Newcomer High School Students as an Asset: The Internationals Approach

Claire Sylvan

In a practitioner-led high school model serving new immigrant students, all teachers simultaneously support both language and content, and students are taught in groups of heterogeneous English proficiency levels.

The last several decades have made clear that large numbers of immigrants still see America as a land of opportunity – and this influx of students has had a strong impact on the K–12 educational system. Most of the million-pupil increase in the public school population in the decade between 2001 and 2011 is due to the increase in English language learners, both those born in this country, whose home languages are not English, and school-age students who immigrate to the United States (Aud et al. 2012). In addition, the U.S. government has expanded the localities that serve as refugee resettlement sites (Patrick 2004). All of this population growth taken together means that more schools and school districts serve students with a variety of home languages and who are new learners of English.

Newly arrived immigrant students at the high school level, also known as *late-entry* students, present a particular challenge – in addition to learning English, they need to learn more

Claire Sylvan is founding executive director and president of Internationals Network for Public Schools in New York City.

complex content than younger students. But high schools serving late-entry English language learners also have a tremendous opportunity to build on the incredible resources that these students bring. Immigrant students come with global experiences and knowledge – a knowledge of life in faraway countries, varied perspectives on school and the world, and a variety of languages. These students are often very resilient. They've travelled across borders by plane, boat, car, truck, bus, and foot, with or without one or both parents. They may not have been the ones who actually decided to come to the United States, and so they may be filled with more than the normal teenage rebellion about parental choices that they had no part in, having left behind friends, family, and all that is familiar. Yet, they are also often eager to benefit from opportunities that were not available to them in their homelands – opportunities to live in peace, to study, to meet people from other cultures, and to become full participants in a democratic society.

THE INTERNATIONALS APPROACH

In 1985, a group of educators in Queens, New York, faced with the challenge of educating newly arrived secondary students, set out to create a new approach to educating immigrants in a new small school, International High School at LaGuardia Community College. Knowing that in the United States, immigration often carries a stigma, the school chose to name itself "International" to confer prestige on the students they serve. Since then, another sixteen small schools and one small learning community have re-created and built upon this approach.

The practitioners formed a nonprofit, Internationals Network for Public Schools, to leverage their work and share it with others. This approach to working with secondary newcomer students is based on a model that builds on the very diverse strengths that students from all over the world bring to their schools and provides them with a rich academic curriculum that prepares them for post-secondary success in college, careers, and democratic society.

This article will present some of the unique features of the Internationals approach. One especially important feature of the approach is that practitioners have led its development and continue to share and learn together across multiple schools, contexts, and geographies.

All Teachers Supporting Both Content and Language Learning

In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Lau v. Nichols* found that the San Francisco Unified School District had violated the rights of students by not providing them support in learning the English language, because the district had placed these students in academic classes without providing them sufficient linguistic supports to access and learn the academic content. Since that time, a variety of state and federal regulations have been developed to ensure that districts meet their obligation to provide linguistic support to students who are speakers of other languages and not yet proficient in English. Yet, despite a variety of regulations governing the education of these students,[1] they are often unsuccessful in school.

Virtually all programs provide linguistic support through English as a second language classes. In most programs, academic content is also taught in English (using a variety of approaches) and in some programs, academic content is taught in students' home language(s). Much of the debate in the United States has focused on the language used by the teacher, with

some states mandating "English-only" instruction in the aftermath of anti-bilingual campaigns in the late 1990s. But in the Internationals approach, rather than separating linguistic and academic development into different class periods with specialists in either language development *or* an academic discipline teaching the respective class, Internationals has *all* teachers support both the linguistic and the academic development of students[2] and supports students' use of home languages as well as English to do this.

It is crucial that all teachers take responsibility for newly arrived high school students' growth in both areas. To be college and career ready, immigrant high school students need to master academic content and develop proficiency in English. They have a very short window of time to learn all this: four years – or at best five or six, if they and their families can afford for them to stay in school and they don't get discouraged. It doesn't make sense for these students to lose their precious, limited time learning English in courses that don't accumulate the academic credits towards graduation that they need.

Researchers and theoreticians also are more and more indicating that the most appropriate place to learn language is in context – and in school, the context is the learning of academic content. Students need to be actively doing this work, not watching others or waiting to do it while learning English. For students learning English in a short period of time, it is especially important that they have the opportunity to actively use language throughout the day. No one learns to ride a bicycle by watching someone else ride it. You need to get up, ride, fall off, and get back on. Language learning is no different. You have to *use* a language to develop proficiency in a language.

In a class where the teacher talks and calls on individual students, even in a relatively small high school class of twenty students, each one would have only a few minutes to practice language. Understanding that the more teachers talk, the less students talk, the Internationals approach prioritizes small-group projects that foster language development alongside of content. Student activity guides direct the activity of students on collaborative projects, and the teacher moves among groups to facilitate their work and guide the process. Students actively speak with their peers, collaborating to complete a cognitively complex problem. They make linguistic choices. They move between using their own language to understand concepts or explain to a peer who doesn't understand in English to using English to communicate with other students who may not share their language or to prepare for oral presentations of their work in English.

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1 Implementation of these regulations has been uneven.

2 See the Understanding Language project at http://ell.stanford.edu for a good explanation of the theoretical basis for this approach.

Grouping Students across Different Levels of Language Proficiency

In order to have students working on complex cognitive tasks, with activity guides prepared in English (in general), the student groups must be heterogeneous with students at different levels of English proficiency, so that they can support each other's learning. But in fact, this learning is enhanced even more when students are diverse on even more characteristics, such as academic proficiency, home language, or previous schooling. In virtually all our schools, students in grades 9 and 10 are mixed in classes and work on projects together in a two-year program, where they remain with the same team of teachers.

> Internationals' experience is that students learn *better* in heterogeneous groups, a fact confirmed by literature on how diverse groups often perform better and reach more optimal decisions than homogeneous groups.

Why have we decided not to stratify students based on their linguistic proficiency? In virtually every program serving English learners, for at least some part of the day, they are divided into groups based on their language proficiency. This grouping is done because educators believe that they can best tailor instruction to students who share the "same level" as their needs will be the same. The Internationals approach looks at this differently:

- Internationals personnel often ask skeptics, "What size class would you need to form a truly homogenous group?" In fact, the minute you level students on one characteristic, they will be different on another. No two people share all characteristics.
- The decisions about grouping students by language proficiency are usually based on an English language proficiency examination. Even if students scored the same on the test, inevitably they did not get all the same answers right and all the same answers wrong. So the students will differ on what they do or don't know about the English language.
- Even when they get the same answers right or wrong, the way that they think about the answers may well differ.

In other words, the only way to have a truly homogeneous class is to have a class of one!

Rather than attempt the impossible task of "leveling students" to create homogenous groups, the Internationals approach leverages diversity and heterogeneity. Across Internationals schools, students come from 119 countries and speak 90 languages. In any one school there may be up to 60 countries and 40 languages. Some students come in on grade level or above, from a strong school system, although they may not speak one word of English. Some of our students have never previously attended school. Others have been out of school for several years due to war or other situations. Still others come from countries where the school day is short (four hours or less) and sometimes there is no teacher. And students will combine on these and other characteristics in innumerable ways.

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on how diverse groups often perform better and reach more optimal decisions than homogeneous groups (Phillips, Kim-Jun & Shim 2010; Page 2007; Boaler 2008; Kellogg Insight 2010).

The Internationals approach capitalizes on the heterogeneity of our students in multiple ways:

- making English the lingua franca in most of our classrooms and encouraging communication in multiple languages to aid in constructing meaning;
- promoting student interaction where students use both English and native language to grasp the content of their projects, to construct new understandings, and to help each other complete the project tasks;
- promoting language and content learning motivated by students' authentic desires to communicate ideas and solve problems and communicate with their peers.

We also leverage diversity by creating heterogeneous groups of teachers who take responsibility for the same group of students. At a minimum, a math, history, science, and English (or ESL) teacher share responsibility for a cluster of about 80 to 100 students. The heterogeneous cluster of students is divided into three to four strands (classes). Each strand sees the same four teachers for their classes, and the teachers see the same 100 students in the same groupings. The practitioners' main affiliation (unusual for high schools) is not their academic discipline but the interdisciplinary team. This team shares responsibility – overall responsibility for this shared cluster of students and their success, academically, linguistically, and affectively – for a collaborative project. Like the students, the teachers' diversity enables them to look at students from different perspectives – students that do well in math may struggle in history, and the fact that the class groupings are the same allows the practitioners to discuss how best to form small groups and pairs for class projects, to see students' strengths in one area in order to leverage them to support their growth in areas they are struggling.

To sum up, since heterogeneity is inevitable, valuable, and positive, rather than attempt to eliminate it falsely, the Internationals approach is to leverage it instructionally and structurally, both for teachers and for students. And for English language learners, this approach is unique, since virtually all other programs level students by proficiency level.

An Approach Developed and Maintained by Practitioners

As described on page 20, the Internationals approach was developed and continues to evolve based on the collaboration of practitioners. In each International High School, teachers work in committees to take responsibility for hiring, supporting, and eventually providing feedback to their peers. They collaboratively plan and lead professional development and serve on curriculum committees overseeing the courses of study, vertical alignment within academic disciplines, etc. The Internationals network supports continued cross-school learning.

Across the network of schools, staff from Internationals Network of Public Schools facilitate committees of faculty to support the opening of new schools, plan joint professional development across schools, plan inter-visitations across schools, and help to populate an online knowledge management system where over 500 curriculum units and additional resources are shared across the network. Educators from Internationals Network facilitate inter-visitations, leadership retreats, and a process to provide feedback to sister schools.

In one example of interschool sharing, a consistent structure in most of our schools now is the team leader meeting, where the principal meets with team leaders to support their growth and facilitate cross-team learning. Yet that structure was developed by the fourth school to open. Practitioners own and develop Internationals practices, even as they have agreed to hold firm to certain key design principles, which they themselves distilled over the course of two summers, based on more than twenty years of school-based practices. The network of schools remains strong as newer and older schools continue to learn from each other and develop their practices.

LEVERAGING THE DIVERSITY OF NEWLY ARRIVED STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Now in three states and eighteen schools, with additional supports provided to other schools in even more states, the Internationals approach holds great promise to provide immigrant and ELL students with real educational opportunity. These students and their families bring global perspectives and great optimism to the communities in which they live. Leveraging their diverse experiences and developing teacher capacity to integrate language and content in complex, rigorous projects, the Internationals approach guides schools and communities to welcome these students and open the door to the American dream for these newly arrived youth.

For more information on the Internationals Network for Public Schools, see http://internationalsnps.org.

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