Preserving the Cultural Identity of the English Language Learner

"Of course, learning English and learning it well is absolutely essential for academic and future life success, but the assumption that one must discard one's identity along the way needs to be challenged. There is nothing shameful in knowing a language other than English. In fact becoming bilingual can benefit individuals and our country in general."

—Sonia Nieto, 1999

A number of forces are converging on the work life of classroom teachers throughout this country. First, the budget crisis is cutting materials and services to the bone. Then the accountability measures from the federal No Child Left Behind law and state high-stakes tests are making statistically measurable outcomes the primary assessment of student and teacher performance.

Finally, in Massachusetts (our state) as well as many other states, new laws are bringing many new English Language Learners (ELL) into mainstream or content classrooms with limited English proficiency.

Now, more than ever, content classroom teachers and ESL teachers wonder how to better educate ELLs who come from various cultural, ethnic, linguistic, academic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Budget crises and government testing seem like an inevitable part of the educational landscape for the foreseeable future, but well-prepared and informed teachers can be effective in helping immigrant children flourish within their classroom communities.

Helping these students become successful means a myriad of things. In this article, we'll look specifically at a critical area that is often overlooked—cultural identity. In particular, we'll address how we help students retain their cultural identity as we help them learn a new language and succeed in the mainstream classroom.

Cultural Identity Validation and Recognition in the Mainstream Classroom

Educational decisions made by policy makers around English Language Learners have a direct impact on the way students feel about themselves. As states set strict English language standards for ELLs and mandate programs such as Sheltered English Immersion, ELLs are pressed to learn English as soon as possible, creating anxiety among students and their teachers. English Language Learners could become invisible in the mainstream classroom or even disconnect from the learning process if teachers do not display sensitivity toward their cultural identity. Moreover, if our energy is concentrated on mainstreaming students at any cost, we run the risk of placing little value on the students' ability to speak two languages. Recognizing and validating multiple cultural identities in the classroom community and developing positive student–teacher relationships strengthen individuals' sense of worth and, ultimately, their academic performance. Similarly, understanding and supporting the cultural norms
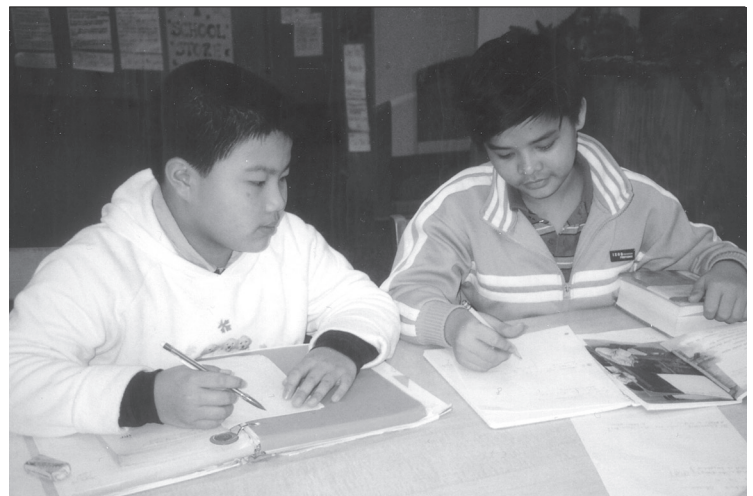
of diverse learners help to create a safe and nurturing environment, which motivates students to take the necessary risks to be successful. Therefore, it is essential to find meaningful ways to incorporate the richness of students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. How can this be done on an ongoing basis rather than as a one-time superficial multicultural display that will be stored in a back closet? As we invest in this critical approach to honoring native cultures, we can indeed ". . . affirm diversity and resist the comfort zone of multiculturalism" (Nieto, 1999; Jackson & Solis, 1995; Kanpol & McLaren, 1995).

If we listen to what many students consider the most important components when describing their "cultural identity," they commonly say the *language and ethnicity* of the social and cultural group to which they feel connected. When teachers support students' primary language in meaningful ways, students feel recognized and validated in the mainstream classroom, which results in a strong sense of self. One way in which teachers can include the students' native language in their teaching practice is by using different languages to say key words, which can be written on the board and learned by all the students in the classroom. Here's how that might look:

> When a language arts teacher in an 8th-grade classroom introduced the new theme for literature circles, she said to the class, "This quarter we will be reading different novels with a central theme on speaking out, and today I will introduce all the books you can choose from." She wrote this theme on the board and asked several ELLs how to say "speaking out" in their language. Some ELLs used their bilingual dictionaries in negotiating that meaning. This was done in Korean, French, and Spanish. The teacher created a web and wrote students' translations phonetically around the English word, asking the class to repeat after each student. She made references to these words throughout the lesson. Another day, she asked one student to give the word of the day, a daily warm-up activity. She said it could be anything related to the unit they were studying. He said a word in Spanish and proudly instructed the class, "Now everyone repeat after me," but because not everyone did, he raised his voice and repeated the instruction. Then almost everyone did it at the same time. There was another time when the

teacher gathered the class in the corner of the room where a world map was pulled down. She asked students to point to their country of origin or their ancestors' country. A mini-geography lesson took place and students guessed the distance between these countries and the United States. Then she asked the students to find the countries in which the stories they were reading took place and share information about those places.

This English teacher also allowed her students to use their primary language when responding to writing prompts for journal entries and when doing freewrites. In addition, when students were engaged in writing bilingual poems, the teacher used multilingual mentor texts, and her classroom library displayed authors from many countries. One of her monolingual English students proudly told her parents that she was learning different languages in her English class. In fact, at the end of the year, another student who was not in a world language class ended up responding to the teacher using the Spanish words he learned throughout the year, such as "Hola, maestra," "Sí, maestra," "¿Cómo está usted?" and "No tengo homework." This is evidence of how all learners in the classroom benefit when the teacher elevates students' cultures in daily instructional practices. It also positions ELLs in the classroom as equal with their peers, and provides a means of transforming their perception of self.

ELL students respond to writing prompts in their home language. Later, they will work to translate their work into English.

In addition to incorporating opportunities to acknowledge English Language Learners' expertise of their home language, cultural way of life, geography, and history into the daily fabric of classroom life, teachers can also validate the power of students' first language in the process of learning English. Encouraging students to use their language serves the dual purpose of validating whom they are and furthering their academic success. For example, in assigning short exploratory activities wherein students are asked to *write to learn*, teachers can give students the option of writing in their mother tongue or home dialect. "The primary function of this 'expressive' language (writing to learn) is not to communicate, but to order and represent experience to our own understanding. In this sense, language provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding" (Fulwiler &Young, 2000). Writing expert Peter Elbow asserts that, ". . . unless we write in the language that is in touch with our unconscious, we lose half our mental strength" (Elbow, 2001). Therefore, when assigning journal writing, freewriting, and writing to solve a problem, allow students to choose the language they find most conducive to tapping their mental reservoirs, and then, later, they can transfer those ideas into English.

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While it is sometimes useful and important to let students think through concepts in their primary language, we also want them to participate in class activities using English. This is difficult, however, as students not only struggle with the language, but worry about speaking a language they don't know well in front of peers. The use of cooperative activities wherein students share information and build meaning together is an effective way to help ELLs learn the content while at the same time building self-esteem that is sometimes challenged as they work to learn a new language. Cooperative activities provide an opportunity for social interaction in which students must both negotiate how to achieve the task and produce the language to accomplish the task.

Grouping students and structuring cooperative learning activities should be clearly orchestrated for maximum results. If two students share the same native language, putting them in the same group will often maximize learning. Using the native language to explain and clarify content is an important advantage that should be utilized. The temperaments and strengths of other students in the class could also be considered in designing successful group activities. Specific directions, tasks, and roles should be explicitly described, and opportunities for practice should be given; if not, English Language Learners could be excluded or tensions could develop within the group. One activity, "Numbered Heads Together" (Kagan, 1992), shows how ELLs can work successfully in cooperative groups. Here's how this might look in one classroom:

> In an 8th-grade science classroom, the teacher has assigned seats for all the students at the laboratory tables. Each table is identified by an index card taped at the center with the name of a color. This card also contains numbers referring to the places at the table. Therefore, each student has a designated number. When the teacher displays a question written on the overhead for class discussion, it is also read aloud. "What is matter? Name the 3 states of matter and give 2 examples of each type of matter." He continues by giving instructions about how to answer these questions. "Now, talk to the people at your table and try to come up with an answer. Be sure everyone shares information and knows the answer because no one knows who will be chosen." The teacher gives the class 3 minutes to confer. When time is up, he clicks the spinner dial number and calls out, "Those with the number 4 please stand up." He repeats the question and requires each standing student to contribute to the answer.

If a non-English-speaking student is standing in this activity, a team member is allowed to whisper the answer phrase-by-phrase as the ELL repeats. This kind of cooperative activity allows English Language Learners to participate with their peers in a non-threatening way. As teachers, we should remain flexible in structuring activities

so that this kind of opportunity for practice, repetition, and peer support can occur. This is but one of many types of activities that encourage cooperation in a class for the limited English speaker. To find other useful resources to help teachers design cooperative activities and provide creative ways to shelter content for English language learners, consider these sources:

- *Cooperative Learning: Resources for Teachers* (S. Kagan, 1992; see references). This book gives a rationale for cooperative learning as well as hundreds of structures that can be used with different content.

- *The CALLA Handbook* (A. Chamot & J. O'Malley, 1994, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley). This is a book about implementing an instructional model using metacognitive strategies.

- *Fifty Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners* (A. L. Herrell, 2000, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall). This is a compilation of successful activities for language learners with examples illustrating how they can be implemented.

- *Making Content Comprehensible for English Language Learners: The SIOP Model* (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000). This is a resource on how to implement the Sheltered Immersion Observational Model, and describes how content teachers can scaffold instruction for the language learners in their classrooms.

As teachers who have worked our whole careers with new immigrant and return migrant children, we recognize the enormous social, academic, and economic challenges our students face in order to succeed in American schools and in the society at large. It is our hope in these uncertain times that *all* teachers recognize the need to promote equal access to the curriculum and take on an advocacy role for ELLs. If we work in collaboration, orchestrate our energy and effort, and share resources, our dream for all English Language Learners to be academically successful in the public schools will become a reality.

[AUTHORS' NOTE: The authors would like to acknowledge the Western Massachusetts Writing Project for its support during the writing of this article.]

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