# Lecture Transcript

## Session 2: Supporting the English Language Learner

**Dr. Mileidis Gort:** It's wonderful to be here this morning. I'm going to start off by describing and defining the population that we're going to be talking about today. The reason that I'm interested in this topic, and why I'm so passionate about the topic of bilingualism and biliteracy in particular, is because I, myself, am bilingual. I came to this country at the age of eight and I had to learn English, as everyone does when they get here as an immigrant. I had very strong native language literacy skills, and so I was able to easily transfer those skills and pick up and develop English literacy.

If we want to describe what a bilingual learner is, or a bilingual individual, the accepted definition today is, someone who knows two or more languages, to different degrees, and uses these languages for a variety of purposes. No longer do we think of bilinguals as a perfectly balanced person -- someone who speaks both languages exactly the same -- because we know that that's not realistic. Bilingualism, in fact, is not a phenomenon of language. It has more to do with use, and how much bilinguals use their languages. So keep that in mind when you think about the English Language Learners in your classroom. Because if you don't know their native language, there's really a lot of difficulty in trying to figure out, How bilingual are they? The point is that they come to you with a language that they may speak at home or in their community, or when they visit home, wherever that may be, and then English, that they're learning in your schools.

I also want to talk about what a heterogeneous group it is. When we think about English Language Learners, we're not talking about one sort of model student. We're talking about U.S.-born students; we're talking about immigrant students; we're talking about students who come from the Spanish speaking countries, perhaps Puerto Rico, perhaps Cuba, Mexico, Central America, other South American countries, as well as Europe, Africa, and Asia. They may come with many, many different language backgrounds. And you're not always going to get English Language Learners from the same group. So that's also important to think about.

We're also talking about children who come from different socio-economic backgrounds. It's not just children in urban settings who come from low socio-economic backgrounds. But in fact, we may be talking about children who come from very wealthy families. So it's a very, very heterogeneous group. The key message that I hope participants will get from this workshop is that

English Language Learners are in every classroom, in every school, and in every district. It's not just something that urban teachers have to deal with, but in fact, at some point, all teachers are going to have to work with English Language Learners. So I wanted to give you the opportunity to think about these issues, and to come away with some strategies that other teachers have developed that have proven effective.

First I'll start out with the variables that affect second-language literacy learning and development. We know that one of the most important variables is the level of L-1 literacy that the students bring to your classroom. We know that students, who have developed literacy in their native language, bring sophisticated knowledge about literacy to the task of second-language reading and writing. They bring some knowledge and skills. They also bring attitudes about reading and writing based on what they have learned in their native language. If they are already literate or have developed some form of literacy in their native language, it's going to be a lot easier for them to develop literacy in a second language because they have a foundation. That sort of makes sense but it's something that we may not think about.

The second variable is how much support there is for the native language, and how much support there is for bilingualism in the different contexts of school and your classrooms, home, and general society. When students have support for the native language and bilingualism, they're able to use their full linguistic repertoire when engaged in literacy tasks. For example, in classrooms, if there is support for the native language or bilingualism, when they're reading a story, if they don't have the exact word to share the story or what they understood from the story with their peers, they go right ahead and use their native language., And that way they're developing their ideas and they're able to show comprehension

One of the more common misconceptions is that my job requires me to teach these kids English and so I need to stay within the language of English. And if I do anything else, then I'm somehow stepping outside the boundaries. But we know and research shows us that, in fact, using the native language, in many different ways, not just one way, but in many different ways, in fact, makes the path to English language proficiency a lot smoother for these children. We also know, related to this, that home literacy habits and attitudes toward literacy and languages are going to influence children's motivation, attitudes, and proficiency. So the more types of literacy uses they see at home and at school, the more that's going to affect their perceptions of what literacy is used for, and what it's used for in each of the languages. A family's concept of literacy and their practices may be congruent with the school practices, but it may also be incongruent. That's something to keep in mind. And that's not to say that the children aren't reading at home, or the parents aren't doing the kinds of activities we'd like them to do. It may just be that their literacy practices at home are quite different. They may have very rich oral traditions. And so they may sit their child down and tell them stories that have been passed down through the generations, as opposed to sitting with

them on their lap and reading a book. The kinds of things that we do at school.

Cultural factors are also important to think about when we talk about variables that affect literacy development, because culture influences the literacy uses and values. Culture also influences prior knowledge. All children have extensive background knowledge and this is related to life experiences. It may just not be the same as what the mainstream children bring to school. It may be due to socio-economic circumstances. It may be due to immigration status and other factors. So these are some of the things that affect prior knowledge. And again, the key is that it's diverse, not that it's lacking or that these kids come with absolutely nothing. It's just that it's different, and we may not know the right questions to ask. Sometimes we assume children are coming with particular basic background knowledge about whatever topic we may be reading about, or talking about. Or that they come with a particular basic knowledge of certain vocabulary. And in fact, with English Language Learners, we can't make those assumptions. We can't take those things for granted.

Some lessons from second-language reading research. This is information on the second poster. We have learned that literacy skills are acquired once and do not need to be relearned in a second language. Literacy development in the native language is going to support the acquisition of literacy in the second language. So English Language Learners need to learn and acquire the idiosyncrasies of the new language,. but they don't need to learn to read all over again. They don't need to learn to write all over again. They know how to pick up a pencil; they know that the symbols on the page have a meaning; they know that the pictures match the text; they have that knowledge. You don't need to reteach that. The role of second-language proficiency and also the role of background knowledge, again, are very important. This is something that research has shown us over and over again.

We know that limitations in second-language proficiency, in this case, English, are going to affect second-language reading and comprehension. It's going to perhaps make the task more arduous, because if you have trouble with the vocabulary, then you're going to have a really hard time and you may focus on specific words instead of looking at generally trying to get the whole meaning. So teachers really need to find out what students do know, what their funds of knowledge are, what they're bringing to the task, and figure out how to appropriate that knowledge in the service of instruction. We need to be very, very flexible with these learners and not assume that they're not bringing anything. Just find out what it is that they are bringing.

But what you may see -- if you get a child in the very early grades, maybe their first experience with school -- you may see a child that may be unfamiliar with the English alphabet and spelling patterns. They may have limited sight vocabulary in English. They may or may not be able to read simple texts. They may have difficulty

processing beyond the sentence level. They may need more experience with written and oral language. They may or may not understand the purposes of reading and writing. Again, depending on how much literacy they have in their native language. If they have some literacy in their native language, they will understand the purposes of reading and writing. But if they don't, they may not. When we compare that to some intermediate readers who have more experience, we see that intermediate readers may have a larger sight vocabulary. They may have experience with various kinds of texts. They may have higher second language proficiency. They may have developed some automaticity and fluency. They may still have difficulty with unknown vocabulary in texts, but they're probably going to need less assistance and scaffolding than the beginning readers. Because they have more experience with reading. Again, their background knowledge may differ from that of mainstream students.