

Reaching ELLs at Risk: Instruction for Students With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education

ANDREA DECAPUA¹ and HELAINE W. MARSHALL²

¹College of New Rochelle, New Rochelle, NY, USA

²Long Island University, Purchase, NY, USA

The United States is receiving unprecedented numbers of immigrants, with a parallel increase in the number of English-language learners (ELLs) entering our schools. Many of these ELLs are students with limited or interrupted formal education who face great challenges, especially at the secondary level where they have little time to master academic content, develop literacy skills, and build English proficiency. Fundamental to school success for these students is their need to adjust to culturally different ways of learning. In this article, the authors examine salient academic and cultural issues and describe a new instructional model to help teachers adapt their instruction to facilitate the active engagement of this student population, as well as transition them to the learning environment of the U.S. educational system.

Keywords: culture, English-language learners, interrupted formal schooling, learning, limited formal education

In a journal entry, Vuong, a Vietnamese student, wrote:

The most important things I have learned about the United States that is a book, newspapers, or notebook and pens. These things are always let me know *how to live here*.

... I always remember the books are the most important things for me *to learn* when I live in the United States.

Vuong, like many English language learners (ELLs), came to the United States with both limited English proficiency and little formal education. This subpopulation of ELLs may be referred to as students with limited or interrupted formal education SLIFE or (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009). A major challenge for Vuong and others like him is catching up with their peers in subject areas, such as math or social studies, while simultaneously developing academic language proficiency and literacy skills in English (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2007). Because of their limited formal education, learning is not centered on the written word for SLIFE but is based instead on the spoken word, a mode sometimes referred to as orality (Ong, 2002). When these students enter the U.S. educational system, they must learn to make the transition to text-based learning, something Vuong has come to realize.

As the son of a fisherman from a rural area of his country, Vuong would be the first in his family to encounter

an educational system that demands knowledge and skills never contemplated or necessary before immigrating. Although the literacy–orality difference is the most striking challenge Vuong faced, it is by no means the only or even the most significant SLIFE face in their attempts to become high-achieving students with high school diplomas. Here, we examine some of these challenges and suggest how teachers can adapt their instruction to facilitate the active engagement of SLIFE while developing the instructional underpinnings they will need to succeed here.

Western-style schooling

People who have fully participated in a Western-style model of education have cognitively different ways of understanding the world (Flynn, 2007; Rogoff, 2003). This model is characterized by formal problem solving and scientific reasoning and centered on formally trained teachers and print (Chavajay & Rogoff, 2002; Flynn; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Through participation in Western-style education, students develop “scientific” or “academic” ways of understanding the world. Systems of classification—process analysis, compare and contrast, and other such abstract reasoning—are integral, along with a concomitant emphasis on extracting information from print resources, especially as students progress through the grades (Meyer, 2000; Spring, 2008). However, this scientific or academic approach is not universal or even necessary to learning (Lave, 1996), unless students are competing in the U.S. educational system for academic success. Although high

Address correspondence to Helaine W. Marshall, Westchester Graduate Campus, Long Island University, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, NY 10577, USA. E-mail: helaine.marshall@liu.edu

school SLIFE are well versed in capitalizing on the world around them and have extensive pragmatic or “funds of knowledge” on the basis of life experiences to interpret and organize new knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll & Greenberg, 1991), their lack of understanding of and familiarity with academic ways of learning and understanding the world disadvantages them when they enter U.S. mainstream classrooms. Because they have not participated in academic-style learning, these SLIFE understand and interpret the world around them differently. For example, they may know the medicinal properties of plants, yet classifying plants on the basis of phyla or reproductive characteristics may be a strange and unfamiliar concept.

Individualism and collectivism

Another challenge facing most SLIFE is adapting to the individualist orientation inherent in U.S. education. A fundamental difference between many of SLIFE and mainstream U.S. culture is the individualism–collectivism orientation, which influences how much people see themselves as independent agents versus as members of a larger group (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). In individualistic cultures, a person’s identity depends primarily on personal attributes, traits, and achievements, and one’s sense of well-being centers on self-actualization and personal accomplishments. In collectivistic cultures, in contrast, self-identity and well-being are predicated on the sharing in and fulfillment of reciprocal obligations and commitments to the members of one’s group, generally an extended familial network or clan (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2001; Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

Approximately 70% of world cultures can be characterized as collectivistic (Triandis, 1989). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), 53% of the foreign-born population in the United States came from Latin America and 25% came from Asia, both regions with many collectivistic cultures. Although these percentages do not reveal the actual number of ELLs or SLIFE, we can extrapolate from these numbers to posit that a large number of ELLs and SLIFE are members of collectivistic cultures, with expectations, values, norms, and behaviors that are different from the mainstream individualistic U.S. culture.

Although individualism and collectivism are presented as a dichotomy, in reality, the distinction is more of a continuum and more complicated (see, e.g., Green, Deschamps, & Páez, 2005; Kagitçibasi, 1994), and within any given culture, elements of both collectivism and individualism can be found (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). Nevertheless, the distinction between collectivism and individualism is an effective tool for helping to understand differences in cultural values underlying an array of attitudes and assumptions reflected in classroom practices and behaviors. In the United States, for example, cooperative learning has become increasingly popular in K–12 teaching, which, one

could argue, reflects a collectivistic view of learning. However, each student is still individually responsible for his or her performance (Cohen, 1994; DeCapua & Marshall, 2009). From the perspective of a member of a collectivistic culture, in contrast, group work is the responsibility of the whole, without individual accountability (Chavajay & Rogoff, 2002; Ibarra, 2001).

Such differing views of cooperative learning, similar to many pedagogical practices, are based on different cultural values, stemming in large part from the collectivistic–individualistic dichotomy. From the individualistic point of view, because each student has the urge to compete and excel as an individual, students want and need to be individually responsible and accountable for their performance (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Isaac, Daley, & Pérez, 2003). From the collectivistic point of view, working together for the benefit of the group is primary. Who does what specifically is not an important matter, as long as the task is accomplished (Wagner, 1995).

Pedagogy and culture

Dominant U.S. pedagogical practices derive from deep-seated, culturally based assumptions about learners and learning. Because these assumptions are an intrinsic part of U.S. mainstream culture, teachers are often unaware of the extent to which these assumptions pervade U.S. mainstream education and how much they shape pedagogical practices (Cole, 1998; Spring, 2008; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). For one, teachers assume that a major goal of K–12 instruction is to produce an independent learner. *Scaffolding*, one of the most lauded and promoted best practices today, encourages learning by providing students with all the necessary but temporary supports for learning, gradually removing the different supports until the learner can learn unassisted (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002; Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). Although scaffolding is certainly invaluable in helping make classroom knowledge accessible to learners, its ultimate goal—to promote independent learning—reflects an individualistic orientation, which is at odds with a collectivistic orientation.

Another assumed goal of K–12 instruction is that much, if not most, of what students learn is to prepare them for life after school. Classroom learning, or academic knowledge, centers on developing formal schemata, higher-level thinking skills, and subject knowledge that generally has little current relevance to life outside school or that is in some other manner immediately applicable. “Funds” of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) are insight and expertise based on daily life experiences. Similarly, apprenticeship or vocational training focuses on developing and advancing proficiency in specific, applied skills, whether pottery, farming, masonry, or other. Such pragmatic knowledge and learning has direct relevance for learners in that they

immediately apply what they are learning (Bailey, Hughes, & Moore, 2004).

SLIFE like Vuong, however, do not share these assumptions of mainstream U.S. education. In fact, what they expect, what they require, and what they bring to school is quite the opposite (Au & Kawakami, 1994). Because SLIFE are generally members of collectivistic cultures, most of these learners are accustomed to group interdependence and with fostering and maintaining group relations. In addition, because their lives have been shaped by pragmatic learning, the wealth of information SLIFE bring to the school setting is generally not the knowledge valued in formal education. Last, they come to school with little or no literacy, or have engaged in literacy practices different from those of the classroom (Kress, 2000; Needham, 2003). Despite efforts of educators to recognize, promote, and integrate the knowledge and cultural and literacy practices of SLIFE (and other ELLs) into the classroom (e.g., Fu, 2003; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Hollins & Oliver, 1999; Olmedo, 2009; Trumbull et al., 2001), many U.S. schools remain unresponsive to the needs of SLIFE (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009; Freeman & Freeman, 2002).

This mismatch between home and school, which Ibarra (2001) termed *cultural dissonance*, causes feelings of isolation, confusion, disengagement, and inadequacy when such students encounter the formal education system of mainstream U.S. schools (Schlosser, 1992). What they need is not provided, and what is demanded of them is new. To understand how teachers can facilitate adjustment and integration into the U.S. classroom, we examined a successful ninth-grade SLIFE math lesson in an urban high school. The students come from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and El Salvador, and they ranged in age from 15 to 20 years.

Ms. Lopez (pseudonym)

As the students enter Ms. Lopez's SLIFE classroom, they greet each other with smiles and hugs, say hello to Ms. Lopez, and look at the board for the day's activity. They sit in pairs and begin working on a number line chart large enough to post on the walls, where their other work is prominently displayed with their names—a student-created word wall of math concept posters. To begin the day's new concept, Ms. Lopez puts up a question on the board: "What does the word *power* mean in math class?" She reads it aloud and then, holding up her arms to show muscular strength, reviews the meaning of *power* in everyday life versus *power* as used in math. She tells the students that they are going to learn about power in math because it is a shortcut, a quick way to show multiplication, and will make math easier, just like shortcuts they take when they walk around between buildings to get to the next block of their neighborhood. The whole class practices the new vocabulary, *base* and *exponent*, as the teacher points to each one from an example, $2^{(3)}$, labeled.

Ms. Lopez next connects *power* to what they already know, by demonstrating how using a power is a shortcut for writ-

ing multiplication: On the board she shows how $2^{(3)}$ is $2 \times 2 \times 2$ expanded. To scaffold their learning, Ms. Lopez passes out a sheet of sample problems, with each problem in its own box. On the sheet, students need to list the steps that they use to solve the problem. First, the students are to label which number represents the base and which represents the exponent. Next, they are to show the expansion; last, they do the multiplication.

Putting it all together: A new instructional model

Most teachers view teaching, learning, and the content as academic and objective (Gunderson, 2000), which contrasts with the largely pragmatic knowledge of SLIFE. The challenge for educators who work with SLIFE is how to take their strengths and their knowledge and build on their different approach to learning to help them succeed in U.S. mainstream education. The mutually adaptive learning paradigm (MALP) is a new instructional model for SLIFE (Marshall, 1994, 1998; DeCapua & Marshall, 2009; DeCapua, Marshall & Antolin, 2010; Marshall & DeCapua, 2010). It combines best practices drawn from research on this population (e.g., Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004; Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998; Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell 2000; Walsh, 1999), with cultural needs and expectations combined in such a way that taken together, the model promotes a powerful change in classroom climate and instructional effectiveness. Unlike other approaches to helping SLIFE, MALP is not a collection of best practices, but rather it provides a framework for teachers to help them understand what works and why it works. Using the MALP instructional model, teachers learn to accept the culturally based conditions SLIFE need for learning, combine their ways of learning with those expected in U.S. classrooms, and teach new academic tasks, such as classification, compare/contrast, and analysis, through familiar language and content (see Figure 1). MALP is unique in that it offers the opportunity for SLIFE to transition to successful learning in the U.S. classroom. MALP is also culturally responsive (Gollnick & Chinn, 2004) because it incorporates and builds on the collectivistic cultural orientation of the overwhelming majority of SLIFE, while helping to close the achievement gap by transitioning them to the demands and requirements of mainstream U.S. education.

Ms. Lopez is successfully reaching this population in her math class because she has been trained in the MALP. To understand how MALP works, it is important for teachers to think of learning in terms of conditions, processes, and activities for learning. This allows them to see how a plan for effective instruction can be forged using the MALP framework. First, teachers need to understand that for members of collectivistic cultures, there are two important conditions for learning: interconnectedness and immediate relevance. These conditions are essential to have in place before learning can begin to occur. If they are not

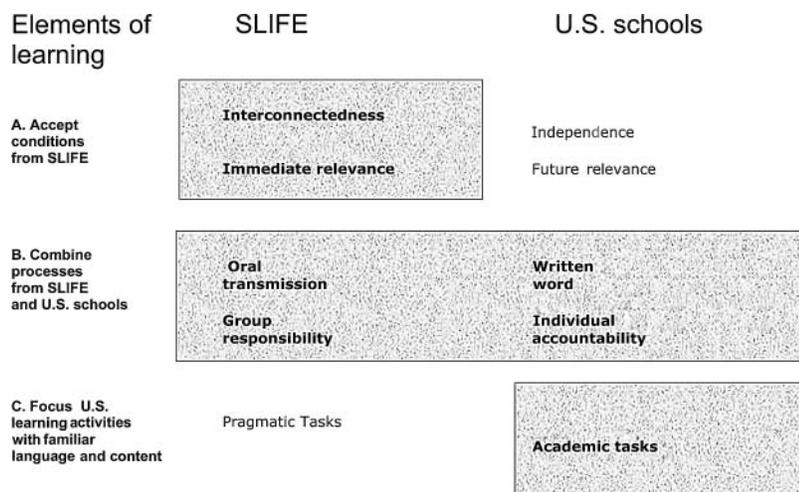


Fig. 1. Mutually adaptive learning paradigm. SLIFE = Students with limited or interrupted formal education. *Source:* Adapted from Marshall, 1998; Marshall & DeCapua, 2010.

met, it is unlikely that SLIFE will engage much with the material—if at all—because then the classroom ethos is not one that meets their learning needs, that is, a learning community that focuses on topics that are immediately relevant to them (Wells, 2002).

Interconnectedness

More effective teachers are those who are culturally and emotionally responsive, who demonstrate genuine caring for their students, and whom SLIFE come to regard as “family” (Brown, 2003; Fránquiz & del Carmen, 2004; Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2008). In many collectivistic cultures, the teacher is viewed as a part of the students’ extended group or network. As Valenzuela’s (1999) study on Mexican immigrant students demonstrated, students believed teachers should care about *them*, more than about what they viewed as abstract commitment to ideas or practices. Similarly, De Jesús & Antrop-González (2006) found that the Latino students in their study consistently emphasized the importance of strong, caring social relations with each other and their teachers for them to feel welcome and valued in school.

Ms. Lopez encourages her students to establish strong relationships that mirror the social relationships in their culture outside school. In this way, the classroom becomes a community and students view themselves, each other, and their teachers as members of that community. Therefore, it is natural when they take a minute to greet each other and the teacher warmly as they enter the room each day; it is natural when they take a seat beside a partner whom they see as both a support and a resource. To foster further this sense of interconnectedness, Ms. Lopez has a large wipe-off monthly calendar posted in the classroom on which she writes in key dates for both school and personal events

for her class. In addition to dates relevant to her mathematics course and school events, Ms. Lopez includes their birthdays as well as other significant personal occasions. Although this is a familiar routine in lower elementary grades, middle school and high school teachers rarely use calendars to mark important personal events in their students’ lives, yet it is valuable in building an interconnected classroom community for these SLIFE.

Immediate relevance

For SLIFE, to a much greater extent than most students, material must be seen as in some way immediately relevant for them to engage. Relevance in this sense indicates some type of immediate benefit for the students that they can derive from the lesson beyond simply saying that the material will be on a forthcoming test or may appear as an item on a required standardized assessment. To make this particular lesson relevant to the students, Ms. Lopez instructs her class that she is going to show them a shortcut they can use to help them save time and trouble when they do their math problems. They immediately see the benefit of understanding the role of exponents presented in this way. To write out the problems and to multiply each number by itself several times takes much longer than to use the exponent, so the students are seeing how the higher level mathematics concepts can make their use of time more efficient and takes fewer steps to complete as well. It is important to explain to them that this same concept will be seen across the curriculum; that with higher levels of academic skill, they can complete tasks more easily, with greater accuracy and in less time.

Once the conditions are in place, teachers can focus on the processes for learning. In MALP, familiar learning processes and the new unfamiliar ones are combined, making the transition feasible for SLIFE.

Oral and written modes of learning

SLIFE are more comfortable with oral transmission of knowledge because their world has been structured around oral practices far more than through print. Although the view of literacy as superior to orality has been challenged (e.g., Street, 1984, 1995), it remains the case that in Western-style education, the printed word is both paramount and highly valued (Keis, 2006). Nevertheless, for SLIFE, orality rather than print is fundamental, and when they do use print, they connect reading and speaking (Ek, 2008/2009; McMillon & Edwards, 2000). Therefore, MALP combines their common processes for learning with those of the U.S. classroom. Ms. Lopez reads the material aloud as they follow along and always uses the written word together with her instructions. In solving problems, the students both write their explanations and share them orally with their partners so that Ms. Lopez is teaching her SLIFE the written language that accompanies the oral language of math.

Ms. Lopez makes explicit the importance of being able to write the steps as well as state them orally. In her lesson on exponents, she writes and reads aloud each step for expanding and simplifying each power expression as she demonstrates today's new math concept. Further scaffolding the movement from oral to written, Ms. Lopez uses body language. She looks and points at her body with her right hand, and describes it as her base, while holding her left hand above her head. She next points to her left hand with her right hand and calls it the exponent. She puts extra stress on the word *exponent*, showing the strength of the term.

Group responsibility and individual accountability

As previously noted, SLIFE generally come from collectivistic cultures and as such prefer group learning and shared responsibilities; being an independent learner and individually accountable for their learning is not common nor highly valued, in contrast with the assumptions and expectations of U.S. educators. However, for SLIFE to engage in the classroom successfully, they need to adapt or transition from their preferences to the expectations of mainstream education. MALP explicitly incorporates both the collaborative and the individual in the classroom. Ms. Lopez provides many opportunities for pair, small-group, and whole-class activities.

To assist them in transitioning to a more individualist educational system, Ms. Lopez does a variation on a cooperative learning technique. After students have worked on a problem in small groups, she has all the members of a group come to the board together. One student reads the problem aloud to the whole class, another student writes the solution line by line, and the third student performs a check to prove the solution is correct. Although the group solved

the problem together, they each presented some aspect of it individually.

To further encourage individual accountability while taking into account SLIFE preference for group work, Ms. Lopez varies the problem-solving activity by assigning one problem to each student. She writes the numbers of the problems and a student's name next to each on the board to reinforce who is responsible for which problem and where each student will put up his or her work for the rest of the class to see. The students prepare to share their problems and how they arrived at their answers with the class by practicing with a partner. Students go up as groups to the board to put up their problems, rather than one at a time. As a whole class, the students view all the problems written on the board and listen as each student takes a turn presenting his/her problem and solution.

Focus on academic tasks

Learning to abstract from contextual information, a cornerstone of the educational process, is only the result of thorough participation in Western-style education (Ventura et al., 2008). SLIFE, however, are pragmatic learners, accustomed to learning through experience and practice and academic tasks are new to them. When these students enter U.S. secondary school, one coping strategy they frequently turn to is memorization (Li & Zhang, 2004; Shuter, 1985). Yet, what SLIFE need to develop is strategies for learning and applying academic ways of thinking. The activities for learning in a MALP classroom focus the learners on the many new types of academic tasks they are encountering for the first time. To transition them in this process, both the language used for the task and content incorporated should be familiar to the student when the aim is grasping a particular type of academic task. In other words, if the academic task is the focus, then language and content should not also be new. Once the academic task is familiar, teachers can facilitate opportunities to apply new information and language to this task.

These activities must be introduced with major support for language and content. In Ms. Lopez's math lesson, she is ensuring that her SLIFE understand math content-specific meanings of the common and familiar word *power*. She is teaching the students the necessary order of operations by having them write and say each step for each problem. She is introducing the concept of exponent, which is now the first item students need to address in solving a problem. As they practice solving new problems, Ms. Lopez makes SLIFE pay close attention to the process they are using to solve the problem. In so doing, she is introducing process analysis, one of the essential higher level critical thinking skills that her students will use across the curriculum.

In Ms. Lopez's other math lessons, such as lessons on identifying like and unlike terms, graphing linear versus quadratic equations, and other areas in which comparison

and contrast are required, she has the students create T-charts and venn diagrams. However, before they create these graphic organizers for math, she has them develop the same types of organizers using personal information about each other. This allows SLIFE to first practice the academic task of comparison and contrast using the familiar language and content of their own lives and experiences before moving on to applying this task to new content. SLIFE are learning academic ways of organizing information, but at the same time they are also learning more about their fellow students and fostering interconnectedness, an essential condition for learning.

Conclusion

The United States is increasingly becoming a multicultural, pluralistic society; nevertheless, the educational system as a whole is changing only slowly to meet the needs of new immigrants, especially ELLs with limited or interrupted formal education (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). We argue that part of the problem derives from the fact that because pedagogical practices are culturally embedded, educators are often unaware how much these are shaped by the dominant cultural values of which they themselves are an integral part, regardless of their own ethnicity or race (Rogoff, 2003; Spring, 2008; Trumbull et al., 2001). By recognizing and accepting how participation in Western-style formal schooling shapes how people understand and interpret knowledge and learning and how deep cultural differences, such as the individualism–collectivism dimension affect an array of behaviors, beliefs, and values, and, educators take the first step toward working to close the achievement gap for SLIFE. Such recognition and acceptance, in conjunction with the other components outlined here, form the basis of the MALP instructional model.

As evidenced in Ms. Lopez's lesson, MALP does not approach SLIFE instruction as remediation, nor does it ignore the need for SLIFE to learn under a Western-style model of education. In MALP-driven instruction, the teacher acknowledges and uses what the SLIFE bring with them but also provides pathways to new and different aspects of learning that their students will need in order to achieve academic success. Teachers accept the conditions for learning, combine familiar processes for learning with new ones, and introduce the new academic tasks they will be required to perform. In this way, teachers demonstrate that they can create a learning climate that supports students while it makes new demands in a reasonable way. Although many teachers may already incorporate aspects of MALP in their teaching, and use some best practices for SLIFE, it is through the implementation of all components of this mutually adaptive instructional model that SLIFE will feel truly included and be able to negotiate the U.S. educational system. When all steps of MALP are implemented together,

SLIFE, as we have seen from Ms. Lopez's lesson, respond and thrive in the classroom.

Author notes

Andrea DeCapua is an associate professor at the College of New Rochelle in New York. Her current research interests are students with limited or interrupted formal education, culture and learning, and understanding and teaching grammar.

Helaine W. Marshall is an associate professor at the Westchester Graduate Campus of Long Island University in New York. Her current research interests are students with limited or interrupted formal schooling, non-traditional approaches to the teaching of grammar, and online language teacher education.

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