

Teaching English Language Learners

Strategies That Work, Grades 6 and Up

Katharine Davies Samway & Dorothy Taylor

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CHAPTER I

Sociocultural Situations

The social and cultural backgrounds of English language learners and their families can greatly influence their school experiences, and schools must take sociocultural issues into account to successfully work with ELLs. The learning styles of ELL students may be affected by their underlying assumptions about the nature of education, classrooms, and the authority of teachers. Students may be coming from cultures in which they were not expected (or allowed) to acquire significant levels of formal education. Students and their families may view schools as representatives of oppressive political regimes and may resist the well-intentioned efforts of teachers and school officials. Expectations about respect or personal demeanor may be highly variable, and assumptions about health and illness may sometimes differ from mainstream Western beliefs and practices. Many students and their families may have come to North America to escape war, oppression, or other hardships. Some have spent years in refugee camps, and many have suffered extraordinary traumas. Under such circumstances, the formal schooling of students and their families was interrupted or it may never have occurred. It is not unusual for political and tribal conflicts to carry over into classrooms and local communities in North America.




Regardless of how they arrived in North America, many ELL students and their families are dealing with economic hardships that may affect how they participate in school. Students may be hungry; their clothes may not be new or of the current style; they may be lacking school supplies; and they, their parents, and other family members may be working long hours and/or multiple jobs. Understanding these sociocultural issues will better equip teachers and schools to achieve the goal of successfully educating ELL students.

Influence of Geopolitical Issues

In the past, immigrant students came to some school districts from well-educated, middle-class backgrounds, such as the first waves of Vietnamese and Cuban refugees in the early 1960s and 1970s respectively. In other cases, ELLs were the children of graduate students at local universities, and they typically had been schooled in their native lands before coming to the U.S. Although middle-class immigrants continue to come to the U.S., now many more ELLs come from low-income homes. Often, they have had little or no schooling due to a variety of factors, including economics (e.g., having to work to help support their families), geography (e.g., living in isolated areas with limited access to teachers), or war (e.g., leading to intermittent and/or interrupted schooling). In other cases, students who speak indigenous languages may have been schooled in their nonnative language, as often happens in countries such as Guatemala (where a majority of the population is of indigenous/Indian descent and speaks many different indigenous languages, including *Maya*). In these situations, it is common for teachers to arrive on a Monday and leave on a Friday, thereby further reducing the educational opportunities for local children.

Due to these socioeconomic factors, immigrants may enter North America with limited schooling in their native language. This factor alone—the level of education in the native language (L1)—plays a huge role in how long it takes to acculturate and acquire English language and literacy. Research shows that the greater the schooling in the L1, the greater the ease in acquiring English (Collier, 1989, 1992; Cummins, 1981; Thomas & Collier, 2001). This is due in part to the way in which literacy skills and content knowledge transfer from the L1 to the new language (L2). Also, in many of the countries from which immigrants come, middle-class families have some familiarity with Western/North American culture through travel, the Internet, cable TV, movies, and print materials. In contrast, people from much humbler circumstances may

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have had very limited contact with English and Western customs; hence, they often need more time to adjust to a very different way of life.

General Strategies

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Information is the key to being prepared to help newly arrived immigrant and refugee families. Local community support agencies, such as refugee resettlement agencies, can alert schools to anticipated arrivals of ELL families and provide culturally relevant information, including the educational backgrounds of arriving students. Once educators know which populations to expect in their schools, they can begin to gather information through the resources listed on pages 16–18. Many immigrant and refugee families arrive with tremendous needs, and it is essential for schools to work with community agencies to coordinate efforts to meet the needs of these families. Patience, time, and a concerted and consistent effort are the greatest means of support that teachers and schools can offer ELL students who have suffered traumas and had little or no schooling.

Schools with large numbers or rapid rises in the numbers of new immigrant and refugee families have found it useful to add some or all of the following staff members and programs:

- Parent liaisons from the same ethnic backgrounds and language groups as the families to provide a bridge between the school and the home.
- Bilingual aides to support ELL students and classroom teachers.
- ELL specialist support people to provide focused English language development (ELD) instruction.
- Bilingual counselors and/or counselors who specialize in counseling refugees and immigrants.
- After-school tutoring to provide one-on-one tutoring and homework assistance.
- Volunteers to work one-on-one with ELLs on a regular basis.
- Newcomer schools or classrooms to provide concentrated cultural orientation, ELD instruction, and sheltered content-area instruction, if it is not available in the L1.
- Advocacy, particularly with regard to funding and standardized testing; it often helps to have access to extra funds for specialized ELD staff and



programs, including professional development. Also, it is important to have the resources to act as advocates on behalf of ELLs, for example, regarding high-stakes testing waivers or test accommodations.

Situation 1

Why is it taking my more recent immigrant and refugee students so much longer to complete the English Language Development (ELD) program than the students I had a few years ago?

Targeted Strategy 1: Check into students' backgrounds.

How much formal education ELL students have received in their native language (L1) often greatly affects how quickly they progress in schools in North America in their new language (L2). In fact, a large-scale national study by Thomas and Collier (2001) led the researchers to conclude, “The strongest predictor of L2 student achievement is the amount of formal L1 schooling. The more L1 grade-level schooling, the higher L2 achievement.” Asking questions about ELL students’ backgrounds will allow teachers to accommodate the needs of these students and adjust expectations about how much time they will need ELD support. Questions that teachers will want to ask parents or guardians, students, or agency support groups include the following:

- How much time did the ELL spend in school?
- Has the ELL’s schooling been interrupted?
- When was the last time the ELL attended school?
- Did the ELL study in the home language?
- Is there a written form of the home language? If so, are the parents literate in the home language (or another language)?
- What kinds of trauma may affect the student’s ability to concentrate?

Targeted Strategy 2: Teach students how to “do” school.

Students who have had little or no formal schooling are not just learning a new language; they are also adjusting to the academic culture of school. Sitting for long periods of time, understanding class schedules, using computers, and raising their hands to speak are aspects of schooling that may be new to them. While teachers should uphold clearly stated standards of behavior for all students, they also should be prepared to explicitly model and instruct ELLs in school conduct and encourage the newcomers’ peers to do so as well—peer partners can be hugely helpful to newcomer ELLs.

Targeted Strategy 3: Contact community support organizations.

Community agencies and refugee resettlement groups can provide information about new groups of immigrants and refugees entering the community and may also offer support services for families, such as helping with basic living needs, transportation, or after-school tutoring. If these services are not in place already, agencies can work collaboratively with schools to write grants and look for other ways to support these services.

Targeted Strategy 4: Enroll students in after-school programs.

Students who have had little or no education in their home countries often benefit greatly from after-school tutoring and homework assistance. Refugee resettlement agencies, community support groups, and schools can work together to secure the financial resources to support these programs. In general, it is a good idea to provide after-school assistance in a location where students of many different ages (elementary, middle, and high school) can receive assistance, since older ELL students are often responsible for the after-school care of younger siblings while parents are at school or at work.

Targeted Strategy 5: Enroll students in newcomer centers or schools.

Many school districts with large numbers of newly arrived ELLs, particularly students who have had little or no formal schooling in their home countries, have created newcomer schools or programs to meet the specialized needs of these newly arrived students. The objective of newcomer programs is to provide students with basic language, academic, and cultural skills to help them prepare for mainstream classes in which they continue to receive language and academic support. Students often receive support in their home language through bilingual teachers or teacher assistants, in addition to English language development (ELD) classes and sheltered English content classes. In addition, newcomer centers offer ELLs and their families the opportunity to become accustomed to a North American school environment (for example, class schedules, grading systems, computer technology, and social customs) in a safe environment in which all students in the program are learning about these issues. Resources, such as trauma and other mental health counseling, parent workshops, interpreters, and collaborative community support for newly arrived families, are often offered as well. Newcomer programs are usually optional and short-term, from a few months to a couple of years, and serve as a bridge to mainstreamed programs in which students will continue to receive English language development support. Further information about newcomer programs is available in *Program Alternatives for Linguistically Diverse Students* (Genesee, 1999).



Situation 2 Which countries, languages, and cultures are we likely to see in the next few years in our schools?

Targeted Strategy 1: Contact national organizations.

Information about national trends in immigration, refugee resettlement, and secondary migration within the U.S. and/or Canada can be obtained from the following organizations, which can often provide information about where to find local organizations.

✿ *Association of Jewish Family and Children Agencies (AJFCA)*

This organization is composed of more than 140 Jewish family and children's agencies and specialized Jewish human service agencies in the United States and Canada. Member JFCA agencies assist Jewish refugees and immigrants.

www.ajfca.org/facts.html

✿ *Catholic Charities USA*

One of the largest social service networks in the United States, Catholic Charities assists local agencies in refugee resettlement and provides networking opportunities, national advocacy, program development, training and technical assistance, and financial support.

www.catholiccharitiesusa.org

✿ *Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)*

CAL is a private, nonprofit organization working to improve communication through better understanding of language and culture.

www.cal.org/index.html


✿ *Central Alberta Refugee Effort Committee (C. A. R. E.)*

C. A. R. E. offers several programs to help immigrants and refugees successfully settle in the area. Some of these programs include ESL classes for adults, providing information about government documents (such as applications for citizenship or passports), access to an interpreter's bank, and general community outreach.

✿ *Church World Service (CSW)*

CSW is the relief, development, and refugee assistance ministry of 35 Christian denominations (Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican) in the United States.

www.churchworldservice.org

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- *Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)*
 CIC admits immigrants, foreign students, visitors, and temporary workers to Canada, resettles refugees, and helps newcomers adapt to society. Its Web site offers information about immigrating to Canada and the refugee system.
www.cic.gc.ca/english/index.asp
 - *Cultural Orientation Resource Center (COR)*
 The center is housed at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), and offers orientation resources for refugee newcomers and service providers throughout the United States and overseas.
www.cal.org/co
 - *Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM)*
 EMM carries out a national program of refugee resettlement through a public/private partnership with the U.S. government.
www.ecusa.anglican.org/emm.htm
 - *FCJ Refugee Centre*
 The center serves refugees and others at risk due to their immigration status. It addresses issues that face newly arrived refugee claimants in Canada, including housing, translation, interpretation, legal issues, orientation to local social services, skills development, and counseling.
www.fcjsisters.ca/RefugeeCentre/index.htm
 - *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB)*
 The IRB of Canada is responsible for applying the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Its mission is to make decisions on immigration and refugee matters in Canada. In partnership with Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Canada Border Services Agency, the IRB helps to develop and implement Canada's immigration and refugee program.
www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/index_e.htm
 - *National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA)*
 NCELA is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). It is authorized to collect, analyze, synthesize, and disseminate information about language instruction, educational programs for limited English-proficient children, and related programs.
www.ncela.gwu.edu



- *U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)*
The committee addresses the needs and rights of refugees and immigrants in the U. S.
<http://refugeesusa.org>
- *U.S. Department of Homeland Security*
The department produces data and statistics on foreign nationals who have been granted permanent residence or are applying for asylum or refugee status.
www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics
- *World Vision Canada*
World Vision’s Refugee Centre provides emergency shelter for refugee claimants and their families in Canada.
www.worldvision.ca/home/programs-and-projects/canadian-programs/refugee-centre

Targeted Strategy 2: Contact local agencies.

Local community support groups and refugee resettlement agencies are the best sources of information for and about immigrants and refugee families. The national agencies listed above often have information about where to find local services. Teachers can also contact community centers within their locale’s ethnic communities.

Targeted Strategy 3: Locate resources about ethnic groups.

Most of the agencies mentioned above have information available about ethnic groups that are currently in schools and/or slated to arrive in the near future. The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) regularly publishes cultural profiles of the history and cultural background of refugee populations. Family members of ELL students can also share information about their culture and recommend readings about their country and culture.

Conflicts Between Students

Adolescence is a particularly volatile time for many students. In addition, any time that communities—including schools and classrooms—undergo change, there is the potential for conflict. Increased numbers of ELL students bring with them the opportunity to enrich a school’s and community’s global understanding. They also bring the potential for cultural clashes and misunderstandings. Conflicts may arise between ELL students and the