

Supporting English-Language Learners in Mainstream Classrooms

**Sylvia Valentin
Department of Education
Niagara University**

Abstract

The student population in school classrooms across the United States continues to become more and more diverse. The make up of our classrooms is comprised of students whose diversity ranges from learning styles/preferences and abilities to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers in mainstream classrooms are required to meet the needs of *all* their students including English language learners (ELLs) and provide them with instruction that is relevant and meaningful. In order to accomplish such tasks, teachers must develop a relationship and get to know their students as unique individuals and value their cultural and linguistic diversity. This article explores some strategies mainstream classroom teachers can use to relate to and effectively teach ELLs.

Introduction

Every school-year, teachers face the task of working with a new group or groups of students to facilitate their learning and promote their academic achievement. It is a duty that teachers welcome; after all that is what they are trained to do. Our classrooms bring together students from many different backgrounds with varied life and academic experiences. This diversity brings many challenges for teachers, especially new teachers. In addition to the challenges of diversity in learning styles, and the various developmental and cognitive levels of students, teachers must also be aware of the linguistic and cultural diversity of their students. In a response to this, most if not all, teacher training programs offer courses dealing with diversity and multicultural issues (Garmon, 2004). However, not all teacher training programs provide their teacher candidates with courses dealing with second language acquisition and issues pertaining

to English language learners (ELLs). These courses are mostly offered in programs leading to bilingual and ESL (English as a Second Language) certification. Therefore, most teachers in mainstream classrooms (non-bilingual, non-ESL) have not received training in second language acquisition and teaching ELLs. However, all teachers are expected, and rightfully so, to address the needs of all students, including English-language-learners. This article explores some strategies mainstream classroom teachers can use to relate to and effectively teach ELLs.

In order to meet students' academic needs, teachers must be knowledgeable in content areas, teaching methodologies, strategies and effective practices. However, to be effective, teachers must get to know *who* their students are. Ms. Marks, a former eighth grade teacher and currently an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh, reflected on her practice after returning to teach eighth grade for a year. She concluded, "The fact that I was doing hours of planning at home and school didn't matter. I was not relating to them as *people*; therefore, I could not reach them, no matter how good my lessons were. They were not going to work for *me*, because I had no relationship with them." (Marks, 2002, 89). This situation is even more difficult, when teaching students whose language and culture are different from their teacher's.

English Language Learners in the United States

Classrooms across the United States reflect the composition of its society. Based on the 2000 U.S. Census, the Office English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (OELA) indicated that the national ELL growth from 1990 to 2000 was 46%. Data on

school-age population for New York State indicated that the number of 5- to 17-year-olds who speak another language and do not speak English “very well” had increased 22.3% since 1990 (OELA, 2002). The number of English-language learners in our classrooms has continued to rise in other states as well. ELL enrollment in Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois and Texas has increased from 1993/1994 to 2003/2004, even in instances when the total school enrollment has dropped (OELA, 2004).

English-language learners represent many languages and cultures. Like any other group of students they are diverse in terms of learning styles, preferences, academic strengths and weaknesses. These students need to be provided with appropriate and relevant learning experiences that address their uniqueness. Therefore, teachers must consider student diversity as an asset and a resource instead of a barrier or problem. Brock (2001) suggests that teachers should capitalize on the languages and cultures that the ELLs have to offer and use this to promote powerful learning experiences.

English-language learners in mainstream classrooms

It is crucial that teachers become aware of their students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Awareness does not just mean that teachers should be able to put a “label” on a student – Asian, Hispanic or African American – to determine the native language or languages he or she speaks. It is more than that. It requires an effort from teachers to connect with the students and understand their reality, where they come from, their cultures, their languages.

Teaching experiences with school-age ELLs and undergraduate/graduate pre-service teachers in a non bilingual non ESL teacher education program have given me the opportunity to experience and identify several ways for teachers to get to know their students and support them in their learning experiences. The following recommendations, I believe to be essential.

1. Learn students' names and pronounce them correctly.

One of the most important things for teachers to do is to try to pronounce their students' names correctly. One's name is one's identity. During the first days of school make an effort to say the names correctly. If a student's name is Josefina, do not call her "Josie", unless that is her nickname and she has informed you about it. Of course there will be many names which could be difficult to pronounce, but ask the student to teach you how to say it correctly. That alone sends a message to the student that you care about him/her and you are making an effort to know him/her.

- 2. Develop an understanding of second language acquisition and English proficiency.** In any given classroom, the English proficiency of ELLs will be varied. In non-bilingual/non-ESL classrooms, students are not necessarily placed according to their English proficiency. As a result, there may be many levels of proficiency. The range could be from fully English proficient students who have exited or tested-out of bilingual or ESL programs to students who are recent arrivals from other countries with very limited proficiency and are placed in an all

English (monolingual/mainstream) classroom due to unavailability of bilingual programs in the school district. These students will then receive ESL services from certified ESL teachers who will work with them in their development of English language skills and learning content. Upon entering the school district, students' language skills are assessed and their English proficiency level is determined. The assessment process, placement and programs available to students vary by state, and by regions or localities within each state. Information on English proficiency levels will be used by ESL teachers to determine the language needs of the students and to plan instruction. The number of ESL units or class periods that students receive depends on their English proficiency level.

It is important to point out that the education of ELLs is not the sole responsibility of the ESL teacher. Mainstream classroom teachers are still responsible for their mastery of content and also for their language development. Teachers must become familiar with how a second language is learned. It is imperative that teachers understand the difference between conversational and academic language. The distinction between conversational and academic language was initially made by Cummins in 1979 when he identified these as basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) respectively. Cummins (2005) has indicated that this distinction was intended to draw attention to the very different time periods typically required by immigrant children to acquire conversational fluency (within two years of exposure) in their second language as compared to age-appropriate academic proficiency (at least five years) in that language. Keeping this

distinction in mind, teachers must provide learning activities that are appropriate for the students' language proficiency level and allow them to continue their academic language development while also learning content. Therefore, it is crucial for a regular/mainstream classroom teacher to consult and collaborate with ESL teachers who are providing services to students. Teachers must work together in order to support ELLs in the development of language skills and learning content. These efforts will then translate into a meaningful, comfortable and successful learning environment for teachers and students.

3. Create class activities that promote the sharing of personal information.

Effective teachers must create a community of learners who know, respect and support each other (Arends, 2004). "Not an easy task," one might say. Teachers must give students the opportunity to share information about themselves and get to know one another. At the beginning of the school year, teachers usually get minimal information about students. School records may provide some biographical data, standard test scores, and comments of prior teachers; but these do not tell much about the likes and dislikes of the students. Teachers must identify the things that interest their students. Teachers must facilitate opportunities for students to express their interests and share these with their peers. One could have students make a drawing about the things they like/dislike and have them share it with a partner and/or the whole class. Another activity that could accomplish this is "written conversation" (Bayles Martin, 2000). In this activity students are paired-up and each partner writes a question to the other,

they then exchange papers and answer the questions. At the end of the activity, each student will introduce his/her partner to the whole class based on the questions asked. This can be adapted to be used with elementary, secondary and college students. It allows students to get to know their peers, but it gives teachers an opportunity to learn more about their students. Teachers can also create or adapt a set of questions or interest inventory in which students are asked to complete statements/answer questions about themselves (Bayles Martin, 2000). It may be necessary and helpful to assure students that these forms are confidential and that only the teacher will read them. These forms are a way for teachers to become familiar with the diverse interests of their students and very useful for planning instruction. It is important to note that students should not be the only ones sharing personal information. It is essential that teachers share some personal information with their students. The amount of personal information to share is up to each individual. Students must feel comfortable, safe and respected. A classroom where one feels connected to the teacher and to other classmates creates a safe haven for learning and the creation and sharing of ideas.

4. Create an environment/climate that is welcoming and respectful to parents.

Parents of English-language learners are no different than any other parents in some aspects. They are concerned about the well-being of their children, expect their children to receive a good education in school, want their children to do well in school and want to be involved in the process. It is probable that the parents'

English skills may be limited and if that is the case, communicating with them could become an issue. However, this should not prevent any teacher, new or experienced, from making efforts to identify ways and resources in the school district and the community that could facilitate communication with the parents. There may be translation services available, tutoring, after school programs and workshops for parents. All parents, not only ELLs' parents, must feel valued and respected. Becoming familiar with the students' language and culture will allow teachers to feel more comfortable interacting and communicating with parents. People tend to generalize and interpret behavior according to their own experiences, many times without considering that there are many factors that affect any behavior. Therefore, teachers must be open minded and not jump to conclusions without having all the necessary information. For example, a parent of a third-grader did not attend any of the daytime parent-teacher conferences because she worked in a factory and could not take time off and would get fired if she missed work. If I had not been aware of the situation, I could have erroneously concluded that she was not interested in her son's education. For that reason, it is essential to establish good rapport and communication with parents. They are key players in their children's education.

5. Integrate the language and culture of the students.

When planning instruction and selecting content and instructional materials, teachers must consider the students' languages and cultures. Teachers should include topics, resources and materials that students can relate to. These should

not be limited to holiday celebrations or what I call the “topic of the month” approach (i.e. Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month). The content taught needs to be made relevant to the students’ experiences and backgrounds all year around. For example, in language arts it is important to include literature written by authors from different backgrounds, and literature that represents the diverse world in which we coexist. In other content areas, one needs to evaluate teaching materials for bias and make sure that these accurately include contributions of individuals from diverse backgrounds and multiple perspectives on the issues presented. These practices are highly recommended by researchers/educators in the fields of multicultural and bilingual education (Banks & McGee Banks, 2003; Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 2006; Jordan Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ovando, Collier & Combs (2003).

Conclusion

In conclusion, teachers must make efforts to know **all** their students including English-language learners. It is not enough to be knowledgeable of content and skilled in methods/strategies. Teachers in mainstream classrooms must provide ELLs with opportunities to feel part of the classroom community by supporting their English language development and encouraging their full participation in activities. To achieve this, they must learn about the process of learning English as a second language, and its implications in teaching English language learners. It is necessary to create a safe and trusting environment where students feel respected, valued and can share their thoughts, ideas and opinions without fear of being ridiculed for making mistakes or

speaking English with an accent. That safe environment can only be created when teachers see their students as unique individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences and skillfully use those to enrich their learning experiences. Getting to know students could be a challenge, but one that should be embraced by all teachers who really want to make a difference.

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