

English Language Learners *in the* Classroom

A Call for Accountability, A Promise of Classroom Enrichment

English Language Learners (ELLs): Who are they? What language(s) do they speak? What challenges do they face? How do they affect classroom instruction? These questions demand an adequate response from education providers at all levels, K-16.

Were the ELL population homogenous, the challenge to meet their learning needs would be big enough; however, given their great diversity, the challenge is enormous. ELLs in American schools come in almost endless variety, with shades of differences within primary categories—age, primary language, culture, years in the country, socio-economic status, parental support, and level of English proficiency—plus a small percentage who have identified learning disabilities. To find ways to meet ELLs' learning needs, to create ELL-friendly classrooms, and to successfully incorporate ELLs into mainstream classrooms are the ever-present challenges to teachers and school administrators. Since the trend points toward increasingly multicultural classrooms, it is imperative that educators find effective strategies to teach these students.

Some Statistics

According to a 2000-2001 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education on ELLs (also known as Limited English Proficient [LEP] students), more than 4.5 million LEP students were enrolled in public schools across the nation. The survey identified more than 425 languages spoken by this group—the larg-

est number (3.5 million) of whom spoke Spanish as their first language. The next top six language groups were Vietnamese (88,906); Hmong (70,768); Chinese, Cantonese (46,466); Korean (43,969); Haitian Creole (42,236); and Arabic (41,279) students.¹ Within these larger groups is considerable diversity. For example, Spanish-speaking students come from countries in Latin America, Inter-America, and Europe, each with its distinct culture, history, and language nuances. Likewise, Arabic-speaking students come from many diverse Middle Eastern countries.

It has been predicted that “By the year 2010, over thirty percent of all [U.S.] school-age children will come from homes in which the primary language is not English.”² The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) states that between 1993 and 2003, the number of ELLs rose by 72 percent, of whom nine percent were ELLs with disabilities.³ It has become increasingly apparent that past strategies, “designed for typically developing students who had fluency in English,” will not work in today’s multilingual classrooms.⁴ Teachers throughout the U.S. share in the struggle to integrate this rapidly growing LEP group in the classroom dynamics.

The Mandate

In the wake of this ELL influx, in 2001 came America’s “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) mandate. Included in the NCLB’s seven performance-based titles is Title III: “Moving limited

English proficient students to English fluency.”⁵ Title III’s mandate was based on research showing “English language learners tend to

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receive lower grades than their English-fluent peers, and also tend to perform below the average on standardized math and reading assessments.”⁶ Title III sets as the goal that “all children, regardless of background,” have equal opportunity to succeed in the classroom.⁷

When after five years, the initiative did not produce optimum results, new NCLB regulations were issued. Recently arrived LEP students are exempt from “one administration of the State’s reading/language arts assessment” and the law “permits the State to not count in Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) denominations the scores of recently arrived LEP students on State mathematics and/or reading/language arts (if taken) assessments.”⁸ A recently arrived LEP student is defined as someone “who has attended schools in the United States for 12 months or less.”⁹

The NEA (National Education Association) is poised to recommend to Congress yet another amendment to NCLB, to use “more than test scores to measure student learning and school performance.”¹⁰ If this recommendation is adopted, it will benefit LEP students by using multiple measures of student learning and recognizing special needs, including the special needs of English Language Learners.

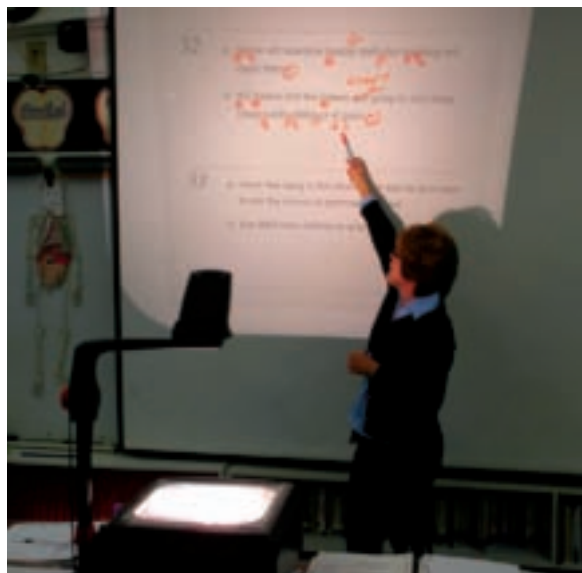
That the U.S. takes this issue seriously can be seen in the size of the NCLB built-in budget of the Bush Administration and the priority listing on the Obama-Biden education agenda. Among their initiatives for K-12, the plan to reform No Child Left Behind is listed first—“to improve student learning in a timely, individualized manner.”¹¹ Another initiative promises to support English Language Learners “by holding schools accountable for making sure these students complete school.”¹²

NCLB and Private Schools

In 2005, the Catholic school system produced a guide to obtaining benefits for their students under the No Child Left Behind Act. A concise version of this guide was posted online on September 3 of that year, under the title “NCLB: Leaving No Catholic-School Child Behind.” The guidelines made it clear that schools desiring to access the NCLB built-in budget ought to be well informed about the obligations that accompanied the benefits and should acquaint themselves with the consultation process.¹³

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into the discussion about sharing the NCLB budget pie, perhaps because of convictions regarding the separation of church and state, have endorsed the ideal of accountability to every child enrolled in the system.

The ELL statistics affecting public schools have had similar effects on the dynamics of many Seventh-day Adventist K-12 classrooms in the U.S.A. These schools, too, are obligated to provide an adequate education for every child they enroll. But for Seventh-day Adventist schools, this goal is part of a broader commitment to service and to the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of God’s children.

The good news is that ELLs do learn English, and many learn it very well, if the conditions are in place to create an optimum learning environment within the multicultural context that appeals to ELLs. More good news: The Seventh-day Adventist school system, as part of a global church, encompasses cultures throughout the world. It’s impossible to measure the positive global impact on an educational system that includes mission stories, mission spotlights, General Conference sessions, mission pageants, and contacts with Adventist immigrants to the U.S. Within this atmosphere of acceptance of global differences in Seventh-day Adventist schools, many non-English speaking students have acquired fluency in English, moved on to institutions of higher learning, and climbed the ladder of success in the workplace.

Still, a big challenge remains—ensuring second-language success for every LEP student. In the educational arena, at every level, we must constantly seek to raise the bar. This constant demand for higher performance is compounded today by the ever-changing world demographics that teachers experience firsthand in the classroom. Children bring to the classroom the problems that afflict homes, as well as the challenges of a shrinking world.

Multicultural Dynamics in the Classroom

Teaching LEP students is not without its blessings. Many LEP students come from cultures that put teachers on a pedestal. The teacher’s word is strictly obeyed. These students have been taught how to behave in the classroom and to show respect to teachers. In addition, as inculcated by their culture, most foreign students are taught to study hard as a duty.

Many LEP students thus have a mindset to cooperate and comply with the teacher’s demands. Being quiet in the class-

room is first a sign of their willingness to cooperate. Like clay in the teacher's hand, these students are pliable and teachable. Nevertheless, in any classroom dynamic, in the mix with a few hyperactive native speakers of English, it is not uncommon for quiet LEP students to be neglected, just as the weaker fledgling in a nest gets fed last. Thus, teachers need to be vigilant to the needs of every child in the classroom, including LEP students, who may not clamor for attention.

Although the above generalizations are true of children from many countries, particularly those who come to the U.S. specifically to learn English, there is great diversity among LEP students. Some are fluent and can read well in their native language; others, particularly those coming from chaotic or war-torn countries, may have had little schooling. Therefore, the teacher needs to treat each one as an individual and investigate his or her background and academic abilities in order to craft the best academic activities for these diverse students.

The teacher can use his or her creativity to draw out LEP students and place them in the center of the learning experience. For example, LEP students can enrich show-and-tell sessions by telling about the unique aspects of their culture, such as dress, foods, national flag and other symbols, festivals, the history and geography of their country, staple crops, and more. Furthermore, their special talents can be incorporated into classroom planning. For example, there may be a talented musician among LEP students, a math wiz, or one who can weave. It's up to the teacher to dig below the surface and discover these talents. From older students, a teacher may learn of taboos, legends, and superstitions. For example, I learned from an Asian student that some Asians do not trim their nails at night. For, according to a legend, night-prowling animals might gobble up the nail bits and take on human forms.

Tips Online for ELL Classrooms

Today, online sources are packed with current educational tips for instructors of ELLs. One source, *Tips for Teaching ELLs*, offers 12 strategies for promoting success for second-language learners—strategies ranging from creating a welcoming, language-rich environment to the basic instruction, such as teaching essential vocabulary, plus the use of hands-on activities and a variety of visual aids to appeal to all learning styles.¹⁴

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The purpose of these strategies is to create optimal conditions for English acquisition.

The Magic Seven for an interactive ELL classroom that provides many opportunities for ELLs to use spoken English are: low-anxiety environment, comprehensible input, communication focus, contextual language, error acceptance, respect for language acquisition stages, and teacher as facilitator.¹⁵ Simple suggestions like labeling everything in the classroom, assigning duties to ELLs from the very beginning, and providing a list of essential vocabulary a day before new lessons¹⁶



will go a long way in lowering anxiety and increasing comprehensible input as well as communication focus.

Program Models to Choose From

To adequately respond to the challenge of today's multicultural classroom, school administrators and teachers must work together in choosing instructional models. Choices range from early-exit transitional to total immersion models, bilingual immersion, or English-only immersion. Factors that affect the choice include the goal of the program, required book lists, school demographics, student characteristics, school budget, and available resources. For a quick overview of different models, check Robert Linquanti's online listing of instructional program models. His document, developed in rubric form, lists the instructional models, gives a definition and characteristics of each model, tells when each is appropriate to use, and



describes the elements of successful implementation.¹⁷

Here are a few models from his listings:

1. *Bilingual Immersion*, used when a sizable number of ELLs come from one language group and are at the same grade level. Its goal is to mainstream students in two to four years;

2. *Integrated TBE (Transitional Bilingual Education)*: Targeted for minority students within majority classrooms, it allows the use of native language in the classroom. Used when a number of ELLs have the same first language but an insufficient number to form a whole class;

3. *ELD (English Language Development)/ESL (English as a Second Language) Pull-Out*: Used when students are mainstreamed for all content subjects with no special assistance, but are pulled out for augmented instruction in English skills and academic content subjects, including teaching of vocabulary and concepts.

Every teacher and school administrator needs in-depth information on the different types of instructional program models in order to choose an ELL program that ensures success for ELLs and fits the school budget. Whichever instructional program model is chosen, the goal must be to provide all school “children with a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education.”¹⁸

Finally, though it may seem an oversimplification, yet it is safe to say LEP students first need to feel safe and accepted in the classroom before they can free their minds to learn and be-

come fluent in English. During my teacher training, one student-teaching supervisor counseled me, “At the beginning of each day, remind yourself that students learn best from those they love.” These words still ring true, and I have witnessed the power of love in successful classrooms. So, let us keep in mind that if we love LEP students, it will not be difficult to open the door of learning to them. ✍



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