Literacy Development and English Language Learners: A Socio-cultural Approach

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Abstract:

The development of literacy skills is of paramount importance for all students learning to read in any language. In the United States, literacy development is a critical component of learning at an early age. For English language learners, literacy is a complex process of learning a new language, adjusting cultural norms associated with reading, involving the family, and utilizing community resources for the purpose of becoming literate. Socio-cultural factors can be applied to English as a second language classrooms as assets to literacy development with English language learners. Teachers of English language learners must be willing to, first of all, recognize differences among students from other cultures. Then they must move past mere recognition of socio-cultural factors to implement strategies and approaches to reading that employ such factors as a means to further development.
Introduction

Concern over the reading achievement gap in the United States has grown over the past decade with the population growth of students from diverse backgrounds. Kathryn H. Au states that “in the 1990s, students of diverse backgrounds constituted 35% of the enrollment in public schools in grades 1 through 12, and approximately 13% of all students spoke a language other than English at home” (1994, p. 393). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that between 1979 and 2008, the number of school-age children who spoke a language other than English at home increased from 3.8 to 10.9 million, statistically from 9% to 21% of the population. An increase from 18% to 21% was also apparent from 2000 through 2008 (Fast Facts, 2008). Brice and Brice reported the findings of the 2002 U.S. Department of Education statistics which show that African American, Hispanic, limited-English proficient students, students with disabilities, and poor children are counted as the highest groups for reading failure (2009). Within the context of English as a second language classrooms, the acquisition of literacy skills is paramount to the success of learners in multiple dimensions of language learning.

Literacy involves numerous factors, including but not limited to print awareness, phonological awareness, phonemic principles, and other processes. Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) define three types of literacy, including school literacies, community literacies, and personal literacies. Because print conveys meaning, these various literacies hold varying meaning for learners. Within English as a second language classrooms, multiple cultures are represented, thus, multiple literacies are present. English as a second language teachers have a unique opportunity to employ such literacies with the aim of increasing second language literacy. Explicit literacy
instruction should occur within the classroom, but should also be holistic in nature, drawing on students’ contextual experiences from the home and community. Literacy is a fluid process, requiring focus on factors capable of moving students to the next level of proficiency. Numerous dynamics influence literacy development, including first language, family, and culture. In regards to educators and instruction, these dynamics should not be viewed as hindrances to literacy development, but as stepping stones to a better understanding of students’ needs.

Literacy is defined by multiple other linguistic factors, including discourse, acquisition, and learning (Mitchell & Weiller, 1991). Kenneth Goodman (1988) defines reading as a process of receptive language. Goodman states that reading is “a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs” (1988, p. 12). James Paul Gee (1991) outlines literacy as a discourse or “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’” (Mitchell & Weiler, p. 5). Bennett (1991) states that literacy is a certain set of skills within a society. Temple and Snow (2001) emphasize that “literacy can be used to refer to the psycholinguistic capacity to read as well as the social practices associated with reading” (p. 55). Applebee (1990) defines a literate person as “not one who can name the approved names, but rather one who is engaged in the ‘ongoing dialogue’ of the culture, one who has dealt with the ideas and issues of the culture” (Hawisher & Soter, p. 104). Probst claims that literacy is not a process of piling up information, but of contributing to the act of creating meaning. He also avows that literacy should be viewed as a part of the
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Dialogue of a culture—its issues, questions, problems, all relevant to its people. He contends that participating in the culture of the second language is in turn participating in the literacy of that culture due to their interconnected nature (1990).

Literacy experienced growth with the regression of oral narrative performance in communities throughout Western societies (Hawisher & Soter, 1990). The emphasis on literacy promoted linear thinking that was analytic in nature. Reading and writing became a means by which to persuade and to powerfully impact society in Western societies (1990). There is a need for teachers of English as a second language to recognize the power of words, spoken and written, and the potentially remarkable impact of the development of literacy for second language learners. Frellet (1981) identifies two purposes for reading: reading for pleasure and reading for information. Within the English as a second language classroom, teachers must be committed to making literacy a reality for students, drawing on resources outside of the classroom. The active process of reading occurs fluidly when students access several knowledge bases. Aebersold and Field (1997) identify five common knowledge sources, including family, community, school, sociocultural environment, and individual differences. The element of diversity is obvious within schools in the United States today. Educators must take a holistic, socio-cultural approach to literacy instruction and the promotion of its development.

The Relationship between L1 and L2 Literacy

Due to the increasing diversity of the population of the United States, there is mounting linguistic diversity within the educational system of the United States.
Linguistic diversity has become the norm within classrooms across the United States. Bailey and Nunan (1996) state that linguistic diversity should be seen as a means to strengthen the classroom. The recognition of linguistic diversity within the classroom has the potential to positively affect other aspects of learning. Educators should not overlook linguistic diversity, but embrace it for the benefit of instruction and students’ learning. Focus on linguistic diversity is capable of translating into the development of critical literacy skills for English language learners.

Bell (1995) claims that most ESL literacy teachers agree that literacy in a person’s native language usually encourages second language literacy skills. She proposes that “the relationship between L1 literacy and improved L2 performance is not causative but correlational” (Bell, 1995, p. 687). Thus, the development of literacy skills in one language has the capacity to support the advancement of literacy skills in a second language. Goodman (1988) considers reading as a series of cycles that the learner must move through to reach further development of critical skills. Goodman lists five cycles readers move through, mainly in a sequential manner: recognition-initiation, prediction, confirmation, correction, and fermination.

The attainment of literacy in one language does not cause literacy in a second language, but the cognitive processes involved in literacy in one language can potentially upsurge a person’s cognitive process in second language literacy. Consequently, the relationship between L1 and L2 literacy is correlational. Patricia A. Richard-Amato’s (1996) view of language acquisition is characterized by the learner’s dependence, during the initial stages of acquisition, on first-language knowledge for second language communication; then the learner begins to work within the framework of the new
language by forming hypotheses about the second language. This theory of acquisition can be applied to all four strands of language learning. Within the strand of reading, the L2 learner may depend on L1 reading processes while learning to read in the L2, but has the potential to move toward reading within the framework of the L2.

Jim Cummins’ work suggests that linguistic interdependence, the idea that language skills developed in one language can transfer to another language, is plausible for second language learners (Bell, 1995). Multiple aspects of literacy, such as fluency, can see positive gains with the transfer of language skills from first language to second language. Because cultures understand and employ language differently, linguistic transfer can be advantageous for second language learners, but is not the only factor that impacts the development of literacy skills in the second language. Bell (1995) stresses that “literacy is not a neutral technology, but a process affected by culture, ethnicity, gender, class and ideology” (p. 690). Because cultures understand literacy in different ways, there are multiple literacies that coincide with the culture’s use of literacy within an everyday context. Every cultural context, including the familial unit, uses literacy for a variety of functions, including technical, aesthetic, and social functions (Auerbach, 1989).

Second language learners employ multiple learning strategies and various learning styles which impact their rate of attaining literacy in language learning settings or experiences. Learning strategies are defined as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning more effective whereas learning styles are the general approaches students use to learn a new language, which are the same styles they employ in solving various problems” (Parry, 1996, p. 666). Many researchers and teachers agree that
learning style influences learning strategies; moreover, they maintain a causative relationship. Learning styles have a clear cultural component according to Oxford and Anderson (Parry, 1996). Although learning styles have a cultural component, broad generalizations cannot be attributed to students because of individual cultural background. Parry urges teachers to instead view learning strategies students may use as reading processes. The relationship between culture and reading processes therefore is understood as use of and attitude toward written text. Cultural learning strategies can thus be evaluated and utilized in second language literacy acquisition. Kate Parry (1996) affirms that in the late 1960s, instruction for reading was ruled by a bottom-up model, wherein students had to “crack the code” of sounds of the language in order to make meaning from written text. In the 1980s, Goodman and Smith collected data that demonstrate that readers bring expectations of the text to the reading process. These beliefs, or expectations, are based on knowledge of text structures, linguistic knowledge, and readers’ awareness of the world (1996).

Goodman and Smith argue that the process of reading is a top-down process, wherein schemata, or prior knowledge, should be built and accessed throughout the reading process (Parry, 1996). Teachers of English as a second language should be mindful of individual learners’ needs and learning styles, but should also employ knowledge of cultural factors related to the reading process. Parry avows that “reading strategies can be seen at least partly as a function of culture and that differences in these strategies can often be explained in terms of how different cultural communities represent, use, and teach both language and literacy” (1996, p. 687). Conversely, she claims that individual strategies can be changed by an individual with encouragement and motivation.
to do so. Individuals learning a second language utilize numerous strategies when moving toward literacy. Many strategies used by learners are impacted by culture and others are implicitly held by the individual due to experience or preference.

Literacy: Cultural Factors

Teachers of English as a second language must continually be cognizant of multiple factors affecting a student’s ability to further develop literacy skills. Cultural factors are intricately woven into the fabric of every student’s frame of reference, and impact his or her cognitive learning of a second language. Jack C. Richards (1997) avows that “cultural differences constitute the largest category of factors that influence L2/FL reading” (p. 28). Richards lists six areas of L2/FL reading most affected by cultural orientation: reading skills and strategies used in the L1, attitudes toward text and purpose of reading, types of strategies and reading skills appropriate in the L2, knowledge of types of text in the L1, beliefs about the reading process, and background knowledge.

Every individual is a member of a culture, or of multiple cultures. Because of the intrinsic diversity of individuals in the classroom, it is essential for teachers to be aware of each student’s cultural background. Sinclair Bell (1995) acknowledges that “cultures use and understand literacy differently” (p. 690). The process of reading in the second language is one influenced by the culture of the first language. The reading process is colored by the process of language learning in the first culture. Therefore, a learner of English as a second language views reading through the lens of his or her own cultural
experience. In addition, he or she must be willing to attempt to understand the culture that influences the reading practices of English.

The population of United States school systems has changed drastically in the past ten years. Students now come from varying ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Within the United States, the cultural practice of literacy has been debated in terms of instructional methods. On an international level, many countries have campaigned for literacy, using it as a means of social empowerment and human liberation (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). Because of differing ideas on the purposes of literacy, English as a second language classrooms within the United States must be willing to develop a culturally relevant approach to literacy instruction that “fosters and sustains the students’ desire to choose academic success in the face of so many competing options” (p. 141).

Ladson-Billings describes culturally relevant teaching as a type of teaching that uses the student’s culture to help him or her come to an understanding of him/herself, others, conceptual knowledge, and social interactions. She charges English as a second language teachers, in the United States, to take on a pedagogy of opposition against assimilationist approaches to teaching. She states that fitting students into the socially acceptable norm of the educational system in America is not the goal for the English as a second language classroom. Rather, “the primary goal of culturally relevant teaching is to empower students to examine critically the society in which they live and to work for social change” (Ladson-Billings, 1990, p. 142).

Culturally relevant teaching draws on literacies such as musical, artistic, scientific, language-based, social, economic, political, cultural, historical, and mathematical. Many teachers enter classrooms in their first years of teaching with a limited view of education.
The inability for teachers to understand other cultures may be due to previously held beliefs or socio-culturally formulated ideas of education. Wake and Modla (2008) suggest that teachers focus literacy instruction on the development of critical literacy. Critical literacy allows students to consider how texts are situated within society and how the text can assist the reader’s understanding of social contexts. This type of literacy also challenges the reader to think critically about self, the text, and the world (2008).

Wake and Modla pair the critical literacy method with the reader response method, in which the reader creates meaning based on social and individual experiences. They encourage teachers to begin introducing literature into the classroom that is culturally relevant to the population of students in that particular class. With regard to teachers, they promote a migration of teacher awareness of socio-cultural influences on their instruction to an understanding of what to do with their individual awareness. The culture of the classroom is influenced by the cultures represented by the students, as well as by the teacher.

After researching several students’ writing, Sabrina Peck (1996) found a relationship between “learning a language and learning a culture” (Bailey & Nunan, p. 236). When learning a language, an individual is participating in the culture of that language. In an effort to promote cultural sensitivity, Peck cites the use of the human relations approach in which multicultural education is utilized with group process, community action projects, and role-playing as features of the approach (1996). Through his research, Robert Serpell (2001) distinguishes between membership and ownership of a culture. Serpell avows that the process of becoming literate involves initial induction
into the culture, or membership, and subsequently, ownership of its cultural resources (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001).

Literacy: Familial Factors

The process of becoming literate involves exposure to multiple literacies, including the literacy developed within the family unit. Family literacy has been defined for many years, but Elsa Roberts Auerbach (1989) developed a broader definition that “acknowledges the family’s social reality and focuses on the family’s strengths” (p. 165). As a whole, Auerbach views family literacy from an approach that is socio-contextual in nature. She quotes a student’s writing from an English as a second language classroom in which the student writes,

“Why I didn’t do the homework
Because the phone is ringing
the door is noking
the kid is yumping
the food is burning
time runs fast" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 165).

Every student enters the classroom with a set of family values and background; he or she transfers continuing familial complexities to the work required of them, inside and outside of school. All students, no matter social background, ask teachers to view school and work completed for school through the lens of life and family, with all of those intricacies. The demands of home often take precedence over school assignments and homework. Family literacy is often defined by educators in broader terms, with attention to assimilated assignments and practices within the framework of daily life. With this social contextual view of family literacy, educators are more apt to enrich the classroom
environment by informing learning. Learning must be meaningful to students if they are to retain the knowledge they receive.

Literacy has often been viewed as a collection of fragments of information, disregarding the task of assisting students in making sense of their own experience (Hawisher & Soter, 1990). Probst (1990) argued that literacy “demands participating in the act of making meaning” (p. 105). He proposes that in order to be literate, as opposed to appearing literate, students must be active participants in literature and in the dialogue of the culture. Auerbach (1989) claims that literacy is meaningful to students within the context of its relationship to daily life that is realistic. She discovers that no matter the family’s background, “families use literacy for a wide variety of purposes (social, technical, and aesthetic purposes), for a wide variety of audiences, and in a wide variety of situations” (Auerbach, 1989, p. 170). A family’s home is filled with print in a variety of forms, so students are continually made aware of print in countless ways.

Victoria Purcell-Gates (1996) promotes the theory of situated dialogue in which learners develop implicit and explicit insights of language processes through experience. Instructional practices that stem from this theory promote literacy as a cultural practice and the development of literacy as an all-encompassing process. The student’s sociocultural community determines his or her experience with written language. Purcell-Gates (1996) alleges that each student enters the educational system with conceptual bases or knowledge assembled from methods of home literacy. While other factors affect the development of literacy, experiences with and exposure to family literacy has a momentous effect on a child’s development. She lists diverse literacy events found in the home, including daily living routines, entertainment, school-related
activity, work, religion, interpersonal communication, participating in an information network, storybook time, literacy for the sake of teaching and learning, and text level. In her research, she finds that the majority of print found and utilized in homes involves reading flyers, containers, advertisements, coupons, TV notices, writing to-do and grocery lists, and writing signatures. Homes that are “print-rich” have the capacity to encourage a child’s literacy development.

Auerbach lists several literacy encounters that can happen at home—

“direct parent-child interactions around literacy tasks: reading with and/or listening to children; talking about and giving and receiving support for homework and school concerns; engaging in other activities with children that involve literacy (such as cooking, writing notes, and so on)” (1989, p. 178).

David Barton (2001) suggests that there are six areas of everyday practice of literacy, including organizing life, personal communication, private leisure, documenting life, sense making, and social participation. He states that literacy is integrated in the home environment through print, media, and symbolic systems. Many researchers have suggested that the issue of literacy development is more closely associated with usage instead of being directly related to a deficit in the family environment (Auerbach, 1989). Emphasis on usage has the potential to change the way educators, parents, and students view literacy; placing importance on the fluidity of literacy in a realistic context. Literacy from this approach encompasses multiple forms of print—print awareness inside and outside of the classroom, and making connections between print viewed in various settings.

Attachment is formed through interactions of parent and child in the natural, home setting. One of the avenues to attachment involves literacy; that of parent-child book reading. In her studies, Adriana G. Bus (1989) evaluates multiple studies from
European and American families and makes the discovery that book reading is “the single most important family routine for building understandings and skills essential for reading success” (p. 39). Carolyn P. Panofsky (2000) acknowledges that the practice of parents reading to their children has become a core belief of good parenting practices for most parents in the United States today. Shared reading between parent and child has become a central part of child rearing practices in most homes in the U.S. First Lady Barbara Bush encouraged book reading across public airwaves in the 1980s and, in turn produced a keen consciousness of the importance of such interactions at an early age. A heightened awareness of early literacy practices emerged from such publicity which has influenced the structure of the educational system as well as the family system in the U.S. First Lady Hilary Rodham Clinton also embraced the cause of parent/child book reading in 1997 when she claimed reading as “an easy way to help a baby’s brain grow” (2000, p. 190).

Bus emphasizes book reading as a social process, and as one component of parent/child interactions in which interactive language is used (1989). She also took into consideration cultural factors when researching various parent/child relationships and their frequency of participating in book reading. Child-rearing patterns differ across cultures; therefore, parent/child relationships vary across cultures. The parent/child relationship or emotional connection is determined by culture and book reading is enhanced or inhibited by these factors. Bus asserts that “best practices” should not be used in book reading techniques. Because parents have a vital role in child rearing and development, the encouragement of family literacy practices should be sensitive to each unique family structure. In her writing, Bus (1989) claims that, “each parent-child
interaction is a reflection of the participants’ unique interpersonal style, history of
storybook readings, and socio-cultural norms” (p. 51). The promotion of book reading
as a social norm in American society and culture is ethnocentric in nature because of its
proponents. Book reading as accepted practice in the United States can become an
actualized event and practice for families within the society, across cultures, if the goal is
not to transform other people’s values of language, but to build upon them.

The assertion of a bottom-up approach to reading builds on itself, from the parts
to the whole. The parts, in a bottom-up approach, include recognition of letters,
individual sounds, combined sounds, and continued combinations of skills with the
outcome of reading, the whole. With this approach, the student is expected to develop a
mental lexicon of words and meanings to draw on while reading. A top-down approach
to reading or focuses on the whole language and supports the access of stored knowledge
or experience in forming meaning while engaged in the act of reading. Snow (2001)
identifies four component skills that lead to reading: narrow print skills, language
analysis skills, world and vocabulary knowledge, and skills that are pragmatic in nature.
A child’s familiarity with these skills and mastery of the knowledge represented in each
skill is largely determined by his or her interactions and awareness of such activities at
home. Oral language development, which strongly correlates to home interactions, also
contributes to literacy development. Within family life, there exist microsystems that
directly and indirectly influence the broader systems of school readiness and literacy
development.
The knowledge base of the community is one of the major factors that influence a student’s ability to develop critical literacy skills. Teachers of ESL have a wealth of resources within the students’ community that can support literacy inside and outside of the classroom. Denise E. Murray (1996) suggests that a student investigate his or her own speech community in order to gather data about his or her literary practices. In this way, he or she creates real-world dialogues that can be referenced within the classroom for reading instruction. In Central Falls, Rhode Island, students participated in a semester-long project in which performance work was used to bolster developing literacy skills. Dorothy Heathcote created the process drama approach in which the focus of the classroom is the community of students who cultivate skills that allow them to transfer meaning through an assortment of symbol systems (2001). Within the Central Falls school, students used photography to capture their families, friends, and community. Students were required to express the events happening in their lives and to describe each photograph. The project strengthened the classroom community and linked the classroom to the communities outside of the classroom. By implementing such a project within the classroom, ESL teachers “place students’ lived experiences at the center of the classroom community (and) link them to resources and communities outside the schoolhouse walls” (Landay et al., 2001, p. 73). As demonstrated by this project, the community can positively influence literacy and the classroom can absolutely affect the community.
Another resource that can be employed to bridge the gap between classroom and community is the public library system. The IFLA states that “the library is a locally based service meeting the needs of the local community and operating within the context of that community” (2001, p. 9). The main goals of the public library system are to provide services and resources in an assortment of media to meet needs of individuals for education, information, and personal development (IFLA, 2001). By providing access to print materials at an early age, public libraries can be a major factor in connecting literacy to real life. The majority of public libraries also have community services that foster literacy, such as story-book readings, after-school programs, and summer reading programs. Ward and Wason-Ellam tell of an immigrant mother from the Philippines who said, “I go to the library and get books so my children have books to read. It helped me to learn English when I read to them when they were little. I looked at the pictures then I could figure out what the books said” (2005, p. 103). English language learners can benefit from services rendered from the public library in their communities.

Within the state of Tennessee, the Imagination Library was founded by Dolly Parton in 1996 in an effort to increase the number of literate individuals in Sevier County, Tennessee (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, 2010). Over the last fourteen years, the Imagination Library has expanded and currently serves every state in the United States and multiple other countries. Parton initially founded the service to foster literacy skills in preschool children in her hometown of Sevierville, Tennessee. Parton wanted young children to be excited about reading so she provided one new book every month for children under five years old, free of charge. In 2009, the number of communities that participated in the Imagination Library increased to 1,068, the number of children
enrolled each month reached 561,000, and the Imagination Library distributed 6.2 million books (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, 2010). According to the area coordinator for Knox County’s Imagination Library, there are currently 17,200 children, ages 0-5, who receive books through the Imagination Library (Moore, 2010). The governor of Tennessee has partnered with the Imagination Library to create Books from Birth, a non-profit organization implemented in 2004. Since partnering with Books from Birth, the Imagination Library has grown to reach more children across the state of Tennessee. Books from Birth’s website claims that “currently, nearly 57% of Tennessee children throughout all 95 counties are enrolled in the program” (Governor's Books from Birth Foundation, 2010) Resources within a community can be accessed and utilized by English as a second language practitioners if they are willing to make connections between the resources, students, and families.

Literacy and the Classroom

Culturally responsive classrooms have the opportunity to positively contribute to culturally inherent values held by students. Every classroom is a community of learners, involving the students and teacher(s) in the common purpose of learning. In her research, Kate Parry (1996) finds that “a major locus for the development of a culturally characteristic literacy is the classroom, and the teacher has more influence on the culture of a particular classroom than does any other individual” (p. 688). The teacher in an English as a second language classroom has the chance to join with students to create a classroom culture. The culture of the classroom is determined not only by the individuals
that make up the class, but also by instructional methods used by the teacher. The culture of the classroom affects the instructional techniques and methods utilized by the ESL teacher. The teacher must consider socio-cultural factors as he or she prepares reading instruction for students. The overarching theoretical perspective that stimulates this type of instruction is constructivism. Au (2004) indicates that learning occurs as individuals, based on their experiences, construct their own understandings of the world. Building on a constructivist view of reading instruction, teachers may use approaches such as whole language, the interactive approach, and schema theory to promote literacy development.

In the Essential Strategies Handbook, activating prior knowledge is listed as an essential strategy for effective classroom reading instruction. The authors state that research has shown that when students lack necessary prior knowledge to read, there are three instructional interventions to consider implementing: “(1) teach vocabulary as a pre-reading step; (2) provide experiences; and (3) introduce a conceptual framework that will enable students to build appropriate background for themselves” (Hamblen County Department of Instruction, 2009, p. 2). Moll and Whitmore (1993) urge teachers to support whole language practices within reading instruction. They maintain that whole language calls attention to authentic social contexts in which students are able to try, use, and manipulate language, as meaning is created. In turn, classrooms that contain an extensive amount of realistic print materials also found in homes have the capacity to positively affect literacy development.

Richard-Amato (1996) promotes reading as an interactive process in which the reader creates meaning. Interactive reading involves the learner, the teacher, and the other learners within the context of the classroom. Interactive reading is also able to
bridge the interactions experienced by students in a holistic manner: school, home, and community. The focus of this approach is the individual. Reading instruction capitalizes on the reader’s relationships, experiences, values, culture, prior knowledge, expectations, and dreams and goals (1996). By drawing on prior knowledge and allowing the learner to create meaning from the text, teachers give students the opportunity and ability to internalize skills, form and test hypotheses, alter expectations, re-examine preconceived ideas, and reach a higher level of understanding of the material (1996). Within the interactive approach, teachers have the freedom to ask higher-level questions that require the learner to develop, and use higher-level thinking; students also are required to develop reflective techniques.

The interactive approach to teaching reading is derived from the schema theory in which pre-existing knowledge is drawn upon for the purpose of creating meaning from the text. Through the interactive approach, bottom-up and top-down processing are used simultaneously. In her research, Sandra Silberstein (1994) found that bottom-up (or text-based) processing occurs when linguistic input from the text is mapped against the reader’s previous knowledge. Top-down, knowledge-based, information processing occurs when readers use prior knowledge to make predictions about the data they will find in a text. In her writings, Silberstein encourages teachers to recognize that schemata differs cross-culturally (1994). Teachers must understand that each student’s background knowledge will differ based on his or her cultural background.
Conclusion

Literacy is not a formulaic equation for every individual, in any culture or language. The process of becoming literate is complex, influenced by multiple factors, including first language, culture, family, the classroom, and the community. The task for bridging the gap between these factors can seem daunting and unattainable for teachers of English language learners. On the surface, each of these factors is unique and complex, but upon further review, they are all connected to each other. Socio-cultural factors such as these are intricately tied to one another by nature. If a teacher recognizes one of these factors and its influence on the literacy development of a student, he or she acknowledges the others as well. Teachers must recognize that they are not only instructors, but holistic practitioners. Instruction within an ESL classroom involves implicit instruction of reading with the goal of becoming literate; but the community of the classroom involves meaningful interactions among the individuals and between individuals and the text. Students enter classrooms with culturally held beliefs, family learned values, and community infused ideas; responsive literacy instruction recognizes these factors and uses them to making learning meaningful to students.
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