

# The Challenge of Bilingual and Limited English Proficient Students

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Salina is an attractive blond and blue eyed 13-year-old seventh grader who hardly ever says a word in school. When she does, people have difficulty understanding her heavily accented English. The other Spanish speaking students do not accept her readily because of her fair skin and blue eyes, and they laugh at her Spanish accent, too. She comes from Chile. There, Salina was a popular student with many friends and highly regarded by her teachers. She had been in the top 10% of her class—bright and curious, a talented artist. In this country things are very different for her.

Because the Chilean school year ranges from January to December, Salina had to leave her friends and her school in the middle of the year to start the US school year in August. The family had seen the move as an adventure, an opportunity to improve their circumstances and provide a better future for the children. Salina soon found her new middle school a confusing place where teachers were annoyed when she asked questions and students did not like her showing her intellectual ability. Salina was put in a low level academic class because of her limited proficiency in English. She found the work boring—basic facts she already knew, reams of worksheets and endless rote vocabulary practice. She feels she can not tell her family at home how lonely she is and how much she dislikes school.

Salina is one of a projected 48.2 million children attending school in the United States in 2004 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). She is also one of 18% of the population over age 5 who speaks a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), and one of 8% of the same population who speaks English "less than well" (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2003). Salina has the misfortune to attend one of the 13% of public schools in the United States that offers neither an English as Second Language nor a bilingual program (NCES, 2003, 1997) and is more likely to be placed in special education classes and, as a Hispanic, less than half as likely as a White student to ever be placed in a program for high achieving and gifted students (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

These facts are important because our society needs well educated citizens to preserve our liberty and well being (Jefferson, 1787). Therefore it is crucially important to educate each child for the benefit of society and the future of the United States, and this includes English Language Learners, this rapidly growing segment of the school population (see Figure 1). From the above statistics, it is clear to see that high ability students who speak a language other than English is no longer a challenge only for selected school districts in isolated states with high immigration numbers. As those in education struggle to come to terms with changing federal and state policies, we have to take the education of bilingual and limited English proficient students very seriously.

Rank (estimate*)	Language	LEP Students (estimate*)	% of LEPs (estimate*)	Alternate Names, Variants
1	<b>Spanish</b>	3,598,451	79.045%	
2	<b>Vietnamese</b>	88,906	1.953%	
3	<b>Hmong</b>	70,768	1.555%	
4	<b>Chinese, Cantonese</b>	46,466	1.021%	Yue
5	<b>Korean</b>	43,969	0.966%	

6	<b>Haitian Creole</b>	42,236	0.928%	Haitian, French Creole
7	<b>Arabic</b>	41,279	0.907%	regional Arabic dialect
8	<b>Russian</b>	37,157	0.816%	
9	<b>Tagalog</b>	34,133	0.750%	Pilipino, Filipino
10	<b>Navajo</b>	27,029	0.594%	Dine

From: <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/stats/toplanguages/rank.xls>

**Figure 1.** Top ten languages spoken by linguistically diverse populations in the United States.

Stakeholders are in conversation about the issue. At the Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia in 1989, then President Bush and the nation's governors declared the need to work to "ensure that a significant number of students from all races, ethnic groups, and income levels are among our top performers" (Castellano, 2002, p. 95). In 1997, the first partnership meeting between leaders of bilingual/ESL education and gifted education came together under the auspices of the United States Department of Education Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement to discuss on a national level how to best develop the talents of high ability students who speak English as a second language (Varoz Rogers, 2001). Policy is not enough. Teachers are in the frontlines of educating the youth of America. Teachers can be instrumental in developing the talents and skills of this group of underserved students who will have to take leadership roles in a diverse United States of the future. Teachers have to look at the Salinas and other culturally diverse students in their classrooms, recognize their potential, and support their talent development.

There are students like Salina in many classrooms across the country, and some teachers are learning to recognize their potential through eye opening experiences. Carla was a fourth grader from Honduras who had been learning English for only 2 years when her teacher, Jo Ann Robisheaux, assigned acrostic poems to her class of limited English proficient students for a writing project. Ms. Robisheaux confesses that she had doubted her students' ability to communicate in their second language. This is what Carla wrote:

*How wonderful it was  
 On the boat  
 Near the mouth of the river at  
 Dawn. The sun was pointing at me  
 Under the roof of the boat. The  
 River was wonderful when the sun was pointing at me  
 And the boat was soft in the water;  
 Soft, very soft in the water.*

*Carla 4th grader*

From this experience, Ms. Robisheaux recognized that Carla was imaginative and showed the cultural sensitivity of her language in her writing. It gave Ms. Robisheaux a new understanding of students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. She started paying attention to procedures at her school so that limited English proficient students would not automatically be labeled "slow learners," and she began investigating the teaching strategies that were recommended for gifted students and adapted those strategies for LEP students (Robisheaux, 1997).

### **Gifted and Talented Students**

Gifted education innovations have often lead the general education world in devising best practices for educating the youth of America (Renzulli, in press). There is no federal legislation governing the definition of, or services for, gifted and talented students (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The first federal definition of giftedness (Marland, 1972) suggests 6 different categories of students that qualify for services as gifted students. It includes athletically talented students. The federal definition currently in operation was formulated in 1993.

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools.

**Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor** (Emphasis added) (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 26).

This definition is a guideline only. Each state has the prerogative of defining giftedness and designing its identification procedures and services. The literature suggests that most gifted programs serve students who are White, middle class, easily identifiable by "objective" means such as standardized tests (Frasier, 1995; Karnes, 2003). Despite the last sentence in the current definition, only seven state definitions specifically mention culturally diverse groups by name, including Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans, two states include an "English as Second Language/English Language Learners" category, and two states specifically include a "culturally diverse" category (Karnes, 2003).

The identification procedures for gifted programs used in the majority of school districts in the country are still heavily weighted in favor of IQ and standardized test scores (Castellano, 2002; Kogan, 2001). If test scores are the primary method of identifying students for gifted programs, diverse students, and especially students with limited English proficiency are at a serious disadvantage. The test bias and cultural aspects of tests have been adequately discussed elsewhere (Castellano, 2002; Eels, Davis, Havighurst, Herrick, & Tyler, 1951; Richert, Alvino, & McDonnel, 1982). Few people dispute these findings and the negative effect these identification practices have on the identification of a diverse population of students for special services. Many districts are utilizing a variety of measures such as teacher nominations, parent nominations, self nominations, and portfolios (Kogan, 2001; Frasier et al., 1995; Renzulli, 1983) in an effort to bring more equity to the identification process. What is not often discussed is the cumulative effect of teacher bias when using a matrix of measures as identification procedures for gifted programs (Castellano, 2002; Kogan, 2001). Three types of bias may diminish teachers' ability to recognize high ability: linguistic bias, communication style bias, and cognitive style bias (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Linguistic bias refers to the fact that students' knowledge may not be recognized because of language errors they make in testing situations, academic settings, and/or social conversation. Communication style bias refers to teachers who are not familiar with expression styles of different ethnic groups and therefore misjudge the intent and gist of communication by their diverse students. Cognitive style bias may influence identification of high ability students when they express their ability in ways not matching standardized test performance requirements, or teachers' expectations of how ability should look. Additionally, lack of fluency in English is often erroneously equated with lack of ability in higher order and critical thinking skills (Shaklee & Hansford, 1992). It is no wonder that teachers are unable to recognize high ability in ELL students, since only 30% of public school teachers who are instructing ELL students have received any training for teaching such students and fewer than 3% of teachers with ELL students in their classes hold a degree in ESL or bilingual education (NCES, 1997, 2003).

A variety of factors apart from the cultural ones mentioned above, can prevent children from fully demonstrating their intellect. Poverty is often found in conjunction with cultural diversity (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Myers & Curtiss, 2003). The difficulties experienced by economically disadvantaged students are similar to those experienced by culturally and linguistically diverse students. A lack of access to stimulating educational materials and experiences can hinder children's early intellectual development (Bainbridge, 2002), nutritional deficiencies can compromise their ability to concentrate, interpersonal skills can be delayed by social isolation, and trauma from the immigration process and their country of origin experiences can depress their overall functioning (Schwartz, 1997). Not all students who live in poverty perform poorly academically, but poverty seems to be one of the factors that best predicts low academic performance (Dorman, 2001). Another factor in the lack of student achievement is teacher expectation (Educational Research Service, 1998). Rather than establishing a demanding, yet nurturing environment for LEP students, teacher expectations are lower for these students

In the meantime, many students like Salina and Carla come to our schools hopeful of an education that will enable them to take their place as knowledgeable citizens of the United States. They continue to find, however, little recognition of their culture, language and "funds of knowledge." The question remains: What can be done to give these LEP students the opportunity to develop their talents and help them rise to the top?

### **Where Do We Begin?**

Many schools and districts seem to approach talent development from a programming perspective: We have a program. Which students qualify for these services? A better approach might be to look at talent development from a student perspective: We have students with strengths and weaknesses. How can we best serve them?

Several studies have highlighted exemplary programs to serve diverse populations of students (Delcourt, 1994; Tomlinson et al., 2003). These programs have the following philosophical approaches in common: They focused on

- recognition that a problem of underrepresentation of diverse students exists, and the inclusion in their written policies of intent to identify underserved populations,
- increasing awareness among faculty of cultural impact on student academic performance, and focusing on individual needs of all students, with specific reference to characteristics of diverse populations of students,
- the establishment of program support to help program coordinators and teachers make necessary changes to help develop the talent of these students, and
- parental and community involvement, which is seen as vital to the success of these programs and each child's education.

Many scholars have addressed the issue of identification of diverse students for gifted programs. Some of their suggestions appear in Table 1.

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Table 1

#### Indicators of Superior Ability

<b>Skills</b>	<b>General descriptions</b>
Communication Skills	The ability to manipulate a symbol system The ability to communicate fluently with peers and within community, even if using nonstandard English Verbal aggressiveness, often inhibited in females
Imagination/creativity	Creativity and artistic ability Is good at finding other uses for things
Humor	The ability to see ambiguities and disparities The ability to see the ridiculous, absurd
Inquiry	Likes to try new things Is observant Is curious Likes to read
Insight	Independent thought Grasping new ideas quickly Making jumps in understanding Coping with abstract concepts before peers
Interests	Is interested in a variety of things Has deeply focused interest in a particular topic

Memory	The ability to store and retrieve large amounts of information The ability to manipulate concepts to aid memory
Problem Solving	The ability to use stored knowledge to solve problems Finds many solutions to a problem
Motivation	Has a strong sense of self, pride, and worth Shows personal initiative, leadership ability and an independent mind
Reasoning	The ability to think logically The ability to reason by analogy The ability to extrapolate knowledge to different circumstances
Affective Skills	Nuclear and extended family closeness is highly valued Resiliency, or the ability to cope with school while living in poverty with dysfunctional families The ability to take on adult roles at home, such as managing the household and supervising siblings, even school attendance and achievement Requires touching, eye contact, feeling of support to achieve maximum academic productivity (affective r
Cultural Skills	An understanding of one's cultural heritage Able to function successfully in two cultures
Collaboration	Accomplishes more, works better in small groups than individually

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Maker & Schiever, (1989); Bermudez, Rakow, Marques, Sawyer, & Ryan (1991); Coleman & Gallagher, (1995); Frasier et al., (1995).

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Paying attention to these potential characteristics will be helpful in identifying diverse students for gifted services. It makes no sense, however, to adjust the identification procedures for these students and not adjust the content of gifted education programs to the needs of these students. Many gifted education programs use language-rich curriculum and teaching strategies, with advanced reading and advanced writing expected. There are very few gifted programs that even consider the English language difficulties experienced by minority students or the benefits of their bilingualism. Just as the merits of gifted education continue to be debated, so do the benefits of bilingualism. There is a significant body of research that shows that bilingualism is associated positively with greater cognitive flexibility (Hakuta, 1990), yet there is a lingering belief in many quarters that bilingualism constitutes a deficit, rather than a strength. In teaching students from diverse backgrounds, one has to consider three issues: (a) language, (b) culture unique to each student, and (c) asynchronous development common to all gifted students.

### Language

A teacher of English language learners needs to consider the student's literacy in both his/her primary language (L1), and in English (L2). There is a difference between conversational or social literacy and academic literacy. Many students are quite proficient in social situations that require verbal language skills, but have no experience with academic language and academic skills. The higher the student's academic literacy rate in L1, the easier it will be to transfer basic skills such as reading and writing from L1 to L2 (Cummins, 2000). Students who are linguistically gifted may often be recognized by the degree of code switching they employ (Granada, 2002). Code switching is defined as the ability to switch between two languages within a unit of communication, while preserving the grammatical structure and vocabulary of each language used (Baker, 1998). This is a very complex process, since it indicates the ability to manipulate language, and a much greater skill than that exhibited by students who merely insert words and grammatical structures from one language into another. Another skill linguistically gifted students display is the ability to translate and interpret. Many youngsters act as interpreters and translators for family members who are less proficient in English than they are (Valdés, 2002). When teachers pay attention to these behaviors they are better able to spot high ability in students who are not perfectly proficient in English.

## Culture

Culture impacts all students and teachers. The cultural mix influencing people shapes their perceptions, the way they interact with peers and authority figures, and the way they interpret what they read and learn (Soltero, 2004). Culture as defined in anthropological terms, includes all the ways of living a group of human beings builds up and then transmits to the next generation (Cross, Baker, & Stiles, 1977). The heritage culture of immigrants, the home culture and customs, the community in which a student lives, and the influences of school culture and popular culture all contribute to the varied tacit knowledge and background knowledge of students. If this knowledge and background differs from that of the teacher, it creates potential for misunderstandings. Teachers who are sensitive to student needs may often find answers to perplexing questions about their students in the mix of cultures these students experience (Granada, 2002). Parental and community involvement is critical to help teachers understand their students. Community members can also make valuable contributions to the multicultural knowledge base in the school by sharing their experiences and resources and acting as mentors.

## Asynchronous Development

The final issue that creates great complexity in teaching diverse gifted students is that of asynchronous development. This refers to a student's development at a pace different from his/her peers or when a student develops intellectually beyond his/her chronological age. It is generally recognized as being a clue to giftedness. When dealing with culturally diverse students, there is another level of asynchronosity to consider—the cultural difference, and the linguistic difference (Soltero, 2004). Teachers have to understand the characteristics used for identifying gifted students, but they must also learn to understand how gifted behaviors may differ in a cultural context (Briggs & Reis, 2004).

## Curricular Considerations

Economically disadvantaged children respond to special instructional techniques and curricular considerations that reinforce their talents (Baldwin, 1985). Recommended practices include use of mentors, community involvement, use of concrete examples of abstract concepts, development of creative skills, and focus on affective needs (Udall, 1989). By giving students the opportunity to participate in appropriately challenging enrichment experiences while taking into account language and cultural differences, teachers allow students to demonstrate their abilities within the context of instruction (Renzulli & Reis, 1985; 1997). Several authors have suggested best practices for bilingual and limited English proficient students of high intellectual ability. These authors are in agreement about the following: Use concrete materials and examples as well as hands-on learning experiences to teach abstract concepts; build on student strengths and what they can do well, while incorporating basic skills when necessary; concentrate on affective needs; and encourage mentors. The remaining suggestions are summarized in Table 2.

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Table 2

### Suggested Best Practices in Curriculum for High Ability English Language Learners

Use Strengths	Use creative and problem-solving strengths Aim instruction and language development at students' ability level, both linguistically and conceptually
Curriculum	Use content-rich curriculum that increases challenge and interest Use instructional examples relevant to students' culture and experience Build on students' prior knowledge Develop oral and written language Include leadership training as an important part of the curriculum
Community	Use community members and parents as mentors and resources
Affective Component	Promote students' self-esteem through valuing them, their strengths, languages, cultures, and experiences Emphasize counseling services as a central part of the program
Instructional Sequencing	Sequence information, presenting information and skills in developmental order Cluster information. It enables students to determine connections among ideas and skills Encourage student use of prior concepts and skills in the acquisition of new concepts and skills by parallel

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Udall (1989); Kaplan (1999); Granada (2002); Kogan (2002)

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### **Instructional Strategies**

Teachers could make simple adjustments in instruction to increase the understanding of limited English proficient students like Salina. Give them a preview of important vocabulary to be used in the lesson, not only basic words, but also conceptual vocabulary. Use pictures and concrete examples to make vocabulary comprehensible. Make a habit of using graphic organizers and concept mapping. Allow Salina to do her thinking and processing in Spanish. Encourage her to use graphics and pictures to demonstrate what she has learned. Work with mentors and community members to provide resources in her heritage language. Find a study buddy for Salina who can collaborate with her, especially in translating her thinking into English. Imagine the following scenario: Salina's seventh grade social studies class is studying South America. Salina and her family can be utilized as resources for information on Chile. Her parents could be asked to speak to her class about their experiences in Chile. They could bring artifacts to school for students to explore. Their family photos could make a strong connection between the theory they are learning in their class, and the reality of people who have first hand knowledge of life in that country. Getting to know Salina and her family might mitigate the rejection she is experiencing from her classmates. Perhaps there are more students in the class from other countries in South America. Imagine a round table discussion between students and their parents about the economic systems in their respective countries, about cultural values important in their home countries, about the similarities and differences in language, food, clothing, music, even political systems! Imagine a South American fiesta where students from various countries bring food and music they love, and perhaps make oral presentations about their countries. There might be a student in class who is linguistically gifted and who would be willing to interpret for Salina if she makes her presentation in Spanish. The richness of the learning that would take place as compared to information in a textbook, is exciting and would energize all students in class. It would also show these students (and their parents) that their contributions are valued.

### **Assessment Considerations**

Any assessment should be clearly linked to learning objectives to be useful (Hales & Marshall, 2004). Both teachers and students are consumers of assessments. By using assessment tools wisely, these assessments can inform Salina's learning and the teacher's instruction. When selecting assessments for use with high ability students with linguistic difficulties, consider the following: Selected response measures or multiple choice questions are heavily impacted by language difficulties. These questions and possible answers are often densely and concisely constructed. Salina would have great difficulty understanding the difference between the available options on the following question unless she had been coached well in vocabulary:

- |   |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| <i>As viewed from above the Northern Hemisphere, the Earth's orbit is _____ . (4)</i> |                     |
| A. Counter-clockwise  | B. Circumferencable |
| C. Diametrical  | D. Clockwise        |

It might be a good idea to include a diagram with each option to illustrate the meaning of the words. Essays could be valuable assessment tools if the teacher carefully thinks about what the student can do and what should be required from an essay. It may be advisable to allow illustrations and graphics, and to allow students to write outlines and drafts in their native language. Salina and her study buddy may be allowed to work together on drafting the essay in Spanish and translating it into English. Her teacher might decide to grade only for content and ignore the grammatical and spelling mistakes in a history essay. In language arts class, Salina's teacher may begin by accepting an English outline rather than expecting a full essay, or limiting the number of paragraphs required.

Performance assessments, such as rubrics and checklists can also be used as teaching tools. It is important to delineate the essential components of the task clearly. Consider this example from a poetry project where

students had to collect their favorite published poems and also poems they have written during the span of the poetry unit (De Wet, 2002).

This rubric is simple and clearly stipulates the components of the task. It can be used to explain what will be expected beforehand. For English as Second Language students, the teacher may consider allowing favorite poems in the students' heritage language.

Portfolios are very useful assessment measures because they reflect mastery of objectives, reflect growth over time, and provide a base for communication between students, teachers, and parents (Granada, 2002). Salina's portfolio might contain information about her style preferences such as My Way: An Expression Style Inventory (Kettle, Renzulli, & Rizza, 1998). This inventory is available on [www.gifted.uconn.edu/sem/exprstyl.html](http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/sem/exprstyl.html) and forms part of a Total Talent Portfolio as described by Renzulli (1985). Including examples of her work in all subjects at various times during the semester provides a basis for discussion among Salina's teachers about her strengths and needs. It also provides demonstrable evidence of her development to her parents. By involving Salina in the conversation about which pieces to include in the portfolio, her teacher has the opportunity for meaningful discussion with Salina about her needs, her strengths, and her emotional well being.

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### ***Poetry Portfolio Rubric***

Table of contents properly organized and complete:	...../10 points
Five favorite poems properly presented, spelling correct	...../15 points
Ten self-created poems, correctly written and laid out	...../20 points
Illustrations for any five poems	...../5 points
Total points	..... /50 points

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### **Conclusion**

Salina's parents brought her to this country to maximize her chances at a prosperous future. Unless her teachers help her develop her strengths and compensate for her needs, that chance will always remain a dream. It takes a small adjustment in how teachers view their limited English proficient students. Rather than seeing them as blank slates with no or very little knowledge to help them through school, teachers could view them as contributors of knowledge not usually part of the curriculum. Rather than seeing their lack of proficiency in English as a deficit, see them as people who have a skill many of us do not have - the capacity to communicate in more than one language. Rather than seeing them as a drain on our limited resources, see them as bringing a wealth of experience, cultures and languages to our classrooms. See them as a precious commodity—talent in need of developing.

Perhaps you have a student like Salina in your classroom. Perhaps there is a Carla who will surprise you around the next bend with a talent you had not noticed before.

Remember that you are all people and that all people are you.

Remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you.

Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you.

Remember that language comes from this.

Remember the dance that language is, that life is.

Remember.

—From "Remember" by Joy Harjo

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