Incorporating Recent-Arrival ELL Students into Mainstream Classrooms
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Introduction

Welcome... Thanks for coming... Today we're talking about reaching students who may not understand the language of instruction. This first part is designed to simulate the linguistic situation in which our students find themselves, with some/many/most of the students not understanding the language of instruction. To maximize the experience we'll begin with a really simple exercise.

OK, now please take out a piece of paper and write the numbers 1 - 10. (Write the numbers on the board. Taking out a piece of paper and write the numbers on it... Walk around showing the paper until at least some of the audience does the same...) Now answer this question: Who are you? You may write in Japanese or your own language. Here are some words that describe me:

1. man
2. dad
3. teacher
4. American
5. etc...

(Walk around and encourage other people to do write. Try to make it clear to those who don’t seem to understand that they can write in English if they like... After 3-4 minutes say...) Do you mind if we switch to English now? This activity, based on an example provided by Mary Elizabeth Curran (2003), was designed to give you the feeling of a class with students of mixed language abilities (OR an ESL class in which most or all students...
don’t understand the teacher’s language). If you couldn’t understand, what was going through your mind as the session began? How did it feel? What were you thinking? Can you identify any strategies you were using to try to understand the content?

**Non-English Speakers**

One of the most difficult things to accept as a teacher is facing the realization that, even after years of education and experience, we may not know how to reach some students. For the average classroom teacher, English Language Learners (ELL) are often among the ‘unreachables’. This is a population which cannot be ignored as, according to the US Department of Education, there has been an increase of an increase of over 200% for the Southeastern states of Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama in the 10 years 1994-2004. While ESL pull-out programs in K-12 schools are growing, ELL students typically spend the greatest portion of their school day in mainstream classrooms. Moreover, school districts typically place responsibility for cultural acclimation, language acquisition, and content-skill development for all students on the mainstream classroom teachers. While the skill level of ELLs varies greatly, some speak no English whatsoever. This presentation focuses on Non-English Speakers (NES) who, adjusting to a new country and its language and culture, are typically overwhelmed socially and emotionally, and very much in need of a support structure in which they can develop comfort, confidence, and begin learning.

**Student Interviews**

We begin with a summary of conversations with 20 students who are, or recently were, NESs. We asked them the following questions:

1. What's it like to learn English?
2. What is the hardest thing about learning English?

3. What has been the most fun?

4. What can teachers do to make learning English easier?

Although the answers varied widely, there were clear trends and tendencies. All students agreed learning English is hard. Over 50% of the students interviewed indicated that at first they simply “didn’t get it” and that they needed help from home, a friend, or in one case, “a private tutor over the summer”.

Answers for what was hardest about learning English varied more widely with some students indicating reading, writing or pronunciation, but with over one-third reporting that the hardest thing was the frustration of trying to understand and communicate. One student vividly recalled desperate cycles of trying to understand and trying to make tell her teacher that she wasn’t “getting it”.

Students report having fun at activities that involve them without a lot of language: music, PE, math, recess, playing games and singing songs were the top responses in this category. The same student who felt so frustrated on her first day, pointed to her first-ever birthday party as her most fun moment.

Our student respondents suggested that the most helpful thing teachers can do is care about, and involve NESs in classroom activities. Specific suggestions included speaking slowly, using actions as well as words to communicate, reading test and quiz questions, making homework instructions very clear while the NES is still in the classroom (“because I have no help for homework at home”), and of course, having bilingual teachers. Our respondents made it quite clear that NES students appreciate any amount of effort on teachers’ parts, even if it is sometimes clumsy or ineffective.
**Integration Suggestions**

Informed by our NES student responses, the next section of this presentation will introduce practical suggestions for mainstream classroom teachers who find NES students in their classrooms. We will begin with programs that should be coordinated school-wide, then move to issues that can be controlled within a single classroom.

**School-Wide**

One of my students recently composed an essay relating her frustration and fear upon arrival into elementary school because she had no solid expectations, did not understand a school so different than the one from which she had come, and was too ashamed and uncomfortable to ask for help. She remembered arriving at school, seeing some forms she didn’t understand and being taken to a strange classroom with a sea of alien faces staring at her. Given a seat in the back corner of the room, she proceeded to have a miserable month, trying to fade into the background so no one would laugh at her. Although she eventually made some friends and now handles English quite well, but her transition would have been much less painful had she been provided an orientation session in her new school. An orientation package should include:

1. an introductory guide with pictures of important people, areas, and facilities.
2. a daily tour of the school each day for at least a week (student volunt
3. a behavioral expectation sheet (in the student’s native language, if possible)

This expectation sheet should include both student focused items (i.e. class rules, showing effort, ways of indicating understanding and confusion, etc.) as well as behaviors they can expect from teachers (times they can seek extra help, verbal and non-verbal signals teachers use, accommodations and modifications in assignments and scoring).
Similarly, have a stock of multiple translations of introduction forms for students to (attempt to) complete upon arrival. Explore TransAct (www.transact.com) as a potential vendor for school forms in multiple translations, but beware, no translation system is perfect. Noting students’ responses to translated forms can provide much needed information on their language abilities in their native language.

**Classroom-based**

Some basic guidelines for teachers to remember when they are presented with the opportunity to share the English learning experience with a student in their mainstream classroom include:

1. **Students are very perceptive** – NES, advanced ESL & native speakers will be watching to see how you feel about the NESs in your classroom (even at the subconscious level) and will react accordingly (McKay & Lewis, DATE?). Privately praising students who make an extra effort to include NESs may be a positive step, or you may take it further by implementing a series of rewards for the whole classroom (read Osgood’s *It Takes a Class to Teach a Child* for an excellent example).

2. **Encourage talking, laughter and belonging** – Successful language learners frequently report that a friendly environment and a welcoming community of classmates makes a significant difference in their motivation and ability to learn. Physical manifestations of this include, “student displays, bulletin boards, and photographs, [a] large and popular student message center, student birthday board, and …student art work” (Champion, DATE?: PAGE?).

3. **Assumptions are dangerous** – Each student is an individual and may or may not act like other students you’ve seen before from the same language group. This relates not only to teachers, but students as well. As Frutiger points out, “Teachers can eliminate stereotypes by presenting materials and activities that stress similarities, not differences” (DATE?, 6).

4. **Give personal attention everyday** – Make eye contact and speak to NES students daily. Our interviews showed that students notice, and are motivated when they get personal attention. Placing students in the front and center of the class ensures that they do not get left out.

5. **Repetition is a good thing** – Keeping a pattern and repeating key phrases at identifiable points (eg. OK, the quietest table gets to line up first) helps students learn those patterns and phrases. As Fracella puts it, “Repetition … help(s) students in adhering to routines, following schedules, and participating in
activities. Often, repetition can be used to increase a child’s comfort level within the classroom, which opens the door for learning” (DATE?, 213; see also Curran, 2003).

6. **Support the students’ native language** – Learning a second language is easier when you have foundational language skills in your first language to build on. Multilingual labels on common classroom items is one simple way to reinforce native language literacy (Einhorn, DATE?). Classroom tours may supplement the school tours discussed above. Also, students can teach simple phrases to the class, and may even be encouraged to teach the class about their home country (Barnett, DATE?; see also Peregoy et al. for a cool activity involving students’ family trees).

7. **Acknowledge the “Silent Period”** – NES students typically go through a period where they produce little or no English. This should be respected. In order to break out of the “Silent Period” students have with both the opportunity and a real reason to talk; students typically talk first about something they truly care about. Collaborative activities in the classroom may be the single best thing a teacher can do for her NES students – and they are great for all the rest as well (Peregoy, et al, 2002).

8. **Scaffold activities** – Provide incremental support for classroom activities that allows NES students to participate by using as the skills they have. A student who cannot write a story in English, for example, should be encouraged to draw a picture first, then to add individual words, then phrases and sentences until they are able to make full paragraphs and pages. This keeps students involved in the class (Peregoy, et al, 2002; Also see Cary, 2000: Chapter 3 for an excellent example of scaffolding in action).

9. **Use cooperative learning groups** in which there is an authentic need for language, literacy and learning. These groups encourage positive interaction and reduce anxiety (Pappamihiel, DATE?) and heighten feelings of belonging and acceptance (Osgood, DATE?).

10. **Avoid long-term pairing** of NES students with other speakers of the same native language. Instead, set up a revolving schedule so the NES student interacts with several different students. This not only ensures no student ‘helper’ gets burned out, but also provides a wider base of support for the NES student to draw on in the future (Einhorn, DATE?; McCallum, DATE?). Champion also emphasizes the importance of student assistants as “instead of consulting the teacher, students combined problem-solving ideas and interacted with each other,” thus increasing their self-reliance and confidence (DATE?, PAGE?).

11. **Accommodate various learning styles** for both fluent and NES students (Champion, DATE?).

12. **Show, don’t tell** - Using gestures and visual clues along with natural language is a powerful aid to NES students (Facella et al DATE?).

14. **Create scholastic accommodations** which support NES students’ integration into the class. Giving NES students separate ‘make-work’ handouts separates them from the class and removes opportunities for them to experience real language. Receiving the same materials as classmates and returning similar ones integrates them into the class and prevents them feeling ignored.

**A Real-life Example**

An effective example is Osgood’s ‘Challenge Program’ (cf #1 above) in which teachers issue a series of learning challenges with incentives for the entire class attached to achievement. The first challenge, while simple, is affectively important. The students must learn everyone’s name; for the native English speakers, this is a relatively easy task, but it requires that all students interact with each other, thereby including the NES students. The second challenge incorporates the NES students’ backgrounds; they must identify their new city, state, and country on a map, while classmates must identify the NES students’ cities and countries of origin. The challenges proceed on to learning tasks with culture, American history and iconography, and basic English vocabulary (43). This program is adaptable to nearly any age, level, or content area. All of the challenges involve the students teaching each other and being responsible for everyone’s learning, and the entire class is rewarded when they succeed. Activities such as this, when managed well, create a classroom community in which everyone is interdependent and no one is invisible. As NES students complete each challenge, they can gain confidence and become more motivated to pursue their language goals.

Our interviews with NES students showed that they understand the difficulties teachers face in instruction, and they were both very grateful and more motivated to learn in those classrooms in which they could see the teachers making an effort on their parts. They described a higher degree of self-confidence, comfort, and respect in classrooms in which the teacher was obviously at least attempting to provide for their needs, even in
small ways, rather than in those in which they felt invisible. NES students need to believe that their teachers are trying, too. Even if first attempts are awkward or frustrating, no matter how uncomfortable this circumstance is for a teacher, it is exponentially more so for the students, but they can recognize, regardless of language barriers, when we are doing our best. The most damaging idea for these students is the assumption that there is nothing we as teachers can give.