Understanding Language in Diverse Classrooms

A Primer for All Teachers

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Chapter 6

Making and Using Comparisons of Languages and Language Use

Why Make Comparisons?

In Chapter 3, we described some of the ways languages can be alike and different. We also noted that there is more than one way to take on the task of learning second or third languages. Some learners rely on what they know of their first language to guide their learning of another; others take on learning the second language as a new challenge and report that they are, at least consciously, unencumbered by the old. We cannot definitively say which of these approaches is better. Many factors, such as the degree of learning of the first language, the scope of similarities and differences between first and second languages, the learning situation, and the predilections of the student as learner will influence the success of any given approach and the degree to which there is transfer from knowledge of one language to the learning of another.

However, we suspect that making explicit the various ways languages are structured does help. For one thing, teachers can gain insights about the aspects of English that English Language Learners (ELLs) may find most challenging. Such insights can be especially useful when dealing with students unaccustomed to academic language because such students may have difficulties with literacy tasks like spelling and understanding the complex language used in the disciplines. For another, students can acquire an understanding of language not just as an everyday ability but as an object of interest in itself. Students need to take pride in their dual-language status. Knowing where and why they may have trouble with English may help them to understand their own learning process better and to overcome obstacles in mastering it. Teachers are the instruments whereby students can gain such knowledge about themselves. For teachers to be able to fulfill that role, they need to have some understanding of the relation between English and their students' home languages and how earlier language experiences can impact learning English. But few teachers are or can be polyglots. Instead, to help teachers understand their students' situations, we created a set of charts, or tables, comparing English with other languages on a set of features that commonly present challenges for ELLs. These are presented below, but first we offer some comments on what we have included in the charts and how to use them.

There are more than 150 home languages represented among the nation's ELLs. We could not in this chapter suggest all the ways that all these home languages differ from English and how they may impact student errors. What we did instead was focus on a subset of languages that are among the most commonly represented in American public schools. The tables in this chapter represent eight languages and only one version of each of those eight at that, although many of the languages have multiple versions. For example, Spanish is spoken in various geographical areas and, although mutually intelligible, the various versions can differ in multiple ways. Also, French is the basis of several creoles, which nonetheless can be quite different from each other as well as from French.

We then drew on the experience and expertise of people who know at least one of the eight languages in addition to English. Whether native to English or to another language, all had insight into the differences and similarities that could present challenges for speakers of these languages when learning English. Ten consultants helped in the creation of the language comparison charts in this chapter. They made suggestions for a useful list of comparison features that may be implicated in many of the common errors made by ELLs from one of these language backgrounds. Importantly, they explained their language's characteristics for inclusion in the subsequent charts and made notations about possible problems (see columns 3 and 4, Tables 6.2–6.9).

The same list of features appears in the first column of each table from Table 6.1 to 6.9. Each table also includes in column 2 a short description of the value of that feature in English. Tables 6.2–6.9 include in column 3 "comparison language," a description of that feature's value in the comparison language; and column 4 "possible problem or error" for ELL, a description of the kind of problem that may occur for an ELL from that comparison language. In Table 6.1, columns 3 and 4 are left blank so that teachers may copy the table and fill it in for any language not found in Tables 6.2–6.9 but represented among their students. To keep the tables to a manageable size, we have made the feature descriptions relatively short and concise, necessarily ignoring details and various exceptions.

Choosing Languages and Features to Compare

It will come as no surprise to teachers that Spanish is the home language for over 70 percent of all ELLs. Data from the 2008–2009 Consolidated State Performance Reports (CSPR) show that Spanish is the home language for over 65 percent of them in each of twenty-eight states and for over 80 percent of them in thirteen of those states (www.migrationinformaton.org/ellinfo/FactSheet). Despite its overwhelming status as the most frequent home language among ELLs in the US, there are seven states in which Spanish is not the top home language, and there are ten states where no single language is the home language for even 50 percent of the ELLs in the state (although Spanish is still

the most frequent home language in four of those states). Thus, these ten states have very heterogeneous ELLs, with many languages represented and no one of them dominant. It can be a mixed blessing for teachers when only one language is prevalent. In recent years, the focus has been on students whose home language is Spanish. On the one hand, then, there are readily available resources on Spanish and for teaching ELLs from that home language (although teachers need to keep in mind that there are geographically-based variations within the broad categories of Spanish language and culture). On the other hand, information on other languages can be harder to find. If teachers have classes with ELLs from a less well-known language background or with a heterogeneous ELL population, fewer language-specific resources may be available, and the task of helping each student becomes more difficult. We suggest that teachers check the data on their state on the relevant web sites listed in Appendix A so that they get a picture of the local demographics of ELLs. Also, Chapter 4 includes suggestions of where to get help.

Our sample languages and comparative features were selected for a variety of reasons. We wanted to illustrate a range of the kinds of errors that can occur among learners from the language backgrounds most commonly found in US schools. To identify the languages, we examined web sites of major school districts in the US, as well as searched websites on the most common languages in the US. We knew that we could not illustrate everything. Still, we wanted both our language choices and the features that we chose for comparison to English to be diverse enough so that many possible sources of error could be included, even if they were not likely to be problematic for speakers of a highly frequent home language like Spanish. For example, Spanish uses Latin script like English, but many others do not. As different as Russian, Korean, and Chinese are from one another, none uses Latin script; all children from those home languages share the task of learning Latin script as they learn to read and write English. Thus, we include type of script as one comparative feature. Similarly, within the bounds of relative commonality in the schools, we chose to include languages that were fairly representative of a group. For example, Russian and Polish share many features, but, in choosing only one, we chose Russian because it is a more common home language among current ELLs in schools. Our choices were also influenced by our consultants' expertise. Although rather different from one another, Bengali and Hindi are both important languages on the Indian subcontinent, and both are common heritage languages in US schools. We wanted to choose one of those to include here; we had available to us a consultant whose native language is Bengali, and so we chose to represent that.

It is important to note that over 10 percent of ELLs in US schools come from language backgrounds that are not among the top ten languages found in the schools. These include, for example, all the languages of Native Americans. In a few states (e.g., Alaska), those languages make up the majority of home

Table 6.1 Language Comparison Chart*

Language feature	*English*	*Comparison language***	*Possible problem or error for ELL*
Syllable structure, e.g., are consonant clusters (c-c's) at starts or ends of words allowed? Does consonant–vowel (c-v) predominate? Is there dropping or eliding, or silent letters?	Frequent consonant clusters can be at start and end of words (e.g., *str-, scr-, -lms*); has silent letters, elisions, e.g., *can't*		
Are there borrowings or influences from other languages?	Germanic and Romance roots cause inconsistent spelling or pronunciation patterns, e.g., *rough* and *ruff*		
Word formation complexity scale goes from simple to midway to complex, e.g., monosyllabic (simple) to multisyllabic, with prefixes or suffixes (complex)	English is midway: it has many multisyllabic words; some grammatical markings, e.g., *walk, walk-s*; some adding of morphemes to roots to make new lexical items (e.g., *nation, national*)		
Misleading word translations: borrowed words or cognates may look similar but have different meanings, sometimes called "false friends"	Many languages borrow words from English but the meanings may change, e.g., in English, *actual* means *real*, the similar word means *current* in some other languages		
Are there gendered words? Is the basis natural? Grammatical?	Natural, only on pronouns (e.g., *he, she*)		
Articles: Where and when are they used? Are there consistent rules for use?	Rules for definites, generics, indefinites, mass and count nouns but inconsistent		

Language feature	*English*	*Comparison language***	*Possible problem or error for ELL*
Spatial relations: how expressed	Prepositions: choice depends on meaning intended with particular verb used		
Does the copula (connecting verb) appear in present tense? In other tenses?	Yes, *be*, e.g., *I am good; I am hungry; I was hungry.* Past, present, and future tenses		
Are there auxiliary verbs?	Yes, required in some constructions, but some dialect variation in how they are used		
Are there verb particles?	Yes, e.g., *turn off*		
How are questions formed?	Auxiliary inversion (*do* if needed), Q words, e.g., *Are you going? Do you want a drink? What time is it?*		
How are commands and requests formed?	Direct imperatives, e.g., *Close the door*; indirect directives, e.g., *Can you . . ., Why don't you . . .*; very indirect requests, e.g., *It's noisy in the hall* (meaning *close the door*)		
Scale of verb marking: none–some–many; consistent?	Some, e.g.: *-s, -ed, -ing.* Some irregularities, e.g., *went*		
Scale of noun marking: none–few–some–many; consistent?	Some: case marking on pronouns, e.g., *I, me, they, them*; possessive *–'s*, plural *–s*, some irregularities, e.g., *two deer*		

Table 6.1 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Comparison language***	*Possible problem or error for ELL*
Is there subject–verb agreement?	For singular and plural only, e.g., *He goes, we go*		
What is the type and importance, and consistency, of word order?	SVO; fairly important and consistent		
Is subject dropping allowed?	Not allowed; dummy *it*, e.g., *It's raining*		
Formality scale: casual–mixed–formal language, e.g., forms of address and use of names; gendered or age-based styles?	Mixed, but tending to casual: slang, everyday speech; but academic language; no formal age- or gender-based styles		
Indirect speech scale, amount of hedging: none–some–much	Much, e.g., *I think . . ., maybe*		
Does the student engage in classroom talk?	Participates, asks and answers questions, engages in discussions		
Writing system	Alphabetic, Latin script		
Is there a written language style?	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes		

* Features of languages and possible problems are based on general descriptions and ignore exceptional details.

** Columns 3 and 4 are left blank on this chart so that teachers can copy this chart and fill it in for any language represented in their classes but not included in charts 6.2–6.9.

languages of a state's ELLs, but across the nation they are relatively small in number; we do not include any here in the charts. However, teachers of such "minority" ELL languages can benefit from examining the features we discuss and following suggestions for making charts of their own.

Our final list of languages included Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Hmong, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. Each of the tables 6.2 through 6.9 compares English with one of our eight languages on the same set of features.

Teachers are encouraged to use the tables as guides to the kinds of errors they may see. When we had specific information about errors, we included it. When we did not, we gave a range of possible errors or entered a question mark. Blank cells indicate that problems are unlikely. Because not all languages found in the schools are represented, the tables should be taken as examples of the kinds of tables teachers can create themselves for the particular languages represented and the kinds of errors made by the ELLs in their classrooms. As we noted earlier, teachers should feel free to copy Table 6.1 as needed and fill it out for whatever languages are represented in their classroom. Web sites suggested in Appendix A can help with that task. There is more on how to use the tables in a later section.

The Eight Languages

With the help of our language consultants, we provide in the following paragraphs some background information on each of the languages.

Arabic

Arabic is the official language of twenty-six countries and has an estimated 200 million speakers. However, it is a broad term for a language with many mutually unintelligible dialects. For many native speakers, their ability to use the Standard Arabic dialect of schools, newspapers, and media may be limited. Regional dialects are not written and have low status in the eyes of many speakers. Most native speakers learn a regional dialect at home and only begin to learn Standard Arabic in school. Depending on level of education, some people may attain only a passive knowledge of Standard Arabic and not ever master speaking or writing it. Additionally, the countries whose official language is Arabic are home to hundreds of linguistic minorities. These children may learn a different, unrelated, language at home and only learn Arabic at school, making them second language speakers of both the dialect and the formal registers.

Bengali

Bengali (also known as Bangla) is an Indo-Aryan language spoken in eastern India and the country of Bangladesh. In terms of the number of speakers, it

ranks fifth or sixth among the world's languages. It is the national and official language of Bangladesh and is one of the recognized regional languages of India. There are substantial Bengali communities in the US, Europe, Australia, and the Middle East. It resembles other Indo-Aryan languages and has borrowed heavily from Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, and English. It has a very rich literary history and has contributed much to Indian literature for many years.

Chinese

Standard Chinese (also known as Beijing Mandarin, Mandarin Chinese, or simply Mandarin) is the official spoken language of China, Taiwan (where it is called *Guoyu*, "National Language") and Singapore (where it is called *Huayu*, "Chinese Language"). It is one of over 100 dialects spoken in China and is used by over 845 million people worldwide. More than a billion people speak one of the various dialects of Chinese, which are generally mutually intelligible. While Standard Chinese is based on the Beijing dialect, most Chinese can speak, read, and write in Standard Chinese even if it is not their native dialect.

French

French is a Romance language spoken in France, parts of Switzerland and Belgium, parts of Canada (i.e., Quebec), and former colonies in Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean among other places. France's colonial history gave rise to a number of French-based creoles that typically emerged in the 17th century from contact between non-standard varieties of the French language and African and/or Amerindian languages. These creoles include Haitian Creole (which has by far the largest number of speakers, estimated to 12 million), Lesser Antillean (Martinique, Guadeloupe, St Lucia) in the Caribbean, Louisiana Creole in the US, Mauritian Creole, Reunionnais Creole, and Seychellois in the Indian Ocean, to name just a few.

Hmong

Hmong is a Southeast Asian language of the Hmong-Mien language family of southern China and northern Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand). The Hmong in the US came from Laos originally; they were resettled in the West in a number of migrations following the Vietnam War. Hmong in the US currently number about 260,000; the greatest population concentrations are in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. Most young Hmong students in the schools will have been born in the US and therefore usually speak English fluently; they typically serve as translators for the older members of their families who were born in Laos. They will probably not be proficient in formal, Academic English, however. Adult Hmong students will tend to have the kinds of problems noted in the chart.

Korean

Korean is spoken by about 78 million people worldwide. It is the official language of both North and South Korea, but with mutually intelligible dialects. The language lacks some grammatical elements found in English, in particular, articles and relative pronouns. For Korean ELLs, both consonant and vowel distinctions can be problematic. Stress is not important in Korean, and so Korean students' English may sound flat to native English speakers. The distinction between formal and informal speech in Korean is age-based and explicit, in contrast to the more subtle distinctions in English.

Russian

Russian is a member of the Slavic language family, which includes, among others, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Czech, Slovak, Polish, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian, and Croatian. Slavic languages are spoken throughout much of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and parts of Central Europe. They typically use either a Cyrillic or Latin alphabet. The former includes Latin, Greek, and Hebrew letters. After the revolution of 1917, the previously erratic spelling of Russian was revised to be highly regular and phonetic.

Spanish

Spanish, a member of the Romance language family, is the official language of Spain, of nineteen republics in Central and South America as well as the Caribbean, and of Equatorial Guinea. There are over 400 million people who claim Spanish as their first language. It has become the second language of the US with over 30 million speakers. The various differences between European and non-European standard varieties of Spanish are relatively minimal and do not affect mutual intelligibility, but teachers should be aware that there are some differences in vocabulary and syntax.

Criteria for Selecting Features for the Tables

We had several criteria for selecting features for our tables. First, we wanted an array of features to illustrate the point that any of the various components of language and language use may cause problems; we did not want to focus on only, say, vocabulary. Second, because we wanted a single feature list of manageable size, we wanted to include features whose values illustrate common, often trouble-causing, differences not just between two languages, but across many languages. For example, English uses the copula *be*, but many other languages do not (at least in the present tense), and speakers of such languages often mistakenly drop it in English. Third, some aspects of English, for example, articles, are difficult for virtually all ELLs, whatever their home language, and

we wanted to represent such features. Fourth, we wanted features we could describe concisely in table form with a minimum of technical terminology. That is, we wanted the tables to be practical: they had to be accessible to teachers with minimal preparation in language study and of usable size. The resulting list of twenty-two features and their English values is found in the first two columns of Table 6.1 and repeated in condensed form in Tables 6.2 through 6.9. Of course, such a comparative feature list could be both much longer and more specific. There are many details and exceptions that we could not hope to cover using this format. Nonetheless, we hope that what we have developed will be useful to teachers in their work with ELLs from a variety of backgrounds, as well as help them understand some of the complexities of languages and their differences.

Beyond the Tables

In this section, we describe three important sources of language differences that are not fully reflected in the tables. The first is differences in sound systems, the second concerns literacy and cultural differences in written genres, and the third refers to the issue of consistency in language systems, particularly those having to do with aspects of grammar.

Sound Systems

One of the gaps in the tables that may strike the reader at first glance is that the tables have little information about sound systems beyond *syllable structure*. The reason for this is that describing sound systems and all the phonemic differences across languages that are found there is a daunting task, not easily accomplished without the use of much technical terminology (and many more pages). For example, English has a large system of vowels, and speakers of languages with smaller systems may find the larger system difficult. Similarly, languages can be very different with regard to the consonantal distinctions they make. For example, a familiar problem for Spanish ELLs is the one caused by the *b-v* distinction in English but not Spanish (except in the spelling of some words in Spanish). Another example, this one often presenting difficulty for English speakers learning Arabic, is the distinction in Arabic between different kinds of the *k* sound. To represent sound systems in the tables, we chose the general case of syllable structure and used the occurrence of consonant clusters (*c-c*'s) as an instance of possible differences. We did so because those languages not allowing *c-c*'s deal with words borrowed from English in such compelling ways. For example, inserting a vowel between every consonant in a cluster to create separate syllables turns the English word *strike* (as in *throw a strike to a batter*) into *su-to-ri-ku* in Japanese, which requires *c-v* syllables. As this example so clearly illustrates, transitioning between sound systems may produce problems for

pronunciation, spelling, and even comprehension. Although we could not catalog all of them here, teachers need to be attentive to such problems and their possible origins.

Literacy

Another instance of difference that cannot be fully explicated in the tables is related to literacy in English. Both reading and writing require an understanding of the structure and style of various genres. However, a culture's values can be reflected in its texts, via content, style, or structure, thereby resulting in differences between English texts and those in other languages. Such differences are found even in picture books translated into various languages (Shatz, *et al.*, 2006). The differences can be subtle, influencing, for example, how interpersonal relations are conveyed and are to be interpreted. Although they learn about the various genres in English in American schools, ELLs who have been exposed to another culture's ways of creating and comprehending text may have difficulty adapting to English content, styles, and structures. ELL students may need to be explicitly encouraged to attend to such potential differences.

Consistency

The theme of *consistency* cuts across many of the features in the table. Research on first language learners confirms that children reveal a preference for consistency. There are numerous examples in the language acquisition literature of young children preferring one-meaning-to-one-form mappings or regular endings for, say, past tenses. A language like English can be inconsistent in how and when it marks something (or how it relates pronunciation to spelling). This can be difficult for a second language learner whose first language may be more consistent, either because it always marks features such as plural or it never does. Such a learner may incorrectly infer English is also consistent one way or the other, thereby either over-using markings or under-using them. Thus, differences in consistency of marking between first and later-learned languages can itself be a cause for error.

Note too that inconsistency can result either from having a rule that is applied to only part of a feature (like subject–verb agreement) or from having no overt rule for a feature that can be taught. For example, English has a rule for marking third-person singular agreement on a verb with *–s*. Apart from the verb *be* with singular pronouns, that is the only overt number–person agreement in English. The rule may be somewhat difficult for learners coming from languages with more consistent subject–verb agreement across all persons, but it still is a rule that can be taught. In contrast, consider the case of articles and when to use them. In English a singular noun can be used as a *generic* (to refer to a whole

class), but a generic noun sometimes takes an article and sometimes does not, e.g., *the lion is the king of beasts*, but *death comes to all men*. We cannot cite a specific rule for when to use the article with generic nouns. Little wonder that many ELLs report so much trouble with when to use articles even after years of studying English.

Expanding on the Features

In this section, we give some additional information about only those features in the tables that we deemed in need of more explanation for readers to understand them.

Syllable Structure

As noted above, languages vary greatly in terms of the meaningful sound distinctions they make as well as how they cluster those sounds. Some languages have only single-syllable words (e.g., Vietnamese), some have simple consonant–vowel composition for every syllable (e.g., Japanese), and some end every word with the same syllable (e.g., Hmong). In contrast, English has multi-syllabic words, complex consonant clusters, and a wide variety of sounds at word-end. Such differences can make for difficulties in comprehending and producing spoken language. Moreover, there are implications for such differences when it comes to moving from speaking to reading. We tend to be much more forgiving of language errors as listeners (when we can ask for clarification) than we are as readers.

Borrowing

Borrowing from other languages is of course a source of vitality for languages; it is what keeps so many ancient languages like Bengali functional in the 21st century. But, as the history of English attests, the result can be inconsistency in spelling and pronunciation patterns. These can be daunting even for first language learners (e.g., *b-v* in Spanish), but can be especially so for ELLs, whose home language may have different sources of borrowed words as well as different ways of adapting them to the home language's sound system. (See "Word Translations" below for difficulties with the meanings of borrowed words.)

Word Formation

Closely related to the topic of syllable structure is the question of whether and how a language adds to its basic words: does it attach pieces to words to add or change meanings or grammatical information? Or do those pieces stand alone? For example, in English, one can attach what are called grammatical

morphemes like *-ed* to a verb to refer to the past. But, in some languages, the past would be regularly marked with a separate, typically small, separate word. (We can even do both in English, e.g., "*she smiled, she did smile,*" but the latter is used more rarely, only for emphasis.) One can also add pieces before or after a root word to change the meaning and/or grammatical category of a word, for example, turning the word *nature* into *un-natur(e)-al*. The word formation scale is a way of describing how much a language allows attaching morphemes together to make larger units, going from simple languages that do very little attaching pieces together to those that fall in the middle (midway) to those that do a lot (complex).

Word Translations

Some words in other languages may have similar looking or sounding counterparts to English words. One reason for this is that two languages may be cognate; that is, they share a common ancestor that has influenced the vocabulary in both languages. So, English *beam* is cognate to German *baum* (*tree*) (Matthews, 2007). Another reason is that, as English has increased in its importance as an international language, many languages borrow words, especially technical words, from it. Virtually all ELLs come to the learning of English with a store of such words. Unfortunately, the meanings of such cognates or borrowings may be transformed in subtle ways such that words that look alike do not necessarily mean the same thing in each language; hence, the name they have been given of "false friends." ELLs can be forewarned about such. (See Swan & Smith, 2001, for many examples.) Also, it is important that both teachers and students realize that translations are virtually never word for word. Style, cultural values, and grammatical differences between languages all contribute to changes from one language to another, making comprehending written language as well as speaking another language a real challenge.

Gender

English refers to *natural genders* of male and female with different pronouns (e.g., *she, he*). It is acceptable to refer to an animal (but not a person) as the neuter *it*, which is used for other entities. Other languages (like German) may use what is called *grammatical gender* for all nouns. Still other languages follow natural gender for animates but arbitrarily assign masculine or feminine gender to inanimates. For example, in Spanish, *the key* is feminine (*la llave*) and *the train* is masculine (*el tren*). Some languages include a neuter; the noun for, say, *table* could be marked as masculine, feminine, neuter, or not marked for gender at all, depending on the language. Pronouns (and often articles, adjectives, and verbs) agree with the gender of the noun (e.g., *la belle Hélène* but *le beau Jean* in French). Thus, languages can vary from no gender markings at all to markings throughout different parts of the language.

Spatial Relations

English uses prepositions such as *in*, *on*, and *under* to express spatial relations between objects. It also tends to use distinct words like *out* and *in* to describe what are called *path* or locational characteristics. So, for example, while English does have verbs like *exit*, it is more customary to use the phrase *go out*. In some languages, spatial relationships are expressed differently; for example, Spanish prefers verbs like *exit* for expressing path. Also, spatial words can refer to different or additional aspects of a relation (e.g., not just whether an object is in a container, but the degree of fit of the object in the container, such as, in Korean, a hand in a glove, Bowerman & Choi, 2001).

Auxiliary Verbs

Auxiliary or modal verbs like *may*, *must*, *can*, and *will* do a variety of work in English, such as changing an action from reality to possibility or from present to future. Other languages may do this work in a variety of other ways. Even those that use some form of auxiliary verbs may not handle the main verb the same way English does. For example, English does not use the infinitival *to* with auxiliaries nor does it mark person on the main verb (e.g., *He may go*; not *He may to go* or *He may goes*). Moreover, a modal verb like *must*, and its counterpart in other languages, can have multiple interpretations (e.g., obligation or certainty); the prevalence of one interpretation over the other in the home language may influence how the modal is interpreted in English (Shatz, 1991).

Questions, Commands, and Requests

All languages must express the various communicative functions of making statements, asking questions, and making demands. They can accomplish this work differently, however. Intonation can be important, as can intensity, especially for commands, but there can also be devices more internal to the structure of the language, such as particular words or word orders. In English, commands and requests can be especially subtle; for example, the question form can be used when a request or command is intended (e.g., *Could you turn in your homework on time in the future?*). Thus, constructions can convey different intentions depending on the context in which they are used.

An anecdote from a trip we took to Japan years ago illustrates well our points about the possible misinterpretation of modal verbs and indirect forms. We had been taken to a restaurant in Tokyo by a former graduate student and were being treated to dish after dish of expensive foods. The abundant array was much more than we could manage to consume, and, as still more food arrived, one of us said, "Oh, you mustn't!" Our host's face fell, and we realized that, rather than expressing our gratitude at her generosity, she thought we disapproved and

were criticizing her. We hurried to assure her we were very pleased with her graciousness.

Scales of Marking

Grammatical gender agreement discussed above is one example of how a language might accrue a lot of marking on various parts of speech. The tables' rows on scales of verb and noun marking and on subject–verb agreement all refer to differences among languages in how much they mark for plurality, gender, and semantic role (e.g., subject, object, possessive), and how consistent they are in doing so. As noted earlier, English is notoriously inconsistent in its use of markings; indeed, some experts now group it with languages like Chinese that rarely if ever use grammatical markings.

Word Order and Subject Dropping

As discussed in Chapter 3, languages can differ in word order. They also differ in the importance of word order for comprehension. Typically, there is a trade-off: languages that have a lot of grammatical markings (i.e., are high on the scales of marking) rely less on word order for comprehension, so word order can be freer. Recall the subject dropping example in Chapter 3 of highly marked Italian, *piove*; subject dropping can be done only when there is a way of identifying the dropped element. So, languages that are high on marking (or that use discourse devices like Chinese) can do it. English cannot.

Language Use

All languages have different ways of talking in different circumstances. Some rely on very explicit forms to be used to signal politeness or respect for age or status. Some languages like English signal informality or equality by hedging commands with phrases like *I think* (e.g., *I think it's bedtime* instead of *Go to bed).* Our formality and indirect speech scales try to capture the kinds of socially based variations found in the uses of different languages. It is worth noting that more than specific devices (e.g., *sir, madam*) influence the character of language use. Languages are used in social contexts, and the contexts themselves influence interpretation. Even in English, an utterance meant to be interpreted one way in a given context can be intended to be taken quite differently in another. For example, in one context, asking the question, "Do you know what time it is?" may be a request, even from a stranger, to be told the time; in a different context, it may be an exhortation from one partner to another about getting to an appointment promptly. Note that in neither context would a simple yes/no answer to the literal question be appropriate. Cultures differ on the norms for when it is appropriate to use direct or literal speech. For example, in Arabic the use of direct requests and imperatives to elders is considered impolite.

Writing

Many of the world's languages do not use Latin script, and some are not even alphabetic. These differences add another layer of complexity to the task of acquiring literacy in English. Writing involves two other problems as well. First, as noted in the section on literacy above, different cultures have different styles and structures for writing, so writing in English for academic purposes may be quite different from what an ELL may have experienced in another setting. Also, for all students, writing is very different from face-to-face, two-way communication in that there is no feedback and no means to assess ongoing understanding. Due to cultural differences, ELL writers may face even more of a challenge than other students because they may be unable to assume as much about what their English readers are like and what they know.

How to Use the Comparison Charts

Teachers should approach the following charts only after reading the above sections as background for interpreting them and for help in understanding the charts' necessarily concise entries. These charts are intended as tools to help teachers identify the possible problems and their sources that ELLs with varied language experiences may have.

General education teachers can use the language comparison charts to identify pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary errors that their ELL students may be more likely to make. These charts can be used before, during, and after a lesson. For example, during the planning of a lesson, the chart can assist teachers in predicting errors or misconceptions that ELLs may make. Teachers can utilize these predictions as a basis to prepare a lesson that is accessible for all the students in the class, making alterations for ELL students as required. In addition, teachers can showcase what language proficiency ELL students do have by planning and eliciting communication sequences where they can use those strengths.

The language comparison charts may also be used as an efficient way to identify and then classify errors in ELLs' oral or written language productions as linked either to a language feature or to lesson content. When doing so, teachers can address the error immediately or reserve the corrections for a later private conversation or a one-to-one tutoring session. For example, with regard to classroom talk, a student from an Arabic-speaking culture, accustomed primarily to rote learning and not familiar with the activity structures (such as inquiry circles) commonly found in US classrooms, may be reluctant to initiate or engage in discussions. Moreover, because of politeness considerations in the home culture, he or she may be reluctant to ask questions or make direct requests of a teacher or older student. The teacher could address the differences between Arabic and English custom in the classroom with a quiet, encouraging

aside to the student that it is fine in the US classroom to use direct requests and to participate in all classroom activities, including discussions.

All teachers can use the charts to assess and reflect on their lesson after implementation. They can make notes on an ELL's errors or misconceptions regarding language features or area content and discern a potential root of the error and potential directed intervention. Thereby, they can use these language comparison charts to enhance their understanding about why an ELL student may be making particular mistakes or pattern of mistakes in either oral or written language, or both. One of our reviewers made the excellent suggestion that the charts could even be shown to particular ELLs (from late elementary school years) who speak those languages to help them gain insight into their own English-learning challenges (E. McNulty, personal communication, November 15, 2011).

We have suggested that teachers construct their own charts for languages they encounter that are not covered in this chapter. When they do so, they may need to consult the resources posted in Appendix A, and/or confer with ESL teachers or other colleagues in refugee/settlement centers, or language/linguistics departments at nearby colleges and universities. We also suggest that teachers may want to add a fifth column to the charts with the heading "*Possible solution.*" Teachers can then enter their own ideas (possibly in consultation with other teachers or specialists) about how to help a particular student or solve a particular problem. After trying out an idea, they can make a note about its success and later share successful strategies with colleagues.

Finally, these eight language comparison charts of some of the most frequently occurring home languages for US ELL students will help general education teachers recognize the complex and inconsistent nature of English.

Table 6.2 Arabic*

Language feature	*English*	*Arabic*	*Possible problem or error*
Syllable structure, e.g., consonant clusters (c-c's) at starts or ends of words allowed? Consonant–vowel (c-v)? Dropping, eliding, silent letters?	Frequent consonant clusters can be at start and end of words (e.g., *str-*, *scr-*, *-lms*); has silent letters, elisions, e.g., *can't*	Consonant clusters possible, but not as long as in English; *p* is not a sound in Arabic	Pronunciation and spelling; often replaces *p* with *b* in speaking
Borrowing or influences from other languages	Germanic and Romance roots cause inconsistent spelling or pronunciation patterns, e.g., *rough* and *ruff*	Borrowings from French and English, but often heavily adapted to Arabic sound system	Words of English or French origin may be pronounced according to Arabic sound system.
Word formation complexity scale: simple–midway–complex, e.g., monosyllabic (simple) to multisyllabic, prefixes or suffixes (complex)	Midway: some grammatical markings, e.g., *walk*, *walk-s*; some new lexical items (e.g., *nation*, *national*)	Complex: prefixes and suffixes; number, person, gender markings. Most words built on three-consonant root, with varied patterns changing meanings; plural markings inconsistent and unpredictable	The English word formation system is less patterned than Arabic, so finding connections between related words in English may be hard for native Arabic speakers
Misleading word translations; "false friends"	E.g., in English, *actual* means *real*, but *current* in some other languages	Not many because of the word-derivation system	Little to none
Gendered words: Natural? Grammatical?	Natural, only on pronouns (e.g., *he*, *she*)	*M* and *f* marked on all verbs, adjectives, and many nouns, but *f* not always overtly marked	Incorrect use of gendered pronouns to refer to inanimate objects

Language feature	*English*	*Arabic*	*Possible problem or error*
Articles: where and when to use; consistency	Rules for definites, generics, indefinites, mass and count nouns but inconsistent	Definite always marked, indefinite usually marked in writing, more rarely in speech. Generics and mass nouns can take definite	Definite marking on generics and mass nouns
Spatial relations: how expressed?	Prepositions: choice depends on meaning intended with particular verb used	Preposition used can completely change verb meaning. Some attach directly to the following word	Wrong word choice
Copula (connecting verb)?	Yes, *be*, e.g., *I am good*; *I am hungry*; *I was hungry*. Past, present, and future tenses	No copula in the present tense, often omitted in future, but required in the past tense	Missing copula or future not marked, e.g., *He good*, *I buy tomorrow.*
Auxiliary verbs?	Yes, some dialect variation	Yes, but dialect variation. Passives, conditionals, and future tense sometimes marked other ways	May be used differently or omitted where expected in English
Verb particles?	Yes, e.g., *turn off*	Yes	
Forming questions	Aux inversion, Q words, *do*, e.g., *Are you going? What time is it? Do you want a drink?*	Q word mainly in literary Arabic; inversion mostly in spoken Arabic	*Do* omission, with inversion and intonation as question markers
Commands and requests	Direct imperatives; indirect directives, e.g., *Can you . . .*, *Why don't you . . .*; very indirect requests, e.g., *It's noisy in the hall* (meaning *Close the door*)	Direct imperatives as in English; a polite form of address in imperatives is possible. Direct requests to elders considered impolite	Misinterpretation of speaker intent

Table 6.2 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Arabic*	*Possible problem or error*
Scale of verb marking: none–some–many. Consistent?	Some, e.g., -s, *-ed*, *-ing*. Some irregularities, e.g., *went*	Verbs have unvarying markings for number, person, and gender in present tense	English irregular verbs may cause problems at first
Scale of noun marking: none–few–some–many. Consistent?	Some: case marking on pronouns, e.g., *I*, *me*, *they*, *them*; possessives, -s, plural –s. Some irregularities, e.g., *two deer*	Plural and feminine markers. Objects directly attached to the verb instead of as stand-alone pronouns	May have some trouble initially with object pronouns
Subject–verb agreement	For singular and plural	For singular, plural, and dual, but number on the verb depends on verb's position in sentence	Possible trouble with subject–verb agreement if the verb not in its canonical place in English
Type and importance, and consistency of word order	SVO; fairly important and consistent	Spoken Arabic generally SVO; literary Arabic starts main clauses with V	Some verbs may appear at the beginning of sentences
Subject dropping allowed?	Not allowed; dummy *it*, e.g., *It's raining*	Yes	Missing subject pronouns
Formality scale: casual–mixed–formal language (e.g., forms of address and use of names); gendered or age-based styles?	Mixed, tending to casual: slang, everyday speech, academic language; no formal age- or gender-based styles	Formal terms of address for respect; for mixed-gender groups, all agreement is M	

Language feature	*English*	*Arabic*	*Possible problem or error*
Indirect speech scale, amount of hedging: none–some–much	Much, e.g., *I think . . ., maybe*	Much hedging, e.g., the phrase *God-willing* when agreeing to act	
Classroom talk	Participates, asks and answers questions, engages in discussions	Possibly more rote memorization and less discussion and questioning	Possible reluctance to participate in discussion
Writing system	Alphabetic, Latin script	Alphabetic, but short vowels omitted. Right-to-left Arabic script. No case distinctions; punctuation rare	Concepts of printing, punctuation, and distinguishing between upper and lower cases may be difficult
Written language	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes	Very formal, requiring high levels of education for mastery. Formal Arabic considered a holy language and art form. Spoken dialects considered "debased" forms of standard	Speakers of dialects without formal education in Arabic may lack experience with written forms of language

* Features of languages and possible problems are based on general descriptions and ignore exceptional details. See Table 6.1 for fuller descriptions of columns 1 and 2.

Table 6.3 Bengali*

Language feature	*English*	*Bengali (Bangla)*	*Possible problem or error*
Syllable structure, e.g., consonant clusters (c-c's) at starts or ends of words allowed? Consonant–vowel (c-v)? Dropping, eliding, silent letters?	Frequent consonant clusters can be at start and end of words (e.g., *str-*, *scr-*, *-lms*); has silent letters, elisions, e.g., *can't*	Complex syllables allowed, like CCCVC. Syllable onsets can be complex. No silent letters or elision	Some consonant clusters of English are not allowed in Bengali. These can lead to problems in pronunciation
Borrowing or influences from other languages	Germanic and Romance roots cause inconsistent spelling or pronunciation patterns, e.g., *rough* and *ruff*	Lots of borrowings from English. Code-switching between English and Bengali is rampant	Influence of English on Bengali may facilitate learning English
Word formation complexity scale: simple–midway–complex, e.g., monosyllabic (simple) to multisyllabic, prefixes or suffixes (complex)	Midway: some grammatical markings, e.g., *walk*, *walk-s*; some new lexical items (e.g., *nation*, *national*)	Complex: grammatical (tense, number) endings on verbs; complex nouns can be derived from adjectives	
	Learners may over-use some derivational processes of English to derive new words		
Misleading word translations; "false friends"	E.g., in English, *actual* means *real*, but *current* in some other languages	Some borrowed words have incorrect usage	Incorrect usage may influence vocabulary learning in English
Gendered words: Natural? Grammatical?	Natural, only on pronouns (e.g., *he, she*)	Natural gender, but not marked even on pronouns	Incorrect gender choices of pronouns

Language feature	*English*	*Bengali (Bangla)*	*Possible problem or error*
Articles: where and when to use; consistency	Rules for definites, generics, indefinites, mass and count nouns but inconsistent	Numericals used instead of articles. Use of demonstratives after nouns to refer to definite.	Post-posing instead of pre-posing of demonstratives; omitting articles
Spatial relations: how expressed	Prepositions: choice depends on meaning intended with particular verb used	Use of post positions instead of prepositions	Possible wrong word choice; possible position error
Copula (connecting verb)?	Yes, *be*, e.g., *I am good; I am hungry; I was hungry.* Past, present, and future tenses	No copulas	Missing copula, e.g., *He good*
Auxiliary verbs?	Yes, some dialect variation	Auxiliaries used after main verbs	Possible position problem
Verb particles?	Yes, e.g., *turn off*	Complex system of compound verbs; two verbs to express one action	Deciding which particle to use with which verb
Forming questions	Aux inversion, Q words, *do*, e.g., *Are you going? What time is it? Do you want a drink?*	As in English, but Q word not always at the beginning of sentence	Possible problem with the placement of Q word
Commands and requests	Direct imperatives; indirect directives, e.g., *Can you . . ., Why don't you . . .*; very indirect requests, e.g., *It's noisy in the hall* (meaning *Close the door*)	Use of both direct and indirect (impersonal) requests (e.g., use of passive constructions to indicate requests)	Misinterpretation of speaker intent

Table 6.3 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Bengali (Bangla)*	*Possible problem or error*
Scale of verb marking: none–some–many. Consistent?	Some, e.g., -s, *-ed*, *-ing*. Some irregularities, e.g., *went*	Verbs inflected for tense, aspect, and person. Consistent	Irregularities in English verbs may be difficult to learn
Scale of noun marking: none–few–some–many. Consistent?	Some: case marking on pronouns, e.g., *I*, *me*, *they*, *them*; possessives, -s, plural –s. Some irregularities, e.g., *two deer*	Some; case markings on nouns and pronouns	?
Subject–verb agreement	For singular and plural	For person	?
Type and importance, and consistency of word order	SVO; fairly important and consistent	SOV word order. But word order is fairly flexible	Possible odd word orders
Subject dropping allowed?	Not allowed; dummy *it*, e.g., *It's raining*	Allowed	Subject omission
Formality scale: casual–mixed–formal language (e.g., forms of address and use of names); gendered or age-based styles?	Mixed, tending to casual: slang, everyday speech, academic language; no formal age- or gender-based styles	Distinction between informal and formal speech	
Indirect speech scale, amount of hedging: none–some–much	Much, e.g., *I think . . ., maybe*	Use of impersonal constructions very common. Non-nominative case marking on subjects to indicate impersonal constructions	Over-use of passive

Language feature	*English*	*Bengali (Bangla)*	*Possible problem or error*
Classroom talk	Participates, asks and answers questions, engages in discussions	Restrained, shy	Lack of participation
Writing system	Alphabetic, Latin script	Bengali script	
Written language	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes	Informal and academic writing	

* Features of languages and possible problems are based on general descriptions and ignore exceptional details. See Table 6.1 for fuller descriptions of columns 1 and 2.

Table 6.4 Chinese*

Language feature	*English*	*Standard Chinese (SC)*	*Possible problem or error*
Syllable structure, e.g., consonant clusters (c-c's) at starts or ends of words allowed? Consonant–vowel (c-v)? Dropping, eliding, silent letters?	Frequent consonant clusters can be at start and end of words (e.g., *str-*, *scr-*, *-lms*); has silent letters, elisions, e.g., *can't*	No consonant clusters are allowed at starts and ends of words; the only consonants that can occur at the ends of words are *–n* and *[ŋ] (ng)*	Pronunciation: final consonant dropped (e.g., *relac* for *relax*); adding vowels after final consonant or inserting vowels between consonants
Borrowing or influences from other languages	Germanic and Romance roots cause inconsistent spelling or pronunciation patterns, e.g., *rough* and *ruff*	Transcription system (used in teaching) of SC has consistent spelling and pronunciation correspondences	Pronunciation and spelling: e.g., *rough* pronounced as *rug*; *craft* spelled as *kraft*
Word formation complexity scale: simple–midway–complex, e.g., monosyllabic (simple) to multisyllabic, prefixes or suffixes (complex)	Midway: some grammatical markings, e.g., *walk*, *walk-s*; some new lexical items (e.g., *nation*, *national*)	Simple: no such word formation	Under-use of grammatical markings, e.g., *He walk home.* Over- or mis-use of lexical affixes, e.g., *contrastly*, *unuseful*, *uncomplete*
Misleading word translations; "false friends"	E.g., in English, *actual* means *real*, but *current* in some other languages	Borrowed word may look or sound much the same but has a different (but often related) meaning	Collocation errors, e.g., *large rain*, *hot regards*, *learn knowledge*
Gendered words: Natural? Grammatical?	Natural, only on pronouns (e.g., *he*, *she*)	Natural, in written form (three different symbols for pronouns), but none in spoken language (all three pronounced the same)	Confusion over gendered pronouns, e.g., *He is my sister*

Language feature	*English*	*Standard Chinese (SC)*	*Possible problem or error*
Articles: where and when to use; consistency	Rules for definites, generics, indefinites, mass and count nouns but inconsistent	No articles	Misuse of articles, e.g., *He likes movie*; *He gained the weight last month*
Spatial relations: how expressed	Prepositions: choice depends on meaning intended with particular verb used	One-to-many mapping of prepositions from Chinese to English	Wrong word choice, e.g., *In a hot morning*; misuse, e.g., *Go to home*
Copula (connecting verb)?	Yes, *be*, e.g., *I am good*; *I am hungry*; *I was hungry*. Past, present, and future tenses	No copula	Missing copula, e.g., *I happy*
Auxiliary verbs?	Yes, some dialect variation	No auxiliary verbs	Omission of auxiliary verbs
Verb particles?	Yes, e.g., *turn off*	No verb particles	Difficulty learning and using such terms
Forming questions	Aux inversion, Q words, *do*, e.g., *Are you going? What time is it? Do you want a drink?*	Q words but no inversion, no *do*	*Do* omission, e.g., *How much you pay for your car?* No inversion, intonation only, e.g., *When you going home?*
Commands and requests	Direct imperatives; indirect directives, e.g., *Can you . . .*, *Why don't you . . .*; very indirect requests, e.g., *It's noisy in the hall* (meaning *Close the door*)	Similar distinctions between direct and indirect directives. Direct requests may be preferred more than in English	Misinterpretation of speaker intent; can be confused by the very indirect requests and not acknowledge speaker intent
Scale of verb marking: none–some–many. Consistent?	Some, e.g., *-s*, *-ed*, *-ing*. Some irregularities, e.g., *went*	None	Missing verb markings, e.g., *Yesterday I run*

Table 6.4 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Standard Chinese (SC)*	*Possible problem or error*
Scale of noun marking: none-few-some-many. Consistent?	Some: case marking on pronouns, e.g., *I, me, they, them*; possessives, -s, plural-s. Some irregularities, e.g. *two deer*	None; possessives are represented by a particle	Confusion with pronouns, missing noun markings, e.g., *I saw he; I have two brother*
Subject–verb agreement	For singular and plural	None	Number disagreement, e.g., *He like cheese; These is called . . .*
Type and importance, and consistency of word order	SVO; fairly important and consistent	SVO; relative clause placed before noun; time and location placed before verbs	Difficulty using English relative clauses, e.g., *I in China studied English for two years*
Subject dropping allowed?	Not allowed; dummy *it*, e.g., *It's raining*	Allowed	Dropping of subjects
Formality scale: casual–mixed–formal language (e.g., forms of address and use of names); gendered or age-based styles?	Mixed, tending to casual: slang, everyday speech, academic language; no formal age- or gender-based styles	No gender-based styles. Some honorific/humble terms, e.g., honorific *you* and ordinary *you*; last name + job title as term of address, e.g., *Smith teacher*	Addressing people as "manager, teacher . . ."
Indirect speech scale, amount of hedging: none–some–much	Much, e.g., *I think . . ., maybe*	Much, as in English	May be limited by vocabulary
Classroom talk	Participates, asks and answers questions, engages in discussions	Similar to those of English	May need more encouragement for participation; prefer small-groups discussion
Writing system	Alphabetic, Latin script	Not alphabetic, but logographic (using symbols to represent words, not syllables)	?
Written language	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes	Similar to those of English	

* Features of languages and possible problems are based on general descriptions and ignore exceptional details. See Table 6.1 for fuller descriptions of columns 1 and 2.

Table 6.5 French*

Language feature	*English*	*French*	*Possible problem or error*
Syllable structure, e.g., consonant clusters (c-c's) at starts or ends of words allowed? Consonant–vowel (c-v)? Dropping, eliding, silent letters?	Frequent consonant clusters can be at start and end of words (e.g., *str-*, *scr-*, *-lms*); has silent letters, elisions, e.g., *can't*	Frequent consonant clusters at starts of words; consonant clusters of two letters word-finally; a lot of silent letters and contractions	Because some verb endings like *-ent* are pronounced like schwas, E learners may leave such letter combinations unpronounced
Borrowing or influences from other languages	Germanic and Romance roots cause inconsistent spelling or pronunciation patterns, e.g., *rough* and *ruff*	Some identical spellings but pronunciation differences	Sing French pronunciation; difficulty with English words with similar spellings but different pronunciations, e.g., *cough*, *through*
Word formation complexity scale: simple–midway–complex, e.g., monosyllabic (simple) to multisyllabic, prefixes or suffixes (complex)	Midway: some grammatical markings, e.g., *walk*, *walk-s*; some new lexical items (e.g., *nation*, *national*)	Midway–complex: many grammatical markings that are unpronounced; complex word formation, e.g., *anti-constitutionellement*	Learners may phonologically underuse grammatical markings
Misleading word translations; "false friends"	E.g., in English, *actual* means *real*, but *current* in some other languages	Many; borrowed word may look or sound much the same but has a different, if related, meaning	Inaccurate meaning
Gendered words: Natural? Grammatical?	Natural, only on pronouns (e.g., *he*, *she*)	Grammatical gender, M and F	Misuse of gendered pronouns when referring to "neutral" objects. Some differences from E in use of gendered pronouns

Table 6.5 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*French*	*Possible problem or error*
Articles: where and when to use; consistency	Rules for definites, generics, indefinites, mass and count nouns but inconsistent	No bare nouns; all common nouns preceded by overt determiners	Over-use of overt determiners
Spatial relations: how expressed	Prepositions: choice depends on meaning intended with particular verb used	Similar to English	
Copula (connecting verb)?	Yes, *be*, e.g., *I am good*; *I am hungry*; *I was hungry*. Past, present, and future tenses	Similar to English; sometimes *have* phrase instead of *be* phrase	Possible *be–have* error, e.g., *I have hunger*
Auxiliary verbs?	Yes, some dialect variation	Use of either *be* or *have* to form past tense; no distinction between present perfect and simple past	Which auxiliary (*be* or *have*) to use; how to form present perfect tense, e.g., *I have eaten* vs. simple past, e.g., *I ate*. Possible over-use of present perfect
Verb particles?	Yes, e.g., *turn off*	No verb particles in French	Difficult to master verbs like *put in*, *put out*, *put off*, *put up*
Forming questions	Aux inversion, Q words, *do*, e.g., *Are you going? What time is it? Do you want a drink?*	Inversion between subjects and full lexical verbs as well as auxiliaries (e.g., *Viens-tu ce soir au cinéma?* Come-you this evening to the movies?) No *do*	*Do* omission; possible full verb inversion

Language feature	*English*	*French*	*Possible problem or error*
Commands and requests	Direct imperatives; indirect directives, e.g., *Can you . . .*, *Why don't you . . .*; very indirect requests, e.g., *It's noisy in the hall* (meaning *Close the door*)	Direct imperatives and indirect directives + very indirect requests	Rare misinterpretation of speaker intent; possible difficulty knowing how to answer (Y or N) to, e.g., *Would you mind closing the door?*
Scale of verb marking: none–some–many. Consistent?	Some, e.g., *-s*, *-ed*, *-ing*. Some irregularities, e.g., *went*	Many irregularities across verb stems and richer verbal markings	Difficulty memorizing English irregular verbs
Scale of noun marking: none–few–some–many. Consistent?	Some: case marking on pronouns, e.g., *I*, *me*, *they*, *them*; possessives, -s, plural *–s*. Some irregularities, e.g., *two deer*	Some on pronouns, e.g., the possessive is formed by prepositional phrase	Over-use of, e.g., *the house of John* instead of *John's house*
Subject–verb agreement	For singular and plural	For singular and plural	
Type and importance, and consistency of word order	SVO; fairly important and consistent	SVO	No difficulty except post-posed adjectives
Subject dropping allowed?	Not allowed; dummy *it*, e.g., *It's raining*	Not allowed; dummy *it*	
Formality scale: casual–mixed–formal language (e.g., forms of address and use of names); gendered or age-based styles?	Mixed, tending to casual: slang, everyday speech, academic language; no formal age- or gender-based styles	Formal with outsiders, slang with friends and family; age-based and class-based styles	May be more formal when speaking English

Table 6.5 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*French*	*Possible problem or error*
Indirect speech scale, amount of hedging: none–some–much	Much, e.g., *I think . . ., maybe*	Much	
Classroom talk	Participates, asks and answers questions, engages in discussions	Active participation expected	
Writing system	Alphabetic, Latin script	Latin script	
Written language	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes	Very formal and academic. Different styles	Difficulty mastering the variety of writing registers

* Features of languages and possible problems are based on general descriptions and ignore exceptional details. See Table 6.1 for fuller descriptions of columns 1 and 2.

Table 6.6 Hmong*

Language feature	*English*	*Hmong*	*Possible problem or error*
Syllable structure, e.g., consonant clusters (c-c's) at starts or ends of words allowed? Consonant–vowel (c-v)? Dropping, eliding, silent letters?	Frequent consonant clusters can be at start and end of words (e.g., *str-*, *scr-*, *-lms*); has silent letters, elisions, e.g., *can't*	Both syllables and words (most words contain only one syllable) are CV(N); no final consonant possible other than an <-*ng*>. Initial consonant clusters are common	Dropping of syllable-final and word-final consonants. Perhaps dropping of initial s- in consonant clusters; despite many initial consonant clusters, no *spl-*, *spr-*, *str-*, etc.
Borrowing or influences from other languages	Germanic and Romance roots cause inconsistent spelling or pronunciation patterns, e.g., *rough* and *ruff*	Chinese and Lao are the two most important sources of borrowed vocabulary	
Word formation complexity scale: simple–midway–complex, e.g., monosyllabic (simple) to multisyllabic, prefixes or suffixes (complex)	Midway: some grammatical markings, e.g., *walk*, *walk-s*; some new lexical items (e.g., *nation*, *national*)	Simple: no marking of number on nouns; no marking of tense on verbs. New words are formed primarily by putting free words together into compounds	Failure to use -s on plural nouns and *-ed* on verbs (and failure to use irregular plural and past tense forms)
Misleading word translations; "false friends"	E.g., in English, *actual* means *real*, but *current* in some other languages	English and Hmong are combined usually via code switching	?
Gendered words: Natural? Grammatical?	Natural, only on pronouns (e.g., *he*, *she*)	No grammatical gender; one third-person pronoun for all three, *he*, *she*, *it*	Confusion between *he*, *she*, and *it*

Table 6.6 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Hmong*	*Possible problem or error*
Articles: where and when to use; consistency	Rules for definites, generics, indefinites, mass and count nouns but inconsistent	Obligatory classifiers on nouns when they are counted, e.g., "one round-thing stone"	Use of articles
Spatial relations: how expressed	Prepositions: choice depends on meaning intended with particular verb used	Some words can be used as either verbs or prepositions, e.g., one word for *put/place* as a verb, and *to/toward* as a preposition	Preposition choice
Copula (connecting verb)?	Yes, *be*, e.g., *I am good; I am hungry; I was hungry.* Past, present, and future tenses	Used with nouns ("I am Hmong"), but not with adjectives ("I tired")	Use of the copula + adjective construction
Auxiliary verbs?	Yes, some dialect variation	Yes, but they do not always appear before the verb	Word order in the verb phrase
Verb particles?	Yes, e.g., *turn off*	No, but some verbs are followed by other particle-like verbs	Verb–particle combinations must be learned one by one
Forming questions	Aux inversion, Q words, *do*, e.g., *Are you going? What time is it? Do you want a drink?*	No inversion. Q words not at start of sentence	Inversion; *do* omission (a problem for both questions and negatives)
Commands and requests	Direct imperatives; indirect directives, e.g., *Can you . . ., Why don't you . . .*; very indirect requests, e.g., *It's noisy in the hall* (meaning *Close the door*)	Mostly direct imperatives	Indirect directives and requests may be difficult to understand

Language feature	*English*	*Hmong*	*Possible problem or error*
Scale of verb marking: none–some–many. Consistent?	Some, e.g., *-s*, *-ed*, *-ing*. Some irregularities, e.g., *went*	None	Verb marking
Scale of noun marking: none–few–some–many. Consistent?	Some: case marking on pronouns, e.g., *I*, *me*, *they*, *them*; possessives, *-s*, plural *–s*. Some irregularities, e.g., *two deer*	None on nouns. Pronouns differ in number (including dual number) and person	Noun marking
Subject–verb agreement	For singular and plural	No subject–verb agreement	Subject–verb agreement
Type and importance, and consistency of word order	SVO; fairly important and consistent	SVO; fairly consistent	Differences in focus may impact word order
Subject dropping allowed?	Not allowed; dummy *it*, e.g., *It's raining*	Same as English, including dummy *it*	
Formality scale: casual–mixed–formal language (e.g., forms of address and use of names); gendered or age-based styles?	Mixed, tending to casual: slang, everyday speech, academic language; no formal age- or gender-based styles	Formality differences not as pronounced; use of complex language in speeches, sermons, poems, etc.; is not the same as academic language	Problems with formal, academic language
Indirect speech scale, amount of hedging: none–some–much	Much, e.g., *I think . . ., maybe*	Some; use of *I think*, but more common: use of discourse particles to "soften" a sentence, or convey speaker's attitude or degree of certainty	

Table 6.6 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Hmong*	*Possible problem or error*
Classroom talk	Participates, asks and answers questions, engages in discussions	Different politeness practices, e.g., thanking others less overtly and routinely	Adult students may be reticent in class; young students may be less so
Writing system	Alphabetic, Latin script	Alphabetic, Latin script (modern)	Rare literacy in Hmong; familiarity with Latin script possible. Some different sound–letter correspondences may cause problems, e.g., letters *x* and s represent the sounds [s] and [*sh*], respectively
Written language	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes	A written language only since the 1950s, so no agreement on a formal/academic style	Most students need help learning the differences between informal and formal English

* Features of languages and possible problems are based on general descriptions and ignore exceptional details. See Table 6.1 for fuller descriptions of columns 1 and 2.

Table 6.7 Korean*

Language feature	*English*	*Korean*	*Possible problem or error*
Syllable structure, e.g., consonant clusters (c-c's) at starts or ends of words allowed? Consonant–vowel (c-v)? Dropping, eliding, silent letters?	Frequent consonant clusters can be at start and end of words (e.g., *str-*, *scr-*, *-lms*); has silent letters, elisions, e.g., *can't*	No clusters at all; pronunciation is relatively true to spelling; does not contrast *r* and *l*; no *f*, *v*, *th*, or *z*; vowel differences	Spelling and pronunciation problems
Borrowing or influences from other languages	Germanic and Romance roots cause inconsistent spelling or pronunciation patterns, e.g., *rough* and *ruff*	Some Chinese-originated vocabulary, but not with present-day Chinese	Spelling?
Word formation complexity scale: simple–midway–complex, e.g., monosyllabic (simple) to multisyllabic, prefixes or suffixes (complex)	Midway: some grammatical markings, e.g., *walk*, *walk-s*; some new lexical items (e.g., *nation*, *national*)	Midway to complex: productive use of prefixes and suffixes. Verb conjugation is highly complex	
Misleading word translations; "false friends"	E.g., in English, *actual* means *real*, but *current* in some other languages	Lots of English borrowing, but pronunciation, word formation, and/or meanings can differ	Vocabulary problems, e.g., *Notebook computer* vs. *laptop*, *sharp (pencil)* for *mechanical pencil*
Gendered words: Natural? Grammatical?	Natural, only on pronouns (e.g., *he*, *she*)	Grammar does not distinguish gender	Choice of pronouns?

Table 6.7 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Korean*	*Possible problem or error*
Articles: where and when to use; consistency	Rules for definites, generics, indefinites, mass and count nouns but inconsistent	No articles. Demonstratives but no discrimination of mass count or singular–plural	Misuse of articles, possible over-use of -s with mass nouns
Spatial relations: how expressed	Prepositions: choice depends on meaning intended with particular verb used	No prepositions. Spatial relations often lexically encoded in verb itself (e.g., different verbs for *putting on* a hat, *putting on* gloves, or *putting* something *on* a table)	Difficulty with correct preposition choice
Copula (connecting verb)?	Yes, *be*, e.g., *I am good; I am hungry; I was hungry.* Past, present, and future tenses	Linking verb with nouns but not with adjectives (e.g., *he good*)	Some misuse of copula
Auxiliary verbs?	Yes, some dialect variation	Yes, auxiliary verbs are used to indicate tense and aspect of verbs	Possible confusion betweens *do*, *be*, or *have*, especially in negatives or questions
Verb particles?	Yes, e.g., *turn off*	Complex system of post-noun particles, marking grammatical functions; no verb particles at all	Difficulty with the differences between verb particle *off*, adverbial *off*, and preposition *off*
Forming questions	Aux inversion, Q words, *do*, e.g., *Are you going? What time is it? Do you want a drink?*	Q word but no inversion, no *do*-support	Incorrect auxiliary choice instead of *do*, e.g., *What are you want?* Over-use of inversion in indirect questions, e.g., *I don't know what should I do*

Language feature	*English*	*Korean*	*Possible problem or error*
Commands and requests	Direct imperatives; indirect directives, e.g., *Can you . . .*, *Why don't you . . .*; very indirect requests, e.g., *It's noisy in the hall* (meaning *Close the door*)	Similar to English	
Scale of verb marking: none–some–many. Consistent?	Some, e.g., -s, *-ed*, *-ing*. Some irregularities, e.g., *went*	Complex verb marking system with many uses, but no number marking	Difficulty with plurals, third-person singular *-s*, and irregular past tenses
Scale of noun marking: none–few–some–many. Consistent?	Some: case marking on pronouns, e.g., *I*, *me*, *they*, *them*; possessives, -s, plural –s. Some irregularities, e.g., *two deer*	Post-noun particles serve grammatical functions, are not considered suffixes	
Subject–verb agreement	For singular and plural	No agreement based on number or gender; less strict agreement as a part of honorific system	Omission of third-person singular -s
Type and importance, and consistency of word order	SVO; fairly important and consistent	SOV; relatively free. Also, no relative pronouns designating clausal structure	Overly free word order? Wrong relative pronoun choice
Subject dropping allowed?	Not allowed; dummy *it*, e.g., *It's raining*	Yes. Everything can be dropped if it is semantically not important (e.g., *What time? Ate dinner?*)	Use of longer subject rather than dummy *it* (e.g., *To finish every homework in time is difficult*); subject dropping rarer

Table 6.7 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Korean*	*Possible problem or error*
Formality scale: casual–mixed–formal language (e.g., forms of address and use of names); gendered or age-based styles?	Mixed, tending to casual: slang, everyday speech, academic language; no formal age- or gender-based styles	Highly developed age-based honorific system; younger people do not address someone older than themselves by name	Reluctance to use names for teacher or senior; Koreans think English is a "less polite language"; they may not distinguish between formal and casual speech
Indirect speech scale, amount of hedging: none–some–much	Much, e.g., *I think . . ., maybe*	Much, even more than English. Indirectness often means politeness	Frequent use of "I don't know," "I'm not sure," or "I don't know well" to hedge, even when knowing the answer
Classroom talk	Participates, asks and answers questions, engages in discussions	In most cases, teachers talk, and students listen and take notes	Reluctance to ask questions; may consider it rude to interrupt teacher to ask a question
Writing system	Alphabetic, Latin script	Hangeul (Korean alphabet, which is relatively true to pronunciation)	Unfamiliarity with cursive
Written language	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes	Most students literate in Korean, possibly some English as well	

* Features of languages and possible problems are based on general descriptions and ignore exceptional details. See Table 6.1 for fuller descriptions of columns 1 and 2.

Table 6.8 Russian*

Language feature	*English*	*Russian*	*Possible problem or error*
Syllable structure, e.g., consonant clusters (c-c's) at starts or ends of words allowed? Consonant–vowel (c-v)? Dropping, eliding, silent letters?	Frequent consonant clusters can be at start and end of words (e.g., *str-*, *scr-*, *-lms*); has silent letters, elisions, e.g., *can't*	Frequent consonant clusters as in English but more complex; spelling represents pronunciation more faithfully; some English sounds are absent	Pronunciation and spelling; certain vowels not distinguished in Russian (e.g., *beat* and *bit*) are in English; problems pronouncing *th*-sounds
Borrowing or influences from other languages	Germanic and Romance roots cause inconsistent spelling or pronunciation patterns, e.g., *rough* and *ruff*	Borrowings are typically transliterated into Russian according to Russian phonological rules	Variable English spellings of borrowed words
Word formation complexity scale: simple–midway–complex, e.g., monosyllabic (simple) to multisyllabic, prefixes or suffixes (complex)	Midway: some grammatical markings, e.g., *walk*, *walk-s*; some new lexical items (e.g., *nation*, *national*)	Complex: multiple suffixes and prefixes, as in *po-na-pis-a-l-i-s'*; extensive grammatical markings and new lexical items	Possible under-marking in English because it is rarer and less consistent than Russian
Misleading word translations; "false friends"	E.g., in English, *actual* means *real*, but *current* in some other languages	Borrowed word may look or sound much the same but has a different (often related) meaning	Incorrect meaning, e.g., in Spanish and Russian, the similar-looking word *actual* means *current*
Gendered words: Natural? Grammatical?	Natural, only on pronouns (e.g., *he*, *she*)	Grammatical gender (three-way system); partially based on natural gender	Over-use of gendered pronouns (*he*, *she*) for non-human referents

Table 6.8 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Russian*	*Possible problem or error*
Articles: where and when to use; consistency	Rules for definites, generics, indefinites, mass and count nouns but inconsistent	No articles at all (either definite or indefinite)	Under-use and incorrect use
Spatial relations: how expressed	Prepositions: choice depends on meaning intended with particular verb used	Meanings can differ from English	Wrong word choice
Copula (connecting verb)?	Yes, *be*, e.g., *I am good*; *I am hungry*; *I was hungry*. Past, present, and future tenses	Copula used in past and future tense only; almost no use of copula in present tense	Under-use of copula in present tense (e.g., *He good*; or *To me brother* for *I have a brother*; or *To me cold*)
Auxiliary verbs?	Yes, some dialect variation	*Be* used for future tense (like *would* in English)	Misuse and absence of auxiliary verbs
Verb particles?	Yes, e.g., *turn off*	Prefixes (related to spatial prepositions) are used	Wrong particle choice; preference for, e.g., *descend* over *go down*
Forming questions	Aux inversion, Q words, *do*, e.g., *Are you going? What time is it? Do you want a drink?*	No inversion or *do*-support; Q words; also a Q word to form yes/no questions (optionally used)	Use of Q word but no inversion; *do* omission; intonation only
Commands and requests	Direct imperatives; indirect directives, e.g., *Can you . . ., Why don't you . . .*; very indirect requests, e.g., *It's noisy in the hall* (meaning *Close the door*)	Same as English	Misinterpretation of speaker intent is rare

Language feature	*English*	*Russian*	*Possible problem or error*
Scale of verb marking: none–some–many. Consistent?	Some, e.g., -s, *-ed*, *-ing*. Some irregularities, e.g., *went*	Many. Many irregularities	Incorrect use of irregular English forms
Scale of noun marking: none–few–some–many. Consistent?	Some: case marking on pronouns, e.g., *I*, *me*, *they*, *them*; possessives, -s, plural –s. Some irregularities, e.g., *two deer*	Many; fairly consistent, taking into account that various patterns are regular	
Subject–verb agreement	For singular and plural	For person and number in present and future tense; for gender and number in past tense	Possibly dropping agreement if seeking consistency for English
Type and importance, and consistency of word order	SVO; fairly important and consistent	Basically SVO, but much freer than in English. Important. Word order is governed by pragmatic rules (what's important, what's been already mentioned, etc.) and to express definiteness	Over-use of non-SVO orders
Subject dropping allowed?	Not allowed; dummy *it*, e.g., *It's raining*	Allowed in some limited circumstances. No dummy pronouns	Over-use of subject dropping
Formality scale: casual–mixed–formal language (e.g., forms of address and use of names); gendered or age-based styles?	Mixed, tending to casual: slang, everyday speech, academic language; no formal age- or gender-based styles	Mixed: slang, everyday speech, academic language. No formal age- or gender-based styles. Complex system of expressing formality through pronouns, names, and form of address.	

Table 6.8 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Russian*	*Possible problem or error*
Indirect speech scale, amount of hedging: none–some–much	Much, e.g., *I think . . ., maybe*	Some	
Classroom talk	Participates, asks and answers questions, engages in discussions	?	?
Writing system	Alphabetic, Latin script	Alphabetic. Cyrillic script	Possible mistakes with letters that look similar but are pronounced differently
Written language	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes; frequent use of passives	Possible over-use of passives

* Features of languages and possible problems are based on general descriptions and ignore exceptional details. See Table 6.1 for fuller descriptions of columns 1 and 2.

Table 6.9 Spanish*

Language feature	*English*	*Spanish*	*Possible problem or error*
Syllable structure, e.g., consonant clusters (c-c's) at starts or ends of words allowed? Consonant–vowel (c-v)? Dropping, eliding, silent letters?	Frequent consonant clusters can be at start and end of words (e.g., *str-*, *scr-*, *-lms*); has silent letters, elisions, e.g., *can't*	Prohibition of word-initial clusters of /s/ + consonant; reduced number of permissible syllable and word-final consonants and consonant clusters	Possibility of transfer to English of Spanish pronunciation habits, especially at outset of learning process, e.g., *I espeak eSpanish*
Borrowing or influences from other languages	Germanic and Romance roots cause inconsistent spelling or pronunciation patterns, e.g., *rough* and *ruff*	Not applicable to Spanish. Foreign roots are accommodated to fairly consistent Spanish spelling practices	Possible spelling issues if the root in question appears with different spellings in English and Spanish
Word formation complexity scale: simple–midway–complex, e.g., monosyllabic (simple) to multisyllabic, prefixes or suffixes (complex)	Midway: some grammatical markings, e.g., *walk*, *walk-s*; some new lexical items (e.g., *nation*, *national*)	Complex. Much richer inflectional verbal morphology, and far greater use of suffixal derivational morphology, often for affective purposes, e.g., diminutives	Possible overuse
Misleading word translations; "false friends"	E.g., in English, *actual* means *real*, but *current* in some other languages	Borrowed word may look or sound much the same but has a different (often related) meaning	Incorrect meaning, e.g., in Spanish and Russian, the similar-looking word *actual* means *current*
Gendered words: Natural? Grammatical?	Natural, only on pronouns (e.g., *he, she*)	All nouns carry grammatical gender (M or F) with obligatory gender agreement markings on accompanying determiners and adjectives	Use of *he/him*, *she/her* rather than *it* for inanimate nouns

Table 6.9 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Spanish*	*Possible problem or error*
Articles: where and when to use; consistency	Rules for definites, generics, indefinites, mass and count nouns but inconsistent	Article is default determiner. Most nouns require prenominal determiner	Over-use of article
Spatial relations: how expressed	Prepositions: choice depends on meaning intended with particular verb used	Meanings can differ from English	Wrong word choice
Copula (connecting verb)?	Yes, *be*, e.g., *I am good; I am hungry; I was hungry.* Past, present, and future tenses	Two so-called copula verbs corresponding to English *to be*; *tener* (*to have*) sometimes used as equivalent of English *to be*	Some *have/be* confusion in cases where Spanish uses *tener*
Auxiliary verbs?	Yes, some dialect variation	One auxiliary verb in compound past tenses	Incorrect use of compound past rather than simple past. Semantic constraints of Spanish compound past different from English (also dialect differences in Spanish)
Verb particles?	Yes, e.g., *turn off*	No	?
Forming questions	Aux inversion, Q words, *do*, e.g., *Are you going? What time is it? Do you want a drink?*	Yes/no questions: inversion of word order or just intonation. Q words require main verb inversion; no *do*	*Do* omission; possible word order problems with questions like *Does John smoke?* or *Is John eating?*

Language feature	*English*	*Spanish*	*Possible problem or error*
Commands and requests	Direct imperatives; indirect directives, e.g., *Can you . . .*, *Why don't you . . .*; very indirect requests, e.g., *It's noisy in the hall* (meaning *Close the door*)	Mostly similar to English; differing verb markings for number and degree of formality/informality between interlocutors	Misinterpretation of speaker intent
Scale of verb marking: none–some–many. Consistent?	Some, e.g., *-s*, *-ed*, *-ing*. Some irregularities, e.g., *went*	All persons of verb have distinct person/number markings. Many frequent verbs have inconsistent verb stem alternations	Possible over-use of verb endings
Scale of noun marking: none–few–some–many. Consistent?	Some: case marking on pronouns, e.g., *I*, *me*, *they*, *them*; possessives, *-s*, plural *–s*. Some irregularities, e.g., *two deer*	Obligatory plural marking. In spoken language, plural suffix weakened or deleted in some common varieties	
Subject–verb agreement	For singular and plural	For singular and plural	
Type and importance, and consistency of word order	SVO; fairly important and consistent	Flexible. VS quite frequent with intransitive verbs. Object movable for topicalization	?
Subject dropping allowed?	Not allowed; dummy *it*, e.g., *It's raining*	Allowed and frequent	Subject pronoun dropping
Formality scale: casual–mixed–formal language (e.g., forms of address and use of names); gendered or age-based styles?	Mixed, tending to casual: slang, everyday speech, academic language; no formal age- or gender-based styles	Formality distinctions in second-person singular (universal); in plural (Spain only); pragmatics, often region-specific, are complicated	Possible problems in choosing appropriate use of first name vs. title + last name

Table 6.9 Continued

Language feature	*English*	*Spanish*	*Possible problem or error*
Indirect speech scale, amount of hedging: none–some–much	Much, e.g., *I think . . ., maybe*	Fair amount	
Classroom talk	Participates, asks and answers questions, engages in discussions	Possibly more passive	?
Writing system	Alphabetic, Latin script	Alphabetic, Latin script	
Written language	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes	More formal, academic; different styles for different purposes	

* Features of languages and possible problems are based on general descriptions and ignore exceptional details. See Table 6.1 for fuller descriptions of columns 1 and 2.

Summary

This chapter focuses on a subset of languages that are among the most commonly represented in American public schools. Drawing on the experience and expertise of people who know at least one of these languages in addition to English, we offered comparisons between these languages and English. Ten linguistic consultants helped in the creation of the eight language comparison charts in this chapter. Whether native to English or to another language, all our consultants provided insights into the differences and similarities that could present challenges for speakers of these languages as they learn English. The consultants made suggestions for a useful list of comparison features that may be implicated in many of the common errors made by ELLs from one of these language backgrounds. Importantly, they explained their language's characteristics in the charts and made notations about possible problems. Teachers can use the charts after reading the background sections for interpreting them. The charts are intended as tools to help teachers identify the possible problems and their sources that ELLs with varied language experiences may have. Finally, we suggested that teachers develop ideas for solving the problems, try them out, and share the results with fellow teachers.

Discussion Questions

- What are some of the features of English that many ELLs from various backgrounds have difficulty with?
- Why might two students whose home language is Spanish differ in the kinds of mistakes they make in English?
- What is consistency in a language? Is English consistent?
- How can a teacher use the language comparison charts to assist the learning of ELLs?