

Understanding and Meeting The Needs of ESL Students

One of the best ways to understand what it is like to be an English-language learner in a U.S. classroom is to hear the stories of immigrant students. Mr. Miller and Mr. Endo use these stories to determine what steps teachers can take to help their students triumph over their struggles with a new culture and a new language.

BY PAUL CHAMNESS MILLER AND HIDEHIRO ENDO

AT LEAST 3.5 million children identified as limited in English proficiency (LEP) are enrolled in U.S. schools.¹ Yet many schools have no programs for LEP students, and many others have only minimal English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual classes. In these situations, students are placed in mainstream classes after just one or two years in such programs, and teachers are put on the spot trying to work with students whom they are not trained to help.

This problem stems partly from a lack of funds and personnel in the schools, but it also reflects the influence of the government. Despite the 1974 ruling in *Lau v. Nichols*, a

PAUL CHAMNESS MILLER will be an assistant professor of foreign language education in the Division of Teacher Education at the University of Cincinnati this coming fall. HIDEHIRO ENDO is completing a master's degree in foreign language education with an emphasis on ESL and multicultural education at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Ind.

decision that required schools to provide services to LEP students, more recent government education policy has sought to bring immigrant students to "proficient" levels of English within three years.² This policy contradicts language research that indicates that students need five to seven years in language programs to reach *academic* proficiency.³ As a result of such government policy, more and more students are being placed into mainstream classrooms before they

are ready and without further support from ESL teachers.

In this article, we present the personal histories of immigrants so that educators can better understand their experiences. This research technique — called narrative inquiry — requires that the stories be told only by individuals.⁴ While the stories clearly involve interpretations of the facts, it is these interpretations on which identities are founded and through which lives are shaped.⁵ The stories we share are those of language learners in the U.S. school system, and they show that language learning is a "complex, contextualized, and narrativized experience."⁶

THE PROBLEMS

English-language learners face a plethora of problems as they begin to build new lives in a strange land. The problems stem primarily from linguistic and cultural differences, and they are not the fault of teachers. How-

ever, it is important that teachers understand these problems so that they can provide these students the help they need.

Struggling with language. “Language shock” is perhaps the most common phenomenon that language learners experience when adjusting to their new environment. This term refers to the anxiety an immigrant experiences when first entering a community in which he or she does not speak, or is not proficient in, the dominant language. It is a common occurrence in schools, where, despite their desire to speak English fluently, students must struggle for several years before they understand everything that is said in their classrooms, in the hallways, and in the cafeteria. The feeling of anxiety is exacerbated by the ignorance of others. Laurie Olsen recounts stories of students being mocked by their peers because of the way that they speak English.⁷ While observing an ESL class, Olsen heard a student visitor comment that it sounded like he was no longer in America when he entered that classroom. (In this particular case, the teacher was allowing the students to communicate in their native languages.) Following that remark, all the students fell silent. Such occurrences only aggravate the anxiety of immigrant children.

Other examples of similar experiences have been documented. For example, Xiaoxia Li reports that, when she went to pick up her daughter Amy from school, she began to ask her some questions about her day, but in Chinese. Amy became upset with her mother and later explained that her classmates would laugh at her in those situations. Moreover, whenever the teacher in Amy’s school inquired as to who had made a particular mistake, one of her classmates would point to her and say, “The Chinese

girl,” when it was usually not so.⁸

The experience of language shock is also described in the autobiography of Eva Hoffman.⁹ When she and her family emigrated from Poland to Canada, she did not know a single word of English. She and her sister were completely stunned when they arrived at their new school. They did not even have the motivation to learn the language at first, and they had great trouble learning how to speak. When Eva finally did make friends, she had much difficulty in trying to understand their language. Eva made every attempt to appear to understand conversations, but she admitted that she did not understand half of what she heard, even after a year of living in Canada. She recalled her frustration when her friends were telling jokes and she tried to tell one — but no one laughed at the punch line. To add to her anxiety, Eva had not wanted her family to emigrate to Canada. She loved Poland and did not want to leave. Such sentiments are very common among immigrant children. Because of this disruption of Eva’s normal childhood, she had a difficult time adjusting to her new life in Canada.

The anxiety created by language shock results in greater difficulty in performing well academically, especially when trying to learn the new language. Stephen Krashen’s affective filter theory applies here.¹⁰ When a student experiences high stress, the affective filter is switched on, and the student will have difficulty in acquiring the new language. When the affective filter is down, language acquisition occurs more efficiently and quickly. Lack of motivation and self-esteem are also factors that trigger the affective filter and so prevent students from learning their new language. Therefore, educators need to provide an environment that reduces stress

and anxiety and also increases immigrant students’ motivation and self-esteem.

To add to the language shock that occurs on entering a new land, many students experience another kind of struggle. As a result of the types of torment described above, they have negative associations with speaking their native language. Yet when they go home, that is the language in which their parents communicate. Moreover, their parents insist that they too maintain the use of the native language as a connection to their homeland and heritage. But many immigrant students associate fluency in English with becoming American and so want to give up their native language. These students are caught in a battle: at home they are expected to speak their native language; at school there is pressure to speak in English.¹¹

Indeed, the majority of immigrant children believe that continuing to speak their native language works against their being accepted at school. Immigrant children quickly learn that it is unacceptable to be different, and language is one of the most obvious differences. Thus immigrant children make every effort to avoid speaking their native language. Many of them even give themselves English names and insist on adopting the fashion rules of the American student. In fact, English tends to *replace* the students’ native languages, even as early as the second generation.¹²

Eva Hoffman recalls that, after some time in Canada, her mother made the comment to her that she was becoming English. Not only was she losing her Polish language, but even her way of thinking was changing to fit her new environment. Many years later, when she returned to Poland, Eva’s friends and acquaintances noticed real differences in her speech and in

her mannerisms.

This struggle between remaining distinct and assimilating is also evident among the Navajo people. Donna Deyhle's research demonstrates the difficulties that the Navajo elders have convincing the young people in their community to learn their language. The young are not interested in learning the language of their people, because they equate success with speaking fluent English. What is more, there is great pressure from the public schools to assimilate and abandon Navajo roots. Many students end up leaving the Navajo land to attend boarding schools. Upon their return, they find that they no longer fit in with their people.¹³ Jane, a student in Deyhle's research, participated in the boarding school program and is now unable to speak Navajo. As a result, she feels uncomfortable in her own community. She does not get along with other Navajo, and she feels stupid when she is with them. While the issues concerning the Navajo and public schools are much more complex than language alone, the language struggle is an important one.

Lily Wong Fillmore tells a similar story.¹⁴ A Cantonese-speaking family who moved to the United States had two children. One of them, Chu-mei, quickly learned some English and maintained a working knowledge of Cantonese. However, Kai-fong did not have the same experience. He remained an outsider at school, and his only friends were other Asian children who were also immigrants. Once he began to learn English, he stopped speak-

ing Cantonese altogether. When his family attempted to converse with him in Cantonese, he would either respond in English or ignore them. Soon, he began alienating himself from home and spending more time with his friends from school. This situation was extremely difficult for his grandmother, who was also living with the family, and it created a great deal of tension between the grandmother, the parents, and Kai-fong.

Why does resolving the conflict between one's native language and English matter? Some argue that the goal should be to make immigrants assimilate. One does not have to go far to hear such comments as, "You are in America, so speak English!" Of course, there is no question that the majority of immigrants want to learn English, but to demand that they give up their native language and their native culture does more harm than good. New language learn-

ers are likely to be more successful if, instead, they are encouraged to embrace their own culture as they learn the new language. They should be encouraged to *add* to their existing language and culture, rather than to exchange their own for the new one.¹⁵

Struggling with pedagogy and curriculum. Another important challenge that many immigrant children face is understanding the curriculum and pedagogy used in America's schools. Our curriculum is largely Eurocentric and could even be said to have a unique American style. When immigrant students enter the classroom here, they are not accustomed to our curriculum and often find it lacking an appreciation for other cultures.¹⁶

Chris Carger shares the story of Alejandro, a Mexican American boy, who was a student in a predominantly Latino Catholic middle school in Chicago.¹⁷ While the teachers and administrators never overtly stated that they believed their students were inferior, they treated them as if they were. Mrs. Wright, Alejandro's homeroom teacher, often used a demeaning tone when she spoke to the students. She didn't allow them to ask questions, nor did she encourage them to think on their own. Many of her assignments included content to which her students could not relate. For example, one task that the students were asked to complete was to describe the experience of going to the dentist. Many of Mrs. Wright's students had never been to a dentist. When a lack of background knowledge that is needed to complete an assignment or to learn new

Regardless of what they may choose as their approach to teaching, teachers should be sure to provide structure in the form of clear directions and to communicate with students individually.

information is added to language difficulties, students experience a heavy “cognitive load,” which is usually lightened if the students are at least able to draw on their own experiences and knowledge.¹⁸ Mrs. Wright’s students did not have this opportunity.

Another pedagogical problem that many immigrant students face is what Lois Meyer calls “cultural load.” English-language learners not only need to learn the dictionary meanings of words, but they also need to understand “the cultural settings and uses that give words their ‘U.S. English mainstream meanings.’”¹⁹ Immigrant students’ peers and teachers often do not explain these meanings, and the immigrant students must struggle to learn when and how to use new words.

HOW CAN CLASSROOM TEACHERS HELP?

The problems that immigrant children face are extensive and complicated. Yet despite this complexity, there are many steps that mainstream classroom teachers can take to help cre-

ate a better learning environment for immigrant children. The following suggestions are certainly not a complete list, nor are they “quick fixes” for the individual issues that teachers and their students may face. However, they offer a starting point for making the classroom a more inclusive place for all students.

Reduce the cognitive load. One very important step teachers can take is to make every effort to reduce the “cognitive load” of the lessons they teach. The key is to choose activities and assignments that allow students to draw on their prior knowledge and life experiences. It is crucial during the process of lesson planning that teachers take into account the capacities of the students involved. Some immigrant students may not have had much schooling prior to their entry into the United States and will not have as much background knowledge or experience on which to draw. Cristina Igoa observed a significant amount of fragmentation in the educational background of her students, information that families do not often disclose to a school.²⁰ It is important for teachers to understand each student’s educational history in order to provide what is needed on an individual basis.

Evaluate teaching strategies and approaches. Teachers also need to pay attention to how they run their classrooms. Some students may have difficulty coping with the style of classroom management that the teacher has chosen. For example, in many countries, students are not to speak unless the teacher asks them a question directly.²¹ To volunteer answers might be considered boastful or conceited. Many students will not question what the teacher says, even if they know it to be wrong. Furthermore, in some countries, teachers are revered and given a high level of au-

thority.²² While many schools emphasize student-centered learning, allowing students to do much of the speaking, immigrant students will often need some time to become comfortable in that type of environment.

Regardless of what they may choose as their approach to teaching, teachers should be sure to provide structure in the form of clear directions and to communicate with students individually. Teachers should also avoid limiting students’ efforts solely to verbal performance and consider varying their teaching styles to help immigrant students adjust. When Igoa switched to a more traditional approach to teaching one day, a Ukrainian boy in her class commented with relief, “At last . . . I feel I am in school, I feel like a student.”²³ In addition, before teachers decide whether a student is misbehaving, they need to be aware that communication styles vary from culture to culture. Parent/teacher conferences are an appropriate forum in which to discuss these issues.

Reduce the cultural load. Lightening the “cultural load” on immigrant students can make learning a more positive experience for them. Meyer suggests that the most important action a teacher can take is to “treat the English learners, their homes and communities, and their primary languages and cultures with respect, not judgment.”²⁴ Showing respect for these aspects of the immigrant child’s life begins by building personal relationships with the students and their families and by making an effort to include aspects of each child’s culture in the classroom on a regular basis. Some simple actions each teacher can take include learning to pronounce each student’s name correctly, finding out where each student is from, and gathering a little background information about each one.

Hassana Alidou suggests that, in

The teacher should purposefully select words and sentence structures that will help the students learn rather than hinder their success in the classroom.

addition to making this effort, the teacher should learn to accept different ways of speaking English.²⁵ Students from some countries in Africa and Asia, among others, speak English as a native language, but they use a different set of pronunciation rules. By taking these steps and coming into the classroom with an open mind, the teacher will develop “new understandings of the cultural content of the classroom and curriculum.”²⁶

Reduce the language load. Teacher talk is often filled with words that are unfamiliar to English-language learners, which can put a great deal of pressure on students as they try to process what the teacher says or what they have to read. To lighten this heavy “language load” for the student, teachers can employ a number of strategies. They can rewrite difficult texts using simpler terms or at least explain the original language simply. They can also break up complex sentences into smaller sentences. They can point out new and particularly difficult words, define them, and explain how they are used. If a particular topic is studied in the classroom, the teacher can provide the students with several different sources that offer the same information but in varied

levels of linguistic difficulty.

English-language learners rely on the teacher to use English skillfully. That is, the teacher should purposefully select words and sentence structures that will help the students learn rather than hinder their success in the classroom. This is not to say that a teacher should avoid using academic language. Indeed, the teacher should avoid using oversimplified vocabulary that could insult immigrant students.²⁷ Instead, a teacher can model academic language, surrounding it with appropriate context clues and other information that will help English-language learners to understand and learn these words. Teachers should also consider using visual manipulatives along with the written word to reinforce what is said.

Native language versus English. One debate that continues in the field of ESL concerns whether language learners should be allowed to use their native language while learning English. We do not intend to support or undercut bilingual education here. We simply point out that some studies show benefits to students in holding on to their native language, whether it is used in the classroom or at home.²⁸ These studies argue that students who maintain their native language while they learn English have achieved a valuable goal by becoming bilingual. Furthermore, it is believed that students who continue to speak their native language have greater success in learning English. What is more, bilingual speakers have been found to have a lower dropout rate than those who speak only English.²⁹ Therefore, we recommend that teachers encourage their immigrant students to use their native language, whether at home or in school. Many immigrant students learn too quickly that their native language is “dead weight” to their social and academic

success. But if teachers simply demonstrate that they value the presence of students who can speak other languages, these students might not be so quick to abandon their native tongues.

Igoa offers the example of a teacher who wanted her students to read in the classroom and made it a point to encourage them to read in their native languages as well as in English during their reading time. She also encouraged them to write in both their native languages and English. Igoa herself took the opportunity to use her immigrant students as teachers of culture in her classroom. For example, one of her Chinese-speaking students taught the other students in the class how to write their names in Chinese. While Igoa supported the use of native languages in the classroom, she was also sensitive to the students’ need to learn English, and she continued to emphasize the use of English. These examples demonstrate small, yet significant, ways in which a teacher can show that students’ native languages are valuable while still providing them what they need to learn English.

Parents and teachers as a team. Lily Wong Fillmore suggests four steps that parents and teachers can take together to help ease the struggle that immigrant students face in school and in the community. First, teachers and parents must see the importance of having the immigrant child learn his or her native language in addition to English. Fillmore suggests that parents tell stories and talk to their children in the native language. Teachers should encourage students to use these stories in school assignments. Second, both parents and teachers need to make themselves aware of the potentially traumatic emotional experiences that immigrant children may face. Parents and teachers should watch for signs of such problems and

provide treatment and support. The lack of attention to this matter leads to drastic consequences.³⁰ Third, parents and teachers need to watch for negative forces in the immigrant child's life. Often children alienate themselves from their family and their culture in an attempt to assimilate. Parents and teachers need to know what is going on in such a child's life. Fourth, parents and teachers should encourage involvement in community events that help promote ethnic languages and cultures. Such activities help keep the cultures and languages of the immigrant population alive, allowing the immigrant student to see how they are valued.

A fifth suggestion comes from Alidou, who recommends that teachers welcome parents as a resource.³¹ The parents of immigrant children can visit classrooms to talk about their cultures and display items from their countries. Parents who have been in the country and school system for some time can also serve as interpreters and mentors for other students' parents. What is important is to get the parents involved in the school and to tap into the resources that they have to offer the community.

CONCLUSION

The following quote is taken from a suicide note written by a young African teenager who felt rejected by his peers, his teachers, and his family:

I am sick and tired of being called names. Can I be myself? I do not know COUNTRY. I do not know Africa anymore and I can't talk to Black kids. I can't talk to White kids. I can't talk to my teachers. They can't stand me because I have a strong accent and a difficult name. Each time the teacher calls me, my classmates laugh. I am sick and tired. My parents are worst. They do not under-

stand me. I hate the whole thing.³²

Tragic situations such as this one, along with the ever-increasing number of immigrant children entering schools across the United States, point to an urgent need to prepare our teachers to welcome these children into their classrooms. Immigrant students face many challenges as they struggle to fit into a new society, learn a new language, and acclimate to a new school. We hope we have demonstrated that teachers have many means at their disposal to create a positive learning environment for these students.

1. Lily Wong Fillmore, "Loss of Family Languages: Should Educators Be Concerned?," *Theory into Practice*, Autumn 2000, pp. 203-10.
2. Laurie Olsen, "Learning English and Learning America: Immigrants in the Center of a Storm," *Theory into Practice*, Autumn 2000, pp. 196-202.
3. Jim Cummins, "Age on Arrival and Immigrant Second Language Learning in Canada: A Reassessment," *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 2, 1981, pp. 132-49; and Russell Gersten, "The Changing Face of Bilingual Education," *Educational Leadership*, April 1999, pp. 41-45.
4. Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Qualitative Research Methods, Vol. 30: Narrative Analysis* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1993).
5. George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochsberg, *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).
6. JoAnn Phillion and Ming Fang He, "Narrative Inquiry in English Language Teaching: Contributions and Future Directions," in Jim Cummins, ed., *International Handbook of English Language Teaching* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, forthcoming).
7. Olsen, op. cit.
8. Xiaoxia Li, "How Can Language Minority Parents Help Their Children Become Bilingual in Familial Context? A Case Study of a Language Minority Mother and Her Daughter," *Bilingual Research Journal*, vol. 23, 1999, pp. 211-24.
9. Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).
10. Stephen Krashen, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982).
11. Selina Mushi, "Acquisition of Multiple Languages Among Children of Immigrant Families: Parents' Role in the Home-School Language Pendulum: Supporting Immigrant Children's Language Learning," ERIC ED 459 622, Fall

- 2001; and Olsen, op. cit.
12. Fillmore, op. cit.
13. Donna Deyhle, "Empowerment and Cultural Conflict: Navajo Parents and the Schooling of Their Children," *Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 4, 1991, pp. 277-97.
14. Fillmore, op. cit.
15. Jim Cummins, *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society* (Ontario, Calif.: California Association for Bilingual Education, 1996); idem, "Age on Arrival"; and Bonny Norton, "Investment, Acculturation, and Language Loss," in Sandra Lee McKay and Saaling Cynthia Wong, eds., *New Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
16. Cristina Igoa, *The Inner World of the Immigrant Child* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
17. Chris Carger, *Of Borders and Dreams* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).
18. Lois Meyer, "Barriers to Meaningful Instruction for English Learners," *Theory into Practice*, Autumn 2000, pp. 228-36.
19. Ibid., p. 231.
20. Igoa, op. cit.
21. Linda Chiang, "Teaching Asian American Students," *Teacher Educator*, Summer 2000, pp. 58-69.
22. Hassana Alidou, "Preparing Teachers for the Education of New Immigrant Students from Africa," *Action in Teacher Education*, Summer 2000, pp. 101-8.
23. Igoa, p. 155.
24. Meyer, p. 232.
25. Alidou, op. cit.
26. Meyer, p. 232.
27. Gersten, op. cit.
28. See, for example, Henry Chow, "English-Language Use Among Chinese Adolescent Immigrants," *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 47, 2001, pp. 191-95; Carl Bankston and Min Zhou, "Effects of Minority-Language Literacy on the Academic Achievement of Vietnamese Youths in New Orleans," *Sociology of Education*, vol. 68, 1995, pp. 1-17; Courtney Cazden and Catherine Snow, "English Plus: Issues in Bilingual Education, Preface," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 1990, pp. 9-11; Richard Duran, *Hispanics' Education and Background* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1983); and Kathryn Lindholm and Zierlein Aclan, "Bilingual Proficiency as a Bridge to Academic Achievement: Results from Bilingual/Immersion Programs," *Journal of Education*, Winter 1991, pp. 99-113.
29. Xue Lan Rong and Judith Preissle, *Educating Immigrant Students* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998).
30. Fillmore, op. cit.; and Alidou, op. cit.
31. Alidou, op. cit.
32. Ibid., p. 104.

Copyright of Phi Delta Kappan is the property of Phi Delta Kappan and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.