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Welcoming ESL Learners into Mainstream Classes: An Experience of Classroom Research and Publication

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Much research shows that ESL learners learn best in active student-centered classes which give wide opportunity for authentic language practice. However, as they leave the ESL environment to enter the mainstream, the learning environment may dramatically change, particularly since they most often enter the mainstream at a low-end track in which students are not often afforded learner-centered interactive methods considered too accelerated for them by many mainstream teachers. But what ESL learners need, and what their mainstream teachers may be apprehensive of offering the native speakers, much less students seen as language deficient, is exactly what the whole group can benefit from in a variety of ways. This paper first discusses instructional theory that stresses authentic language and reality-based work which puts learners at the center of action, and secondly, gives an example of a model that worked well in classes of mixed language ability students.

A Rationale

All learners need to know that the material they are asked to master will be functional in their own lives in some way. Language learners in particular look for utility in their lessons. What teacher hasn't heard students question the relevancy of the skills and content they are asked to master? Answers to their question often sound weak, and teachers can find it absurd and frustrating to be in competition for the minds of their students with the world students are being prepared for. Especially with secondary students, it is extremely difficult to interest them in the work at hand without clear and interesting connections to the "real world." They are much more concerned about their wider lives outside of the school environment. For both core content classes and the language classes that prepare ESL learners for core, students crave for authenticity in the work we ask them to do.

When I encountered mixed language ability classes and the special challenges they posed, I tried various methods to address the wide range of levels present. As I catered to one language level, others would feel either neglected or overwhelmed. What was needed were lessons and activities that would benefit and appeal to all, regardless of their language abilities, and what students wanted was connection to the real world. It was left for them and I to see that the class in all its diversity was the real world, a

reflection of the world in which people work together, with all their strengths and weaknesses, to get real things done. I was reminded of the ideas of John Dewey who believed that the school should be a microcosm of society in which students of all backgrounds would learn together and support each other in a beehive of community action. Working collaboratively in classroom situations to produce clear learning outcomes and tangible results similar to those of the authentic workplace is often called cooperative learning. Its strength lies in the active participation of students in their own learning. The value of cooperative learning and critical thinking as cousins in learner- centered teaching is well established and figures highly in nontraditional methods of education, but they are not recent developments. The philosophy behind them, and the hands-on activities that necessarily go along with them, lie with the ideas of Dewey, ideas as fresh and relevant today as when he offered them a century ago. In his 1899 treatise *The School and Society*, he reminds us that "Personalities which became effective in action were bred and tested in the medium of action" (1990, p. 11). Of his goals for instruction he says,

> . . . But if the end in view is the development of a spirit of social co-operation and community life, discipline must grow out of and be relative to such an aim . . . They are doing a variety of things, and there is confusion, the bustle, that results from activity. But out of the occupation, out of doing things that are to produce results, and out of doing these in a social and co-operative way, there is born a discipline of its own kind and type. Our whole conception of school discipline changes when we get this point of view. In critical moments we all realize that the only discipline that stands by us, the only training that becomes institution, is that got through life itself. (pp. 16-17)

Dewey challenged educators to build action and meaning into instruction, to connect our students with the building of society by encouraging the society of the classroom.

A higher degree of cultural diversity in the classroom today poses additional challenges, such as guiding mainstreamed ESL learners to authentic language parity with their native speaking peers while increasing whole class mastery of content knowledge and life skills in an environment that is interesting, empowering and relevant to the world our students will enter. This is a tall task, especially in respect to language instruction for non-English speaking minority and immigrant students. But, there is a good deal of evidence that learner-centered approaches are beneficial in both language and core content acquisition. In writing on learner-centered activities in foreign language teaching, Ballman (1998) discusses research and benefits and concludes that it is shown that students should be active participants in their learning and that they need an environment rich in opportunities to practice language autonomously. She cites Long and Porter (1985) who say that group work increases such opportunities while also

providing a positive affective climate and a greater degree of individualized instruction and motivation. Ballman emphasizes the importance that the type of group activity should be meaning-focused, that students must stay on task, and that the purposefulness of the activity is made clear to the students. She is speaking of instruction in the language classroom, but we must extend the same principles to the mainstream they will eventually enter.

When ESL learners are mainstreamed they must be placed in an environment of heightened sensitivity to their specialized needs and in which the selection of teaching methods will maximize their success along with the whole class. As they are not yet at the same developmental stage in their second language as their native speaking peers, their confidence must be fortified in ways that build whole group solidarity. This is particularly important for students of middle and high school ages who are keenly aware of social dynamics and to whom group inclusion is much more important than chancing public mistakes, however insignificant. It is believed that language learners do best when they identify with and admire the culture of the target language (Cook, 1996, p. 97). Likewise, if learners feel excluded by the mainstream cultural group due to language deficiencies, they may feel rejection of the target language to be in their interests. In Cook's comparison of language learning models, the acculturation model discussed emphasizes the influence of the relationship of the language learner's social group and the social group of the speakers of the target language. It is proposed that the learners will not learn the language very well if they think of themselves as inferior or superior to the target language group (Cook, 1996, p. 169). Since teachers cannot ensure the mainstream learning environment will be free of negative social factors, it is imperative to offer the classroom as a harbor where risk is relatively safe for language learners, and where their mistakes won't be damaging to their motivation. It is equally important to offer substantive content and challenging interactive lessons appropriate for the grade level of the class. Cooperative learning strategies address these issues well. Olsen and Kagan (1994) find three major benefits in the use of cooperative learning strategies: they provide ways to structure interactions between students; they address both content area learning and language development needs; and they allow for increased opportunities for individualized instruction. Content area classes structured along cooperative learning principles provide an active, learner-centered environment within which mainstreamed ESL learners can comfortably experiment with a variety of authentic language tasks, both oral and written, such as questioning, clarifying, describing and paraphrasing, and in which native speakers are equally enriched. Able English speakers and ESL learners working closely together also allows for the positive dimension of a peer support structure which both sides enjoy.

In their 1999 study, Collier and Thomas compare remedial-type ESL programs, still commonly found today, and enrichment programs using cooperative learning, process writing, performance and portfolio assessment, critical thinking, and other non-traditional strategies. They analyzed data from 23 school districts in 15 U.S. states and found a consistent negative impact of remedial ESL on the learners' long-term achievement in the mainstream curriculum. Their research shows that despite great initial progress in the first few years of any language program, English language learners lose ground when they encounter the cognitive and academic demands of mainstream classes in middle and high school in comparison to the advancing native English speakers. My experience with mainstreamed ESL learners bears this out. The mainstreamed students begin to fall behind almost immediately, from which they often perceive recovery to be impossible.

This occurs for various reasons, one being that the teaching methods employed may not be responsive to their needs. Another is that many students are overwhelmed when they realize the extent of the two challenges before them: to master the content knowledge and to continue an uphill battle with their second language. Confidence is essential, but once they find themselves treading water in a treacherous sea they begin to lose hope. In addition, cultural backgrounds which may preclude questioning the teacher or discourage involvement in discussions further hobble their success (Cook, 1996; Davidson, 1994). Also, many feel a sense of inferiority in relation to their native speaker peers even before they enter the mainstream. When ESL classes are perceived as remediation, there will be a negative influence on student success. This is so even in the case of ESL programs in international schools abroad where English is the mainstream teaching language, but the national culture is the culture of the majority of ESL learners. Stigmatizing labels can add to already low self-esteem and frustration due to inability to adequately express oneself in a new language. And though students may receive needed language assistance in an ESL program before entering mainstream classes, they often receive inadequate academic preparation. Collier and Thomas (1999) tell us that when teachers focus on remedial skills watered down curriculums are the norm, and that when students realize they are not receiving age-appropriate school work they tune out.

In response to these problems, Collier and Thomas (1999) promote replacing remedial type classes with integrated enrichment experiences in which classes of native speakers and ESL learners are challenged academically in an engaging and language rich environment where they can use their individual strengths as resources to support and teach each other. For mainstream teachers, however, learner-centered enrichment models of instruction may seem more suitable to honors level classes or gifted students rather than groups of mixed language ability students. Mainstream teachers who know little about the linguistic needs of ESL learners often do not know how to address them

in their classes, and may be apprehensive of using instructional methods that seer accelerated for the level of classes which include language learners. Others may reaso that as the students were deemed ready for the mainstream the best course of action i to expect of them what would be normally expected of the native speakers in the sam group, without special considerations. However, ESL learners must have thei specialized needs and stages of development taken into account for them to successfull overcome the transition. They need to be affirmed and made to feel comfortable in relaxed environment, but one that does not allow them to be passive.

An environment built for success is one that involves highly interactive activitie with English language modelers in the content area, allowing for much opportunity fo successful communication in many contexts. As is aptly stated by Davidson (1994) "ESL learners must have a carefully integrated program of both language-consciou content teaching and content-based language instruction" (p. 91). The question fo teachers becomes how to create an environment within the whole group setting whicl addresses the mainstreamed ESL learners' needs without diluting the instruction o neglecting the native speakers. But, is this the dilemma it seems? Good teachers knov that there are various learner types in any group and adjust their teaching method accordingly. Meeting the needs of mainstreamed ESL learners requires additiona awareness, but many of the principles applicable to their success are equally beneficia for the whole group. As language students learn faster when the language in th classroom is authentic, purposeful and content rich, so will all the students, as will al benefit from group interaction in meaningful activities. When the activities includ English language modelers as partners, the ESL learners can only achieve succes sooner. And when the classroom activities are structured in such a way that the languag learners contribute their strengths, all will benefit. Such a classroom does not only cate to mainstreamed ESL learners, it is a recipe for success of the whole group.

This is the value of the type of learning work which I give an example of in thi paper. It lies in the investment made by the students in themselves and in the group They literally find themselves in the work. As they begin to see results and understan the implications of their work and others, they find meaning in it. Students of diverse backgrounds and language abilities have the opportunity to bring to the classroom thei own ways of thinking, their culture, and their language. As they do, they find thei stream converging with the streams of their peers moving ultimately towards a fully blended final product in which they've invested themselves individually and as a unifie group, much in the same way that a group of engineers will develop a project or a grou of line workers assemble an automobile. At the end of the day each person feels a sens of accomplishment when the bridge is constructed or the cars roll off the end. Thi feeling is a powerful force in its validation of the work done and in the accomplishmen

of the individual. It is a pride-building and work-affirming force. When teachers promote this level of validation and autonomy in the educational process student perceptions of school as a generally passive system of jumping through hoops, or bypassing them altogether, may be turned around.

In particular, ESL learners greatly benefit when each is affirmed through using and sharing the unique strengths they bring to the classroom (Rosenthal, 2000; Collier & Thomas, 1999; Davidson, 1994). Their strengths may be new perspectives, a high degree of motivation to succeed, a respect for other languages and cultures, and a heightened understanding of language attributed to their bilingualism, among others, which can impact the entire group. Perhaps best are the simple contributions from their cultural backgrounds which can be truly mind opening for monolinguals in the class. I found in my cooperative learning experiences with mixed language ability students that ESL learners who were able to integrate their own cultural perspectives and materials into the mainstream class immediately began to exhibit a sense of ownership and involvement that persisted long after. From that step, motivation to persevere with their new language became easier to find.

An Example

In designing a cooperative learning project I looked for issues and topics that would address the students' concerns well. In a group discussion of issues in our mainstream world history class one problem that emerged common to all was the language of the textbook. The native speakers found it dry and the ESL learners found the academic language too challenging. I proposed that the class write their own materials from which all could learn about world regions. A project of this sort uses a tremendous amount of class time and requires real investment by the whole group. Could they do it, or would it fade into a waste of valuable time? After more discussion the students generally thought it was a good idea.

The topic of our research and writing project was the history, geography, and culture of India. Teams were responsible for researching and writing about a portion of one of these areas, and each paper they produced would become a chapter in their book. I divided the class into pairs, or teams of three, carefully considering the students' language abilities and degree of motivation (among other factors such as personality dynamics) in deciding the partners. Due to the length of time involved, it is very necessary for partners to be balanced in abilities and able to work very well together. Each team was then assigned a specific area of the topic to research.

Discussing the entire process and knowing what is expected is crucial for success. Before we began work, guidelines were laid out and discussed, including assessment criteria, so that the students would understand well the challenge before them. It is very

important that they envision what they are expected to do and learn, and how they ar expected to demonstrate that learning. It is best for students to know, and be a part of the assessment process in order for them to benefit from it. If assessment is not clear or is merely a grade on the final project, some students will do as little as possible overly rely on their partners, or work randomly in hopes of hitting it right. They mus know what the goals are, what the steps are to reach them, and what quality work look like. And they each should know what they will be held accountable for. For them no to have clear expected learning outcomes means a quality process of learning from assessment guidelines degenerates into a low level project fun-time atmosphere.

Before the work got underway we looked at model research papers in order for th students to know what a quality paper looks like and how one is put together. In thei own work students were expected to search far and wide for information and to properly document all sources. They utilized the school library, electronic data bases an Internet resources, as well as public libraries and personal contacts. Since few of them knew how to document sources, lessons and exercises in that discipline were essential Creating appendices was another area of new ground for them to cover. As the student got further into the work, more question areas came up. It was a wonderful change o pace for students who had previously been complacent or reticent to speak in class t ask for direction and advice in one area or another and to help each other out. Work became contagious and they would get right into it as soon as they entered class with most all of them accepting the project quite seriously.

Peer proofreading and editing became one of the major components of the project. As notes were taken and material compiled, it fell to the higher language ability students to help instruct their less able partners in language related issues. Written work was also proofread by other teams, marked with questions and suggestions and returned to the original authors for correction and revision. This process greatly helped students to see the importance of clarity in writing and of collaboration.

When the written work was completed we held conferences where each team participated in reporting and discussing the successes and pitfalls of group researching and writing. This was a valuable opportunity for student reflection on their own learning and on their individual responsibilities. Students saw where and why things went well, and where the process broke down. Self evaluation raised their consciousness of how they learned best and how good quality work was produced individually and collaboratively.

Finally came the compiling of all the research into chapters and the designing and construction of the book. The cover design was arrived at by class consensus and each team designed a colorful first page for their own chapter. The entire package was then

assembled for publication, pages were numbered and a table of contents was made. Pairs volunteered for these various jobs, as well as the long job of copying it all on an office copier and getting the color pages and cover card stock copied locally.

After binding and distributing, we proudly arrived at the next major part of the project: each team was to share what they had learned with the whole class. Reading of each chapter was assigned before the authors would teach and field questions. Everyone was asked to listen, take notes, ask questions and learn what each of the other teams had to teach. Teams felt expert on their portion of the history or culture of India and were able to teach the class what they knew. For the most part they were confident to do this, and were proud of what they had accomplished. They showed pictures, maps, and other items during the teaching sessions and the room gradually became decorated with pictures and goods of India. I believe the students found themselves much more interested in social studies, in writing and in the process of learning than they ever had. It was a long haul and required strong commitment on my part, and administrative support as well. This particular project took more than one academic quarter to complete, but in the end it paid off greatly for all involved. To celebrate completion, the entire class met downtown at an Indian restaurant for a wonderful self-congratulatory dinner.

The project was very successful in teaching the research writing process and the skill and necessity of producing high quality work as well as in teaching content material in a way that built in ownership and therefore retention of that knowledge. The language rich classroom environment significantly benefitted the ESL learners by allowing unlimited opportunities for language practice in informal authentic situations. It became nearly impossible for them not to be directly involved with their new language. Besides the reading and writing involved, working with their partners, whole group conferencing and student teaching created oral dimensions as well. The various project components offered opportunities for valid assessment of student knowledge and skills, and student-created exams of the core content material taught by them filled out a solid evaluation of what was learned. In addition, there was great improvement in student interaction, social skill development, and connectedness with the learning process that lent a cheerful atmosphere to the class. And especially for the ESL learners, there developed a stronger sense of self confidence and unity with the class as their native English speaking peers took on roles of partner and guide through the process. They became much more immersed in the construction and use of language as a result. Equally important, the process significantly raised student interest in learning. It gave them a sense of doing real work in a realistic situation where they saw concrete results in the final product, and felt like authentic authors. It was heart-warming to see their joy when the ninety-two page nicely designed books were distributed and each saw their name on the introduction page beside the portion they had authored. I believe it was an experience they will not forget,

and I know I won't. Students who had previously felt little connection with the learning process and disliked school were proud and eager to bring home what they had created. They felt ownership in their class and their school, but more importantly they felt ownership in their own lives through the work they accomplished, work which initiated a change in attitude and interest that lingered on well after the completion of the project. Some of the same students later went on with others to use their experience in completing school-published cooperative studies titled *The History, Culture and Geography of China*, and *The Culture of Japan.*

Conclusion

Young people want to know what school has to do with the real world outside the windows. They need meaning and results in their lives and have little patience with waiting for a "someday" payoff. Their discontent leads directly to apathy, and even anger, when they feel defeated by school or just don't see the point of it in their lives. ESL learners in particular can become quickly frustrated with the effort necessary to gain the level of fluency needed to use the second language in authentic situations. For many, the longer they are forced to stick with it, without clear results, the more convinced they become that they cannot succeed. Before this happens positive confidence building language experiences are needed to encourage the will to apply themselves to the task. With cooperative learning strategies, and others in the learner-centered toolbox, teachers have the means to make firmer connections with the actual life and work of the social enterprise beyond the school. These tools can go far in producing curriculums of greater meaning and worth to students, and the community, by better preparing them to become confident young adults. It is not just that more authentic work is brought to our students by these methods, but also that they bring themselves to it. With that comes validation of themselves in the work they do, with all the positive repercussions that brings.

Students, and teachers too, who tend to see little validation of their hard work in the incremental advancements of their students, can find a sense of accomplishment in work which so clearly comes to successful conclusion, with the added value of a tangible and meaningful final product to celebrate. In his time, Dewey clearly saw the weakness of preparing students for future society in a medium that paradoxically did not contain social spirit or relevancy to students' lives. In *The School and Society* he warned "It is our social problem now, even more urgent than in the time of Plato, that method, purpose, understanding, shall exist in the consciousness of the one who does the work, that his activity shall have meaning to himself' (1990, p. 23). Perhaps in our time it is even more important to bring real meaning to our often troubled classrooms.

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