RELUCTANT MIDDLE SCHOOL ELLS

Reluctant Middle School ELLs: Creating Conditions for Quality Schoolwork

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide middle level educators with an orientation to an intervention designed to facilitate reluctant middle school English language learners (ELLs) engagement in quality schoolwork. The article introduces a new investigation of English language learning through the lens of Glasser's Quality School and Choice Theory concepts (1998a, 1998b). The following topics are addressed: (a) identification of reluctant middle school ELLs, (b) focused examination of the importance of listening and speaking in the context of acquiring academic English language proficiency, (c) brief review of Glasser's conditions for quality schoolwork, (d) summary of an intervention applying these concepts in a middle school ELL classroom during school year 2008-2009, and (e) a synopsis of ongoing challenges based on classroom practice. References include a series of websites designed to assist students, parents, teachers, and administrators in the process of engaging in quality schoolwork.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to provide middle level educators with an orientation to an intervention designed to help reluctant middle school English language learners (ELLs) engage in quality schoolwork. The article introduces a new investigation of English language learning through the lens of Glasser's Quality School and Choice Theory concepts (Glasser, 1998a, 1998b, 2008b). The following topics are addressed: (a) identification of reluctant middle school ELLs, (b) focused examination of the importance of listening and speaking in the context of acquiring academic language proficiency in English, (c) brief review of Glasser's conditions for quality schoolwork, (d) summary of an intervention applying these concepts in a middle school ELL classroom during school year 2008-2009, and (e) a synopsis of ongoing challenges based on classroom practice. References include a series of websites designed to assist students, parents, teachers and administrators to engage in quality schoolwork.

Reluctant Middle School Learners

William Glasser, in his book *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom* (1998a), identifies a group of middle school students who have "removed learning, teachers, reading, and schoolwork" from the quality pictures they store in their heads. These students have begun to lose or renounce the few good friends they still have who like school. They develop friendships with students who share their common interest in disruption, and non-academic values. They frequently skip classes and eventually lose ground academically. At the end of middle school, many are less prepared for high school than when they entered.

These students regularly demonstrate disciplinary problems throughout their middle school careers. Walter, Lambie, and Ngazimbi (2008) review how Choice Theory has been used effectively in counseling middle school students with disciplinary problems. This article focuses on applying related concepts as a part of regular classroom instruction.

Middle school students are usually eager communicators and make extreme efforts to be able to communicate verbally with their peers. English language learners (ELLs) take between eighteen months and two years to gain enough knowledge of social language to communicate in English on a peer-to-peer level (Cummins, 1999). They require significantly more time (five to six years or more) and concentrated effort to develop grade-level academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1999; Krashen & Brown, 2008). The academic language proficiency expected of middle school students is an exceptional challenge for ELLs (Carrier, 2005).

Reading Comprehension Challenges for ELLs at the Middle Level

Many ELLs at the middle school level (grades seven and eight) have had limited exposure to reading and writing in their native language (L1) and are extremely limited in their reading and writing competence in English (L2). Often, the students in this situation exhibit reading scores placing them at the third grade level on standardized tests such as the Measures of Academic Performance (MAP) developed by the Northwest Evaluation Association (2008). Books available at this reading level are frequently inappropriate for students who are thirteen and fourteen years old. Textbook writing for the middle school

frequently hovers above the eighth grade level and is therefore extremely difficult for challenged ELLs to understand.

Middle school ELLs identified as "reluctant readers" do not enjoy regular reading at school or at home, for academic reasons or for pleasure. However, these same students are building on their verbal vocabulary base almost daily as they learn to connect meaning to new words heard on the news, in daily conversation, in the classroom, and in entertainment media from video games to movies, television, music and the Internet.

The Importance of Listening and Speaking in English Language Learning

Infants first observe the communication of the people with whom they interact (Nathanson, 1992). Hearing infants listen to the sounds, and eventually, try to repeat the sounds they want to communicate. Deaf infants go through similar patterns through observations of hand signs or other body language rather than sounds. Long after children learn the basics of verbal communication, they begin to learn how words look written down (reading). Only then can they begin to write themselves (Cummins, 2007; Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003).

A main difference between middle school ELLs and infants is that middle school students already have an existing knowledge and experience base that they are building their new understandings upon (Cummins, 2007; Montgomery, 1992). To begin to grasp the concepts contained in their middle school academic textbooks, ELLs need to go through the same pattern of learning acquisition that infants do, first listening and observing, then speaking. Later, once the students

can communicate verbally, they learn what the words look like and practice writing the words themselves. (See Figure 1.)

For ELLs to make sense of academic content in middle school classrooms, they need to listen to the content before they try to read it. As they develop an understanding of the oral vocabulary, they need to practice using the vocabulary verbally, actively recording their verbal responses to problems and questions related to the academic content. This process, using the stepping-stones of language acquisition, can assist middle school ELLs to become more confident in their abilities to work with the materials successfully.

Students can be encouraged to listen to the content again as they read their textbook—making the connection between the words they know when they hear them and the way these words are arranged on a page. Once students are comfortable with recording their verbal responses, they can begin transcribing their verbal responses as a first step toward writing mastery.

Audio Books

Audio books (unabridged books recorded on compact disks, cassettes, and in a variety of Internet-related formats) can have an important role in bringing ELLs up to grade level reading. Public libraries are great resources for varied collections of age-appropriate audio books. Many can be checked out as a set in both audio and book format. When ELLs read-along with the audio book, they can quickly master new written vocabulary and will learn both correct pronunciation and meaning in context from the ongoing story. Reluctant middle

school learners working with audio books of interest to them can quickly build skills in understanding reading materials while engaging in enjoyable activity.

Writing Comprehension Challenges

Completing written assignments based on the reading in middle school textbooks is an even greater challenge for ELLs. Those who try to do the work often copy entire (and frequently irrelevant) passages from the text or write responses in one or two minimally coherent sentences. Students' frustration levels climb and many fail to complete the assignments.

Gap Between Thinking Skills and Written Expression

Because good writers first have to be good readers (Krashen, 1998), middle school ELLs who do not read at grade level frequently fail to show grade-level thinking and reasoning skills when preparing written responses. Challenged ELLs have developed coping strategies of guessing on multiple choice tests and of writing less than coherent responses to problems or essays. These strategies are well established for some students, making it difficult for teachers to assess actual thinking skills.

By assigning work to be recorded rather than written, ELLs and other students challenged by writing can be encouraged to listen to texts and class discussions, then to begin practicing thinking aloud, recording their thoughts and working to improve the quality of their recorded responses. This allows students to improve the quality of their schoolwork without making additional demands on reading and writing skills. Improvement in the areas of reading and writing can

flow naturally as a result of improving the quality of listening and spoken

schoolwork.

Quality—Needs—Choices—Results

People work with quality pictures stored in their heads, choosing to act in

ways that they believe, at the time, will satisfy their needs as shaped by these

pictures. Five essential human needs form the core for motivation for human

behavior and people choose behavior to fulfilling one or more of these needs:

survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1998a, 2008b).

Before people accept the value of something they learn, they attempt to

apply it to their life experience (Glasser, 1998a, 2008b; Montgomery, 1992).

Reluctant middle school learners who have eliminated teachers and schoolwork

from their quality pictures do not see value in what they learn by cooperating with

teachers or doing schoolwork. They attempt to satisfy their needs by choosing to

act in ways that match the quality pictures they do have. When teachers and

administrators want to help reluctant middle school learners to initiate new

behavior, they need to help the learners to accept two key concepts: 1) The

behavior the student is currently choosing does not feel very good; 2) There is

something different to do that, sooner or later, will feel better than what the

student is doing now. In order for teachers to have students put them into their

quality worlds, their interactions need to add kindness, courtesy and humor to

whatever they ask students to do (Glasser, 1998a, 2008b). Glasser observes that,

when power is unequal in any relationship, the stronger person needs to

demonstrate respect for the weaker person's position in order to strengthen the relationship (Glasser, 2002).

Conditions for Quality Schoolwork

In his book, *The Quality School Teacher* (1998b), Glasser identifies six conditions required for quality schoolwork. These conditions will help middle school students engage in and produce quality schoolwork. Reluctant learners and ELLs will find more opportunities to engage in positive learning activity when these conditions are present. (See Table 1.)

Creating Conditions for Quality Schoolwork in the Middle School ELL Classroom—Summary of an Intervention during the 2008-2009 School Year

Create a warm, supportive classroom environment

Creating norms for a warm, supportive classroom environment requires reinforcement on multiple levels including the signage in the classroom, classroom routines, expectations, and messages to the students regarding expectations, grading, and positive behaviors. See Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5 for examples of classroom structures that support this kind of classroom environment. Collaborative interactions and teacher facilitation encourage students to pursue quality in all of their assignments. Parents and students are asked to complete "learning passports" (Montgomery, J.R., 2009e) granting permission and agreeing to work within guidelines regarding innovations in class, after school, and using the Internet. The "learning passport" reinforces the concept that learning is both a process and adventure and that we will explore new worlds from the classroom. There are a series of websites (Montgomery, J.R., 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009e)

created to support learning. Students make use of these websites both in school and at home (or from public libraries if students do not have Internet access outside of school). Parents, students, administrators and other teachers can access these websites, though sites for student work are protected. Only students with signed learning passports have authorization to submit work via the Internet. Students view a presentation about class rules and grades, which is also available on the websites. Students complete an open-book test on the class rules and grades (ninety percent mastery is required and students can complete the test as often as required to achieve mastery). Assignments and links to online resources, tests and other support materials are all made available on these websites. Students without Internet access from home can access these sites during school hours, in afterschool programs and in public libraries.

Two initial projects, the Human Migration-Family Story project and the Footprints project, offer the students an opportunity to learn about their teacher. The Human Migration story begins with results of the National Geographic Genographic project (National Geographic, 2008) and continues with the teacher's family history. Students then work with their own family histories. The Footprints project provides a review of the teacher's life experiences—including tracking these experiences on maps from Google Earth. When students begin their own Footprint projects, they explore a simulation developed by the Illinois State University College of Education (2008). Working with this simulation, students explore possible careers of interest as well as potential families, homes, cars, and

numbers of children in order for them to begin to become aware of the importance of education in their future.

Students are asked to do only useful work

Glasser (2001, 2008b) indicates that students need to satisfy one or more of their human needs in their learning activities and that, in particular, learning needs to reflect an experience of freedom and fun. Part of the process of students doing useful work involves anchor projects. Some of these anchor projects include elements of service to the school, families or the community. Each anchor project is multidisciplinary (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2004) and tied to relevant state and district learning goals and standards (Montgomery, J.R., 2009d). One anchor project includes listening to an audio book. Other projects involve listening to an audio recording of relevant text books. By completing the anchor projects (independently or in collaborative learning groups), students demonstrate competence in the relevant learning goals and standards. Students and teachers create rubrics for these projects and students are encouraged to work on them until they have attained ninety percent mastery. When tests are required, students are encouraged to use their books, notes and projects and to repeat the test until they achieve ninety percent mastery. Separate practice sessions are provided to assist students to prepare for state-required standardized tests. On tests such as the NWEA MAP (2008) where the histories of student scores are available, students earn points when they exceed their previous personal best on any MAP score.

Because texts at the middle school level are a challenge to understand for ELL students, they listen to an audio recording of the text and can ask for a copy of that recording to take home to listen to as they read their textbooks. One option is to record class assignments. Students are encouraged to have small group discussions on any class assignments prior to recording their responses.

While building a better academic vocabulary is a critical skill for these ELLs, the vocabulary work has links on the Internet to primary sources and reference resources. The teacher expects students to write two or three sentences about each of the words, which will allow them to recognize and understand the words in the context of their reading or on standardized tests.

Students are always asked to do the best that they can do

While students do not usually have assigned homework, students are encouraged to improve the quality of their work both in and out of class. When students attain ninety percent mastery on any assignment, they have met the quality requirements for that assignment. (Though shooting for ninety percent, many students, by accident, earn one hundred percent or more on most assignments.)

Students are asked to evaluate their own work and improve it

The class creates many of the rubrics for almost all assignments. The teacher can then measure the quality of the output of individuals and groups against the rubrics. As a general standard, students know to complete all assignments at a ninety percent mastery level or better.

Frequently, assignments go to small groups of students who work on them together. With this type of assignment, part of the rubric includes individual and group assessments of the quality of work—did each person and the group do the best that they could do? What can they improve and should it be before declaring the assignment complete?

Many of the tests are available on Quia.com (2008). Students receive their scores and can re-take the test as often as they choose to until they achieve ninety percent mastery. For students without Internet access, teachers can provide these same tests on paper, with students retaking the paper tests until they achieve ninety percent mastery.

Quality work always feels good

As students begin to achieve consistent levels of ninety percent mastery or better, they begin to be more enthusiastic about what they are doing. By providing variety within the assignments, students find elements of the assignments they actually enjoy doing., There is a specific service project designed to reach some of the reluctant ELLs. Student volunteers contribute one or two periods per week helping other students with exceptional needs. Teachers of the exceptional needs students closely supervise these volunteers who have received additional parental permission. Volunteers and the supervising teachers report that the service project is a win-win for both the volunteers and the students they support. This project is in the early stages and looks promising as another way to get reluctant ELLs to put some quality schoolwork back into their quality pictures. The expectation is that they complete all class projects at the ninety percent mastery level as well as

volunteering their service—and they earn points for both service and class

projects.

Kids College (Learning Through Sports, 2008) is a software program

made available through the school district to all students in grades K-8. The

program provides an assessment, based on grade level, of reading and math skills,

then creates a set of challenging questions designed to assist the students move up

to their grade level in reading and math. To supplement the online software, each

student receives an individually tailored set of activity pages (frequently more

than five hundred pages) in Adobe Acrobat (.PDF) format that will also assist the

student to bring reading and math skills to grade level. Once students have

answered a set number of questions correctly (seven in these classes), they are

allowed thirty seconds to be a virtual player in one of six sports. As they progress

through the sports, they earn points and certificates and compete with themselves

and with each other for the highest scores. In addition to improving math and

reading skills, the material is at appropriate interest level and students look

forward to working with Kids College. The teacher sponsors Kids College

contests with awards going to the five highest scores for the time of the contest.

The software automatically stops access to the game if students guess answers too

quickly. Many reluctant ELLs love Kids College.

Quality work is never destructive

Some students are not used to producing quality work. The design of

assignments is collaborative. Additionally, what has been considered "cheating"

is not supported in the nature of the assignments and grading rubrics. Students are

encouraged to help each other and only to compete to improve their own

"personal best." Whenever possible, the outputs of projects are leveraged as

inputs for subsequent projects. The class is also encouraging "Celebration of

Learning" events after school to involve families. At these events, students will

share their outputs. Students record some of the videotaped outputs onto DVD's

so that they can share with families who cannot attend the school-based

celebrations.

Grading, Portfolios, Rubrics, Student Input

The Star Model (see figure 4) is a primary model for grading in these

classes. Students complete their work and preserve copies of the finished quality

work in electronic portfolios. These electronic portfolios contain copies of video

and audio recordings and photographs or scanned images of paper-based

products. Student input is part of the creation and development of rubrics

designed to help them recognize quality in assignments. A software program

called "Making the Grade" (Jay Klein Productions, 2008) tracks the multiple

inputs for grades. Measurement of all assignments involves points or check-marks

(for completion). Students who earn ninety percent mastery earn full points for an

assignment. Assignments completed at higher than ninety percent mastery can

earn more than one hundred percent of the points available. In addition, extra

credit points are available for work contributed beyond the basic requirements for

the class. Students can complete their work online (if they have signed learning

passports) and in class and in school. Students complete tests and quizzes created

on Quia.com online. The Quia server preserves record of completed tests.

Students start all classes with an "A" and maintain that "A" with quality work. Students have the entire quarter to complete their work at the quality standard. Progress grades (sent in the middle of the reporting period) merely indicate the number of completed areas to date. Points convert to grades for report cards. Final grades (sent at the end of the reporting periods) represent the quality scores of all completed and incomplete work. There is no averaging of grades or any competition for class standing. Everyone can and is encouraged to do the quality work for an "A." The number of points earned over the course of the reporting period determine each grade.

Ongoing Challenges

Reluctant middle school ELLs who have eliminated schoolwork and teachers from their quality pictures and have replaced them with disruptive and immature behavior are challenged to change these mind-sets and to choose to work toward quality schoolwork, even when the conditions are in place to encourage them to do so. If the school as a whole follows an external control (behaviorist) discipline approach, these students will often be engaging in behaviors that exclude them from the classroom and, eventually, from school. While the initiatives described in this article appear to be helping some of these students to refocus on quality schoolwork and positive relationships with teachers and administrators, many of the students still choose the behavioral habits that interfere with learning. Teachers who choose to implement this approach face significant extra investment of time and energy in setting-up their assignments and facilitating their students' progress. Some school and district administrations

who have not yet adopted the concepts of "quality schoolwork" and "quality schools" into their own quality pictures do not appreciate the value of such initiatives. At times, well meaning school disciplinary procedures emphasizing external control (behaviorist) approaches may be at odds with the initiatives described here. Reluctant middle school learners (ELLs and native speakers) will receive mixed messages from teachers and administrators. District and school administrators and teachers need professional development related to quality school initiatives and effective use of choice theory in schools. What's more, teachers need additional support in teaching these concepts to students, parents, and to the community.

School and district support for computers in the classroom is another critical factor in implementing these initiatives. If districts and schools face fund restrictions and inadequate infrastructure support needed for more computers and Internet access in the classroom, many of these initiatives will not be as readily available to students. Students without Internet access at home will have to make time to access computers at school outside of class time or at public access sites such as public libraries. This significantly reduces the amount of time available for students to engage in quality schoolwork.

<center>Summary</center>

This article provided middle level educators with an orientation to an intervention designed to help reluctant middle school English language learners (ELLs) engage in quality schoolwork. The article introduced a new investigation of English language learning and built on Glasser's Quality School and Choice

Theory concepts (1998a, 1998b). The following topics were addressed: (a)

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Create a warm, supportive classroom environment.	Trust and a strong, friendly feeling need to exist among students, teachers and administrators. Each group must believe that the others have their welfare in mind. If the trust is missing, one or more of the groups will not make the effort to do quality work.
Students are asked to do only useful work.	Teachers must make clear how the work is going to be useful to students in order for students to recognize the value of the work they are asked to do. When the work involves preparing for standardized tests, teachers and students need to create a shared vision of how improving student behavior and assessment scores have present and future value.
Students are always asked to do the best that they can do.	Teachers and students together produce a model and a rubric of what quality looks like for a given assignment. It is then essential to allot enough time and freedom for students to be able to make

|	
	the necessary effort to improve the quality of their work.
Students are asked to evaluate their own work and improve it.	One can always improve quality. Teachers help students learn how to evaluate their own work and to have strategies to improve the quality of the work. Students then evaluate their own quality and work to improve it. Teachers encourage continuous improvement of quality with constructive feedback.
Quality work always feels good.	As students find themselves satisfying their needs with quality schoolwork, they feel good about themselves and about their success in producing what they see is quality.
Quality work is never destructive.	It is not quality to achieve good feelings through the use of anything that is destructive to people, living creatures, property, or the environment.

Table 1
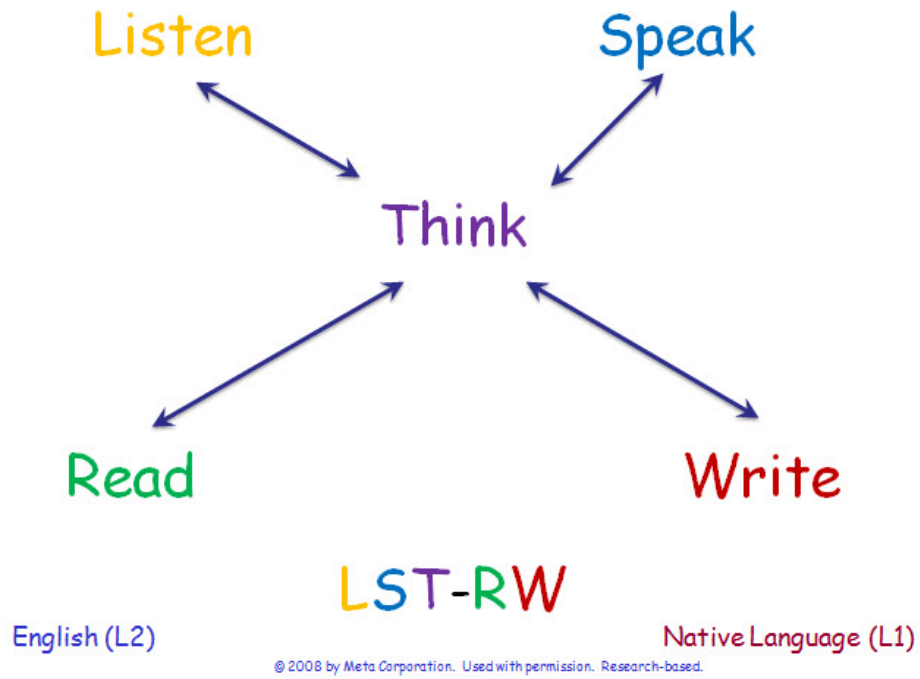
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3
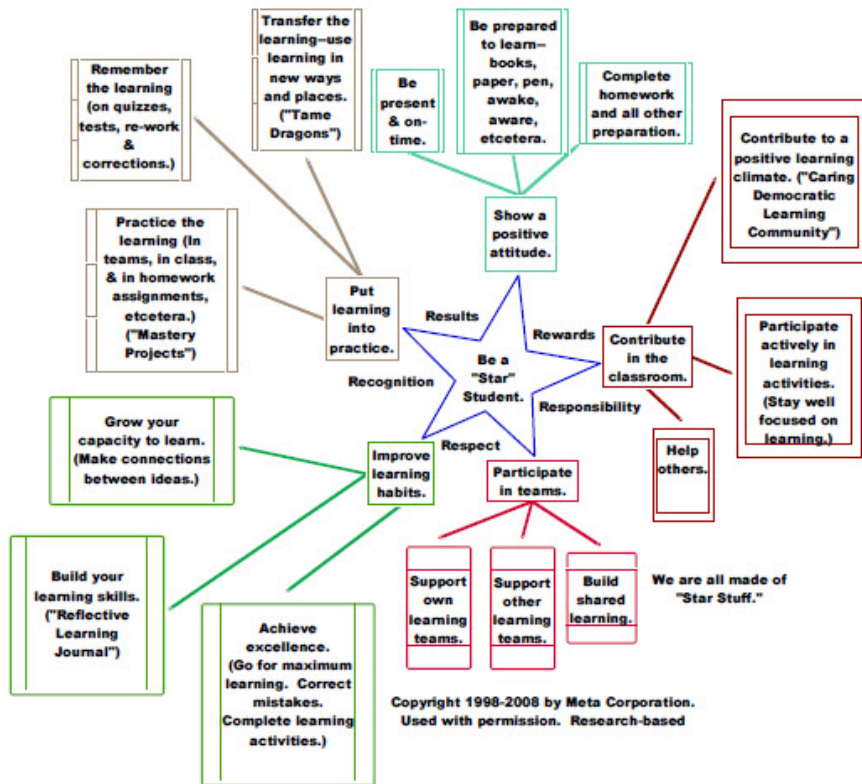
Figure 4

Choice Theory in Our Classroom

- All we do is behave.
- Almost all behavior is chosen.
- We are driven by our genes to satisfy five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun.

In practice, the most important need is love and belonging, as closeness and connectedness with the people we care about is required to satisfy all of the needs.

We support these caring habits:	We replace these deadly habits:
1. Supporting	• Criticizing
2. Encouraging	• Blaming
3. Listening	• Complaining
4. Accepting	• Nagging
5. Trusting	• Threatening
6. Respecting	• Punishing
7. Negotiating differences	• Bribing, rewarding to control

Dr. Montgomery's Classes   Source: Glasser, W. (2008). Choice Theory (Web Page) Downloaded 12/31/2008 from
http://www.wglasser.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=27

Figure 5