

# Using Cognates to Scaffold Context Clue Strategies for Latino ELs

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**G**abriela (pseudonym), a fourth-grade Latina English learner (EL), struggled as she read the novel *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan. The pages contained many difficult words and phrases, such as *trustworthy* and *dawned on*. Although this is a culturally relevant novel, the language is not always easily accessible. Gabriela was frustrated by her inability to understand some of this text. In this article we present a meaning-making strategy for helping students like Gabriela read, comprehend, and appreciate texts written in English.

Latino ELs come to elementary classrooms with many English–Spanish cognates in their listening, speaking, reading, and writing vocabularies. Cognates are words that are orthographically, semantically, and syntactically similar in two languages because of a shared etymology. Some cognates are identical in both English and Spanish, as in the case of *hospital/hospital*. Other cognates, such as *cat/gato*, are not as obvious (Montelongo, 2002; Montelongo, Hernández, Herter, & Hernández, 2009).

Educators have suggested the use of cognates to facilitate second-language learning for decades (Doyle, 1926; Rodríguez, 2001). There are more than 20,000 English–Spanish cognates, many of which are among the most frequently used words in English (Johnston, 1941; Montelongo, 2002). Despite this prevalence, however, cognates remain an underutilized language resource (Fitzgerald & Cummins, 1999).

Teachers can help Latino ELs like Gabriela take advantage of their rich linguistic background by using cognates to scaffold the acquisition of various reading strategies subsumed under the general using-the-context umbrella. Although using context clues has long been a strategy of reading teachers, conflating context clues with cognates is a new approach to meeting the needs of EL readers. Through this new strategy, Latino EL readers discern the meaning of unknown English words and their

English–Spanish cognates, thereby increasing the size of their English vocabulary. Through the cognate strategy, Latino ELs learn to prize their ability to speak two languages as their teachers tap into this rich linguistic reservoir.

Latino ELs bring different levels of prior knowledge and language proficiency in English. To further expand their English and academic vocabulary, Latino newcomers in the third through sixth grades can use their Spanish oral language and literacy to develop second-language proficiency through the use of cognates. Latino ELs who have received literacy instruction in their primary language (Spanish) benefit the most from a cognate recognition strategy.

Scarcella (2003) pointed out the importance of including academic language in the instruction of ELs. Many English–Spanish cognates are academic vocabulary words by virtue of having originated from the Latin, the language used by the European scholars of centuries past. Much of the academic language found in the glossaries of the content area textbooks in the upper elementary grades and beyond includes English–Spanish cognates. Several textbook companies publish both English and Spanish glossaries in the content areas where the value of cognates becomes most evident.

## Cognates and Using-the-Context Exercises

Latino EL readers often encounter words they do not know. The inability to understand these unknown words affects comprehension. Although a reader may resort to asking a teacher or classmate for the definition of the troublesome word, there are times when no one is available to help define the word. Furthermore, searching for a word's meaning takes time and attention away from the reading of the text, affecting fluency.

Context clues can be used to guess at the meaning of an unknown word. Teaching students this useful strategy in tandem with their knowledge of cognates can enhance their meaning-making capabilities. They can be taught to look at the sentences before and after the unknown word for synonyms, antonyms, definitions, examples, appositive words or phrases, and punctuation (e.g., parenthesis or boldface type) for clues to the unknown word's meaning (Artley, 1943; Baumann, Font, Edwards, & Boland, 2005). Titles, sectional headings, and pictures also provide clues to the unknown word's meaning in context (McCullough, 1958).

Research has shown that using-the-context activities are beneficial for students (Fukkink & de Glopper, 1998). Through these activities, students develop confidence in their abilities to guess at the meanings of unfamiliar words to gain an initial understanding of the unknown words. The literature also suggests that using the context is the preferred strategy for making meaning of unknown words in text (Frantzen, 2003) and is an essential contributor to vocabulary growth (Schmitt, 2008; Walters, 2004). The reading field's assessment of the using-the-context strategy is summarized by Walters (2006): "It is widely acknowledged that native speakers of a language are able to infer the meanings of unknown words from context, and that this ability accounts for a large part of a native speaker's considerable vocabulary size" (p. 176).

## Classroom Instruction

We taught the context clue strategy with six different types of clues to fourth graders in a mixed Latino EL and English-only classroom. The types of context clues we included were synonyms, antonyms, definition, examples, appositive words or phrases, and punctuation. Examples of these are presented in Figure 1.

Two examples of the context clue strategy are described. The first example we taught involved

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- How can English–Spanish cognates be used to enhance Latino English learners' understanding and appreciation of text?
- How accessible is multicultural literature if students cannot comprehend the language in the text?
- How much general language instruction (etymology, morphology, affixes and roots, cognates and vocabulary) are students receiving in reading and language arts classes?
- How can language learning objectives be used to meet content learning objectives?

looking for synonym context clues. The students read around the unknown word for synonyms. In the example sentence, the unfamiliar word is *gathered*. Using the synonym example, students read the next sentence for words or phrases that might have a similar meaning. Several ELs guessed that *collected*, an English–Spanish cognate (*collect/coleccionar*), was the synonym for *gathered*. Once the students recognized the cognate *collect*, they understood the meaning of the word *gathered*, which led them to comprehend the sentence.

Similar to the synonym example, we had the students identify the unknown word and search for antonyms. In the example sentence, the unfamiliar word is *raided*. Students read the next sentence for antonyms, words or phrases that had the opposite meaning. Recognizing an English–Spanish cognate (*defend/defender*) as an antonym for *raided* unlocked the

meaning of the sentence for the students. From both examples, the English-only students benefited from learning about the etymology of English.

The rest of the examples provided in Figure 1 were modeled in the teaching of the cognate context clue strategy. After we taught the strategy, we presented students with difficult vocabulary words and phrases found in Chapter 4 of *Esperanza Rising*. The strategy was used as a prereading activity to lead students to independent reading of the chapter. The exercises are presented in Figure 2.

In response to the lesson, the classroom teacher expressed appreciation for the strategy and resolved to use more such exercises as part of the curriculum. Equally important as the teacher's reaction were the students' responses to the strategy. The majority of the students completed the activities successfully and celebrated the new strategy that was built on their knowledge of Spanish. Moreover, as they read Chapter 4 from *Esperanza Rising*, the students remarked on the usefulness of the cognate context clue strategy.

**Figure 1**  
**English–Spanish Cognates in Context Clues Exercises to Scaffold Comprehension**

1. Context Clue: Synonyms  
The Indian children *gathered* the olives. They collected these small fruits for use in cooking.  
From the context, you can tell that *gathered* means the same as \_\_\_\_\_. (*collected*)
2. Context Clue: Antonyms  
Bandits *raided* farms and ranches for food and money. The farmers and ranchers defended themselves with guns and rifles.  
From the context, you can tell that *raided* means the opposite of \_\_\_\_\_. (*defended*)
3. Context Clue: Definition  
A *settlement* is usually a small community of people who have recently moved there.  
From the context, you can tell that a *settlement* means the same as \_\_\_\_\_. (*community*)
4. Context Clue: Examples  
Many of the *crops* come from the fields of California. For example, broccoli, spinach, and olives are grown in this state.  
From the context, you can tell that *crops* means the same as: \_\_\_\_\_. (*broccoli, spinach, olives*)
5. Context Clue: Appositive word or phrase  
Each pueblo had many adobe houses grouped around a *town square*, or plaza.  
From the context, you can tell that *town square* means the same as: \_\_\_\_\_. (*plaza*)
6. Context Clue: Punctuation  
The writer revealed her *thoughts* (ideas) in a diary.  
From the context, you can tell that *thoughts* means the same as: \_\_\_\_\_. (*ideas*)

**Figure 2**  
**Using the Cognate Context Clue Strategy for *Esperanza Rising* Vocabulary**

- Directions: Guess at the meanings of the words in **boldface** type.
1. Mary was **looking forward to** riding on the train. She expected\* a happy ride. She imagined\* being able to rest.  
You can tell that *looking forward to* means \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. The people in the alley did not look **trustworthy**. They did not appear to be honest\*.  
You can tell that *trustworthy* means \_\_\_\_\_.
  3. The children of the rich man **scorned** their father's poor uncle. They didn't admire\* or respect\*him.  
You can tell that *scorned* means \_\_\_\_\_.
  4. Elsa was **annoyed** with her little sister for losing her doll. She was furious\* because it was her favorite doll.  
You can tell that *annoyed* means \_\_\_\_\_.
  5. Manuel was **weary** from the long trip. He was exhausted\* from sitting on the bus for fifteen hours. He was so fatigued\* that he went to sleep immediately.  
You can tell that *weary* means \_\_\_\_\_.
  6. It **dawned on** Myra that her friend was in trouble. She realized\* that might be seriously hurt.  
You can tell that *dawned on* means \_\_\_\_\_.

Note: Cognates denoted by asterisks (\*).

## More Teaching Tips About Cognates

Studies have shown that the recognition of cognates is not an automatic process (Jiménez, 1997; Nagy, Garcia, Durgunogulu, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993). As noted earlier, some cognates are identical in spelling (*natural/natural*, *radiol/radio*, *decision/decisión*), others are moderately similar (*democracy/democracia*, *statue/estatua*, *computer/computadora*), while others are very dissimilar (*rice/arroz*, *cat/gato*, *chief/jefe*). To reap the greatest benefit from this strategy, teachers should use cognates that are most similar in spelling.

Studies have also shown that some Spanish cognates appear so infrequently to be of little use in scaffolding their English equivalents (*beverage/brebaje*). Latino ELs would probably not have these Spanish words in their vocabularies. Therefore, the use of rare and infrequent English–Spanish cognates to scaffold the learning of English words is probably not very effective.

A more serious concern is that there are some Spanish words that are spelled identically to words in English but have a totally different meaning. As anyone who has studied Spanish in high school learns, cognates can be hazardous. The most infamous case of false cognates, *embarrassed*, in English is orthographically similar to the Spanish word for *pregnant* (*embarazada*). Such false cognates set off alarms for the language student and the language teacher (Grabe, 1991). This generalization is even more dangerous because it undermines the utility of the many thousands of cognates. There are many more true cognates (over 20,000) than false cognates.

## Cognate Resources

There are several resources to help teachers incorporate cognates into their instruction. One of the most useful resources on English–Spanish cognates is *NTC's Dictionary of Spanish Cognates: Thematically Organized* (Nash, 1997). This book is ideal for creating



many types of context clue exercises: synonyms, antonyms, definitions, examples, appositive words or phrases, and punctuation. An important feature of this book is its organization of 20,000 true cognates into 20 themes further subdivided into 100 topics, including academic vocabulary, as well as technical terms. The cognates are listed in alphabetical order by topic, and there are almost 300 pages of English–Spanish cognates included in this resource.

An online source that can be used to check if a particular English word has a Spanish cognate is the Find-a-Cognate database located at [www.angelfire.com/ill/monte/findacognate.html](http://www.angelfire.com/ill/monte/findacognate.html). Teachers can type in an English word and the system will provide a cognate, if one exists. Similarly, teachers in dual language programs can type in a Spanish word to see if an English cognate exists.

## English–Spanish Cognates Enhance Reading Comprehension

Strategies that build upon the linguistic strengths of Spanish-speaking students should be encouraged and cultivated. Latino ELs come to U.S. classrooms with rich linguistic backgrounds. We have presented teachers, both monolingual and bilingual, with ideas for developing ELs' meaning-making strategies by tapping into their knowledge of Spanish. The cognate context clue strategy is linguistically rich because it builds on the strengths of ELs' prior knowledge and establishes language learning for all students. Employing English–Spanish cognates to teach using

context clues for meaning-making demonstrates the power of language to enhance reading comprehension for all students.

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## Take ACTION!

Here are steps to follow in creating context clue exercises with English–Spanish cognates:

**1.** Preview a text such as Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising* by identifying words and phrases that may be difficult for Latino ELs:

- One-syllable words such as *crops* and *scorn*
- Multisyllable words such as *settlement* and *gather*
- Two-part verbs such as *dawn on* and *move on*
- Idiomatic expressions such as *look forward to* and *piece of cake*
- Compound words such as *trustworthy*

For other resources, look for websites that deal with vocabulary from the text. Teachers can search the Internet for the title of the book and the term *vocabulary*. For instance, a teacher interested in finding vocabulary for the book *Esperanza Rising* would type in the search terms “*Esperanza Rising*” and “*vocabulary*.” An online resource for teachers is [www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=7795](http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=7795).

**2.** Use a thesaurus or dictionary to locate synonyms, antonyms, examples, or definitions for clues to the meanings of the difficult words.

**3.** Check the online Find-a-Cognate database ([www.angelfire.com/ill/monte/findacognate.html](http://www.angelfire.com/ill/monte/findacognate.html)) to ensure that the synonyms, antonyms, and examples are cognates for the difficult words. A second resource for cognates is *NTC's Dictionary of Spanish Cognates: Thematically Organized* (Nash, 1997). This book is an excellent source for creating context clues activities requiring synonyms and examples.

**4.** Create the context clue activity for the identified difficult vocabulary. Students can now access the multicultural richness of the text!

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

- "Let's Read It Again: Comprehension Strategies for English-Language Learners" by Christine Kalemba

### IRA Books

- *Dynamic Read-Aloud Strategies for English Learners: Building Language and Literacy in the Primary Grades* by Peggy Hickman and Sharolyn D. Pollard-Durodola
- *One Classroom, Many Learners: Best Literacy Practices for Today's Multilingual Classrooms* edited by Julie Coppola and Elizabeth V. Primas

### IRA Journal Articles

- "English-Language Learners' Reading Achievement: Dialectical Relationships Between Policy and Practices in Meaning-Making Opportunities" by Mariana Pacheco, *Reading Research Quarterly*, July/August/September 2010
- "Reading in Spanish and English: A Comparative Study of Processing Strategies" by Robert Pritchard and Susan O'Hara, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, May 2008
- "Using Sentence Frames to Develop Academic Vocabulary for English Learners" by Whitney Bray Donnelly and Christopher J. Roe, *The Reading Teacher*, October 2010
- "Vocabulary Instruction for English Learners: Lessons From MCVIP" by Patrick C. Manyak, *The Reading Teacher*, October 2010

### Even More!

- "Second-Language Literacy Instruction" (IRA position statement): [www.reading.org/General/AboutIRA/PositionStatements/SecondLanguagePosition.aspx](http://www.reading.org/General/AboutIRA/PositionStatements/SecondLanguagePosition.aspx)

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