Providing social-emotional and academic supports to SLIFE: What every teacher needs to know

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Abstract

Recent trends of migration have contributed to the growing number of Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) in our K-12 classrooms in the United States and worldwide. Simultaneously, the visibility of SLIFE in academic publications from around the world (i.e., Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; DeCapua et al., 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2022) contributes to a general understanding of best practices on what this population needs and how teachers can best help them. In this article, we rely on recent and relevant available publications, as well as personal experiences, to recommend essential *social-emotional* and *academic* considerations that teachers and stakeholders should know to support SLIFE effectively. The social-emotional considerations shared include social and emotional needs, cultural dissonance, connections to programming and services, and interpersonal relationships. The academic considerations shared are programming, first language (L1) literacy instruction, appropriate scaffolding, oscillating target language (L2) literacy instruction, and authentic learning beyond the school walls.

Keywords: academic support, social-emotional support, students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), literacy education and instruction

Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)[1] are a growing population in our K-12 classrooms. This population of learners is highly diverse, heterogeneous, and arrives in our learning spaces with unique strengths and needs that many of their English learner (EL) counterparts may not have. In recent years, the visibility of SLIFE has been increasing in academic publications from around the world (i.e., Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; DeCapua et al., 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2022) which has contributed to our general understanding of best practices on what this population needs and how teachers can best help them. In this article, we rely on recent and relevant available publications, as well as personal experiences, to recommend essential *social-emotional* and *academic* considerations that teachers and stakeholders should know to effectively support SLIFE.

The term *students with limited or interrupted formal education* was coined by DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang (2009), updating the previously-used term *students with interrupted formal education* (SIFE). In their book, DeCapua et al. (2009) added the 'L' to the term *SIFE* to indicate that some of the students in the group have more than just an *interrupted* education but may have extremely *limited* formal schooling experiences. Students with interrupted formal education are a subset of newly-arrived ELs who are receiving increased attention around the world. In this article, we have chosen to use the acronym SLIFE for the primary reason that, although there are numerous terms for this group of students, SLIFE "is currently the term most commonly used when discussing recent-arrival adolescent English learner (EL) students" (Browder, 2019, p. 43).

SLIFE is the acronym now used by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA; see WIDA 2022), the creator of the most widely used placement and assessment tool in the United States, as well as the term used in the forthcoming iteration of the Newcomer Toolkit by the U.S. Department of Education. While there is no universal description of who qualifies for the term SLIFE, and there are challenges connected to its operationalization (see Browder et al., 2022), most educational agencies and organizations apply the term to students who have at least two years of interrupted formal education due to a number of possible factors, most of which were beyond the family to control, such as violence, political or religious restrictions, or economic hardship. In addition, SLIFE may limited backgrounds in reading and writing in their native language(s) and may be below grade level in most academic skills (Freeman et al., 2002).

Introducing Ourselves and Our Writing Perspective

We would like to take this opportunity to share information about us and the vision behind the writing of this manuscript. Luis Javier Pentón Herrera is a Cuban-born teacher who was exposed to the topic of limited or interrupted formal education early in life. His father attended school up to third grade and his paternal grandmother never joined formal schooling. Growing up, Luis Javier knew that his paternal grandmother could not read or write, but did not understand why. One day, he heard someone use the word *analfabeta* (illiterate) to describe his grandmother and, from that day forward, he became obsessed with learning the intricacies of literacy and reading and writing. As a teacher in the United States, Luis Javier has taught Spanish and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) in all grades (K-12) and has supported SLIFE in K-12 and in adult learning contexts. The experiences he is most fond of is working with and supporting Indigenous SLIFE from Guatemala in high school, which lead to different publications (e.g., Pentón Herrera, 2021).

Brenda Custodio worked with refugee-background students in a large urban school district, where she helped to create a newcomer program to meet the needs of the predominately SLIFE population. Her experiences led to the publication of three professional development books: one

on newcomer programs (Custodio, 2011), one on Students with Interrupted Formal Education (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017), and one on supporting immigrant students who have experienced trauma (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020). The last two books are co-authored with Judith O'Loughlin.

Judith O'Loughlin is an educational consultant and teacher trainer. She has thirty years of teaching in public schools in the U.S. in English, English as a second language, and special education, in small population, low incidence programs. She has also worked in Japan at Soka University, as a visiting professor, teaching graduate candidates how to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to young learners. She has trained teachers in credentialing programs in the areas of second language acquisition and learning, bilingual special education, sheltered instruction, SLIFE, differentiating instruction and strategies, and curriculum development in ESL and EFL low incidence programs. She is the author of chapters in several edited publications, and the author of the Academic language accelerator (O'Loughlin, 2010) and co-author (with Brenda Custodio) of Students with interrupted formal education: Bridging where they are and what they need (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017) and Supporting the journey of English learners after trauma (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020).

The three of us are practitioners who have supported SLIFE for many years of our lives. We believe SLIFE transformed our perspectives about teaching and learning and also taught us how to be more compassionate and supportive educators. When we first encountered SLIFE in our classrooms, we realized that our teacher preparation programs had not prepared us to support this student population and, to date, SLIFE continue to be hugely underrepresented and invisible in teacher preparation programs in the United States (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2022). For this reason, we came together to write this article for teachers working with and supporting SLIFE. Although the context and experiences shared in this manuscript are primarily connected to SLIFE in the United States, we believe this manuscript can also be helpful for teachers in other countries.

During the preparation of this manuscript, we reviewed—to our knowledge—all available publications about SLIFE, which remain remarkably limited in size and depth. From these publications and our personal experiences, we compiled a list of social-emotional and academic considerations that teachers can read about and use in their classrooms to support SLIFE. Our goal with writing this manuscript is to make the information presented here as clear and practical as possible. As practitioners, we know first-hand the enduring gap between theory and practice in language teaching and learning (Ur, 2019; Yin, 2019), which is partly caused by the highly sophisticated, philosophical language used in the texts assigned in teacher preparation programs. As such, we hope to present clear, concise, and practical suggestions in this manuscript that teachers can readily use to support SLIFE in their learning spaces.

A Note of Clarification About Our Positionality and Language Used

Given the rising tensions and lingering concerns in the field with terms and deficit-focused vocabulary, we find it necessary to explain our positionality and how we use language in this article. The three of us are practitioners who taught SLIFE in different grade levels in K-12 and adult education. As such, we experienced first-hand the challenges SLIFE endure in formal school settings due to the lack of available research and practitioner knowledge on how to best support them. Thus, we understand that the vocabulary we use throughout this manuscript, such as the word *limited*, may be perceived as deficit-based terms. However, our intention is not to approach the conversation about SLIFE from a deficit-based standpoint or a place of judgment. Instead, we

use this term and other words throughout the manuscript descriptively, referring to the prior formal schooling experiences of SLIFE and offering practical solutions that teachers can use. We acknowledge that SLIFE and all students arrive with assets and proficiencies that extend well beyond formal education settings, such as personality assets, emotional intelligence, and resilience, to name a few. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this manuscript, we focus on social-emotional and academic supports within the formal school setting and, specifically, on the SLIFE population that arrives with developing print literacy, little to no experience with formal schooling, and with social-emotional needs. For a deeper conversation about the problematization of the term SLIFE and similar terms to describe students with interrupted or limited formal schooling, see Browder et al. (2022).

Social-Emotional Considerations to Support SLIFE

Story from the Field: Told by Luis Javier Pentón Herrera

Jacqueline (pseudonym), an 18-year-old student, arrived to our high school from Honduras with very limited formal schooling experience. She was hard of hearing (which also affected her speech), so schools in Honduras could not support her learning and she stopped going to school during her elementary school years. When she arrived in our classroom, Jacqueline was terrified. Tears would often run down her cheeks during class and, during class changes, she would freeze in the hallway frightened by the large number of students expeditiously moving from classroom to classroom. Formal schooling in the United States was, in many ways, a brand-new experience for Jacqueline that was proving too overwhelming, prompting her to consider dropping out of school. I, along with Jacqueline, her mother, and a school counselor, designed a plan to tend to Jacqueline's social-emotional needs and keep her in school. We recognized that supporting her social-emotional needs was vital for her learning. Our plan proved successful, and Jacqueline completed successfully two years at our school before being transferred to a school that could best cater to her hearing needs.

Jacqueline's story is a real story; one of many stories from SLIFE. Many SLIFE, such as Jacqueline, arrive to our schools with many strong emotions they do not know how to deal with. In our experience, no learning can take place when students are distraught, afraid, or suffering from social-emotional issues. As such, and based on our collective experience supporting the social-emotional needs of SLIFE, we share four relevant social-emotional considerations teachers should keep in mind when supporting SLIFE, namely: (a) social and emotional needs, (b) cultural dissonance, (c) connections to programming and services, and (d) interpersonal relationships. We recommend that these four social-emotional considerations are addressed simultaneously (or before) the academic consideration shared below for the benefit of SLIFE.

Social and Emotional Needs

Due to their life experiences, it is not uncommon for SLIFE to be dealing with the effects of trauma in their lives both before and after arrival. DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang (2009, p. 40) list the following social-emotional, affective needs of SLIFE:

- Social, emotional, and psychological isolation due to family separation

- Difficulty developing formation of social identity

- Unclear sense of belonging and purpose

- Limited community support network

- Cultural adjustment difficulty

These and other social and emotional challenges are compounded by the frustration of trying to adapt to a new school environment and blend into a peer community, which at times, may be hostile. How can a classroom teacher provide the support that is vitally needed? When students first arrive, entering a safe and welcoming environment is critical. For some students, school may be the safest portion of their day. Teachers who understand the backgrounds of their students, even in a general way, can better help students navigate the transition to the new life (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020). Often, it is the bilingual or ESOL teacher who becomes the mentor and advisor. It does not require a therapist degree to show empathy and support. The structure and routine of the school itself can become central to the healing of a trauma-background student. See Pentón Herrera (2020) for some examples of how teachers may incorporate social and emotional learning in the ESOL classroom.

Cultural Dissonance

In addition to the obvious academic challenges encountered by SLIFE, often their worldview is in a jarring disconnect to their new context.

> Learners with no, minimal, or limited exposure to formal education generally do not share the expectations and assumptions of their new setting. It is these learners who are likely to struggle and find themselves confounded by the ways in which the language and content are presented, practiced, and assessed (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013, p. ix).

This situation and the feelings of alienation, disorientation, or not belonging that SLIFE experience in schools has been labeled as *cultural dissonance* (Ibarra, 2001). Cultural dissonance in education creates confusion, and sometimes conflict, for SLIFE who are moving into a new school culture, academic learning, and unfamiliar cultural environment. It is often the 'hidden curriculum' that creates confusion about a school's academic and social expectations for all students. Just as many ELs, SLIFE bring with them their own cultural norms, including the ways they learn, behave, interact, and communicate. Social and cultural expectations in Western schools are not obvious to newcomers from other cultures.

"The concept of the 'hidden curriculum' refers to a number of unspoken and, even unwritten, behaviors and norms existing within an educational institution" (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020, p. 92). These are unspoken physical and social aspects within a school. Further, the hidden curriculum is the school's subliminal culture, which is often defined by artifacts present throughout the physical building, including awards, artwork, and school signage available only in English. It tells students, without words, 'this is the way we do things around here.' The physical aspects of a school show SLIFE what the school stands for and supports. For example, when you see cases of trophies, awards, walls with banners, and mascots celebrating athletics, when you enter the building, you know the school values the students who excel athletically. Or the school may have photos and artifacts from social events such as school plays, clubs, and dances, showing that the school values social involvement. There are often unwritten or unspoken years of common practice norms of social behavior in hallways, lunchrooms, classrooms, and outdoor school areas that are expected of students, but never explained. Finally, when there is no visual representation of the diverse population in the school, such as flags, maps, signs in multiple languages, and/or artifacts from the cultures in the school, SLIFE feel confused and unwelcome.

It is beneficial for teachers to know about the hidden curriculum because certain attitudes and behaviors, even though often communicated nonverbally, are expected of all students, and they are extremely difficult for SLIFE to comprehend without being provided with both guidance and specific instruction. Richard Lavoie (2005) asserts that all learners, with appropriate and differentiated instruction focused on their needs, can master the standard "3R" curriculum (Relevant, a Review, and Realistic), but their success in school can be negatively affected if the hidden curriculum, consisting of an expansive variety of social skills and strategies, including peer interactions and group dynamics, is ignored. The ESOL professional is often the person playing the role of game master for the students with interrupted schooling as they learn to adjust to this new culture.

Connections to Programming and Services

Some issues experienced by SLIFE can best be resolved with the support of informed and caring school personnel such as guidance counselors, social workers, and nurses. For example, schedules that allow students to work while continuing their education can make a difference for students who are supporting themselves and their families. Also, counselors who can help SLIFE make informed decisions about the value of a high school diploma and realistic post-secondary options are critical. The pathway to college and career training is complex even for native English speakers, and navigating this system requires support from experts, either inside the school system or through community organizations.

All too often, SLIFE enter formal schooling with issues that are beyond the classroom teacher and sometimes even the school system itself to provide. They may (or may not) be living with extended family for various reasons and need social services such as clothing, housing, utilities, and food support. Students and families who are undocumented may also need affordable health care, including vision, hearing, and dental. Some schools have been able to meet this need with school-based health clinics, some of which also have counseling services. Students who enter the country as unaccompanied minors may be reunited with family members, including parents, whom they have not seen in several years. The reunification process can be extremely stressful for all concerned and may require outside assistance to make the transition smoother. Some students may also need legal assistance with immigration issues for themselves or their family members. Immigration attorney fees are extremely costly, and finding affordable legal aid may require knowledgeable community assistance.

Interpersonal Relationships

At its heart, effective teaching and learning begin with the establishment of clear, positive interpersonal relationships among classmates and teachers. For SLIFE, specifically, establishing positive human bonds with their classmates and teachers may affect their learning experiences and whether or not they decide to remain in school or drop out. At the same time, fostering a culture of respectful interpersonal relationships can help prevent disruption in the classroom, for example, having some students make fun of SLIFE for their developing print literacy skills (see Pentón Herrera, 2021). Teachers should keep in mind that due to their life experiences, forming human bonds may initially prove difficult for SLIFE, a common effect of having experienced trauma (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020). For example, some SLIFE may not know how to form interpersonal relationships with classmates or peers of their age group, which may generate feelings of isolation and exclusion in the formal schooling environment. Paulo Freire (1998) reminds us that "the relationship between educators and learners is complex, fundamental, and

difficult; it is a relationship about which we should think constantly" (p. 60). Educators should consider the building and maintaining of caring interpersonal relationships among students and teachers as a vital step of social and emotional support for SLIFE.

Academic Considerations to Support SLIFE

Story from the Field: Told by Brenda Custodio

One year, a student from El Salvador enrolled in our newcomer program. At first, he seemed to be fitting in well and making academic progress in his subjects and in English. Then he began having issues with attendance and behavior. Discussions with the counselor revealed that he was living in an apartment with three other teens. All four were in the United States without family and were pooling their money from their restaurant jobs to survive. Our student was working late at night and having difficulty getting up in time for school. He did not have time to work on schoolwork in the evening and had no one available for emotional or financial support. We adjusted his schedule to allow him to come late to school, began weekly check-ins with the counselor, connected him with community agencies for food and clothing, and alerted the teachers about his issues. He was able to make it through the schoolyear, but never came back the next year. Even with all the academic and social supports we were able to provide, we still wondered if there was more we could have done to support him to stay in school.

The vignette shared by Brenda is a real story from the field. SLIFE often have lives and realities outside of school walls that are different from non-SLIFE, through no fault of their own. Their realities often collide with the rigid formal schooling agenda and priorities, which makes their participation and integration even more challenging. Thus, when supporting SLIFE' academic needs, formal schooling should consider SLIFE' realities to better support their success. In this section, we share five relevant academic considerations teachers should keep in mind when supporting SLIFE, namely: (a) programming, (b) first language (L1) literacy instruction, (c) appropriate scaffolding, (d) oscillating target language (L2) literacy instruction, and (e) authentic learning beyond the school walls. In our view, these five academic considerations are essential and non-negotiable for SLIFE, especially during their first year of formal schooling in their host country. As an important reminder, these supports will take time and practice from both teachers and SLIFE. Also, the type of support needed will vary depending on the amount of previous formal education the student has experienced.

Programming

Suggestion 1: Daily SLIFE Programming

It is important that SLIFE be welcomed into a program that is designed specifically for them and their needs. When designing these programs, teachers and stakeholders need to detach themselves from traditional school programming mindsets. SLIFE programs should be tailored-made for their unique needs, which are often different from the needs addressed in traditional school programming. Designing and implementing a program tailored specifically for SLIFE may require multiple steps and processes at different hierarchical levels. See Custodio (2011), pages 15-17, for an example of a checklist for establishing a newcomer program, which often may be one of the best methods for supporting SLIFE because, while all SLIFE are, by definition, newcomers, not all newcomers will have interrupted schooling. In this section, we primarily focus on programming at the building level (i.e., schedule of classes and instruction). Important considerations teachers, school counselors, and school administrators should have when welcoming SLIFE are:

- SLIFE need a sheltered, day-long program designed specifically for them. While this may not be possible in schools and districts with low numbers, SLIFE will benefit from being assigned to classes that provide instruction in L2, print literacy (i.e., reading and writing) in the L1 when possible (more about this in the section below), and the delivery of content in the L2 with heavy L1 support. See Table 1 below for an example of a day-long SLIFE program for high school. Note that, except for the L1 language professionals, all the other classes should be taught by certified ESOL teachers. For clarity, throughout this article, we will use the term L1 language professional to include all professionals teaching SLIFE in their L1, which may be world language teachers, L1 tutors, bilingual educators, and/or L1 specialists, to name a few. Also, we recognize other terms used such as English as a second language (ESL) teacher, English language development (ELD) teacher, and English learner (EL) teacher. For consistency, we use ESOL teacher throughout this article.

- Whenever possible, the class size for SLIFE needs to be small (less than 15 students). SLIFE require constant informal and formative evaluations to ensure they are following the instruction, and need individualized scaffolding. In mixed (SLIFE and non-SLIFE), large classes, SLIFE tend to become invisible and teachers are unable to provide adequate support, which may lead to stagnation, demotivation and, eventually, dropping out of school (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; Pentón Herrera, 2021).

- SLIFE require individualized content- and language-based support at their level (Windle & Miller, 2019). This means that teachers should approach SLIFE with an inquisitive mindset of wanting to learn about where they are and start instruction at that level. Instruction for SLIFE should be flexible and adjust to the specific needs of the student when possible (Custodio, 2011; Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017), especially during their first year of school.

- Have a paraprofessional or co-teacher in the classroom to provide individualized support.

- Courses offered in the SLIFE program should count toward their credit count for graduation. For adolescent SLIFE in high school, specifically, this consideration is of utmost importance as many of them have very limited time to graduate before they reach the maximum age to continue attending public school. One way to do this is by providing elective credits for their initial transition courses.

- Involve certified guidance counselors who are familiar with the issues and challenges of SLIFE and how their developing knowledge of formal secondary schooling (6-12 grade) protocols affects their ability to make informed post-secondary choices.

Table 1. Example of an Ideal Daily SLIFE Programming in High School

Class Period and Times (45 minutes)	Courses
1st Period: 7:45 am – 8:30 am	English (focus on four language domains in L2)
10 minutes of break	10 minutes of break
2nd Period: 8:40 am – 9:25 am	Literacy (focus on print literacy in L2)
10 minutes of break	10 minutes of break
3rd Period: 9:35 am – 10:20 am	Mathematics (taught in L2, heavy L1 support)
10 minutes of break	10 minutes of break
4th Period: 10:30 am – 11:15 am	L1 print literacy tutoring*
10 minutes of break	10 minutes of break
5th Period: 11:25 am – 12:10 pm	Science (taught in L2, heavy L1 support)
30 minutes of lunch	30 minutes of lunch
6th Period: 12:40 pm – 1:25 pm	History (taught in L2, heavy L1 support)
10 minutes of break	10 minutes of break
7th Period: 1:35 pm – 2:45 pm	Study hall with support

*NOTE: L1 print literacy tutoring is a class for SLIFE with the same L1. The class should be tailored to L1 print literacy instruction. See more information in the "L1 support" section below.

A final point we would like to make about Table 1 is that, during the last hour and ten minutes (or last class period of the day), SLIFE need time to study independently, in groups, and/or with teacher support. During study hall, SLIFE have the opportunity to work on homework or assignments, and they can use the paraprofessional and ESOL teacher(s) to support them as needed. This daily time is vital for SLIFE as they are learning to become familiar with the daily routine of formal education, and with the concepts of homework and independent study. Also, SLIFE may not have adults at home who are able to support them academically because their parents may also have limited or interrupted formal education, or students may be unaccompanied minors. For these reasons, the study hall provides additional opportunities to help students succeed in school by completing assignments and homework with a teacher and/or classmate's support.

Suggestion 2: Programming for Low Incidence Programs

Low Incidence ESOL programs are programs in which there are small numbers of multilingual learners at each grade level and thus making it difficult for a school to create a program that serves students by grade level. In addition, language level programming is also difficult since there are usually no significant clusters of learners at any one language level. Teachers in low incidence programs often create multi-grade multilevel pull-out instructional groups for elementary instruction. At the secondary level, students are taught together in one multi-grade multilevel class for multiple class periods during the school day. Instruction is designed around themes in a content area, such flight, habitats, forces within nature, revolution, communities, or heroes. The instructional units introduce cross-content topics within the theme and vocabulary, such as science

and math, social studies, and language arts. Reading materials (content picture books, trade books, and thematically organized ESOL texts) and assignments are differentiated by language level. Under this programming model, students work in whole group and cooperative group reading/writing/oral language practice activities.

L1 Literacy Instruction

First language support is a staple of effective ESOL instruction. However, for SLIFE, L1 support needs to go a step further because many SLIFE have limited print literacy in their home language. In addition to providing L1 scaffolding in L2 content classes, SLIFE programs need to incorporate daily L1 tutoring services where the L1 language professional focuses on L1 print literacy instruction. Ideally, the L1 language professional and ESOL teacher will work on a model similar to parallel teaching where the L1 language professional reviews the content students are learning in at least one of the L2 courses (e.g., Mathematics, English, Science, etc.) while focusing on L1 print literacy. In this class period, students need to be grouped or separated by their L1, and each group works with their L1 language professional. During these L1 print literacy classes, instruction may move along the L1-L2 scale; that is, students may primarily use L1 to talk about the content learned in the L2 courses.

We understand that L1 print literacy tutoring may be a fairly new concept for some countries, such as the United States and that L1 language professionals may not have the preparation for it. However, we emphasize the vitality of offering L1 print literacy services to SLIFE on a daily basis. Pentón Herrera & Duany (2016) share some considerations and topics of interest that Spanish teachers/tutors can use to support SLIFE' L1 print literacy. Also, Winlund (2020) shares details of how L1 tutoring services are offered to Somali SLIFE via translanguaging (Otheguy et al., 2015). In cases where there is no available L1 language professional for the student's L1, that class period should be dedicated to additional individualized instruction in the L2.

Appropriate Scaffolding

The introduction of new information to SLIFE needs to be (1) contextualized, (2) connected to the students' prior knowledge, and (3) scaffolded through multimodal designs and through the combination of oral transmission with the written word (see Marshall & DeCapua, 2013; Frydland, 2022). Contextualized instruction is commonly defined in the literature as teaching and learning that focuses on the delivery of specific content by providing concrete applications (Baker et al., 2009; DeCapua et al., 2020). SLIFE need highly contextualized instruction to draw on students' prior knowledge, experiences, and linguistic repertoire while connecting this information to the students' real world. Kidwell (2022) shares examples of highly contextualized language instruction where she and her co-teacher included real photographs of locations in the neighborhood (e.g., post office, bank, etc.) to introduce vocabulary. This way, students could connect the new vocabulary (i.e., content) with real-life applications or places (i.e., context) and 'see' how the new information is relatable and useful in their present life. An important consideration is to limit the amount of new information taught to SLIFE and to create opportunities to revisit and revise this information to promote memorization. For example, Kidwell (2022) suggests teaching no more than a dozen new vocabulary words at a time to increase good reception and memorization.

Connecting instruction to students' funds of knowledge (see Moll et al., 1992) and prior background solidifies the acquisition and retention of new information (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; Kidwell, 2022; Windle & Miller, 2019; Winlund, 2020). This means that teachers should

first learn about their students' backgrounds to effectively incorporate activities and information that is relevant to them and their lives in the host country. At this step, forging meaningful personal relationships with students is necessary to learn about them, their interests, and their experiences. As explained by Frydland (2022), forging open and trusting relationships with SLIFE requires teachers to share information about themselves, create a welcoming and safe environment, and model information-sharing techniques/protocols. Linville and Pentón Herrera (2022) share an example of how an ESOL and an art teacher collaborated to use a student's background knowledge to transform decontextualized text into contextualized art. Also, Winlund (2020) reports how a teacher relied on their students' geographical background knowledge about their native countries as a starting point to explain the equivalents in their host country.
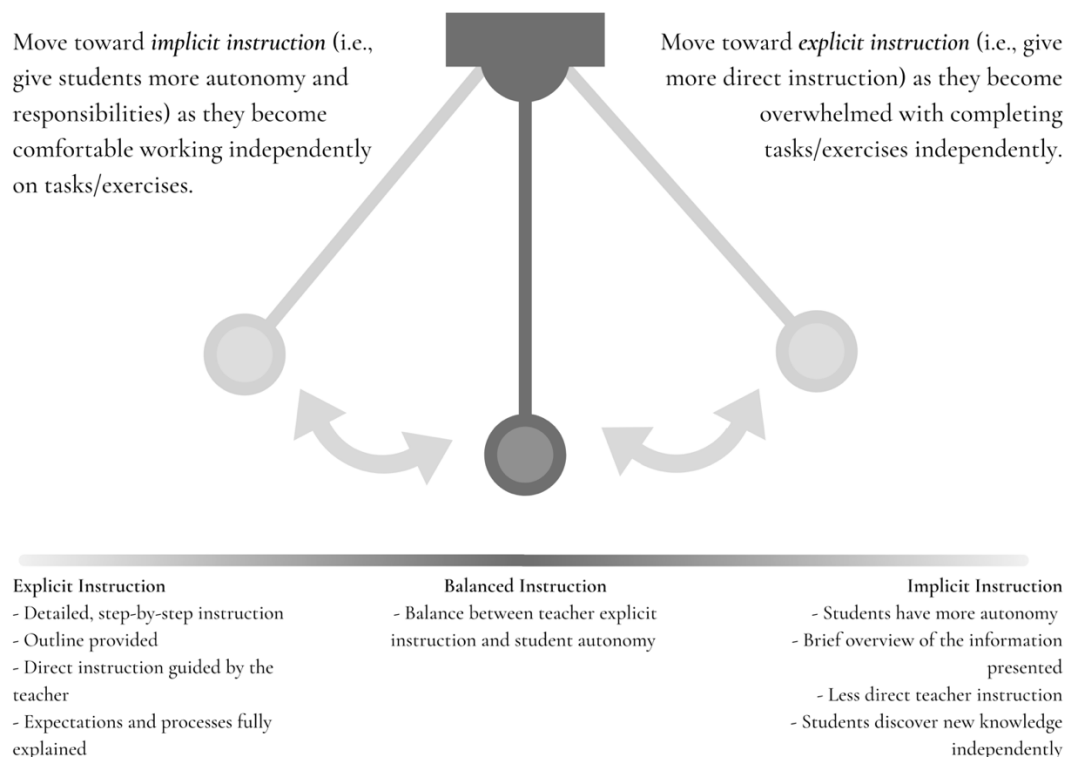
Lastly, when introducing information to SLIFE, teachers should rely on multimodal designs and on the combination of oral transmission with the written word. In the literature, multimodal designs are understood as a combination of two or more modes of resources that promote meaning (see Kress, 2010). In the classroom, this translates to designing the introduction of topics by relying on two or more modes such as visual (e.g., image), text (i.e., written language), sensory (e.g., audio, smell), and gestural (e.g., body language, acting, total physical response [TPR]), to name a few. For SLIFE, it is essential that teachers use multimodal designs during instruction, always relying on oral transmission as a foundational requisite for delivery. Teaching content through only one mode of instruction (e.g., using speaking only, or using text only) is not helpful for SLIFE (Custodio, 2011; DeCapua et al., 2020; Winlund, 2020); instead, SLIFE benefit from teaching that includes an oral component (introduce information orally), and rely on at least two additional modes. For example, teachers can introduce vocabulary about fruits by saying the name of the fruit out loud (oral component), showing a picture of the fruit with the word/text (visual and text modes), and having students touch and smell the actual fruit (sensory mode).

Oscillating Language Instruction

When we welcome SLIFE into our learning spaces, we should keep in mind that, in addition to being new students in the host country, they might also be participating in formal education for the first time in their lives. This means that, regardless of age, SLIFE need to be explicitly taught what is expected from them in a formal school environment and what constitutes acceptable behaviors in school (see Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). Examples of formal schooling expectations that SLIFE may not be familiar with can range from waiting in line to organizing their notebook and taking notes (Frydland, 2022). From the moment SLIFE arrive in our classrooms, everything they are experiencing needs to be considered learning; all information is new content knowledge for them. With this in mind, teachers should be mindful that language instruction for SLIFE needs to follow an oscillating pattern, that is, moving repeatedly and flexibly from side to side. More specifically, language instruction should oscillate from explicit to implicit, and from contextualized to decontextualized language instruction.

In the literature, explicit instruction is understood as a direct and structured form of teacher-guided instruction (see Friedman et al., 2022). In explicit instruction, teachers explain in detail the expectations, content, and step-by-step processes that students need to follow to learn and complete tasks. On the other hand, in implicit instruction, educators do not explain in detail the goals or expectations. Instead, in implicit instruction, teachers present the information or problem by creating opportunities for independent, conscious learning (Khamesipour, 2015), where students can 'discover' the solutions, answers, or conclusions by themselves. In the first weeks (or months) of school, language instruction for SLIFE should be predominantly explicit (e.g., modeling

effective note-taking skills, explaining the content in detail, and showing them how to complete tasks) and, as students become more comfortable, the teacher can slowly assign more responsibilities to them by moving toward implicit instruction. This practice of language instruction needs to follow a continuous pattern of oscillation to avoid overwhelming SLIFE; the goal is to find a balance between guided language instruction, slow release of responsibilities, and return to guided language instruction until the student is ready for additional autonomy, as shown in Figure 1.

Move toward *implicit instruction* (i.e., give students more autonomy and responsibilities) as they become comfortable working independently on tasks/exercises.

Move toward *explicit instruction* (i.e., give more direct instruction) as they become overwhelmed with completing tasks/exercises independently.

Explicit Instruction
- Detailed, step-by-step instruction
- Outline provided
- Direct instruction guided by the teacher
- Expectations and processes fully explained

Balanced Instruction
- Balance between teacher explicit instruction and student autonomy

Implicit Instruction
- Students have more autonomy
- Brief overview of the information presented
- Less direct teacher instruction
- Students discover new knowledge independently

Figure 1. Oscillating Implicit-Explicit Language Instruction

Similar to explicit and implicit instruction, SLIFE benefit from oscillating contextualized and decontextualized language instruction. In formal education, contextualized language instruction is understood as teaching, learning, and assessment practices aimed at developing specific language skills in specific contexts (Baker et al., 2009; DeCapua et al., 2020). The importance of contextualized instruction for SLIFE is best seen in Marrero Colón and Désir (2022), who share the story of Ronaldo, a student with limited formal education who was able to graduate from an auto technician certification program by learning language (and content) in a highly contextualized environment. On the other hand, decontextualized language instruction, preferred over contextualized in formal education settings (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2010), "consists of language parts divorced from the whole, such as grammatical abstractions often found in school textbooks" (Winlund, 2000, p. 4). Teachers should find opportunities where students can first learn language in context and then transition to using that vocabulary in decontextualized conversations. In the section below, we share more information about how teachers might be able to accomplish this through authentic learning experiences beyond the school walls.

Authentic Learning Beyond the School Walls

Opportunities for authentic learning beyond the school walls, such as virtual and in-person field trips and spending class time in the students' community, serve as a starting point for literacy instruction and helps SLIFE transition from *contextualized* to *decontextualized* modes (Kidwell, 2022; Frydland, 2022; Pentón Herrera, 2021; Winlund, 2020). In a recent study, Pentón Herrera (2021) shared the story of Traquilino, a student struggling in the traditional school setting. In this study, Pentón Herrera (2021) learned that, for Traquilino, experiences in the real world were more beneficial and preferred, and also contributed to language learning and retention of contextualized information. Similarly, Kidwell (2022) found that taking the adult SLIFE with whom she worked to the local grocery store during class hours to learn how to weigh produce and information about money motivated students and helped them learn the information (i.e., content) in a contextualized real-life setting. Lastly, Frydland (2022) and Winlund (2020) report how taking students to field trips in the community helps them use the contextualized knowledge they learn in these real-life experiences in decontextualized settings. That is, students were able to acquire, retain, and transition from general words or vocabulary learned in the field trips, to more specific (or academic) vocabulary, such as using the word *dinosaur*, instead of *animal* (Pentón Herrera, 2021), and calling a river by its proper name instead of saying 'water' (Winlund, 2020).

Final Thoughts

We would like to end this article by acknowledging that the information we share here is non-exhaustive. There are multiple layers filled with factors that teachers and stakeholders serving SLIFE should consider, such as state-level requirements in teacher preparation programs (see Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2022), pre- and in-service teacher professional development (see Ledger & Montero, 2022; Marrero Colón & Désir, 2022), advocacy for SLIFE (see Linville & Pentón Herrera, 2022), family involvement and family literacy education for SLIFE (see Cruzado-Guerrero & Martínez-Alba, 2022), the intersection of gender, identity, and formal schooling for SLIFE (see Trinh, 2022), and concerns with the operationalization and definition of SLIFE for placement purposes (see Browder et al., 2022), to name a few. However, our goal in this article is not to address all the challenges SLIFE face but to offer essential, practical, and accessible social-emotional and academic considerations that teachers need to know to support SLIFE in their learning spaces, especially those with very limited experiences in formal school settings. We hope this article will serve as foundational reading in all programs educating pre- and in-service teachers. Also, we hope scholars will use this information to continue advancing the knowledge of how to best support students with limited or interrupted formal education around the world.

Note

[1] SIFE or SLIFE usually refers to students who have entered U.S. school districts with at least two fewer years of academic education than traditional newcomers. SIFE and SLIFE are used in different areas of the U.S. as interchangeable terms, with the latter term including the word 'limited', concretely expressing what is implied in the former term. Other terms that are used around the world to describe SLIFE include low-literate refugees, learners with limited prior schooling, or students with minimal, severely interrupted or no previous formal schooling, to name a few. For clarity, the term *SLIFE* is plural.

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