiences may or may not be similar to that of the group they represent."

It is tempting to view your students as the experts, and it is certainly important to draw on what they have to offer to the class, but it is also important to discuss whether they feel comfortable doing so beforehand, and to avoid putting them on the spot – particularly about cultural, political, or religious subjects that might be particularly sensitive.

[You can read more about these topics in Colorín Colorado's articles, **Learning about Your Students' Backgrounds, Culturally Responsive Instruction for Holiday and Religious Celebrations**, and the **ELLs in Middle and High School webcast**, which features more information about SIOP.]

2. Look for resources that go beyond the textbook that will engage students and involve them in the learning process so that they find elements they can connect to and learn from.

These may include:

Art

There are many ways to bring educational content to life through art, and to use art as a starting point for discussing different cultural traditions. For example, in a history class, you may offer students a couple of different artistic representations of historical events from different perspectives, and ask whether a particular perspective resonates with their experiences.

Or you might want to compare artwork depicting similar kinds of events as they occurred in different countries, such as revolutions, battles, the signing of a famous document, inaugurations, elections, protests, and major milestones. Perhaps students can share depictions of those kinds of events in their country as a way to open up the discussion and connect their experience to the content as well. Students can examine artistic style, theme, the artist's intent, and the materials used while comparing artistic works from different cultures as a way of applying what they learning about the content.

Using artwork that depicts day-to-day events and celebrations can also be a provocative starting point for a discussion about the similarities and differences between other cultures, and a way of affirming the students' daily lives, traditions, and lifestyles in the classroom.

Music

Students are a great resource for sharing music, and older students especially like to share music, discuss the meaning, and connect it to content. If the song is in a language some students do not understand, ask the student to translate it and discuss the meaning. Songs from other countries often describe political events or re-tell folk stories in poetic form.

Culture Kits

I got this idea from the Dakota County library system in Minnesota. They have a learning resource called "Bifolkal Kits" that patrons can check out. The kits have themes such as the "The Fifties," "Work Life," or "African American Lives." Each kit contains items relevant to the topic, reading materials, and questions that can be asked of a person who has experience in that area. It would be a wonderful addition to a curriculum if students created their own Culture Kits with special items that would bring culture alive as a way of sharing their cultures and discussing what can be learned from different multicultural traditions.

3. Use literature, stories, and folktales from other cultures as a way of encouraging students to connect what they are reading to their own experiences.

While this seems like a simple and logical place to start, it will take some research to find just the right additions for an educational unit. However, libraries across the nation have increased the amount of multicultural literature available from a wide variety of countries and cultures. Some of the material is written in other languages, and some of it is translated into English. There are also many publishers who have focused on increasing multicultural literature in the classroom, and Language Arts series often will have a multicultural connection with suggestions of books to read with the class.

[To read about one high school teacher's use of multicultural literature in the classroom, read **Time is Not on Our Side: Literacy and Literature for High School Language Learners**, on our sister site, **AdLit.org**.]

4. Use storytelling in the classroom.

Many cultures have a rich tradition of storytelling that often gets lost in the U.S. with the focus on developing literacy skills. Many of the common stories in cultures have been translated and written in story form, but children also enjoy telling and acting out stories. There are many resources to help build storytelling skills, and some students may also have a relative who is a great storyteller and would be willing to visit the class and tell a story. The class can have great discussions about what made the story interesting, what the story was trying to tell them, and if they know other stories that are similar. For example, many cultures have a story version of "Cinderella."

One final note: Teachers spend a lot of their own money to add to the school curriculum in order to meet the needs of their students. Adding multicultural curriculum and materials shouldn't be an additional financial burden on the teacher. Many schools are willing to fund the purchase of multicultural items if the teacher has researched the purchase and can explain how it will enhance student learning. If the school does not have resources, there may be funding at the district level or diversity grant funding available to teachers.

[A good starting point for researching grant funding opportunities is the **Teach Diversity** website.]

In the end, the efforts that teachers make to add a rich, cultural dimension to the curriculum will enhance student learning and comprehension, and create excitement in the classroom. The most wonderful thing about adding a multicultural perspective to the lesson is that it is a way of letting your students know — particularly ELL students — that their diverse experiences and backgrounds are valued in your classroom. Students may also be motivated to explore content and deepen their understanding of material that they had not previously shown interest in. As students share insights with you and with each other, they will develop appreciation for other cultural perspectives and they may find that there are more similarities than differences among them — and that might prove to be the greatest lesson of all.

References

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