

# **Making Meaning Matter: A Look at Instructional Practice in Additive and Subtractive Contexts**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, I examine the implications of additive and subtractive conceptions for the education of English language learner (ELL) students. To understand how competing theories regarding the education of ELL students materialize into action, I examine select findings from one district's implementation of Proposition 227. Focusing on the cases of two teachers, I examine the connections between teachers' theories about their students and the role in the policy to practice connection. This article provides an opportunity for school leaders to consider the implications of subtractive and additive approaches in the educational achievement of ELL students.

## **Introduction**

Proposition 227, known by its proponents as the "English for the Children Initiative," passed by a 61% majority of California voters on June 2, 1998. Its intent was to end bilingual education for California's 1.5 million culturally and linguistic diverse students. Since the passage of Proposition 227, I have been studying the changes brought about by this voter initiative (cf. Stritikus, 2002). My research has occasioned me to ask a basic question about educational policy and practice for English language learner (ELL) students: Will we see cultural and linguistic diversity as resources? Or will we see ELL students from a subtractive lens and attempt to erode the resources that linguistic and cultural diversity affords? In this article, I examine the way in which two teachers' practice took shape after the passage of Proposition 227 to understand the manner in which additive and subtractive visions for ELL students play out in the classroom.

Table 1

*Additive Conceptual Dimensions of Addressing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity*

School-wide practices	Teacher practices
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A vision defined by the acceptance and valuing of diversity— Americanization is NOT the goal.</li> <li>2. Professional development characterized by collaboration, flexibility, and continuity with a focus on teaching, learning, and student achievement</li> <li>3. Reflection of and connection to surrounding community, particularly with the families of the students attending the school</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bilingual/bicultural skills and awareness</li> <li>2. High expectations of diverse students</li> <li>3. Treatment of diversity as an asset to the classroom</li> <li>4. Basis of curriculum development to address cultural and linguistic diversity</li> <li>5. Attention to and integration of home culture/practices</li> <li>6. Focus on maximizing student interactions across categories of Spanish and English proficiency and academic performance</li> <li>7. Focus on language development through meaningful interactions and communications</li> </ol>

Additive perspectives are built around the view that, for ELL students, language, culture, and their accompanying values play a central role in student success. An appropriate perspective of teaching ELL students is to recognize that learning becomes enhanced when it occurs in contexts that are socioculturally, linguistically, and cognitively meaningful for the learner (García, 1995; Moll, 1988). Table 1 exemplifies the attributes of school-wide and teacher practices associated with this conceptual framework. This is clearly contrasted with the conceptual framework that is at the foundation of Proposition 227: a disregard for non English skills and a focus on the instruction of English in English. Table 2 articulates the school-wide practices and teacher practices following this conceptual framework.

Proposition 227 has forced districts and schools to consider which approach to educating ELL students will guide their practice. This is not a question unique to California. Across the nation, districts must consider the following important questions: Will teachers, through native language instruction and other enriching approaches, connect with and build upon the cultural and linguistic resources of ELL students? Or will students' native language be seen as an illness with English-only instruction being the cure? To understand how competing theories regarding the education of ELL students materialize into action, I examine select findings from one district's

implementation of Proposition 227 by focusing on the responses of two teachers. I present the cases of these two teachers so that educational decision-makers might consider the implications of subtractive and additive approaches to the education of ELL students.

### **Additive Theories for Educating ELL Students**

For Elisa, a third-grade teacher at Open Valley, a rural school in California’s Central Valley, which maintained its bilingual program through the parental waiver process, a guiding theory drove her intellectual work at the school. She believed that native language instruction provided significant academic, cognitive, social, and cultural benefits for her students. Academic success and participation in American society did not mean that students had to sacrifice elements of their social and cultural identities. For her, these identities served as the basis for student success.

To understand the manner in which additive conceptions of linguistic diversity influence classroom practice, I present the data excerpt from one of the first days Elisa introduced English reading to the students. The event

Table 2

*Subtractive Conceptual Dimensions of Addressing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity*

<b>School-wide practices</b>	<b>Teacher practices</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A vision defined by the learning of English—Americanization/assimilation is the goal.</li> <li>2. Professional development characterized by a focus on direct teaching, emphasizing instruction of phonology, grammar and phonics in reading</li> <li>3. Connection to surrounding community, particularly with the families of the students who attend the school that emphasizes the development and use of English</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. English development skills and awareness</li> <li>2. Expectations that students’ oral English proficiency will enhance academic achievement</li> <li>3. Treatment of linguistic diversity as a characteristic that must be minimized</li> <li>4. Ongoing professional development and direct enforcement of direct teaching practices</li> <li>5. Basis of curriculum development to address cultural and linguistic assimilation</li> <li>6. Attention to and integration of diverse cultures into the “norm”</li> <li>7. Focus on English language, reading and literacy development through methods of direct instructions of skills</li> </ol>

illustrates Elisa's attempt to create an additive context for learning in her classroom. Elisa commented that the debate over Proposition 227 had made her more committed to making sure that her students saw their home language as a resource. On the first day of English guided reading, Elisa led each of the groups that she worked with through a series of activities in Spanish. Each group she worked with examined a picture of an animal. Elisa solicited comments from the students about the animal. After having a conversation about the picture, Elisa gave the students 5 minutes to write a few sentences about the picture. The following conversation occurred between Elisa and her students after they had concluded the activity.

Elisa: *OK, ayúdame. Qué es lo que estamos haciendo? Por qué estamos haciendo esto* [OK, help me out. What are we doing? Why are we doing this]?

(All the students have raised their hands and she is calling on them by touching her hand in front of the students.)

Ernesto: (dutifully) *Aprender* [To learn].

Rosa: *Para aprender los dibujos* [To learn about drawings].

Cristóbal: *Para aprender más palabras* [To learn more words].

Elisa: *Para aprender palabras* [To learn words]?

Rosa: *Para hacer como agarrar palabras de un dibujo* [To learn how to take words from a picture].

Elisa: *Para hacer como agarrar palabras de un dibujo? Y para . . . lo que dijiste ahorita. Si ven como hacerlo en español y cómo vamos aprender el inglés* [To learn how to take words from a picture? And for . . . what did you just say? You can see how it is done in Spanish and how we are going to learn English].

Cristóbal: (taking turn without hand up) *Para aprender el inglés* [To learn English].

Ernesto: *Aprendiendo palabras* [Learning words].

Elisa: *Aprendiendo palabras* [Learning words].

Elsa: (hand up—officially recognized) *Tenemos que saber como lo hacemos en español primero y luego es más fácil hacerlo en inglés* [We have to know how to do it in Spanish first and then it will be easier to do it in English].

Elisa: *Sí. Cuando estamos con un dibujo, y tenemos palabras, y de la palabras qué hacemos* [Yes. When we are working with a picture, and we have words, from the words what do we make]?

Daniel: *Oraciones* [Sentences]!

(At this point the pace of the discussion quickens.)

Elisa: *De estas oraciones qué podemos hacer* [From these sentences what can we do]?

Students: *Párrafo* [Paragraph].

Elisa: *De un párrafo qué podemos hacer* [From a paragraph what can we do]?

Students: *Un capítulo/Un resumen/Ensayos* [A chapter/A summary/Essays].

Elisa: *Qué tiene que ver esto con el inglés* [What does all this have to do with English]?

Daniel: *Yo voy a saber las palabras que tiene que responder* [I'll know the words I need to know to answer the questions].

Betty: (pointing at the white board where Elisa had written some of the sentences students had generated.) *Puedes poner "tree" en vez de árbol* [You can put "tree" in place of árbol].

(After Betty's comments, Elisa asks the students using "what can I put in place of . . ." with each of the Spanish words that they had come up with to describe the picture. The students excitedly call out the English words.)

Elisa: *Si saben las palabras en inglés, podemos hacer oraciones en inglés* [If you know words in English, can we do sentences in English]?

Students: *Sí* [Yes].

Elisa: *Y luego podemos hacer párrafos* [And later can we do paragraphs]?

Students: *Sí* [Yes].

Elisa: *Luego podemos hacer ensayos en inglés* [Later can we do essays in English]?

Students: *Sí* [Yes].

Elisa's decision to establish an instructional context in which Spanish was presented to the students as a direct way to make sense of English also had important consequences in terms of the way students approached learning tasks in the guided reading group. During the interaction of this group, the students eagerly explored the new ways they would be able to use English. Her framing of learning English as an activity created a palpable sense of energy for the students. This excitement surfaced as the students discussed what they would one day be able to do with English. Elisa created an additive context in which she encouraged students to capitalize on their existing linguistic resources during their acquisition of English. The context established by Elisa made it clear to the students that Spanish was viewed as a language-learning resource by their teacher.

### **Subtractive Theories of Education for ELL Students**

To understand the connection between subtractive theories for ELL students and classroom practice, I present the case of Connie, a third-grade teacher at Westway Elementary, a school in the same district that switched to

English-only after Proposition 227. Connie's theories surrounding her students were undergirded by two major beliefs. First, she believed that the English language served as the unifying force in the United States that was undermined by multilingualism. In this sense, Connie was in striking agreement with much of the political discourse surrounding both the English-only and anti-bilingual education movements. In an interview, Connie commented, "I totally agree that English should be the language of this country. You need to have some base and I think English needs to be the base here." Second, Connie believed that her students' academic progress was severely limited by their use of Spanish. Thus, rather than seeing students' primary language as a resource, she saw it as one of their primary weaknesses.

Connie's theory about ELL students resulted in educational practice that did not focus on the cultural, social, and linguistic resources brought by her students. A significant amount of instructional time focused on phonetic exactness—moments in instruction when Connie focused on the components and sounds of words. During these interactions Connie's emphasis was on correct pronunciation and strict adherence to teacher directions.

Her emphasis on these three types of interactions was influenced by the nature of her school's language arts program (Open Court) and its literacy material. During teacher-run reading events, Connie seldom asked questions regarding the story events or the plot. Connie often asked students to identify compound words or to circle long vowels. Such interaction contributed to the treatment of text as a puzzle. Texts were viewed as little more than the sum total of their phonetic or grammatical values. During literacy instruction, Connie closely adhered to the script of the Open Court teacher's manual. Open Court activities dominated her instructional day. Beyond the 40 minutes that Connie spent in math instruction, the entire day was occupied with Open Court literacy activities. The subtractive nature of literacy instruction was highlighted in the following event:

Connie stood at the front of the class and had just read the first problem of the worksheet. She instructed students that they were supposed to circle each long vowel sound in each of the sentences and write the word in the long vowel column. This was the third in a series of worksheets the class had done that day. Connie completed the first three sentences with the students. In each sentence, her pattern was fairly consistent. She read the sentence and asked the students which words in the sentence had a long vowel sound. Students were not allowed to pick up their pencils until the class had identified all the long vowel sounds. During the first three sentences, a few students called out answers without being officially recognized. When this happened on the fourth sentence, Connie said, "Since you seem to have no problem with this activity, you can do it on your own." Ruben and Miguel excitedly rubbed their hands together. Miguel read a sentence

in a flat tone with no questioning intonation, “Will Pat go to the store.” He paused for a moment and read it again in a flat tone, “Will Pat go to the store. Will Pat . . . Pat go to the store? That doesn’t make any sense. Don’t matter.” He picked up his pencil and wrote the words “go” and “store” in the “Long O” column.

This literacy event highlighted many of the themes that emerged from the study of Connie’s classroom. Classroom instruction focused on the component parts of reading. Connie’s comfort with this focus was related to her views about the instructional needs of her students. The event also highlighted the tightly controlled nature of literacy events. Lastly, the event indicated the nature of students’ experiences of literacy curriculum that stressed skills over meaning. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Asato (2000) question the efficacy of such literacy practice, particularly as it relates to ELL students’ ability to develop meaning-making skills central to literacy development. A meaning-based literacy curriculum has been shown to play a significant and important role in the academic achievement of ELL students (Franquiz & Reyes, 1998; Hudelson, 1994; Moll, 1994).

Connie believed that her students would experience success if they stopped speaking Spanish in the classroom. For Connie, Proposition 227 offered an opportunity to enact a subtractive vision of language and literacy practice in her classroom. Proposition 227 and its subtractive implications for the schooling of culturally and linguistically diverse students complemented Connie’s existing views of her students and gave her liberty to attempt to restrict and limit students’ use of Spanish in her classroom. While I do not claim that Connie’s use of the Open Court literacy series is representative of all uses of the program, Connie’s case illustrates how teachers with subtractive theories of their students might utilize and implement aspects of similar skills-based scripted literacy programs.

## Conclusions

Today, and into the future, additive and subtractive perspectives of the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students will continue to play a large role in shaping policy and practice. In Arizona, California, and Massachusetts, subtractive policies have become part of the official language policy. At the same time, bilingual advocates in these and other states continue to push for more additive conceptions of the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students. As the bilingual education debate continues to evolve, advocates and detractors will look toward test scores and program evaluations for support of their perspectives. While such a move will always be a part of educational decision making, those concerned with education must continue to direct their gaze beyond test scores and evaluations to the lived experiences of bilingual students in classrooms.

The findings of this research raise serious questions about Proposition 227 and student learning. There is a growing body of evidence that Proposition 227 has resulted in classroom practice that is not conducive to language and literacy development (Gutiérrez et al., 2000; Thompson, DiCerbo, Mahoney, & MacSwan, 2002). The findings echo those claims and raise doubts about the wisdom of combining English-only instruction with programs such as Open Court and their emphasis on decoding skills and direct phonics instruction. It is significant to note that the strictest and most rigid implementations of Proposition 227 resulted in learning contexts where students concluded that “making sense” did not matter.

The additive conceptions possessed by Elisa served as a basis for how she reacted to and mediated aspects of Proposition 227 implementation. She saw the manner in which she constructed her classroom literacy practice as a response to the political and pedagogical implications of Proposition 227 implementation. In creating an additive context for her students, she created opportunities for students to draw upon their linguistic and cultural resources. Seeking the day when all ELL students will conclude that what they do in their classrooms does matter, I suggest we must continue to pursue and develop substantial ways to support and develop additive conceptions of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

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