I was lucky to be able to attend the International TESOL convention in Toronto in March this year (Jim Cummins’ home town).

At this convention, [Jim Cummins](http://www.softconference.com/tesol/2015_webcast/Evidence.html) talked about Evidence-Based TESOL: Teaching Through a Multilingual Lens.

In his talk, he discussed the politics of TESOL in relation to ‘closing the gap’ in the ‘No Child Left Behind’ Law in the USA: how **ideology** rather than **evidence-based** teaching influenced the development of standardized testing and literacy approaches.

Follow the link from Jim’s name above and have a listen.

Cummins' points of relevance in this keynote include:

* **Evidence-based TESOL** practices vs. the use of **evidence-free policies** for all learners with specific importance for English-additional-language learners
* Ideology rather than researched evidence-based practices are the norm, damaging the lives of students and teachers
* The time it takes to learn an other language and the ideological practices that ignore this in relation to standardised testing and teaching practices
* Policies in the USA re ‘No Child Left Behind’ (NCLB) give ELLs one year to catch up academically.

What about our NAPLAN program – four years of mainstream **exposure** – not TESOL – prior to English before academic testing? This is sufficient to acquire Interpersonal English, not Cognitive Academic Language (between 5-7 or more years).

* NCLB law (USA) takes students achievements on standardized tests as indication of ‘poor teaching and bad schools’.

**Which policies and practices are evidence-based and which are evidence-free?**

**Big idea: teaching through a multilingual lens**

**Examples of evidence-free policies**:

* **prioritised teaching of phonics**….. research shows this is unrelated to comprehension after Grade 1; many students received intervention weakly related to evidence; practices related to evidence were not implemented
* Canadian policies – **some languages are worth learning and others are not;** languages outside of English and French are not valued as bilingual capability; in Ontario it is illegal to teach languages outside of these

Which languages do we value in Australia in terms of teaching multilingual students and in supported bilingual programs?

* National Reading Panel (USA, Clinton Years) – followed up by Bush administration implemented Reading First program – one billion per year – it funded only programs with intensive phonics focus especially in the early years; the Direct Instruction practices dominated this field
* **The role of print access and extensive literacy engagement was ignored despite extensive research documenting its impact on literacy attainment and reading comprehension**
* National Reading Panel report on the results of Reading First showed no link between systematic phonics instruction and reading comprehension
* ‘Reading First’ report revealed no impact on comprehension in Grades 1-3; it produced a positive impact in decoding in Grade One students tested in one school year; only with decoding in Grades 1-3; did not produce statistically significant impact on student engagement with print.

Consequences of evidence-free policy are huge – not just economically (6 billion $ poured down the drain);

“we are denying students access to instruction that will work for them”

* Problematic for Low SES and and ELLs who need support provided by schools to acquire the language of the school, the language of learning.

**WHAT DOES EVIDENCE-BASED instruction look like?**

Three components of effective instruction extensively supported by the research:

* SCAFFOLDING to gain access to meaning and means of learning
* ACTIVATING AND BUILDING ON STUDENTS’ BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE
* Direct Instruction folks interpret background knowledge as reminding students what they learned in the lesson before
* Rather, here it means activating the funds of knowledge in students’ communities, connecting with students’ lives in way that they can connect their experience with the experiences of instruction
* EXTENDING STUDENTS KNOWLEDGE THROUGH EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION (NB: not Direct Instruction, but extending students knowledge of academic language through explicit instruction).

The researched evidence ignored by policy makers is **LITERACY ENGAGEMENT** and access to print. Middle income students have greater access to PRINT than those ‘left behind’:

* **Centrality of Reading engagement** as a powerful predictor of success – this evidence was/is ignored in the USA – research is overwhelming – emerged in much of the research as a powerful predictor of reading attainment for both second language learners and English first language learners
* In the USA, these findings have been largely ignored because of the fact that these studies were not considered by or were dismissed by the National Reading Panel which reported in 2006; but the research is overwhelming of the centrality of reading engagement.
* **Identity of students** and research – where identity is ignored for students from marginalised communities – research shows that these students experience disproportional underachievement. Schools need to promote ‘Identities of Competence” ……

What does this say about the phasing out of Bilingual Programs for our Indigenous Language Speaking Minorities in the NT?

* Where identities are not promoted, students have been punished for speaking own languages, low expectations among teachers for students from diverse backgrounds has been communicated either explicitly or implicitly…..they have lived down to these expectations…. Due to devaluation of students’ identities. Schools have to reverse this by valuing language and culture that students bring to school.
* Most policy documents around English speaking world don’t acknowledge valuing students identity as key

**Centrality of literacy engagement**

* If academic language is found mostly in printed texts then **print access and literacy engagement** are of central importance in promoting academic language proficiency
* We find academic language in two places – in classrooms and in printed text
* **If we take away printed text – if we say students have to learn all the rules of phonics before we let them loose on real, engaging books then we’re cutting off students’ access to what they need to get**
* Many students we are talking about aren’t socialised to a literacy orientation, similar to many students of low socio-economic status – no money for books, ipads, local libraries not as rich as others therefore

“from the day a child walks into schools they should be surrounded by books and immersed in literacy experiences”

* Teaching literacy practices through printed texts is a socialisation process that a lot of middle class kids (English-speaking) from literate backgrounds get prior to coming to school. ‘Non-achieving’ kids tend not to have had that and often they don’t get it in schools
* Issues related to immigration, education of multilingual students, increase in rise of racism – ideology, not evidence-based information dominates policies and practice as a result.

Jim talks of text-based approaches as research-based approaches to TESOL ☺

He talks of the essential nature of students being immersed in written texts as part of the socialisation process of achieving literacy; that literacy is much more than learning skills.

**Fran’s Endnote:**

*Immersion in written texts alongside the teaching of oracy as the base, is the core of the Walking Talking Texts[[1]](#footnote-1) methodology. The visible evidence of the learning are the* [*Language Floods*](http://www.walktalkteach.com.au/en/walking-talking-texts/155-language-floods-in-classrooms-to-support-learning) *in classrooms. These are integral to the methodology. I have a PowerPoint of various literacy flooded classrooms around the Territory. Teachers and students in these classrooms regularly ‘walk-the-talk’ as part of the methodology. These visuals reflect the written text-based teaching of and learning by the students and are immediately relevant to the learning and teaching of English as an Additional Language. Students from Oral Home Cultures need to be taught and to experience contexts and roles of English literacy for academic learning in western school cultures. For these students living in remote communities in the north of Australia, there is, by and large, no essential purpose or role for literacy in local daily interactions with others. Outside of school, students in these communities can meet all of their emotional, social, academic, economic needs very effectively through oral home language encounters and interactions. Yes there is a level of English literacy use visible around these communities such as food labels etc. Are these ‘read’ or ‘visually recognised as illustrations’?*

*A number of bilingual programs implemented and supported across the NT between 1974 and 2008 significantly changed the place of and purposes for home language (literacy) in school learning. Results in the mid 2000s demonstrate the positive impact of bilingual teaching on English literacy outcomes for students who speak minority (undervalued) languages and who are from oral home cultures. In addition these programs were based on explicit teaching in, of, and through both languages, (home language and English), affirmation of students’ identities, and community development in valuing and up-skilling home language speakers to become teachers. All of which reflect Cummins’ effective evidence-based practices.*

1. *I am not ‘selling’ this methodology as the only or best pedagogic answer, however, as the author, I do have a biased interest ☺ ☺. As a result, I agree with Cummins’ proclamations about engagement with literacy and its centrality in literacy achievement in home language and in EAL/D.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)