

Rethinking Literacy Instruction to Non-LEP/ESL-Labeled Language Minority Students

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This qualitative study examines three non-limited English proficiency (LEP) / English as a second language (ESL)-labeled Chinese American students' English language and literacy performance in mainstream classrooms. Multiple methods were adopted for data collection, including interviewing the focal students' teachers and their parents, observing and audiotaping classroom interactions, and collecting student work. Findings indicate that although the focal students passed the ESL placement test and standardized tests when entering public school, they still showed needs in developing specific areas in English as a second language and sociolinguistic competence. However, findings demonstrated that such needs have been overlooked in class and also ignored by the mainstream curriculum. Even if their teachers noticed that the focal students' use of English language was different from other English monolingual students, the teachers did not consider the difference as a serious problem and did not feel the need to make any accommodations for them. Therefore, this study attempts to expand mainstream teachers' understanding of language minority students; it advocates that literacy developmental needs of language minority students should not be understood simply through labels used by schools to classify students and scores that students obtained on high-stakes tests which are the judgmental criterion of mainstream valuing.

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

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INTRODUCTION

After reading the story *Allie's Basketball Dream* (Barber, 1998), Ms. Baker asked students to use the key words to make a sentence. Xing chose the word *bounce*.

- Xing: I bounced the basketball to Trevor; he dribbled up the field.
Ms. Baker: Field?
Parker: A basketball doesn't have field.
Students: NO! Not the field. Court!
Ms. Baker: Thank you. Next, Parker.

Looking embarrassed, Xing lowered his head and mumbled in a very low voice. Xing was a fourth grader at Northside Elementary School; he was not classified as an LEP (limited English proficient) student in school. In this vignette, Xing made a wrong word choice which was obvious to his peers. However, his teacher, Ms. Baker, did not stop to provide him any support and continued her lesson.

Since U.S. schools now serve more than 14 million children nationwide who come from households in which English is not the primary language, teaching language minority students to read and write well in English is an urgent challenge in the nation's K–12 schools (August & Shanahan, 2006). By federal law, school districts are required to offer English as a second language (ESL) services to language minority students to improve their English language proficiency skills. So far, rich literature (Genesee, Geva, Dressler, & Kamil, 2006; Jiménez, García, & Pearson 1995) has addressed various language and literacy instructional needs of language minority students who were receiving ESL/bilingual services in school. However, based on the definition of language minority students—which refers to students whose home language is other than English (Thomas & Collier, 2002)—language minority student populations are diverse, including students who have been classified as LEP/ESL and are eligible for ESL/bilingual services, and those who are not LEP/ESL-labeled (e.g., former ESL students who exited from the services and U.S.-born children of immigrants who passed the ESL placement test when entering the school). The second group of language minority students is underrepresented in the field of language minority education.

Relatively few studies investigate whether there is a need for providing English language instruction or assistance to language minority students who are not classified as LEP/ESL by K–12 schools and yet speak a language other than English at home. U.S.-born/raised language minority students, through schooling, probably have developed conversational fluency and basic language skills through different mediations (e.g., social contact). If they passed the ESL placement oral proficiency test when entering school, they might not receive any formal instruction on specific aspects of English as a second language.

Moreover, many mainstream teachers are not trained to fully understand language minority students' level of English language proficiency and even overestimate their proficiency "because of their apparent ease and comfort with conversational English" (Watt, Rosessingh, & Bosetti, 1996); the teachers treat non-LEP/ESL labeled language minority students as native English speakers (Cummins, 2000). However, this group of language minority students' socio-cultural and language learning experiences are quite different from English language learners classified by schools, as well as English monolingual students.

Cummins (1981, 2003) identified three dimensions of language proficiency that English language learners (ELLs) must master in order to succeed in American schools, including conversational fluency (i.e., communicative language), discrete English skills (i.e., specific aspects of English linguistic knowledge), and academic language. Only acknowledged by their conversational fluency, language minority students' learning needs have been ignored by the uniformed classroom practices informed by the homogeneous curricula (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

Gersten and Woodward (1995) conducted a longitudinal study on 117 language minority students' academic performance on Iowa Tests of Basic Skills after exiting transitional bilingual programs and being mainstreamed since fourth grade. Being tracked from fourth grade to seventh grade, the students performed under the 25th percentile in reading and vocabulary. As shown in research studies (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Thonus, 2003), when *generation 1.5* immigrant students entered colleges, their lack of academic writing skills has been identified and the call for ESL support has been placed by their college professors. Additionally, the Florida Department of Education reports that "between 12 and 20 percent fewer former English language learners pass the state's test than fluent English speakers in math and reading at grades 4, 5, 8, and 10" (as cited in De Jong, 2004, p. 5). De Jong investigated academic performance of 38 fourth-grade ESL-exited students and 56 eighth-grade ESL-exited students; she found fewer exited students scored at the *proficient* level in English Language Arts as compared to regular education students. Research studies above indicate that after exiting from ESL/bilingual programs, language minority students still need some support and have the continued need for developing English language competence. Yet, very few studies have explored specifically what English language-related areas non-LEP/ESL-labeled language minority students need to improve and what their learning needs are. The lack of research on the non-LEP/ESL-labeled language minority students became the impetus for the study described in this article.

Based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, language and literacy skills develop as human beings participate in the social, cultural, and historical activity using symbolic mediation, which starts before students enter school. In the area of the influence of social environment on language learning and

literacy development, Heath (1983) uncovers the importance of sociocultural contexts in children's literacy development, as well as their learning habits. The reason that children of two rural working-class communities experienced a hard time adjusting to school requirements and standards is the different sociocultural environment in which they grew up and the parents' different ways to socialize their children with language and to develop children's literacy skills compared to "townpeople." Pérez (2004) also explains, "A view of literacy from a sociocultural theory of learning seeks to understand the cultural context within which children have grown and developed" (p. 4). Therefore, language and literacy development consists of both linguistic skills and sociocultural competence on the symbolic representation of meaning.

The unique challenges traditional ESL students face in acquiring academic English language include specific sentence and text structures, culture- and content-specific concepts and vocabulary, and prior knowledge (Barone, Mallette, & Xu, 2005); it is important to learn if the focal students, although not classified as LEP/ESL, still need improvement in such areas. Especially, drawing on the data from a larger study, this study aims at answering the following questions:

1. What ESL-related learning needs do the focal students have, although not LEP/ESL labeled?
2. Do their teachers provide any ESL support to the focal students in class? If not, what are reasons that lead to the overlooked learning needs?

METHODOLOGY

School Site and Participants

Three Chinese American children at Northside Elementary School participated in the study. Table 1 indicates student demographics. The school served 1,119 students, according to the Texas Education Agency 2007–2008 school report card.

Although the school has a diverse student population, it is neither an ESL nor a bilingual campus, and no ESL/bilingual specialist works on campus. The LEP-classified students are bused to another school to receive the ESL service in agreement with their parents. According to adequate yearly progress (AYP—a statewide accountability system), this K–5 school was rated as *exemplary* by the Texas Education Agency in 2005–2006, *recognized* in 2006–2007, and *exemplary* in 2007–2008.

Table 1. Student Demographics of Northside Elementary School

Category	Northside	State Average
White	52%	35%
Hispanic	35%	47%
Asian or Pacific Islander	8%	3%
Black	4%	14%
Native American	<1%	<1%
Economically Disadvantaged	7%	55%
Special Education	8%	10%
Limited English Proficient	2%	17%

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2007-2008

Born in the U.S., May was a third grader and taught by Ms. Flower when she participated in this study. Ms. Flower is a White, middle-class woman who has taught at the elementary level for more than 10 years. Lan and Xing were twins and born in China, but they came to the U.S. with their parents at the age of 3. They were fourth graders and taught by Ms. April and Ms. Baker. Ms. April is bilingual in Spanish and English, but she told me she would not speak Spanish in class, as I observed. She believes English is the language spoken in school, and Spanish is the language spoken at home. Ms. Baker, a young White teacher in her 20s, moved to Texas 2 years ago.

I got to know the three students through the Chinese heritage language (CHL) schools they attended on Sundays where they were developing their Chinese literacy skills. I was curious about how the two types of schools (i.e. mainstream and CHL schools) prepared them to develop their bilingual and biliteracy skills. I then got the permission from the appropriate school and district personnel to sit in their mainstream classrooms. I was perceived by the focal students as a researcher who wanted to know how their learning experiences in schools helped other children learn Chinese and English. The three mainstream teachers saw me as a researcher and learner who wanted to understand what literacy practices were implemented in mainstream classes and how the focal students performed on literacy tasks.

According to the local school district's registration regulation, if a language other than English is indicated on a student's home language survey (HLS), the student is referred to the student placement center as part of the registration process. The center provides oral assessment and academic assessment (second grade and above) for new-to-district students. Before attending Northside Elementary, the focal students all attended daycares in the U.S. at the age of

3 or 4, where English was used as the only language in communication and instruction. The focal students were not qualified for ESL services because they passed the state-proved English oral proficiency test when they entered Northside Elementary as kindergartners or first graders.

The three children were chosen to participate in the study because of their similar backgrounds. They attended the same public elementary school located in a middle-class neighborhood. They are all from middle-class families and their parents are highly educated (i.e. at least one parent of a household has a doctoral degree from an American university). They are not classified as LEP/ESL at Northside Elementary School and seen as “academic achievers” by their teachers. Also, the literacy instruction is still part of the curriculum of the third and fourth grades, helping students develop literacy strategies to read and write more independently.

Data Collection and Analysis

I adhered to a qualitative approach of data collection and analysis because the qualitative data can help to understand “the nature of phenomena” (BeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). During the focused 6-month field work, participant observation was used to collect data about what language arts/reading lessons are delivered in class, and how the focal students performed in such practices. I utilized the audio-recorded classroom observation data to check the accuracy of the field notes, and I verbatim transcribed relevant parts that could help answer the research questions. I typed the detailed descriptions of the settings and individuals based on the information recorded in the field notes. After data had been collected, I reread and analyzed the field notes and then coded data consistently into categories (e.g., Ms. April’s perspective on home language and English, Lan’s struggles in class). Once coding was complete, I narrowed down categories and reorganized them into key themes that were relevant to this study (e.g., teachers’ perspectives on literacy development).

The semistructured interviews with the three Chinese American students’ teachers and their parents were conducted to collect data about their perceptions and beliefs of the focal students’ learning experience at Northside Elementary. I transcribed all interviews verbatim and translated parents’ interviews into English if the original transcripts were in Chinese. I read interview data and coded them into categories (e.g., language spoken at home). I then reviewed participants’ remarks, looking for interconnections in their perspectives to interpret the data.

Furthermore, other artifacts such as writing samples were collected whenever it became possible to grant another source to analyze the focal children’s performance on literacy practices. Multiple sources of data collection help triangulate data to gain interpretation through multiple perspectives and cross-

check emerging themes so as to build up trustworthiness and the credibility of the qualitative analyses. Additionally, to validate the findings, I used member-checking in data analysis. For example, I showed the teachers the interview transcripts to verify the comments they shared with me. Additionally, I had a third-party reviewer to review the coding data, the identified categories, and the key themes.

FINDINGS

In this section, I first provide a detailed description of the three teachers' views on literacy development and the focal students' learning needs, since their views directly shaped their instructional practices and reflected their values and beliefs. I then use examples of the focal students' literacy performance to demonstrate their learning needs in the areas of sociolinguistic knowledge, vocabulary, and specific linguistic knowledge related to ESL.

Teachers' Perspectives on the Focal Students' Learning Needs and Literacy Development

When I met the three public school teachers (Ms. April, Ms. Baker, and Ms. Flower) for the first time and mentioned to them the three students with whom I worked, they all commented that the focal students were smart, good at math, and top students in their respective classes. Ms. Flower said, "I never worry about May's performance and I didn't see any problems." Ms. Baker commented, "Xing is very intelligent, good at math. He is my top student." Ms. April also told me, "Lan is very good at math, very smart."

In terms of literacy development, Ms. Baker believed that literacy was acquired in a streamline from grade to grade. She added:

It [literacy development] also depends on home language as well. It depends on how parents speak to their child, how they are spoken to, and how they speak with one another ... when they [parents] are with their kids, their parents interact with them in appropriate grammar and then beyond fourth grade, what they write they use skills they learned to formally write papers, to formally write letters, to formally use writing to get their creativeness and thoughts across and in a well-composed manner.

Acknowledging Xing's parents were non-native English speakers, Ms. Baker expressed her concern, "If you are in this environment that your child has been sent to the school, learning English all day, then the teacher expects them to go home and be part of an English-speaking environment." Ms. Baker

expected Xing's parents to speak English at home and support Xing with basic English language skills because her expectation of her students was "when students came, they already have a basic knowledge of language." Ms. April, Lan's teacher, believes that literacy is developed through reading and schooling. She also shares similar expectations as Ms. Baker; she hopes Lan's parents can speak more English at home. Ms. Baker and Ms. April appeared to favor using English over language minority students' first language both in school and at home.

Ms. Flower related literacy development with a rich literate environment, so besides various literacy practices in school, she expected parents to read to their children every day. She elaborated that "literacy comes through oral conversation, being exposed to books, being read aloud to, and then develops to lots of modeling, lots of opportunities to good literature, to hear read-alouds, to practice reading themselves, and to writing activities as well." In her elaboration, Ms. Flower did not explicitly explain which language should be used in the literacy activities. She then asked me if May's father read bedtime stories to May: "He probably didn't read her bedtime stories, right? [Pause] Probably not in English, I guess." I had a conversation with May's father about literacy-related activities at home, so I shared with Ms. Flower, "Her dad read to her stories in Chinese." Hence, Ms. Flower, in her earlier comments, probably meant "in English" regarding creating a rich literate environment. However, Ms. Flower was not aware that even if language minority students' parents could speak English, they probably chose to speak Chinese at home for various reasons, such as the hope for their children to maintain their heritage language and/or become bilingual.

When I asked Ms. Flower if May had any English language learning needs, her instant reply was, "No. She isn't an ESL student. Their English skills are so advanced." In a second, Ms. Flower paused a little and mentioned an incident. "May was placed in a reading gifted program in her second grade, but was dropped in the second semester. It might relate to the reason that her first language is not English."

According to the interviews with the teachers, although they knew the focal students' first language is not English, they thought the students did not have any special needs in English language development. The teachers expected that the focal students already acquired English language because they were not LEP/ESL-labeled as emphasized in their comments; hence, no continuous support from the teachers on second language development was needed. As shown in the following teaching episode, it was not surprising to observe that literacy instruction taught by the focal teachers was not designed to address language minority students' learning needs in English as a second language.

During a language arts session, Ms. Flower was teaching adjectives that compare. She showed a sentence, "Crabs have harder hardest shells than shrimp" on the board, asking students to write the correct adjective on their

white board and then show their answer to the class. Many students read aloud, “harder.” Ms. Flower smiled, “Yes, harder. The one needs to end in e-r.” May erased the word *hardest* as quickly as she could. Ms. Flower showed the second sentence, “That chameleon has the smaller smallest eyes I’ve seen.” “Ok, write down the one you think is correct. 5-4-3-2-1,” Ms. Flower counted. May wrote *smaller* on her board and held her board quietly. “Smallest,” students answered loudly. “Right. Smallest,” Ms. Flower confirmed the answer. “Why not slowest?” one student asked. “Can you have slowest eyes?” Ms. Flower asked. “No,” students laughed. May noticed she chose the wrong answer and erased her board quietly. During this whole-group activity, Ms. Flower did not explain reasons for the correct choices; instead, she simply confirmed students’ correct answers. Also, she did not notice that some students like May did not have the correct answers on their boards all the time. In the next section, I turn to the focal students’ learning needs in ESL as demonstrated through their English literacy performance in class, which also indicate what additional ESL support teachers need to provide to facilitate and maximize the students’ learning.

Learning Need 1: Overlooked Sociolinguistic Competence

Lan and Xing were usually very competitive and confident in class. Also, they were attentive in class and actively answered questions raised by their teachers. They completed class assignments very quickly. Watching Lan finishing her assignment, I once talked to her, “Wow, Lan, you are so fast. You finished already?” She responded to me confidently, “Of course.” However, both Lan and Xing were silenced in an idiom mini-lesson. According to Ms. April and Ms. Baker, idioms were introduced in the fourth grade as an example of figurative and descriptive languages to help students become more-detailed writers. The lesson was not intended to accommodate Lan and Xing’s English language learning needs.

Ms. April asked students to brainstorm idioms they knew before reading aloud the boldly illustrated book entitled *Even More Parts: Idioms from Head to Toe* (Arnold, 2004). English monolingual students were very active, throwing the idioms into discussions, such as “It’s raining cats and dogs,” and “You crack me up.” Lan looked very lost, repeatedly asking, “What does it really mean?” Her neighbors occasionally explained to her. Ms. April then picked up the book on her desk and started reading page by page, “Sometimes I wish my stupid ears always open wide... I lost my mind. It makes my head spin. I laugh my head off. My head is in the clouds. I keep changing my mind. I keep an open mind. My mind is wandering. I lost my marbles. These are all idioms,” Ms. April explained. “What do they mean?” Lan asked again. Ms. April paused a little and turned to Lan, “Don’t worry about it if you cannot figure it out.” Ms. April kept reading, “My eyes are glued to the television. Look at the picture. The eyes really are glued to the TV. My ears are burning. Hey, lend me

your ears. My nose is buried in the book. I follow my nose.” Lan asked, “What? I don’t get it.” Cathy, who was Lan’s neighbor, turned to her, “It means you read all the time.”

Compared to Lan, her English native-speaking classmates were far more familiar with the topic “idioms.” Even though Ms. April noticed Lan’s frustration, she did not provide extra assistance to her instead of telling her, “Don’t worry about it if you cannot figure it out.” It may be because Ms. April thought that acquiring idioms would not affect Lan’s scores much on reading and writing tests.

Since Ms. April and Ms. Baker were team teaching, Ms. Baker also gave the idiom mini-lesson in her class. Like Lan, Xing was silenced in the mini-lesson because of lack of prior knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge. Since Ms. Baker did not ask students to brainstorm idioms but read the book to students directly, Xing did not participate at all during the whole mini-lesson. When students laughed about the pictures of idioms, Xing looked absent-minded and even hid his head into his sweater collar. However, Ms. Baker did not notice the indicator that Xing was not engaged.

According to Ms. Baker and Ms. April, the purpose of using this book was to teach students figurative language in a humorous way because of the bold illustrations of literal descriptions. The mini-lesson conducted by Ms. Baker and Ms. April reflected the expectations of the mainstream curriculum: “draw on experiences to bring meanings to words in context such as interpreting figurative language and multiple-meaning words” (§110.6. English Language Arts and Reading, Grade 4, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, 2008). Both teachers incorporated the children’s book into the lesson to contextualize the idioms. Ms. April, especially, asked students to brainstorm idioms; many students shared idioms in sentences they brainstormed. She then read the book and showed students pictures of literal illustrations from the book; the majority of students laughed aloud, demonstrating their understanding of the idioms in the book. Nevertheless, the book is not designed to help language minority students understand the meaning of idioms. Ms. April and Ms. Baker assumed the familiarity of the topic by all students so they did not modify the book and the instruction to accommodate Lan and Xing’s needs. The sociolinguistic competence is also a concern of the focal parents. In the interview May’s father made a comment:

Native English speakers are good at social English. Of course, that’s their mother tongue, but not everyone is good at academic English. I think May probably is not as good as her English native-speaking classmates in terms of social English, like slangs or idioms. After all, she has limited contact to non-academic English language.

(personal interview, March 17, 2007)

Learning Need 2: Vocabulary

In a weekly morning routine practice, Ms. April and Ms. Baker handed to students a list of 10 new vocabulary words with definitions and sentence examples. I was told that the words on the list were collected by teachers and used to prepare for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) state standardized tests in reading and writing. Ms. April told me, “They [students] need to know these words to read and write in TAKS. That’s the expectation.” Taking Ms. April’s class as an example, she read words aloud and asked students to repeat the words after her to ensure that students pronounced words correctly. If a word (e.g., *lackadaisical*) was difficult to pronounce, she would break it down into syllables (e.g., *la-cka-dai-si-cal*) and told students that was a way they could memorize the spelling. Ms. April then read the definition and the sentence containing the target word. After reading the list of words, their definitions, and sentences, Ms. April asked students to study these new words on their own for 10 minutes — copying words and sentences on index cards first and then using their own ways to review them.

The focal students usually obtained high scores on weekly spelling and vocabulary quizzes; however, I noticed that they were hesitant to answer teachers’ questions regarding meanings of new vocabulary in reading. In class observations of shared reading sessions, I recorded various types of questions the teachers asked and types of questions that led the focal students to raise their hands. Among all shared-reading sections I recorded (15 sections in each of the three teachers’ classes), Lan raised her hand to predict the word meaning twice, Xing once, and May none, although the teachers constantly included questions of vocabulary words which had appeared in reading. Other times the focal students were waiting for the answers from their classmates or teachers instead. However, the focal students actively responded to questions of summarizing main ideas, identifying details, inferencing, and drawing conclusions. Less participation on meaning prediction of new words might be caused by a lack of vocabulary or low self-confidence with new words even if the students knew the meanings.

Through classroom observations and student sample analyses, I constantly noticed that the focal students had problems with English conventional phrases, word choices, and multiple-meaning words in reading and writing. I use the following examples to illustrate their learning needs in these areas.

Reviewing parts of speech, Ms. April asked students to locate the nouns in the sentence: “His pet peeve is when his daughter says ‘That’s all I get?’ when he bought her something.” Lan raised her hand and answered, “pet.” Clearly, Lan did not know the meaning of the phrase *pet peeve* or the word *peeve*. Other students yelled out, “No. Pet peeve.” Ms. April nodded her head and responded to the class, “Yes. Pet peeve.” However, no explanation was followed by Ms. April. Lan still did not know what the phrase *pet peeve* means. She looked confused, rereading the sentence while the rest of class moved on.

Another example of wrong word choices is seen in a summary May wrote after reading: “Once they [dogs] find the smell, they go the smell to the person.” Ms. Flower helped her change the sentence to “once they find the scent, they follow the scent to the person.” Clearly, May chose the words *smell* and *go* based on their literal meanings and did not know the appropriate word choices, which also indicated her need to expand vocabulary for academic writing. In a recent reading Curriculum Diagnostic Benchmarks (CDB) test, May made 7 errors out of 40 questions, including 2 errors on words that have multiple meanings. One word question asks students to choose the correct meaning of *fit* in the sentence, “They hope the exercise will help kids learn how to be fit.” May chose “moving” as her answer; the correct choice is “strong.” The other word question asks for the meaning of *lifted* in the sentence, “The bird spread its wings and lifted into the air.” May chose the answer “carried,” instead of the correct one, “flew.”

Learning Need 3: Specific Linguistic Knowledge Related to ESL

In addition to word choices as illustrated above, errors such as tense agreement and articles which English monolingual students would rarely make in the third or fourth grade were spotted in three focal students’ English academic written language and their utterances. Examining May’s English writing samples, I noticed that she had very few invented words, but often had some problems with verb tenses, subject-verb agreements, and articles. However, Ms. Flower did not point them out in her comments because they were not the focus of writing instruction. The writing rubrics used by teachers at Northside Elementary School focus on five areas: focus, organization, idea development, voice, and conventions. One of May’s writing samples, which is scored 4 (the highest score) as graded by Ms. Flower according to TAKS writing rubrics, is retyped as follows:

In the Garden (May, 09/13/2007)

Today it is buddy day. Me and my buddy Laura were out in the garden observing plants and bugs.

If we found something intresting to observe or catch, my buddy Laura would say “Hey, look May what’s that?” Then she’d take the magnifying glass from my hands to observe the bug or plant. After she was done using it, she’d give it back to me. Sometimes she’d just take the magnifying glass without saying word. Othertimes she’d probably say something lik “May Can I have the magnifying glass?” We almost never use bug box. I the only who really uses them, Laura doesn’t use them. We found white things hanging from a leaf which made Laura

say “Cool!” We also found things like afids, milkweed bugs and even butterflies.

I had fun. I can’t wait for the next buddy class.

In this writing, May has a good voice and attracts interest to read her writing. Most of her ideas are developed thoroughly and are consistent with each other. Clearly, the writing also demonstrates her understanding of organization. Ms. Flower made a comment in the first paragraph: “nice word choice” and corrected one misspelling from “afids” to “aphids” in the second paragraph. In terms of convention, besides four misspellings, she also made several grammatical errors. For example, her writing has an inconsistent verb tense agreement. She starts a sentence in the present tense and then switches to past tense in the second sentence. In the second paragraph, she changes back to the present tense (“we almost never use bug box.”). She forgot to include an indefinite article “a” in front of “word” — she wrote, “without saying word.” Usage of articles—although not explicitly included in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English Language Arts and Reading—is expected to be acquired in the second grade, according to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Spanish Language Arts (SLA) and English as a Second Language (ESL) standards. However, no extra assistance or attention to such English language developmental areas was given to the focal students either inside or outside of classrooms.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrated that three Chinese immigrant students still needed ESL support from their teachers and peers to facilitate their learning in the mainstream classrooms, although they were not labeled as LEP/ESL. The findings, however, do not suggest any generalizations and cannot apply to explain all language minority students’ literacy development experiences. Future studies can include all language minority students in these three focal classrooms, which might be able to contribute to the findings further along this line. Nevertheless, as evidenced by the cited examples, I have revealed the focal students’ learning needs in three areas: sociolinguistic knowledge, vocabulary, and specific linguistic knowledge related to ESL.

The focal students’ English language performance was recognized by their teachers which was different from other English monolingual students (e.g., vocabulary); however, the teachers probably either thought that the students could develop language skills eventually as a result of their continuous schooling, or did not see it as a problem since the students did not show they were having trouble on the tests. When teaching English language conventions, they usually assumed that students should have no problem in such areas since their

language skills had already been acquired naturally while growing up in the English-speaking environment. As the episode shown in the findings, without any modification, Ms. Flower quickly rushed through the mini-lesson on comparative and superlative adjectives as required by the curriculum. Such perspectives indicate the teachers' lack of knowledge in second language acquisition. As Kingner, Hoover, and Baca (2008) claimed, exposure and interactions with the target language are necessary factors in second language acquisition, but by themselves, they are not sufficient.

Lan's frustration and Xing's nonparticipation in the idiom mini-lesson indicated their learning needs of figurative English language; however, such needs were overlooked. Idioms have conventionalized meanings and are socially constructed (Irujo, 1986) which are beyond fundamental language and literacy (e.g., phonological awareness). Since cultural and social norms in the environment are reflected in literacy practice (Heath, 1983; Pérez, 2004), meanings of idioms must be detected through contexts and require high socio-linguistic competence. Students who are English native speakers probably use idioms very often in their lives through social mediations such as daily conversations with their parents and siblings. However, language minority students had limited access to learn and use English figurative language. As reported by their mother in the interview, Lan and Xing speak Chinese to their parents and other family members, and their family has a very limited social network outside of the Chinese community. Lan and Xing's mother would never say to them, "I have eyes in the back of my head." A mainstream-oriented literacy instructional framework, such as the idiom lesson in this study, is developed for English monolingual students. Without any modification, it cannot reach language minority students and develop their potentials to the maximum extent.

Hence, teachers should explain explicitly about the meaning and function of idioms to language minority students and give the students an opportunity of using idioms meaningfully in contextualized situations instead of just being read idioms. Additionally through class instruction, Ms. April and Ms. Baker can help fill in the gap between the mainstream curriculum and language minority students' learning needs. They can build upon Lan and Xing's strengths, connect to their sociocultural world, and integrate Chinese language and culture into the idiom lesson by asking Lan and Xing to share Chinese idioms and compare them with English ones. Accordingly, the focal students' learning experience in mainstream classrooms can be tied with their lives so they can make learning relevant and broaden their understandings. Their Chinese language and culture can become meaningful and valuable in class which in turn will inform the teaching and benefit all students in class. Although figurative language may not weigh much in standardized tests in the fourth grade, it is an important topic in language arts and English literature in higher grades, impacting students' success in more-advanced English classes.

Therefore, ignoring their language learning needs is to deny the students' opportunity for future success.

Moreover, although writing convention is one criterion for evaluating students' English writing performance in TAKS writing, teachers paid more attention to content development. According to TAKS writing rubrics designed to reflect the curriculum standards, students would get 4 points (the highest) in terms of convention if "these types of errors do not detract from the overall fluency of the composition" (Texas Education Agency, 2003). Even the TAKS writing rubrics imply that weakness of convention depends on the effectiveness of the communication of ideas. However, lack of attention to and guidance on language forms may cause problems in the long term and can impact on the students' success in the future. As Harklau et al. (1999) pointed out in their study, generation 1.5 students suffered in college writing because although they appeared in conversation to be native English speakers, they were less skilled in the academic language especially in the area of writing. Therefore, teachers need to raise their awareness that language minority students need continuous support in the area of English as a second language to help recognize their second language error patterns and clarify their confusions.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article suggests that mainstream teachers need to understand that language minority students' English literacy developmental needs should not be determined simply through the LEP/ESL label and/or scores students obtained on high-stakes tests, which are usually the judgmental criterion of mainstream valuing. Additionally, the problems revealed in this study offer several factors to be taken into consideration as schools develop policies and practices to provide immigrant students opportunities to learn. The goal of education and language policies in the U.S. is politically and economically motivated. As cited by Callahan, Wilkinson, Muller, & Frisco (2009), "Whether the label is externally imposed by the school system or whether it is adopted internally by the student as a facet of his or her identity (Dillon, 2001; Olsen, 2000), its function is likely to vary depending on immigrant students' contexts and the statuses" (p. 361). The LEP/ESL label used in school functions is a political tracking system and serves for legislative purposes (e.g., funding) rather than a performance indicator; it does not guide teachers regarding what language minority students know or need to know. Therefore, teachers should not use the label as a criterion to make any presumptions about language minority students' English proficiency levels and learning needs in ESL.

Since some language minority students, such as the focal students in this study, were born in the U.S. and attended English-speaking daycares, they are fluent in oral English. Therefore, they passed the language assessment scales'

oral language assessment to enter kindergarten. However, the English language oral proficiency test as part of the ESL placement procedures only indicates the qualification of English language instruction classes, but is not designed to discover areas in ESL that language minority students need to improve to move to a higher proficiency level. Therefore, the ESL placement test is insufficient to inform mainstream teachers about language minority students' academic English proficiency levels and sociolinguistic competency. Indeed, many students who passed the standardized tests and exited from ESL services were still unable to meet the language demands of mainstream content classrooms (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Therefore, teachers should understand that "labeling students leads teachers to stigmatize, to generalize, and to make inaccurate predictions about what students are likely to do" (Spack, 1997, p. 765).

In addition, teachers' approaches to literacy instruction should reflect the current curriculum; however, without any modification, the curriculum based on a mainstream literacy instructional framework cannot reach out to language minority students as demonstrated in this study, and thus hinders the development of the students' potentials as competent readers/writers. At the curriculum level, consideration of cultural backgrounds and sociolinguistic competence of the students should be translated into explicit instructional activities.

All children learn language, but teachers should be aware that children's learning is shaped by their everyday sociocultural experiences (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Willis (2000) stated that "effective literacy instruction builds upon the cultural and linguistic backgrounds, ways of making meaning, and prior knowledge that all children bring to the classroom" (p. 3). She suggests that the initiative to undertake should be to develop teachers' understanding of their students' cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. Language minority students, no matter if they are receiving ESL services or not, have very different English literacy developmental paths compared to English monolingual students. They had less contact with English literacy events and the mainstream culture compared to students of the mainstream families (Pu, 2008). Teachers who appear to see literacy development primarily as the ability to read and write may ignore background knowledge and experience of practice upon which language minority students need to build for meaning negotiation.

Inadequate understanding of language minority students' skills and their learning environment contributes to inappropriate expectations. When linguistic needs for cognitively demanding academic tasks are not considered as the responsibility of a language arts/literacy curriculum or mainstream teachers, lessons carried out will not treat these needs as important and lead to the ignorance of the needs. Only if mainstream teachers understand the cultural context within which children have grown and developed, and raise awareness of the areas in ESL that language minority students are still developing, can they create opportunities and select forms of mediation (e.g., scaffolding) to support all language minority students' learning (Freeman & Freeman, 2001).

Furthermore, the focal teachers in this study were not ESL trained, so they were not sensitive to the students' English language developmental needs disguised by their fluent English oral skills. It is a challenge for teachers without second language acquisition training or experiences to distinguish if the problematic areas in the use of English language are developmental or second language acquisition-related. Hence, it is critical that teacher preparation programs should include the second language acquisition component and prepare teachers to work with language minority students who need to improve English proficiency and/or sociocultural competence in regular classrooms. However, I do not suggest overemphasizing language forms in instruction; instead, teachers need to help language minority students recognize and understand language forms in a contextualized way.

At the end of the semester, I interviewed Ms. Flower regarding the focal students' performance and literacy practices she used in class. Her words at the end of interview also inspired this study:

Maybe because of who these children are, because they are so capable, I probably [did] not focus as much as I maybe have on children in the past from different cultures and different places because they have been so comfortable and so confident. You know, I made assumptions they haven't needed any extra assistance. Sometimes, I may not give them more opportunities to share. So, you give me some food to think too. I appreciate that.

I appreciate Ms. Flower's honesty and her reflection of her teaching. Meanwhile, I hope these findings can call the attention of other mainstream teachers to recognize their language minority students' disguised learning needs as constructed in their unique sociocultural learning environment.

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