

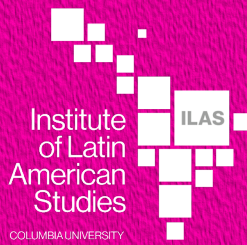
Teaching Early Grade Literacy to Migrant Children from Central America and the Dominican Republic

A culturally relevant pedagogy-based guide

Alex Bonilla Jarquín · Natalia Guzmán Taveras · Rafael Meza Duriez



ILAS K-12 Outreach Program, Columbia University | RedLEI



**Teaching Early Grade Literacy to Migrant Children from
Central America and the Dominican Republic**
A Culturally Relevant Pedagogy-Based Guide

The Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) at Columbia University has commissioned the production of this curriculum guide to serve as a resource for the K-12 teaching community in New York City. This work aims to strengthen background knowledge and instructional strategies so that teachers and educators can both meet the demands and make use of the great cultural and linguistic diversity of students coming from or whose relatives are from Latin America and the Caribbean. The ILAS K-12 Outreach Program strives to enhance the professional capacity of teachers in a multicultural New York City environment and promote the inclusion of Latin American and Caribbean history and culture in their classrooms and students' daily lives.

On an ongoing basis, the K-12 Outreach Program draws on the expertise and support of faculty and students across Columbia University to provide the K-12 teaching community with resources and opportunities to learn about creative ways to incorporate topics Latin American and Caribbean topics into their educational activities. On this occasion, the Central American and Caribbean Early Literacy Network (RedLEI) collaborated with the Program to develop this guide. We hope that this collaboration contributes to the endeavors of the K-12 teaching community from a real-time, cultural perspective prepared by experts in the field.

Content: RedLEI

Alex Bonilla Jarquín, alexmartin28@gmail.com

Natalia Guzmán Taveras, Inataliaguzman@gmail.com

Rafael Meza Duriez, rsmeza@uvg.edu.gt

Production: ILAS K-12 Outreach Program

Esteban Andrade, Program Manager

Romina Quezada Morales, Program Coordinator

k-12outreach@lists.columbia.edu

Design: Mariel Rivera Nieves

maried.rivera@gmail.com



The Central American and Caribbean Early Literacy Network (RedLEI) is a network of universities in Central America and the Dominican Republic and an international organization whose headquarters are at the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala (UVG). RedLEI was created to build local capacity to conduct and apply the best Early Grade Literacy (EGL) evidence for the improvement of teaching and learning outcomes in the region. It is committed to building a community of academic actors (universities) and encouraging them to promote rigorous research to produce evidence to be used by decision makers, policymakers, and other actors that develop initiatives to improve the quality of education, particularly in EGL.

Together with the UVG, the other founding members of RedLEI are: Francisco Morazán National Pedagogical University (UPNFM) of Honduras; the Central American University (of Nicaragua); Central American University “José Simeón Cañas” (of El Salvador); the University of Costa Rica (UCR); the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (PUCMM) of the Dominican Republic; and the Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination (CECC-SICA).

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank all those who helped in the creation of this guide, in particular the experts of the LAC Reads Capacity Program (LRCP), which is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the RedLEI members. We are also grateful to the RedLEI Board of Directors and the Technical Coordination Unit for their contributions. Their engagement with the topic and their keen interest in Central America and the Caribbean provided great lessons on the importance and significance of capability building in the development of high-quality research in the region.

We would like to specially recognize the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala for its commitment to education and, especially, Early Grade Literacy in Central America and the Caribbean.

www.red-lei.org
inforedlei@uvg.edu.gt



**Teaching Reading and
Writing to Migrant
Children from Central
America and the
Dominican Republic:**

**How to Make It Culturally
Relevant?**



New York is a cosmopolitan city that welcomes people from all cultures. Consequently, teachers from the different districts in the city must adopt a culturally relevant pedagogy that responds to the learning needs of Central American and Caribbean children.

Jennerjohn (2020) describes the education that supports culture as one that retrieves students' cultural heritage to link the curriculum to their lives. For Peralta (2002), the cultural relevance of a curriculum helps contextualize learning which, in turn, fosters evoking prior knowledge in a meaningful way, which is essential to address reading comprehension (Hattan & Lupo, 2020; Kaefer, 2020).

Based on the above and on culturally relevant pedagogy, this chapter offers recommendations to reinforce the development of reading comprehension skills, creative writing, and phonological awareness, in addition to strengthening the learning of these skills through the recovery of Central American and Caribbean cultural heritage as a resource for reading and writing in classrooms where children from that region learn.

These three skills were selected based on the evidence framework available in the referred area, which provides guidance on the need to produce processes to reinforce them. Each section discusses concepts and theoretical references based on EGL skills, as well as recommendations for planning a class to address the content used in teaching which, according to Schares (2017), are key indicators to develop cultural leadership. Links to resources available online that can be used in the teaching processes are also provided.

Teachers as cultural leaders

How to practice cultural leadership? Cultural leadership implies bringing together the school's culture and the children's culture. Cultural relevance is closely linked to educational inclusion to the extent that diversity is integrated into teaching processes to guarantee the same learning opportunities for all students (Montoya, 2007).

Cultural competence (Schares, 2017), in turn, enables teachers to understand cultural diversity in their classroom, and seeks to incorporate it to ensure motivation, relevance, and meaningful learning. A person who teaches and is culturally competent has the ability to reflect on the biases that arise from the privileged positions created from a hegemonic ideology and where that diversity is exploited to justify the learning gap (Wagner et al., 2012).

To practice cultural leadership, teachers must practice some competencies. Schares (2017) provides a series of indicators to achieve this, which have been adapted in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Cultural leadership achievement indicators for teachers

Component	Indicator
Content Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frame the theory according to the context and culture of students.• Use examples, metaphors and analogies that reflect the context of the group of students.• Identify, address, and correct biases in the curriculum.
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Plan while thinking of different scenarios and learning modalities.• Use assessment data to identify who is learning at the expected pace and who is struggling.• Incorporate resources from the surroundings or community to facilitate learning.• Consider using multiple formats to display information.
Instructional Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Model high-level thinking through conversation.• Employ cooperative learning and promote collaboration over competition.• Communicate high expectations to all students.• Connect teaching strategies with real learning needs.

Component	Indicator
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use several evaluation formats. • Evaluate instructional strategies. • Monitor and report progress. • Take advantage of the strengths of each student. • Provide specific feedback.
Classroom Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce attitudes that promote a good classroom atmosphere. • Address instantly any gender-biased or violent behavior through positive disciplinary practices and resolve. • Promote respect and tolerance to deconstruct any prejudices and symbolic violence.

How to teach reading and writing from a cultural leadership pedagogical perspective?

Below are specific examples of the application of good educational practices according to culturally relevant pedagogy, designed and adapted for students of Central American and Dominican origin. The examples suggest teachers to reflect on how to integrate cultural relevance into their classroom practices. Strategies to help implement the pedagogy in class are provided, which intend to make important changes to teaching reading and writing in settings as complex as the multicultural one.

Topic 1 | Reading comprehension from a culturally relevant perspective.

According to Tunmer & Hoover (2019), reading comprehension is the goal of reading, and it is achieved through the complex interaction among cognitive skills under two basic components: letter and word recognition, and oral language comprehension. Therefore, each learner needs to apply language comprehension skills (development of inferences and vocabulary, among others) in such a way as to facilitate the construction of meaning from what is read. The process of teaching to understand what is read may be organized in the following phases.

1. To plan: Promote empathy, think outside the classroom, and consider guidelines.

To integrate cultural relevance to the teaching of reading comprehension, teachers will be guided through the following points to reflect on and think about the curriculum from the perspective and emotions of Central American and Dominican children.

A. Promote empathy. Remember your childhood. Reflect and write about the following:

Describe your early grade literacy learning process.

What would you have liked your teacher to know?

Where did you need help?

How is your experience different from that of your students of Central American and Dominican origin?

How is your experience similar to that of your students of Central American and Dominican origin?

B. Think “outside the school.” Complete what is requested in the table below (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

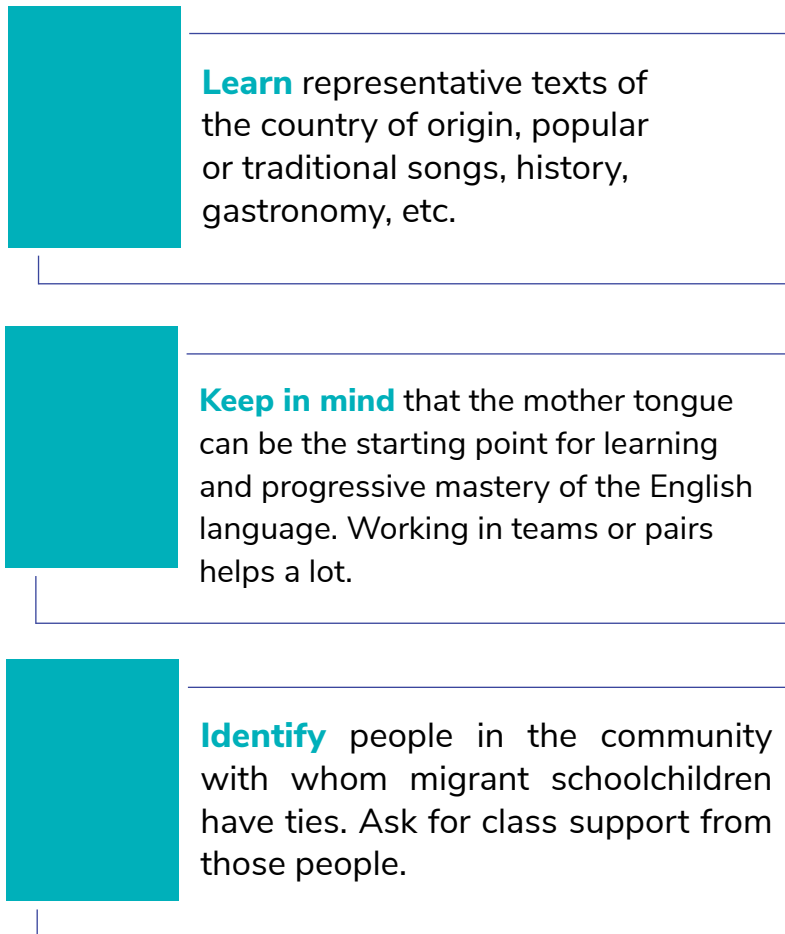
Topics and Resources

Curricular Competencies	Biases: What does the curriculum omit?	Interesting and relevant topics in the community	Resources available in the community	Potential learning activities

- C. Read the guidelines in the boxes that follow (Figure 2). Mark the ones you incorporate or use with your students of Central American and Dominican origin.

FIGURE 2

Guidelines



Learn representative texts of the country of origin, popular or traditional songs, history, gastronomy, etc.

Keep in mind that the mother tongue can be the starting point for learning and progressive mastery of the English language. Working in teams or pairs helps a lot.

Identify people in the community with whom migrant schoolchildren have ties. Ask for class support from those people.

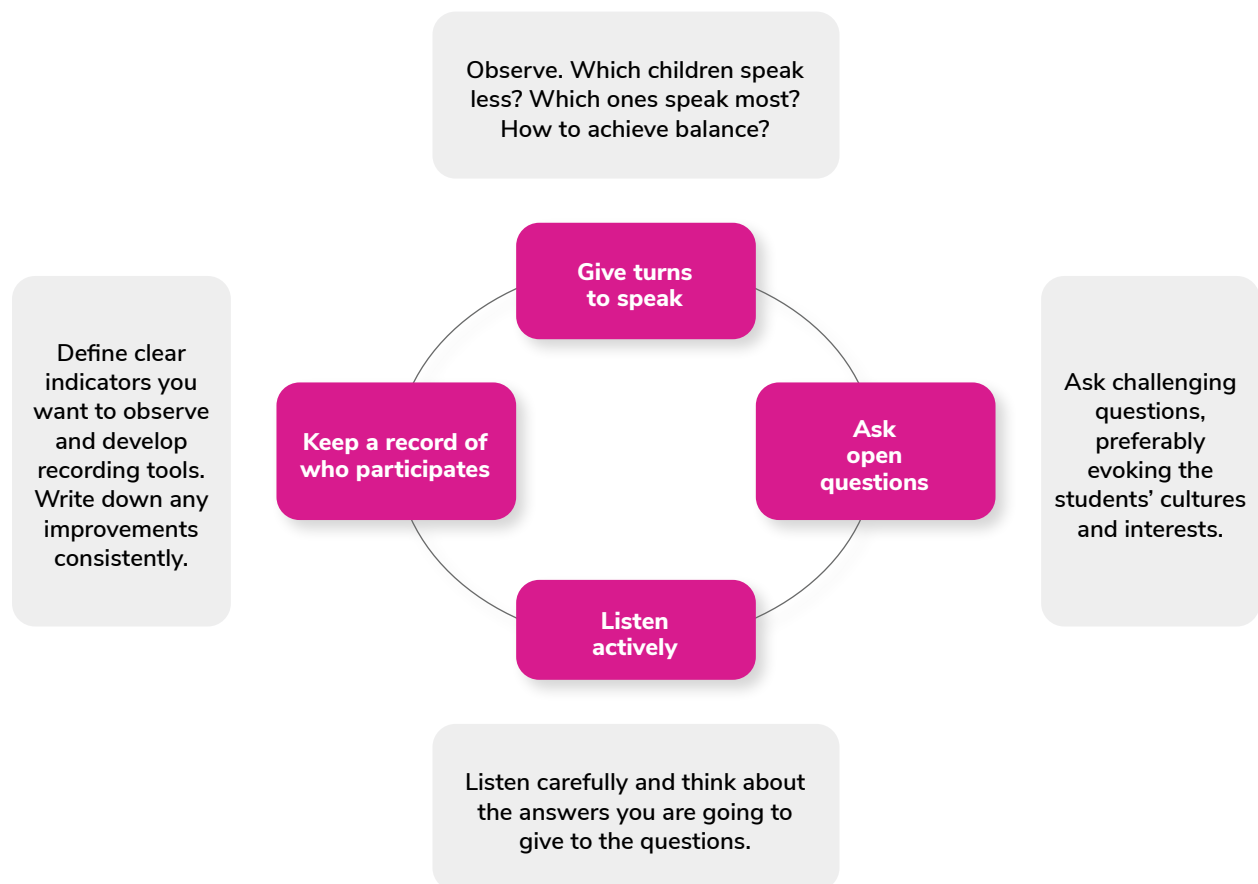
2. To promote oral language understanding: Practice structured dialogues.

Oral language comprehension is important to understand what we read since written language is a representation of how the world is perceived based on sociocultural interactions. Therefore, we invite you to create spaces to promote the understanding of oral language while considering the context of origin of Central American and Dominican children. To do this, we offer you the following guidelines.

- A.** Conduct structured dialogues that seek to create the “third space”¹ (Benson, 2010). Structured dialogues are the best way for children to participate actively. A structured dialogue should ensure everyone’s participation. A series of resources is suggested to help develop a structured dialogue.
- i.** To organize the dialogue, you may use the *Talk strategy* (Hadley et al., 2020).

FIGURE 3

Talk Strategy. Figure based on Hadley et al., 2020.



- ii.** Complete a table like the following one (Figure 4) by writing down aspects of the types of texts, the topics of interest and your alternative uses. Keep this information at hand to continue structuring dialogues.

¹According to Benson, the “third space” is the space of intersection between the culture of the school and that of the context of origin. At that intersection, each infant detects the biases of the curriculum and finds ways to make it relevant to themselves.

FIGURE 4

Texts and topics.

Most used texts in the classroom	Topics covered by the text	Topics of interest to my students	Options vis-a-vis the most used text (alternative text)

- iii. Refer to Figure 5, which shows a guide with useful questions to create the meeting point between the most used text and the cultural background of your students. The colors represent the level of reading comprehension that you want to promote through the question (**black**, literal comprehension; **green**, inferential; **orange**, critical.)

FIGURE 5

Question guide to find meeting points

Questions about the most used text in the classroom	Meeting point	Script of questions about the alternative text
What is the reading about?	What differentiates one story from the other?	What is the reading about?
Which main characters do you remember?	Which of the two did you like more? Why?	Which main characters do you remember?
What facts or events do they face?	Which text better represents you?	What facts or events do they face?

Questions about the most used text in the classroom	Meeting point	Script of questions about the alternative text
<p>How do they solve their problems?</p>	<p>What do you take away from each text?</p> <p>What life lesson does it teach you?</p>	<p>How do they solve their problems?</p>
<p>What is the moral of the story?</p> <p>How do you think the characters felt when ...?</p> <p>Do you feel that something like this could happen to you or your family?</p> <p>What would you have done differently from what happened in the story?</p> <p>How did you feel when ...?</p> <p>What memories did the story bring back when ...?</p>		<p>What is the moral of the story?</p> <p>How do you think the characters felt when ...?</p> <p>Do you feel that something like this could happen to you or your family?</p> <p>What would he have done differently from what happened in the story?</p> <p>How did you feel when ...?</p> <p>What memories did the story bring back when ...?</p>
<p>What do you think of the actions of each character?</p> <p>What did you like about the story?</p> <p>What did you dislike about the story?</p> <p>What would change in the story?</p>		<p>What do you think of the actions of each character?</p> <p>What did you like about the story?</p> <p>What did you dislike about the story?</p> <p>What would change in the story?</p>

iv. Implement the *Talk Strategy* (as a way to structure the dialogue).

B. Ask the group of students to tell culturally relevant stories.

i. Suggest using different formats to strengthen the use of language. Some themes include:

- important family celebrations
- historical dates of the country of origin and their importance
- family memories
- childhood anecdotes
- stories from community or neighborhood where the student lives

We suggest using the following formats to tell stories: writing a narrative for anecdotes or stories; drawing the story; making a family album; creating a digital book using available resources (such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Microsoft PowerPoint, or others).

3. Resources to apply the strategies: Mother tongue, family members, and Internet sites.

Additionally, it is important that children be allowed to express themselves in their mother tongue in order to master its underlying linguistic knowledge. That learning will later be transferred to the second language, in this case, English. To achieve this, we suggest the following activities.

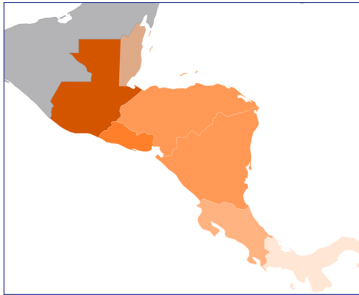
A. For the explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies, using the mother tongue is important, especially if the group of students do not master the English language or there are some minors who do not do so completely. Under those circumstances, request support from your students' family members and ask them to:

- i. Visit the classroom to participate as readers or assistants and help students speak in their mother tongue. This option is also appropriate when the teacher does not speak the children's mother tongue.
- ii. Model the strategies from home, in their own language, and compare what they do at school versus what they do at home.

B. To access resources available online to use in the classroom, we suggest visiting the following sites (all resources are in English):



- **Folktales, myths and other stories from Central America.** This is a site containing myths, stories, and legends from Central America: https://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/central_american_folklore.html



- **Geography Now.** This YouTube channel offers cultural, demographic, and social information on Central American countries and the Dominican Republic. All videos are available in English. <https://www.youtube.com/c/GeographyNow/videos>



- **Teaching Central America.** This site offers free downloadable material, such as lessons, biographies, poetry, and prose by personalities and artists of Central American origin, such as Roque Dalton, Rigoberta Menchú, Claribel Alegría and Ernesto Cardenal: <https://www.teachingcentralamerica.org/about>



References

- Benson, S. (2010). "I don't know if that'd be English or not": Third space theory and literacy instruction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(7), 555-563.
- Hadley, E. B., Newman, K. M. & Mock, J. (2020). Setting the Stage for TALK: Strategies for Encouraging Language-Building Conversations. *The Reading Teacher*, 74(1), 39-48.
- Hattan, C. & Lupo, S. M. (2020). Rethinking the Role of Knowledge in the Literacy Classroom. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55, S283-S298.
- Kaefer, T. (2020). When Did You Learn It? How Background Knowledge Impacts Attention and Comprehension in Read-Aloud Activities. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55, S173-S183.
- Jennerjohn, A. (2020). School-Family Partnerships for Culturally Sustaining Texts. *The Reading Teacher*, 73(5), 657-661. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1891>
- Montoya, W. (2007). Inclusión: principio de calidad educativa desde la perspectiva del desarrollo humano. *Revista Educación*, 31(2), 45-58.
- Peralta, M. V., & Hernández, L. (2012). *Antología de experiencias de la educación inicial iberoamericana*. OEI.
- Schares, D. K. (2017). Becoming a Culturally Competent Educational Leader. In Curran, C. M., & Petersen, A. J. (Eds.), *Handbook of research on classroom diversity and inclusive education practice*, (pp. 54-76). IGI Global.
- Tunmer, W. & Hoover, W. (2019) The cognitive foundations of learning to read: a framework for preventing and remediating reading difficulties, *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 24(1), 75-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2019.1614081>
- Wagner, D., Murphy, K. & De Korne, H. (2012). Learning First: A Research Agenda for Improving Learning in Low-Income Countries [Working Paper 7]. Brookings Center for Universal Education.

Image and Photography Credits:

- p. 6: Miriam Martínez for PCLR/USAID;
p. 16: (1) [Stela at Copan](#) by Frederick Catherwood; (2) Central America Map by Daniel Sojuel for RedLEI; (3) Miriam Martínez for PCLR/USAID;
p. 17: Miriam Martínez for PCLR/USAID.



©2021

Institute of Latin American Studies, Columbia University

www.ilas.columbia.edu