

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ELL STUDENTS  
IN AN AMERICAN CLASSROOM

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## **Introduction**

Our society today has become a melting pot of cultures, ethnicities, and lifestyles. Although these differences have become a trademark of our American society, they also make teaching to a classroom of twenty students in the same way taxing for teachers. Despite the difficulties that come with a diverse, multicultural society, educators still have a responsibility to ensure each child, no matter what their background or language, receives the best education possible. One of the greatest challenges with a multicultural student population is the student who is learning English while in an American, English-Only speaking classroom. These students are known as English Language Learners (ELL), and are students who face the greatest challenge in finding success in an American classroom. With the tremendous influx of immigrants from Mexico and other Central and South American countries, ELL students are flooding American classrooms and struggling to keep up in the predominantly Anglo-American educational system.

Los Angeles, especially, is a city in which a staggering number of students do not speak English as their first or even second language. As an undergraduate student I was able to experience working with a variety of students from different parts of the world first hand while working in a public elementary school in downtown LA. Many of the students I worked with recently immigrated from Mexico, Guatemala, and even as far as Haiti and China. With so many cultures and experiences different from the typical “American” education in which I grew up, I saw these children struggling to learn in a country where they had no cultural ties. As a result of working four years with the inner-city youth of Los Angeles, I began to realize students immigrating to the U.S. with a past

and culture very unlike our own need teachers, classrooms, and schools which are different from what we have in place now. Through the realization that children from multicultural backgrounds may learn differently than students within the dominant American culture, we may begin to see more success with ELL students within U.S. classrooms. This means the children America is responsible for educating are not predominantly white and middle class anymore. Along with each immigrant and their families comes a culture that is significantly different than that which is assumed in our classrooms. However, the great question is how we ensure success with every student, when every student learns differently. Our students are diverse and so are our classrooms. With such a growing diversity in U.S. schools, there seems to be a greater propensity for students who are not of the mainstream American culture to be left behind. How do we as educators take multicultural, ELL students and the extreme cultural diversity that comes along with them and lead them toward success for the future?

### **Literature Review**

Due to the fact that ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity in our classrooms around the nation has become so prevalent, there is extensive research on teaching in multicultural classrooms. Much of the research is centered on the lack of preparation teacher's have for the dramatic influx of non-English speaking, or culturally diverse students. This narrows a focus for any researcher on multicultural education to how teachers are being trained. An article by M. Brown (2007) focuses on creating culturally responsive teachers, classrooms, and students. An emphasis is placed in the article on the dramatic demographic shift U.S. public schools are experiencing. However, this shift in the demography of our students is not the primary problem our educational system is

facing. According to M. Brown the obstacle is the way in which educators are responding to this change. The realization that culturally and linguistically diverse students' education is the educator's responsibility may be one of the first steps to finding equality in multicultural education (Brown, 2007). Brown communicates a solution through the emphasis on celebrating student's culture and backgrounds within a classroom environment.

The celebration of multicultural diversity in American classrooms strives toward the goal of higher achievement for all students. To reach this goal we must create a broad, encompassing definition of what multicultural education entails. Lowery and Sabis- Burns (2007) provide a definition that asserts multicultural education,

“Challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect” (p.50).

This definition is highly applicable to the current trend in our nation's schools because of how pluralistic our society truly is. Discourse on multicultural education is incomplete, if not misleading, without all the separate parts of a diverse society, such as culture and language. Through acknowledging the different facets that encompass a multicultural society, the investigation into how the American education system is affected by the rise in multicultural students can begin.

As research helps us unravel this mystery of helping multicultural students, educators can begin to see that the important aspects of multicultural education is helping students feel welcome and comfortable enough in a classroom to enable learning and

student motivation. Ginsberg (2005) expounds upon the idea of cultural interaction as an indicator of motivation to learn within diverse communities. Ginsberg's research shows that cultural interaction in classrooms increase student motivation. For example, the interaction of language, values, beliefs, and behaviors influence every part of a student's life. Why not take these interactions and use them as external motivation within the classroom (Ginsberg, 2005). If students feel incorporated and accepted into a culture they are more likely to thrive in this environment. By making the classroom a culture of acceptance and integration of other languages, ideas, beliefs, and traditions, students will begin to build a unique academic identity within the classroom that may lead to an excitement to learn and thrive.

One way to guarantee students, especially ELL students, thrive in the classroom is to focus on the topic of teacher preparedness for the diversity of their students. Preparing teachers with these skills before they enter the classroom is important. By training teachers before they are fully immersed in the overwhelming stress of teaching a full class of students, teachers may be able to come into classrooms with a greater understanding of how a class needs to be taught to ensure effective teaching to all students. M. Brown (2007) calls this "culturally responsive teaching" (CRT). Through preparing teachers to be culturally responsive to their students they will in turn feel accepted and more involved in a classroom community as a whole. The components that make up "culturally responsive teaching" include the acceptance and inclusion of a student's culture and lifestyle, and an emphasis on differences that are positive and beneficial to a classroom community. This works especially well for students who may

have just arrived from a foreign country and are not familiar with the language and culture of the classroom.

Just as culturally responsive teaching helps culturally diverse students acclimate to their surroundings, Butler, Lee, and Tippins (2006) elaborate on this idea by focusing on the impact pre-service teacher training can have on an ELL student's education. When it comes to understanding the diversity teachers will see in their students before they enter the classrooms, the positive results in student achievement are significant. In this research study pre-service teachers were given hands-on exercises dealing with culturally diverse lesson plans, measuring how students might respond to them. Several participants found that the student responses to culturally divergent lessons were not as they expected and were forced to respond with creative problem solving, decision-making, and reflective practices (Butler, et al. 2006). Examples of some culturally divergent lessons are finding ways to communicate with students through acting exercises in which no verbal communication is used. Some pre-service teachers found themselves using their own creativity to create lessons in math in which the students went around the classrooms and found props to explain to another student without words how to add or subtract different objects. By having dealt with culturally diverse situations before entering the teaching field, new teachers are able to come into a classroom fully prepared to acknowledge and implement activities based around ELL student's needs.

In addition to creating teachers who are trained for culturally diverse settings, Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse (2006) find that many teachers need to be exposed to multicultural classrooms before they have received training because of the negative stigmas they have attached to working with multicultural students. The researchers

discovered that the pre-service teachers in their study expressed a lower level of comfort towards African-American and ELL students. In contrast to these feeling of anxiety towards multicultural students, the study also reveals that the majority of pre-service teachers also believe all students are entitled to equal education, with the teachers being the ones responsible for ensuring student needs are being assessed and addressed (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2006). Researchers Christine Wang and Jerry Aldridge agree that, “the majority of classroom teachers still do not believe that they are well-equipped to meet the needs of students and families from diverse backgrounds” (Pg. 1). What Walker- Dalhouse and other researchers of pre-service multicultural teacher training are indicating is that in order to help students experiencing cultural and linguistic challenges in our classrooms, we must, again, educate and prepare our teachers before they enter a classroom rather than allowing them to face a challenging experience without the proper training. However, training in itself is not enough. We must also expose pre-service teacher to multicultural settings.

While pre-service teacher training may be recommended in teaching to multicultural classrooms, there are endless ways in which a teacher can become better qualified to teach to multicultural classrooms. One of the best ways to prepare a teacher for multicultural teaching, according to Brock, Wallace, Herschbach, Johnson, Raikes, and Warren, (2006) is to immerse the teacher into a multicultural experience of their own. Just as many aforementioned authors acknowledge, such as Walker-Dalhouse, and Ginsberg, multicultural experiences for pre-service teachers are an invaluable asset when entering an American classroom. A common reason teachers are ambivalent towards classrooms with racial and cultural diversity is because they must also come out of their



own comfort zone and step into a culture unfamiliar to their own. Giving pre-service teachers a cross-cultural experience before they enter a multicultural classroom can produce wonders in the relationships between a teacher of one culture and a student of another (Brock et. al., 2006). Giving teachers the opportunity to step into a culture unlike their own gives them empathy and insight into a multicultural, ELL student's struggles.

Multicultural student-teacher relationships are especially important when looking at statistics from the past couple of years showing the tremendous increase in a Spanish speaking Hispanic population. A study done by Hoffman and Pearson in 2000 predicts that between 2000 and 2020 the U.S. Hispanic population will increase by 47% (Brock et. al., 2006). This projected increase in the Hispanic population leads to an increase in the traditional demography of the U.S. from European White to, "one of the most highly racialized cultures in the world" according to Ramsay (2005). Due to America's dramatic shift in demography, educational institutions must form a new way of thinking towards cultural education. Ramsay (2005) introduces the concept of de-centering our diverse classrooms.

The idea of de-centering involves the dominant racial cultures disregarding the ideals of racial superiority and meritocracy. Whether our society likes to acknowledge the invisible racial hierarchy or not, there tends to be one. Some areas are not as outlined in a hierarchy as others but what Ramsay is trying to say is that those who hold the ability to do certain things or speak a certain way will find more success. Meritocracy is a slippery slope to travel because it is based on the ideals of using one's abilities to get to the top and those who are not able to perform to society's standards due to language or cultural barrier will be left at the bottom. Greta Vollmer (2000) expounds upon the idea

of meritocracy in relation to ELL students in U.S. classrooms. She again reaffirms the idea that immigrant students from other countries who speak another language will be at a disadvantage because of the stigma of inferiority our society automatically places on these students. In order for our classrooms to truly produce an equal learning experience for all students we must begin with the social institution of our educational system as a whole. This sounds like a daunting endeavor, and it is, however, with a change in educational policy and administration towards a multicultural centered model in which there is not one race, culture, or ethnicity seen as dominant, students may be able to achieve higher standards in education, such as better test scores and grades. The only way to reach this amazing feat of bringing multicultural students to higher achievement is through the creation of classroom communities in which students work with and accept one another as peers and equals.

H.L. David (2001) reasserts the claim of educational success through creating multicultural classroom communities focused on the integration of a global society. In his research on classroom communities he finds a focus on America's global society creating diverse students and classrooms. These communities lead to the concept of creating an environment in which students who are outside the American norm, culturally and linguistically, may feel accepted (David, 2001). As anyone who has been to foreign country which speaks another language understands, the experience of trying to speak a language and fit into a culture that is not your own is uncomfortable and unnerving. Along the same lines, students who come into the U.S. from countries in which English is not spoken as the prominent language may feel like outsiders in the classroom, hindering their motivation to learn. As a result, David suggests teachers create close-knit classroom

communities where students feel at home and ready to learn cooperatively and constructively.

Just as not speaking a country's language can make someone feel like an outsider, the language that a person was brought up with can create a sense of identity and belonging. According to L.J. Ajayi (2006), "Language is the medium through which an individual is socially constructed and through which the individual... defines himself and his subjectivities" (p.35). This means that students who have a first language other than English will create their identity based on what surrounds that language, which is often the culture of the country they are from. In our classrooms, teachers must understand that there is much more to learning a language than just learning to read and write. There are numerous cultural implications to learning a language and to children a lot of it may have to do with being accepted by their new culture rather than feeling ostracized because they can not participate and communicate. For example, when a student does not feel comfortable or safe in their learning environment they are much more likely to shut down, refusing to talk, participate, even listen. Educators must take the talents of ELL students and show them off to their classrooms as assets and skills rather than negative differences.

The research Ajayi found on middle school English Language learners in Los Angeles, CA found that the students saw their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds as assets rather than hindrances (Ajayi, 2006). However, this only applies to students who are fluent in both English and their native language. Once the student has learned English and is comfortable with speaking in the classroom, their multilingualism can be seen as social capital and an investment into gaining entrance into the community they

desire to gain entrance to (Ajayi, 2006). However, while being accepted into a social community may be motivation to learn a language, it may also be a deterrent. Since many children may feel like outsiders if they do not know the language, incentive to become part a classroom may be lacking. When students are not able to speak the same language as their peers and therefore unable to communicate, they will not feel motivated to become part of the classroom environment. This is where it is the teacher's responsibility to make a student feel part of a classroom community whether they know the language or not.

A change in approach in the way a student is taught may also be a helpful tool for incorporating multicultural students into a classroom. The prominent teaching method in American education tends to involve a teacher-centered approach in which the teacher assumes that one teaching style will fit all (Brown, 2003). Understanding that all students do not learn in the same way leads a teacher to begin to look for alternative methods, which will produce more successful results with the classroom as a whole, rather than for just a few students. Brown (2003) encourages a learner-centered approach where the focus is put on the student's heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs. This might work by having days in the classroom where students are encouraged and invited to share about their own unique cultural experiences and then have other students comment on what they liked about that student's story. The incorporation of all these attributes will help the student feel more involved in their own learning rather than feeling as if they are an outsider expected to perform to unrealistic expectations laid out by teacher-centered goals. The inclusion of student-centered qualities will be especially beneficial for

English Language Learners because of the emphasis placed on background and interests of the student. The incorporation of these two qualities is essential when working with students who feel isolated in the foreign community of a multicultural classroom.

As a result of all of the research on multicultural education and student learning the institution of education needs to focus on multicultural pre-service teacher training and classroom communities. These two aspects of education are crucial when we start raising the standards on educational equality for all students. Whether equality in education will ever be achieved is another question in itself, however, spending more time on our teachers before they enter the classroom, then emphasizing acceptance and integration once they arrive will ensure students of different faiths, colors, nationalities, and ethnicities will feel ready and competent to learn and succeed. This review of the literature on multicultural education, specifically regarding ELL students, raises several important questions that drive this project.

### **Research Question**

In light of the above literature review I am left with the following questions: How are students taught in multicultural classrooms, and how does this teaching affect students from different countries and backgrounds, specifically ELL students? In addition to this question, more specifically I ask: Does a student's culture and background if it is different from the mainstream U.S. culture put them at a disadvantage for learning in American classrooms?

## **Methodology**

### *Method and Rationale*

Educators hold endless ideas and answers to the problem of teaching students from different backgrounds. Observing the different qualities of students, classrooms, and teachers becomes an important step towards better understanding how we might equally teach children from diverse backgrounds. There are many different approaches that can be used, and the options can be overwhelming. By entering a classroom and observing how the diversity and dynamics of a classroom affects classroom learning as a whole, specifically focused on the experience of ELL students may offer further insights into our efforts of multicultural education. In terms of diversity, I am mainly interested in seeing how students who are of different ethnicities, and even more specifically those who are learning English as a second, third or even fourth language, interact with the curriculum presented with them in the classroom. To do this I will observe one classroom for a specific period of time, considering what curriculum is being used and how it is being taught.

### *Sample*

The most important people to my ethnographic study will be the students who are learning English within their classroom. I will be working with and observing elementary aged students, predominantly fourth-graders at a rural public school. I will choose four students with the only conditions being that they are English Language Learners to be observed in relation to the challenges they face because of their English Language deficiency, specifically noting teaching methods, classmates, and classroom environment. I have chosen participant observation of students in a rural elementary

school because I will have access to the students through my graduate program's student-teaching placement. I will also be observing students from the ELL program, which is separate from the individual mainstream classes. Working with my student-teaching classroom and the ELL program I will be able to observe how students learn within a mainstream classroom and one-on-one in an individual English Learning classroom. There will be four students I will be working with: Daisy and Fred- both third graders, Manuel- a fifth grader, and Stacy- a first grader. Through these four students I will observe and record anything that may seem pertinent to my search into how teachers can help ELL students find success in an American classroom.

#### *Instrumentation*

In order to collect data on how an ELL student learns in a public school classroom setting, I will observe four ELL students for four months. In this study I will be looking for what obstacles do these students confront because of their language and cultural differences. How do teachers notice these obstacles and what are they doing to help the students through them. My data will include the facial expressions and actions of students while working on activities and lessons. Do the students look happy during the lesson or are they confused and frustrated? Do they have outbursts? How will the teacher respond to outbursts of frustration or confusion and will the teacher's response help the child get through the activity or make it worse? Overall, I will be looking for patterns in the interactions between the ELL students and their teachers.

#### *Procedure*

In analyzing my data I will also be looking for patterns in the ELL students challenges with their classroom; what comes up most often, whether it is the assignments,

teacher, classmates, etc. My overall goal of the observations and interviews in this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of an ELL student and how this experience is helped or hindered by their teacher. I will compare and contrast the experience of ELL students and students who already use English as a first language. I anticipate that the more calm and intuitive the teacher is the more likely a student will be able to get through lessons and activities. Coming into this research I already have a few biases and ideas of my own because of my own experience working with ELL students in Los Angeles. When I was working with my own ELL students a couple of years ago I remember having to come up with many creative ways to communicate with the students who do not speak English; such as, drawing pictures and acting words out. I find myself expecting to see the same type of activities while observing the teachers at Riverview Elementary. However, I also do not want to input my own expectations into my research. In order to avoid bias or judgment, I will only write down things I observe. After I write down observations for the day I will sit down with the teacher who was working with the student to see if they agree with the observations I made or if I interpreted something different from what actually happens. This will give me more validity with my data and hold my biases to a minimum. As I go into my analysis I will check it with others who have worked with ELL students to see if they agree with my interpretations to make sure I am not fabricating or exaggerating stories because of my prior knowledge of working with ELL students. Using these different tools of triangulation and acknowledgment of biases, I should have a substantial amount of accurate and interesting data on the struggles and challenges of teaching an ELL student.



## **Data**

### *Classroom Setting*

As I entered the ELL Classroom at Riverview Elementary I immediately saw many familiar elements to the students and classes with which I had worked back in Los Angeles. Students were eager to learn; but frustrated. The school is located in a small farming town that is made up of a mostly white, middle to working class demographic. Riverview Elementary is a public school in which the racial diversity is slim, but present. There is about twenty- three percent minority and forty-five percent free and reduced lunch. Most of the minority students are of Hispanic origin, with a couple that are African, Asian, and Native American. Teachers and ELL Resource specialists were eager to teach and help; yet overwhelmed. These represented both of the elements that brought me back to the importance of my research question. The ELL resource room was very small, about the size of a large office and located in the back wing of the school across from the multi-purpose room. There were two larger tables for students to work with the teachers with smaller desks for the ELL specialists to work in. Throughout the room was an overwhelming plethora of books, games, school supplies, and various English language- learning tools. My time spent in this room was sporadic because of the fact that I was simultaneously student teaching in the same building and the main ELL Specialist split her time between two other elementary schools in the district. However, the goal of the specialist was to keep a structured time and day of the week for each of the struggling ELL students to come in and work on English skills.

### *Classroom Observations*

While collecting my research data, I soon realized that I would need to split my findings and observations into three main categories, each of which would relate to both the main barriers for teachers and students when it came to ELL students in American classrooms. I broke my data up into the three categories including; Similarities and Differences in the challenges between teaching an ELL student and being an ELL student, Language, and what a substantial impact this makes on learning and succeeding, and finally; how Culture impacts a student's ability to learn in a classroom with a culture different from their own.

#### 1. Similarities and Differences

While observing ELL students and their teachers I find it very hard to separate the challenges of teaching these students and the challenges ELL students face. Although I am choosing to focus on what educators can do to help ELL students achieve success in our classrooms, this cannot be done without looking at the issue from a student's point of view. Teaching and learning are inverse operations; one cannot be done without the other. As a result, I will focus part of my observations on the most prominent similarities and differences when it comes to teaching and learning English.

Teachers must seek to understand their students before they can ever expect students to understand them. The most common similarities that arose between students and teachers were the desire to learn and a sense of frustration from numerous learning obstacles. While both teacher and student manifest these emotions in different ways, both are present in almost every lesson I observed.

A specific example includes a time when the ELL specialist is working with an ELL student, Fred, to write a letter to a family member. They just finished reading a

book together called, "Corduroy Writes a Letter." Fred is an immigrant from Mexico and only speaks Spanish, however the book and the letter are to be read and written in English. The ELL specialist does not speak Spanish making communication between the two difficult. Watching both the student and teacher, I could see the student likes reading the book and looking at the pictures, but does not quite understand what it is about or what is expected of him. Fred looks puzzled and a little bemused, yet, the teacher is patient and kind, but having trouble explaining to him how he should write his letter and what is expected of him. I could see this through the looks Fred kept giving the teacher. Every time he started to write something he would stop and look at her, waiting for some sort of help or response. Fred also gets up many times to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water. He does this every time the teacher asks him firmly to continue his work. Fred offers to read another book by pointing at the bookshelf, yet the teacher wants him to finish the lesson they are working on. After much pointing and explaining it is time for Fred to go back to class. This experience shows that both the student and the teacher want the student to succeed and write the letter, but communication barriers create a frustrating challenge.

During a math exercise, a fifth grade student named Manuel from Guatemala, decides to stop playing multiplication bingo because he is not interested in the game or in learning multiplication. The teacher then becomes frustrated and moves onto flashcards, which the student still has no interest in. This cycle continues until the student is sent back to class. In this situation the student faces the challenge of fighting past the disadvantage of expectations to perform to standards they are unable to comprehend. For example, many of the students I observed are still required to do some form of

assessment in order to show improvement in their English Language Skills. Yet, many of these same students do not understand assignments from teachers let alone how to take a test or write about what they learn. I was present in the classroom the day Manuel was given a multiplication assessment. I notice the same thing as when he was given multiplication bingo, Manuel looks at the test for a while and begins to fill in random numbers. The teacher approaches him and asks if he would like to use manipulatives, but he shakes his head and continues filling out the test. Manuel finishes the test and apathetically folds his arms and quietly waits until he is sent back to his regular classroom.

In another situation I was able to witness a teacher working with Stacy, the first grader, in which Stacy looks enthralled and excited about the lesson. Stacy and her teacher are working a lesson about learning the different “ou” words. Although the teacher uses flashcards with pictures of a house, mouse, etc, in addition to the flashcards the teacher encourages Daisy to jump up and show what a house looks like. Daisy puts her arms in the air and makes an upside down “V” as if she has become a house. She giggles as she says “casa”, but then the teacher points to the flashcard and Stacy says “house!” The teacher then brings up the next flashcard and Stacy dives down to the floor as if looking for a piece of cheese to steal as she becomes a little mouse. She mutters “Soy un raton!” Again the teacher encourages her to use the English word she has just learned as she continues to squirm around the room saying “mouse, mouse!” Stacy is enjoying her activity while continuing to learn her English words.

## 2. Language

When it comes to scholarly discourse about English Language Learners, the importance of language is indisputable. In our classrooms speaking a common language is the medium through which the majority of learning occurs. When a child does not have the ability to speak the same language as their peers or teachers, they are at an extreme disadvantage. My most common observation when seeing ELL students work with American teachers in the classroom or resource room was frustration from their inability to communicate successfully due to a language barrier.

There are several behaviors students exhibit when they are unable to understand or be understood. One is the shutdown of communication all together. Another is an outburst in either anger or frustration. Lastly, many students will write or do activities based on guessing what the teacher wants them to do through their own knowledge or understanding. While observing a third grade girl, Daisy, attempt to retell a story that was just read to her, she displays all three of the previous behaviors. When the teacher asks calmly for her to repeat what has happened in a section of the story, she asks the teacher what she means. The teacher then points to a part of the story and puts up her arms as if to ask a question like “what happened here?” The little girl is not sure how to say it and proceeds to sit in her chair and stare at the desk. When the teacher continues to push for an answer the student becomes frustrated, shakes her head and looks as if she is about to cry. Finally, the teacher calms her down and re-explains what she is to do through hand gestures and pointing.

The student sits for a while longer and begins to put together words she recognizes from the story, but was not necessarily a retelling like the teacher had asked.

Another day, while I was observing Daisy with the teacher they did the same type of lesson. However, this time the teacher shows Daisy the book, then tries to explain the activity to her with pictures and examples from other students. The activity is a mobile sequencing the events of the story. Daisy grabs the example the teacher shows her and begins to look at it for a couple of minutes. Her face lights up as she fingers through the different pictures from the story. She then puts the mobile down and grabs the book to begin reading. This time she seems to take her time through the story and glances at the mobile and the teacher as if trying to decide how she can make her own. Once the story is finished Daisy is eager to begin the activity, but halfway through becomes frustrated because she cannot remember how the story goes or what the story was about.

During my observation period I was able to observe similar situations from the other three students. One morning I was watching Fred work on an activity in which he was to read a book about an autumn leaf that lost his way. The activity was to draw a map for the leaf so that he would not get lost again. To me this seemed like a really fun activity that would encourage language skills and reading comprehension. However, after Fred struggles his way through the book the teacher brings out a leaf cut out and tries to explain to him that he should draw a map because we do not want the little leaf to get lost again. Fred looks at the leaf and begins to draw a picture of the forest that the leaf lived in. While it was a good drawing, this was not the point of the activity. The activity directions were lost in a different language. When the teacher tries to lead him back to drawing a map he exclaims something in Spanish and continues to draw his picture of the forest.

### 3.Culture

My literature review in part focused on how a student's culture influences every part of their learning process. The influence of a student's culture fits in line with everything I saw while observing ELL students working with teachers in Riverview Elementary Classrooms. The two largest factors I noticed when it came to students learning English in relation to their cultural influence was the way they interpret stories and activities and their sense of acceptance in an academic environment.

Both issues came to the surface during a day when I was watching a first grade Hispanic girl, Stacy, read the book, "Recess Mess." This book has a cover picture of three Caucasian boys playing on the monkey bars. As Stacy continues to attempt to read through the story, she keeps looking at the teacher with a puzzled look and does not seem to understand what the book is about, even though there are many pictures and very few words. The teacher encourages her through the rest of the book; however, she gets frustrated and does not want to finish. Her frustration shows through her lack of energy and interest in the book. She continually looks at the teacher with angry and disconnected looks. I found out later from speaking with the teacher that the student was frustrated because not only did she not understand the words that she was reading, but also she could not relate to any of the pictures or even guess what was going on because she was not familiar with any of the scenes or characters. I decide to speak with Stacy the next day and ask her about the book because I am curious why she did not like it. I was intrigued when she told me that she did not like the boy in the book or the book.

A similar experience occurred one morning when Manual and his teacher were doing a math exercise where the boy comes up with different games and he discusses the

probability of winning them. The teacher gave examples of games such as rock, paper, scissors, or the game of Life and was discussing with him what the probability of winning these games were. However, Manuel continues to attempt to explain that he has never played any of those games and therefore he gets frustrated because he cannot understand the examples the teacher is giving him to understand the exercise.

Similar events occurred many times when I worked with students in Los Angeles elementary schools. Students would struggle to get through a book because they did not know the language and were not able to use interpreting skills through pictures due to the inability to connect to the pictures or story from the lack of a cultural connection.

### **Analysis of Data**

As I continue to the interpretation section of the data gathered throughout my ethnographic experience in an ELL classroom, I must return to the original reason for diving into this research. The most important aspect in which I focus my attention is how the teachers working with these struggling students can most efficiently and effectively focus their energy to yield excited and avid learners. The first step into this endeavor includes looking into how the ELL students and teachers I observed use their similarities and differences to learn and teach. The next step leads us to why language and culture are such significant factors in the fight for quality ELL education.

#### **1. Similarities and Differences**

Despite the many obstacles and challenges I witnessed during my observations that both the student and teacher face, many of the lessons ended up producing some form of positive results or success. For example, many times the teacher would put aside the actual assignment for a moment to focus on a word, concept or skill that had arisen from



the struggles they were facing in a lesson. Going back to the “Corduroy Writes a Letter” lesson, Fred is frustrated because he does not understand that he is supposed to do what Corduroy has done in the book. His lack of understanding is because he knows very little English to read the story, let alone write a whole letter. When the teacher takes this as an opportunity to explain what writing a letter is and how a letter should be written through modeling rather than telling, results are more positive. After many examples and words of encouragement, despite the fact they still are not speaking the same language, he starts to show signs of calmness and interest in learning about something he is not familiar with. This shows that although both the student and teacher are easily frustrated because of communication difficulties, when the teacher takes a step back and is willing to accept a student’s frustration and look more deeply into the cause rather than getting frustrated themselves, more positive results present themselves. Teachers who have the ability to put themselves in the students place will find more success when it comes to working with ELL students.

In addition to the challenge of student frustration, teachers also face the challenge of trying to find new, provocative and exciting ways to keep students interested. In almost every I saw, if a student cannot connect to a story or activity they will not even attempt to participate or learn.

Differences in teaching ELL students versus learning English as an ELL student have mainly to do with the ability to understand one another and what the other is going through. The main barrier for a teacher trying to instruct an ELL student, as shown with Manuel, who was disinterested in multiplication bingo, is trying to get students interested and keep them interested. While this may be a challenge for any teacher, it becomes even

greater so for an ELL instructor because the student does not understand verbal directions or dialogue. While observing Manuel and his teacher I saw that if the teacher did not use an abundance of visuals or animated behavior, the student tends to become disengaged or confused. Then, when it comes to testing, as we also saw in Manuel's case, the student is not prepared or motivated to do well on the assessment. When you bring in culturally relevant material that the student is familiar with and excited about, chances are far less that they will become bored and apathetic.

Overall, the similarities and differences that I saw between ELL students and ELL teachers were significant but not disastrous. If the teacher takes a step back and allows the underlying reasons for the student's struggles to come to the surface, rather than forcing an agenda, results were more productive and encouraging for both the student and teacher.

## 2. Language

When it comes to student learning one of the first steps a child gravitates towards is developing their sense of self through their articulation of ideas and thoughts. However, when verbal expression is not possible a student's academic world comes to a standstill. This is the case for every student I observed at Riverview Elementary. The inability to communicate through a common language creates extreme hardship for both the teacher and the student. This was especially true for Daisy when she was asked to retell the story her and her teacher had read together. Her frustration came from the fact that she is unable to communicate her ideas or understand what her teacher is telling her to do.

Student frustration in many different forms and manifestations is common when looking at student needs as they relate to learning. These outbursts of frustration

stem from the students having a desire to learn and accomplish tasks but not being able to follow instructions because of a language barrier. While these three behaviors, shutting down, outbursts, and guessing, were common in the students I observed, they were non-productive and even retrogressive for the teacher when it came to accurately and successfully teaching a student how to speak and write English.

As I saw in my observations, students need to feel a sense of reinforcement and reaffirmation that they are capable and valuable students. However, when an obstacle such as the inability to communicate presents itself to students, the common reaction is to shutdown or act out.

I appreciate the choice that the ELL specialist made when working with Daisy who was frustrated with not being able to understand her assignments. Instead of the teacher becoming frustrated herself with the situation, which is a common occurrence for many overwhelmed teachers, she stopped and calmly gestured to the student in non-verbal way that she was willing to be patient and do whatever it took to help the student communicate what she was feeling and what she needed. The teacher then took out a visual example of what she expected from Daisy, making the activity much easier for the student to understand and complete. This act of respect shows the student that the teacher does care about what the student has to say, even if they are having trouble communicating it. The teacher's patience communicates to the student that she is an ally and friend who wants to help the student learn and succeed. A sense of mutual respect and acceptance will in turn help the student trust and open herself up to learning a new and difficult language.

### 3. Culture

Based on my observations, the influence of culture when looking at the success of a new diverse population that has inundated American schools is immense. Creating culturally diverse and accepting classrooms is not only a new trend in pre-service teacher training, but is necessary if we want ELL and culturally diverse students to fit into our classrooms and learn. However, these expectations are not easily attainable for ELL students due to the fact that our educational system still centers on the Caucasian, middle-class student.

Going back to the example of Stacy, who was struggling profusely through a picture book that was in no way representative of the knowledge or culture she came from. This happens every day all over the United States. Students are expected to embrace and find success within a culture that is very dissimilar to their own. This means that when Stacy is struggling through a book she has no cultural ties to, she should be asked what type of things she does with her family and friends. Offer her a choice of books where she sees others that are like her that she can relate to. Students must feel included and accepted into a society through the acceptance of their own culture. Without a sense acceptance, a student will not feel as if they can or want to learn within an unfamiliar environment.

As a result of this ethnographic experience, I found the inclusion of an ELL student's culture, language and acknowledgment of their differences in a positive way are the foremost important and essential stepping-stones to helping a student learn within an unfamiliar environment. Looking at the stories and struggles of Daisy, Fred, Manuel, and Stacy allows us to re-evaluate classroom curriculum and practices in order to become more empathetic towards a multicultural and diverse language student population.

## **Conclusion**

Educators have a responsibility to educate all students to the best of their ability successfully and equally. While this may be an idealistic point of view, research and my own observations shows that through multicultural experiences in pre-service teacher training and an emphasis on cultural inclusion in classrooms, this ideal can be achieved. After working with ELL students for four years in Los Angeles, and most recently for four months at Riverview Elementary, I believe whole-heartedly that educators and those who implement educational standards can use these tools of patience, understanding, and empathy to integrate multicultural education as a norm in our classrooms across the country. By creating, implementing, and accepting student diversity and multicultural education standards, students who come from a foreign place and are thrown into a foreign system will not have to feel as lost and frustrated, but included and celebrated for their diversity. After spending day after day watching these four students struggle just to understand what they are expected to learn, my original assumption that multicultural students need culturally empathetic teachers is confirmed. I have found from my own research that in order for these students to succeed and feel accepted in our classrooms teachers must be allies and motivators in their struggle for academic success and cultural acceptance. The best example I can leave you with is little Stacy wriggling around the room elated to be learning about a mouse because her teacher allows her to learn in a way that is interesting, understanding, and most of all accepting of who she is and where she comes from.

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