Topic Brief:
Developing Content-Area Literacy for Diverse ELLs/MLLs in Secondary Classrooms

Introduction

This topic brief puts forth ideas for teaching content-area literacy in secondary classrooms. Because content-area classrooms are often highly diverse, containing students with various language backgrounds, ranges of English and home language abilities, and different types and levels of content knowledge, teachers must be prepared to differentiate their instruction for a variety of learners. In addition, because of the high levels of literacy required for content-area assessments at the secondary level, *all* teachers - and especially those who work with English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners (ELLs/MLLs) - must be teachers of language and literacy.

This brief speaks directly to those educators who work with ELLs/MLLs in content-area classrooms and wish to gain new insights and approaches for teaching content-area literacy. To this end, we organize this brief around several **essential questions**:

1. How can teachers structure content-area classrooms for diverse ELLs/MLLs?
2. What are effective practices for teaching content-area literacy to diverse ELLs/MLLs?
3. How can teachers draw on all of ELLs/MLLs' linguistic resources and teach content-area literacy in more expansive ways?

We begin by outlining several topics that we believe are integral to teaching content-area literacy to ELLs/MLLs in secondary English as a New Language classrooms. We briefly explore existing literature on these important topics, emphasizing practical take-aways for educators. We then move into examples of promising school- and classroom-based practices that demonstrate how content-area literacy can be taught effectively to ELLs/MLLs. These examples draw on real schools, teachers, and students and provide models of successful teaching and powerful learning.

Key Terms and Concepts	
Teaching language through content	To develop the language needed to comprehend and produce in the subject-area language of each discipline.
Language for academic purposes	Language practices that students use for academic purposes
Translanguaging	The ways that bi- and multilingual people use features of their unitary linguistic system that do not necessarily align with socially recognized and defined named languages
Multimodal instruction	When students are given opportunities to use all their meaning-making resources (i.e.: language, movement, visuals, etc.) to share ideas and engage with complex texts and grade-level content

How can teachers structure content-area classrooms for diverse ELLs/MLLs?

In thinking about how to structure the content-area classroom, it is important to think both about the *multilingual ecology* of the classroom, as well as how *collaborative groupings* can be designed to support students and draw on their home languages (Celic, 2009).

Classroom multilingual ecology

Linguistic ecology refers to the visual space (charts, signs, bulletin boards), aural ecology (announcements, audiobooks, podcasts, music) and multimedia resources (online dictionaries, multilingual websites that students access frequently, etc.) of the classroom. It is essential that students' home languages are reflected in this linguistic ecology, and that the visual, aural, and multimedia spaces are organized in ways that can be used to support students in developing content-area literacy (Celic & Seltzer, 2012). While designing your classroom space, think about how each element supports the language demands of a unit. For example, while a multilingual word wall might include words that are connected to a content-area topic, a multilingual anchor chart might provide sentence stems that help students begin each paragraph of a short essay (García, Johnson & Seltzer 2017). At the beginning of a unit, you could engage students in creating a multilingual word wall by finding key words or definitions in their home language and adding them. You could also set up the classroom so there are stations where students can access curated multimedia content that can be used for background research or to model specific content area literacy strategies (Cioè-Peña & Collins, 2016; also see page 6 for ideas on how to incorporate multimodal resources).

Collaboration by design

It is important to think strategically about how to use a variety of collaborative models for different purposes. Since content-area classrooms are highly diverse spaces, it is essential to design tasks that leverage collaboration to help differentiate instruction for a variety of learners. Here are several models that can be integrated into the design of lessons and other activities that can contribute to the development of ELLs/MLLs' content-area literacy:

> *Language partners* can be an invaluable resource for all ELLs/MLLs. In using their home language to make sense of new content in English, they are also building on each other's strengths and knowledge (Freeman & Freeman, 2007; Celic & Seltzer, 2012). Language partners are a particularly important support for *Newcomer ELLs/MLLs* and students identified as *SIFE* as they engage with grade-level content and build content-area literacy.

> *Home language groups* are an important structure for all ELLs/MLLs, but particularly *Newcomers* and students labeled *SIFE* who need additional language and literacy support to do content-area tasks. Students can, for example, work on a math problem in a home language group, discuss the different strategies that they used to solve it in their home language, and prepare to discuss their strategies with the larger class in English.

> *Peer mentoring* is a way to recognize students' expertise and leverage it to help ELLs/MLLs with a diversity of linguistic and content-related needs. If students are particularly strong in a content area, they can help other students who share their home

languages. ELLs/MLLs have often developed their own strategies for developing with content-area literacy that they can share with others.

Key Points

Students' home languages need to be reflected in the linguistic ecology of the classroom. The classroom environment – including visual, aural, and multimedia resources – must be organized to support students in developing content-area literacy.

It is important to think strategically about how to use a variety of collaborative models that help ELLs/MLLs develop content-area literacy in different ways. Some of these models include language partners, home language groups, and peer mentoring.

What are effective practices for teaching content-area literacy to diverse ELL/MLL students?

In this section, we discuss several practices that can help diverse ELL/MLL students develop content-area literacy and build what many refer to as "academic language," but is described here as "language for academic purposes" (see **Box 1** below). For all content-area teachers, and particularly those who teach ELL/MLL students, it is highly important to teach language through content, appropriately scaffold complex, content-area texts, and structure the writing process so that ELL/MLL students with different linguistic profiles and experiences with English can demonstrate what they know and can do in these classrooms.

Box 1: What is a multilingual approach to developing language for academic purposes?

While many educators and policy-makers refer to the importance of "academic language," this term focuses the conversation on only one of the many forms of language that students use in the context of learning in a school (Valdés, 2017). Instead, it is important to shift the focus to developing the language practices that students use for *academic purposes* (García, Johnson, and Seltzer, 2017). This means setting up opportunities for students to "gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, using text-based evidence, as [standards] require" (p.11). For diverse ELLs/MLLs with varying degrees of experience with the English language practices and literacies expected in U.S. schools, it is important that content-area teachers create opportunities for them to draw on *all* their linguistic resources to engage in practices like gathering information and reporting on ideas.

Teaching language through content

As ELLs/MLLs learn the content of various academic subjects, they must simultaneously develop the language needed to comprehend and produce in the subject-area language of each discipline. Teaching language and content together keeps language in its natural context. For example, the vocabulary of different subject areas are part of a system of related terms needed to understand some aspect of a subject (e.g. fractions in math; photosynthesis in biology). As students learn the vocabulary of different content areas, they also come to understand that in different contexts, the same word takes on different meanings (e.g. table). In addition, when teachers focus on language, ELLs/MLLs are exposed to different genres in the context of each subject area (Freeman et al., 2016). Teaching language through content gives students an

authentic purpose for using subject-specific language. In addition, abstract concepts are easier to access and understand when built on the foundation of relevant prior learning and experience such as hands on concrete activities (Gibbons, 2015).

In order to teach language through content, teachers must develop language objectives that align with the content objectives. First, they need to establish the *language demands* of a given unit or lesson, asking themselves, what are the language structures and academic vocabulary students will need to perform these tasks or understand this content? Based on those language demands, developing *language objectives* organizes students' learning of the language structures and subject area vocabulary they need to advance both their language development and their content understandings (Freeman et al., 2016). For example, in a science class, the content objective might be that students should be able to describe how a chemical reaction occurs and explain why it happens after doing an experiment. Two accompanying language objectives would be that (1) students are able to use procedural language to explain the steps in the experiment, and (2) students are able to use sentence frames like "therefore" and "as a result" to explain cause and effect.

Scaffolding complex, content-area texts
Content-area literacy activities designed with ELLs/MLLs in mind should help these students comprehend the text itself and extend their understandings and ideas *beyond* the text. These kinds of activities must occur at three different moments: *before* engaging with a text, *during* engagement with a text, and *after* engagement with a text (Walqui, 2010; Gibbons, 2015). By organizing content-area literacy instruction in this way, teachers set up supportive scaffolds for students and provide opportunities to engage with the content in meaningful ways. Taking this approach to content-area literacy means that teachers do not have to simplify complex content and texts; they must only amplify their instruction to make the content and texts more accessible for ELLs/MLLs (Gibbons, 2015; García, Johnson & Seltzer, 2017). The activities that help scaffold complex texts are as follows:
1. **Pre-reading activities:** These activities occur *before* students engage with a text. They should create a "bridge" between the students and the text they are going to read. They establish students' interest and focus, activate prior knowledge, and introduce new essential vocabulary.
2. **During-reading activities:** These activities actively engage students with the text *during* their reading and make explicit the kinds of literacy strategies that experienced readers utilize unconsciously.
3. **After-reading activities:** These activities extend and deepen students' understandings of the text by asking students to respond creatively to what they have read and connect what they learned to other knowledge, ideas and experiences.

Structuring the content-area writing process
In addition to preparing ELLs/MLLs to engage with content-area texts, teachers must also prepare students to create their *own* texts that explore complex content. One way to do this is to use what Gibbons (2009) refers to as the Teaching and Learning Cycle, which breaks down the genres of school writing (i.e.: narrative and argument writing) so that students understand elements such its social purpose, it's overall structure and organization, and the language features that are typical of it (p.108). This cycle aims to make the elements of any genre

recognizable to students so that they can take up those elements in their own writing. The Cycle contains four stages: building the field, modeling the genre, joint construction, and independent writing. Though Gibbons talks about this cycle regarding writing, this cycle could be used with genres across modalities (i.e.: a speech, a commercial, a podcast, etc.).

Building on Gibbons's work, García, Johnson and Seltzer (2017) provide a Translanguaging Design Cycle that not only makes the writing and text production process clear, but also engages bilingual students in activities and assessments that explicitly leverage their bilingualism. The cycle includes five stages: *Explorar/Explore, Evaluar/Evaluate, Imaginar/Imagine, Presentar/Present,* and *Implementar/Implement.*

Like Gibbons's first stage, the Translanguaging Design Cycle also begins with an *exploration* of the topic/theme of study. As students explore the content, they are also put in the position to *evaluate*, which is the second stage of the cycle. During this stage, teachers might ask students whose voices are heard and which are left out in this topic/theme? Where might you add your own local knowledge and bilingual voices (p.73)? It is here that students *imagine* the answers to these questions through a performance-based task. In this stage, students brainstorm, plan, draft, talk, and research further so they might create something that answers an authentic question or fills a "hole" in the field. The fourth stage, *present*, engages students in peer editing, conferencing, re-writing, and eventually presenting the work they have imagined. The last stage, *implement*, requires meaningful action; it is here that students' writing or other text production comes to life. Here, students might do a final performance, share their work with a larger audience, or create a "campaign" for the school or local community that connects their classroom work to the world.

> ### Key Points
> To **teach language through content**, teachers must develop language objectives that align with the content objectives. This means identifying the language demands of a content-area topic and explicitly teaching students the language they need to engage with that topic.
>
> To help **scaffold complex texts**, teachers can design activities that occur at three different reading moments: *before* engaging with a text, *during* engagement with a text, and *after* engagement with a text.
>
> To **engage students in creating their own texts**, teachers can take up a genre-based, multilingual approach to writing that asks students to engage in both language- and content-learning.

How can teachers draw on all of students' linguistic resources and teach content-area literacy in more expansive ways?

Young people live in a world where they create and use multimodal texts, such as graphic novels, videos, and podcasts, to name a few. It is important to leverage those literacies in the content-area classroom so that ELLs/MLLs can use their full semiotic repertoire to share their ideas, engage with complex texts, and learn grade-level content (The New London Group, 1996). By integrating multimodal texts and providing students with the opportunity to understand

content-area topics through a variety of media and modalities, we give ELLs/MLLs more opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do in content-area classrooms. In this section, we provide examples of how teachers can build content-area literacy using multimodal texts.

Using multilingual listening centers

Creating multilingual listening centers is a way for ELLs/MLLs to engage with texts in both English and their home languages. Listening center activities can be used for a variety of purposes, from building students' background information on a topic to scaffolding their understanding of a complex text in English (Celic & Seltzer, 2012). Multilingual listening centers could include recorded versions of home language texts, recorded translations of English texts, and radio and/or educational podcasts in the home language. Having a listening center is an especially crucial support for SIFE students and other ELLs/MLLs with low levels of literacy in both English and their home languages. To build content-area literacy and help these students engage with grade-level content, you could:

- Have students listen to home language texts or media to build background knowledge on content and/or before they read a content-area text.
- Help students read the content-area text in English. As you help them decode the text, they will be better prepared to make meaning from the words by making connections to what they heard in the listening center.
- Have students take home texts recorded in English and the home language so they can listen repeatedly and follow along with the reading. This will develop their decoding ability, sight word recognition, and reading fluency (Celic & Seltzer, 2012, p.87).

Using multilingual, multimodal research

Multilingual, multimodal research provides ELLs/MLLs with the opportunity to access resources in multiple languages across genres. When planning a research-based unit, consider using videos, radio journalism, podcasts, or links to archives of artifacts. Museums, online magazines, or newspapers often offer curated collections of resources, such as historical images or political cartoons. For example, a global studies teacher might want to use collection of pictorial maps of the wars of the 20th century, put together by National Geographic in Spanish (http://www.nationalgeographic.com.es/historia/actualidad/mapas-pictoricos-guerras-del-siglo_10772/4). Students could view the maps, read the captions, and write notes in their home languages using a graphic organizer with a set of exploratory questions. Viewing and discussing the maps could help ELLs/MLLs to formulate authentic questions that they want to research further.

Using digital tools to prepare for writing

As students make sense of new content, they can use digital mapping tools to create concept maps, timelines, or pre-writing outlines (see **Box 2** for a list of resources for concept mapping, among other digital tools). Mapping tools such as "Popplets" (http://popplet.com) allow ELLs/MLLs to include images, as well as words and sounds, when they are creating concept maps. Rather than freeze in front of a blank page if they are faced with a complex writing task, with a mapping tool enables them to use an image or record their ideas, using multiple languages to plan and get their ideas out before writing.

> ## Box 2: Resources for Incorporating Digital Tools in Content-Area Literacy
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> *Online Mapping* tools allow students to organize their thoughts on a topic in a systematic way. They can help students to creatively make connections to ideas, discern important points and map outlines for papers. These are particularly useful for Newcomer ELLs/MLLs because they can start by using audio and images to share their ideas. Two websites that provide mapping tools are SimpleMind (https://simplemind.eu) and Popplet (http://popplet.com).
>
> *Visual Storytelling* tools allow students to create short videos using still images, music, and titles. These are well suited for content-based final projects. You can use Adobe Spark (https://spark.adobe.com) or PhotoStory (https://microsoft-photo-story.en.softonic.com/download)
>
> *Digital Comics Making* tools provide students with an opportunity to explore the genre of comics. Students can create comic strips using their home languages and English. You can use Make Believe Comics https://www.makebeliefscomix.com/Comix/ or Pixton (https://schools.pixton.com/schools/overview)

> ## Key Points
> Providing ELLs/MLLs with texts in both English and the home language across a variety of media and modalities provides them with more entry-points into content-area topics and discussions.
>
> To help students create their own texts around content-area topics, teachers can design opportunities to engage in multilingual, multimodal research and to do conceptual mapping and create final projects using multimodal digital tools.

Promising Practices

In this section, we step into several content-area classrooms that have taken a multilingual, multimodal approach to developing content-area literacy for diverse ELLs/MLLs. In each vignette, you will see teachers take up several of the ideas put forth in the previous sections. After we describe the classroom practices, we provide insights into the ways in which the teachers developed content-area literacy for the many different ELLs/MLLs in their classrooms.

Classroom Practice: Scaffolding and Collaborative Work to Develop Content-Area Reading Comprehension

The following vignette illustrates how one teacher used pre-, during-, and after-reading activities to scaffold complex content and texts in a high school Global Studies classroom. The teacher's 10th grade students are all learning English, but have had different levels of exposure to the literacy practices expected of them in U.S. schools. Because many of her students are labeled SIFE, the teacher must scaffold grade-level content-area texts in ways that draw on their rich knowledge and help them develop their language practices for academic purposes. She sets up these content-area literacy activities for her students in the following ways:

Before reading a text about the start of World War I and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the teacher gave students, who were mostly from the Dominican Republic, the following scenario:

> *The United States has taken over the Dominican Republic. People are no longer allowed to speak in Spanish, and the country is controlled and run by the U.S. Discuss in language partners: How would you feel? What would you do?*

After the discussion with their language partners, students shared their ideas with the whole class in English. After the class had engaged in a lively discussion, the teacher used her Multilingual Word Wall to point out Spanish-English cognates for key vocabulary words (i.e.: *nacionalismo*/nationalism, *imperialismo*/imperialism).

Next, the teacher divided the class into small home language groups to do a "jigsaw reading." Each group read a short paragraph from a longer text in English that explained what was going on in different parts of Europe before World War I. The groups then collaboratively wrote down key information from their paragraph on sticky notes in their language of choice (either English or Spanish). Along one wall of the classroom, the teacher had put up a blank timeline with the years leading up to World War I. After reading their section of the historical text, the groups added their sticky notes to the relevant section of the timeline and shared their thoughts with the class in English. When necessary, the teacher would ask students to translate one another's comments from English to Spanish or to translate for a student who was still emerging in his English speaking abilities.

For the remainder of the class, students were given an excerpt from graphic novel in English entitled, "World War One: 1914-1918." Students read independently, annotating their texts in English and Spanish and making connections to the scenario they discussed at the beginning of class as well as the article they had read in pairs.

Through the pre-reading activity – which took the form of a scenario that students discussed in language partners – the teacher was able to introduce two complex key concepts before students read a text about the run-up to World War I: nationalism and imperialism. This made-up scenario was intended to help the students make a personal connection to what was happening in Europe at the time, as well as introduce key vocabulary in English by connecting it to Spanish cognates. The during-reading activity, which jigsawed a complex text and asked students to work in home language groups to note key information from the paragraph on sticky notes, helped them stay engaged with the text and synthesize the complex content in the language of their choice. The after-reading activities helped students to put their understandings into a larger historical context and to extend their abilities to use English for academic purposes with the teacher's and their peers' support. The scaffolding that occurred prepared students to read a multimodal text independently in English and to connect a new text to the understandings they had built during the lesson.

Classroom Practice: Using Video Production to Prepare ELLs/MLLs for Standardized Tests

The following vignette illustrates how an ENL teacher used video production to provide a platform for students to create short video tutorials for the English Language Arts Regents exam, fostering metacognitive and metalinguistic reflection. The goal of the project was for the students to review the different strategies that they learned and to solidify their understanding by explaining to other ELLs/MLLs how to apply them. The videos were targeted at younger students who could use them to prepare for the ELA Regents exam in the future.

In preparation for creating short ELA Regents exam tutorial videos demonstrating reading and writing strategies that they had learned, the teacher first modeled reading strategies, such as marking up text using color coding and writing margin notes. While the text was in English, she modeled this strategy using students' home languages to annotate. After she had modeled this strategy, the students practiced the strategy on their own and debriefed, sharing their notes using a document camera. While they shared, they explained their decision making process for what to write and how to color code.
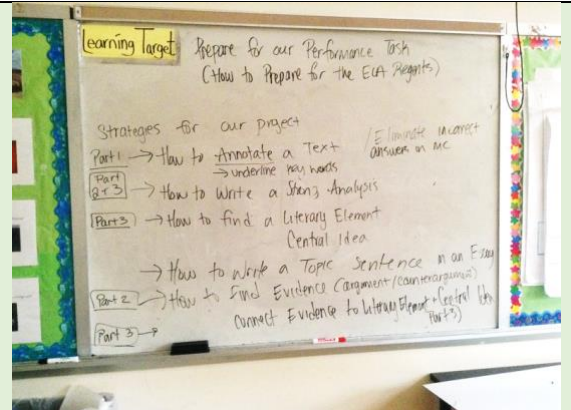
After the students had learned and practiced using a number of reading and writing strategies, they reviewed them and created a class list. The teacher showed the students short examples of tutorial videos that demonstrated how to do various things, from writing a short story to doing an intricate hair style. The students discussed how the videos were produced and how the visual and aural elements were integrated to convey a message. In groups of three, the students chose a test-taking strategy, planned, storyboarded, and shot bilingual videos for younger students in the school, modeling the strategy and explaining when it was appropriate to use it.

In this project, ELLs/MLLs had an authentic audience of younger students who would benefit from the tutorial videos. To create the videos, they also had to think about the best way to communicate using images, titles, and audio (narration), creating a complex, multilingual, multimodal text as they worked collaboratively in a group. For all ELLs/MLLs, but in particular those ELLs/MLLs at the early stages of their English development, it is helpful to be able to access texts and create projects that don't rely only on linguistic signs, but that also incorporate images, music, sounds, and other conventions used in multimodal communication. Having access to these videos taught by their peers using language practices they understood helped the diverse ELLs/MLLs at the school prepare for a rigorous exam in English.

Classroom Practice: Text "Re-presentation" to Develop Content-Area Writing

In a linguistically and culturally diverse math classroom, an ENL teacher "pushed in" and co-taught with the content-area teacher. The two teachers designed a variety of activities that they

used to scaffold and develop students' abilities to write about their learning in mathematics. A text re-presentation means taking a linguistically challenging text or a complex idea and providing students with the opportunity to "re-present" that text or idea in a less linguistically-challenging genre. In the math class, the teachers took the complex text of *word problems* and came up with a variety of ways that students could re-present those word problems in creative ways that also scaffolded their learning and, eventually, their ability to *write* about their learning.

After introducing their diverse ELLs/MLLs to the mathematical formulas for measuring area, volume, and surface area for different geographical objects, the two teachers gave students a task: they had to take a geometry word problem and "re-present" it as a bilingual children's book. In small home language groups, students worked together using their full linguistic repertoire to:
- Read and deconstruct their assigned word problem, which was provided in both English and the students' home languages
- Solve the word problem
- Create a narrative from the word problem that would serve as the basic plot of the children's book
- Write short children's books in both English and their home languages that not only explained the word problem but demonstrated how to solve it.

Before they created their children's books, the ELLs/MLLs in the class were given a number of multilingual children's books to get exposed to how the genre was organized, such as how the different languages were organized, how pictures or images were integrated into the text, and how the general "arc" of the story was constructed. They then got to work planning their own stories.

After sharing their finished products with the class, the teachers asked the students to "re-present" their texts once again! Now that they had created children's books that explained the word problem and how to solve it, they would now turn those texts into personal emails from them to a friend or family member explaining the same concept. The group talked about how the new text would be different, from how much detail about the mathematical concept they'd have to include to how their language and style would have to change.

First, we see that the teachers were strategic in how they taught students how to write: they introduced features of a given genre, helping students understand how to read and then write in ways that aligned with that genre. Second, the teachers thought carefully about how they would scaffold this writing process for their ELLs/MLLs, who had different language backgrounds, levels of exposure to genres commonly found in U.S. schooling, and content-area literacies in both their home languages and in English. By starting with a less linguistically-complex genre – the children's book – students were supported as they worked out how to represent their mathematical learning in writing. By then moving into the genre of a personal email, the teachers gradually increased the levels of complexity – both linguistic and content-related – that students would have to articulate through writing. Through this fun activity, the teachers were able to assess their diverse ELLs/MLLs content knowledge at the same time they developed their language and literacy practices.

Key Points

In this section, you read about how different teachers use multiple strategies to build content-area literacy among diverse ELLs/MLLs. Here is a summary of some of those practices:

- Scaffold reading through pre-reading, during reading, and after reading activities
- Design collaborative work in home language groups to develop content-area reading comprehension
- Engage students in multimodal projects that foster metacognitive reflection, draw on home language resources, and help prepare them for standardized tests
- Create projects that involve text "re-presentation" to scaffold content-area writing and encourage students to use all their linguistic and meaning-making resources.

Conclusion

When teaching ELLs/MLLs, *all* teachers must see themselves as language and literacy teachers. For these students, whose backgrounds, experiences, and language and literacy abilities vary greatly, it is not enough simply to teach content and expect them to find success. Instead, teachers must teach language *through* content, finding creative and engaging ways to scaffold complex grade-level content and texts. By organizing your classroom and your instruction so that students are exposed to a variety of texts – written and multimodal, in English and in students' home languages – as well as a variety of well-structured opportunities to develop their reading comprehension and writing practices, you can better understand what your ELLs/MLLs know and can do as well as how you can *extend* those skills and knowledge in ways that will help them find success in content-area classrooms.

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