Teaching Students with Interrupted Formal Education

Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators— their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

By Christine Rowland

For 23 years, I had the good fortune to work with high school students from a wide range of language backgrounds and widely differing circumstances. What they all had in common was that they were developing competence and confidence in academic English. One of the challenges in teaching them was that some students had traveled back and forth between the United States and their country of origin, alternating between school systems and languages, and frequently missing periods of formal schooling entirely. Throughout my career in the Bronx, New York, I developed ideas on how to best support these students, commonly known as students with interrupted formal education (SIFE).

Although I am now retired from teaching, I still remember many of my former students extremely well. In addition to my

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work as a classroom teacher, I also facilitated professional development for a number of years, by supporting teachers of English language learners (ELLs) in helping their students succeed.

Student Variation

Among the challenges of supporting SIFE includes the fact that they come from vastly different backgrounds and experiences. For the purposes of this article, I will introduce four of my former students. To protect their privacy, I have changed their names.

Manuel was born in the United States and holds a U.S. passport. His family had decided to move back to Mexico when he was 6 years old. One of eight children, Manuel and his family lived in a rural area in Mexico. When he enrolled in high school, his walk to school took three hours each way. Deciding it was too long of a commute, his family sent him to the Bronx to live with a relative. Upon his arrival, Manuel entered the 10th grade. He had spent only first grade in the United States and had attended grades 2 through 8 in Mexico. But when he returned to New York to complete high school, he had effectively missed at least a year and a half of schooling. Also, his English was poor, and he lacked the academic English and content knowledge necessary for school success.
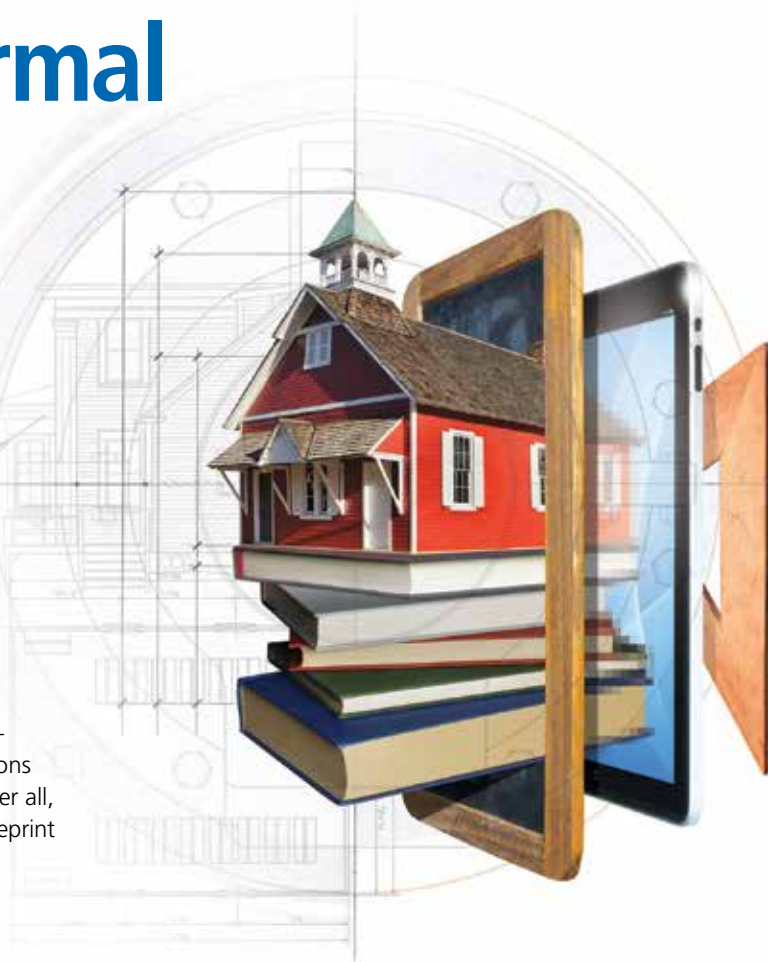
Amira was born in Bangladesh and spoke Bengali as her first language. She attended school there for several years and learned to read and write in Bengali. But at the age of 11, she left school to help out at home. When she was 15, her family won the green card lottery and moved to the Bronx, where she entered high school after having missed three years of school completely.

Jorge was born in Ecuador and spent his early years there. He and his family moved to the United States for a couple of years, then returned to Ecuador for a couple more years, before ultimately returning to New York when he was 15. When he entered my class in the second semester of 10th grade, he tested at the fourth-grade level in Spanish.

Like quite a few of our students, Melita came from Kosovo. Because she and her family hid for periods of time amid the violence there, Melita had missed close to two years of schooling by the time she arrived in the Bronx.

Although Melita was technically a student with interrupted formal education, the reality is that her dedication to her studies and focus meant that there was no appreciable difference between her performance and that of her classmates. In fact, she often found herself near the top academically. She ultimately graduated with her high school class and went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Hunter College in Manhattan.

Supports for SIFE

Supports for these students come in two broad categories—systemic and academic. All four of my students benefited from both.

One of the challenges in supporting students who arrive at high school with little English is that the multiple class periods of English needed for language development present scheduling challenges in terms of fulfilling curricular requirements. In other words, if two or three class periods a day are taken up with English, then it becomes an increasing challenge to fit in everything else. The result is that the students who have the most to learn face the most challenging program, making it very difficult for the school to both structure their program and ensure students learn everything they need. This situation can cause students to feel overwhelmed at times. Without careful nurturing and support, they might also fail. Thus, a carefully thought-out system of support is crucial for these students.

Systemic Supports

At Christopher Columbus High School, where I worked, all teachers of ELLs met together twice a week during a professional period. As the on-site representative for the United Federation of Teachers' Teacher Center (school-based teacher support centers), I facilitated those meetings, which were a critical systemic support. The first meeting each week consisted of case conferencing, which was an opportunity for teachers to raise challenges, whether academic or behavioral, they experienced with specific students. During these meetings, we kept records of our conversations and the interventions and supports we were providing, which enabled us to see how specific students were working across the curriculum. Students were aware that we were working as a team, and I often felt that such knowledge alone made a significant impact. Students knew they were important to us, and that we were working together for their success.

Those meetings also gave us the time and access to look at report cards and transcripts, so we could examine students' overall academic progress, in addition to our own experiences in working with each student. We also followed attendance records and looked for any concerns related to absenteeism* and/or lateness. While a school counselor was not able to attend our meetings, we did coordinate with him as best we could.

The second meeting of the week focused on instructional strategies to support ELLs, including those with interrupted formal education. The choice of strategy was typically informed by the case conferencing in addition to sheltered instruction strategies, designed to support ELLs in content-area classes. These included pre-reading, reading, and post-reading strategies.

We would also heighten teachers' awareness of the ways in which incidental vocabulary could become a stumbling block specifically for ELLs. For instance, in a lesson on World War II, I recall a sentence explaining that France was invaded by Germany. Melita did not know the verb "to invade," but she thought it looked like "invite." As a result, she and other English learners simply substituted one for the other, thus coming away with the mistaken impression that France had invited in Germany. Because this professional period was not long (often only 40 minutes), we tended to focus on one particular strategy at each meeting.

For these supports to work, it was essential that teachers of ELLs shared a common planning period. To that end, administrative support and investment is vital. Interventions we discussed at these meetings provided enough systemic support for students such as Manuel and Melita to succeed, while Amira and Jorge needed far more extensive support, especially with written responses to questions so they could demonstrate their learning.

An additional systemic support that we provided for Jorge was a native language arts class after school two days a week. Based on the research on language acquisition, we strongly suspected that his weakness in Spanish contributed to his challenges in learning English. This class, implemented for a handful of students with severe native language literacy issues, was created to strengthen language skills and academic knowledge. From our anecdotal observations, we could see such a class allowed Jorge to feel comfortable and less overwhelmed with learning.

The final systemic intervention we offered was afterschool tutoring in a range of subjects. For Amira, it was particularly helpful. She benefited from the extra time and attention that was not always available within a larger class. The small group and one-on-one support she received built her confidence in her work. Amira had her heart set on college and wanted to become a nurse. Ensuring she was ready for college meant she needed to produce academic papers that would give her a realistic sense of what a
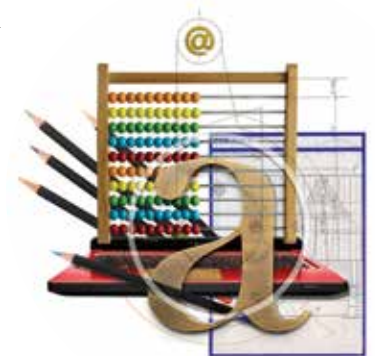
finished product in college would be expected to look like.

One way I approached teaching these students in the same classroom as others was to create instructional units where all students worked on the same basic assignment, but expectations varied according to their English level. For this purpose, I used simple beginning, intermediate, advanced, and transitional designations. Assignment sheets clearly delineated the expectations by level, and rubrics were differentiated by level, in order to present an appropriate challenge to each student, and to afford each an opportunity to succeed, while acknowledging their different starting points.

I designed these units with the Understanding by Design framework, an educational design approach developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. I typically began with the overarching understanding I wanted students to attain, followed by the essential questions they would need to answer. Also, I identified key points of learning and vocabulary for each unit. Next, I considered how students would demonstrate their understanding. To that end, I created two final products: a performance, usually with a range of options for students to select from, and a written paper.

In developing units, I also had to decide what skills and knowledge students needed to develop, what supports they would need, and how many lessons it would take to accomplish everything. Unit length varied tremendously from a few days to a few weeks. I invested considerable time in developing a unit, and I made judicious adjustments to improve them for future use. I also shared my favorites on AFT's Share My Lesson (www.sharemylesson.com). Posting my lessons was a great way to highlight my portfolio and to join a reflective community of committed professionals.

The final assignment in these units included both a written paper and an in-person presentation. The paper was developed, expanded, revised, and edited throughout the unit. Grouping within the class could be either homogeneous or heterogeneous, according to a specific purpose. Homogeneous grouping would allow me, upon occasion, to pull the students with the greatest needs (frequently those with interrupted formal education) around my desk to work together.

Also, we supplemented the practice of working with drafts and feedback with afterschool support for students who needed it. Amira, in particular, took extensive advantage of these opportunities—frequently staying for help in further developing her papers. Of course, I was careful not to correct her work for her but focused on giving her feedback and information on where weaknesses lay.

For both Amira and Jorge, the Comprehensive English Regents Examination, a New York state graduation requirement, was a huge obstacle. Jorge had the slight advantage of taking the examination while there was a "local diploma" option for students facing major challenges, which meant scoring 55 percent rather than 65 percent on the exam to graduate. After several tries, he did in fact achieve this score.

Entering the school system later than Jorge, Amira needed a grade of 65 percent, with listening, reading (both fiction and nonfiction), and writing skills tested, along with completing sections on literary response and analysis. Typically, students needed several tries to reach the passing mark, and Amira was no exception. Although she was unable to reach the target score with her cohort, she took an additional year to strengthen her skills sufficiently to make the grade for her to walk at graduation and achieve her dream of attending college.

Academic Supports

Before identifying specific academic strategies, it's worth mentioning a few basic practices in the classroom that support SIFE:

1. Create a warm and welcoming environment. Do your best to help all students feel welcomed and valued.
2. Remember that all students bring strengths with them. Try to find ways to draw these strengths out and build upon them.
3. Find ways to help students recognize and celebrate their progress.
4. Differentiate regularly—it helps to ensure that all students feel appropriately challenged and helps all to make progress.
5. Check comprehension regularly. Never consider a "yes" response an affirmation of understanding. Require instead a response that demonstrates understanding.

One of the most important considerations with specific instructional strategies is that they be well suited to the overall instructional purpose—not just used for their own sake. At one point, I was teaching a high school English class that consisted of ELLs at multiple levels (including several SIFE-designated students), both juniors and seniors, who needed to pass the English Regents exam to graduate. The exam consisted of reading and responding to and analyzing literature, among other things. One unit I developed for this class, "Reading and Analyzing *The Pearl* with ELLs," is freely available for download on Share My Lesson. The unit, a top-rated resource on Share My Lesson in 2019, includes specific lesson plans and handouts. I mention it here as an example of incorporating specific strategies for supporting ELLs into instructional planning.

The first challenge in tackling a work of literature with ELLs is actually having them read it. For this unit, I used John Steinbeck's novella *The Pearl*. I selected it for its broad universal themes, its relatively short length, and the fact that my students across the years had really loved it. So that students could read and comprehend the novella prior to beginning an analysis of it, I employed two basic reading strategies that helped them, which I describe below.

Although I do not claim to have developed these strategies, I have personalized various ones throughout my career. I trust that you will do the same, tinkering to find an adaptation that optimizes learning for your own students. If I were teaching a more advanced group of ELLs, I might speed up the initial reading stage of the unit by assigning more pages of the novella for homework, and asking students to complete double-entry journals or summaries to accompany their reading.

Read/Discuss/Write

For the first strategy, the class sits in a circle. As much as possible, I pair students whose English comprehension is stronger with

those at the earlier stages of English language development. Ideally, students work in pairs, but they can also work in threes when there are fewer stronger readers in the room. The teacher reads a passage of text, typically a paragraph in length, and reads with lots of emphasis and expression. Students have two minutes to discuss together what happened in that paragraph. Then, students have two minutes to write down the most important thing they heard in that paragraph. Then we move on, and I read the next paragraph. This process is typically repeated about five or six times in the course of a lesson. Students hand in their work as they leave the room, which serves as their classwork grade. It also informs me of their degree of text comprehension and where there may have been misunderstandings, allowing me to address them in the next class.

Additionally, I have found that it's important to give the students their work back at the beginning of the next class in order to have them buy into the assignment and understand and appreciate their own progress. Giving a classwork grade for this work strengthens student motivation.

I do vary this technique. Where I sense that a paragraph may be particularly challenging, I may elaborate a little or tackle it as a read-aloud/think-aloud activity, or use a smaller passage of text. Where the text is less complex, I may lengthen the passage I read. These choices are a matter of professional judgment, and I would strongly recommend reading ahead in order to determine the passage length and your approach to reading it in order to do the best possible job of presenting it to your students.

For students with interrupted formal schooling, this assignment also boosts their skills and confidence. The work allows them to participate with their classmates and enables the teacher to monitor their comprehension of the material. From the teacher's perspective, the combination of listening, speaking/discussing, and writing also generally helps address standards within a lesson, while the fairly disciplined timing keeps everyone focused on the task at hand.

Closer Reading

The second strategy I used was selecting a phrase or sentence that I believed needed particular attention because it unlocks a key idea or reveals an author's purpose, or just because, syntactically or in terms of vocabulary, it presents a higher degree of challenge. I would also pose questions and engage students in digging deeper to unlock the significance of this smaller part of text.

To illustrate, I'll use a line from chapter 3 of *The Pearl*: "The essence of pearl mixed with essence of men and a curious dark residue was precipitated."

With this sentence, note the potential questions around the author's use of figurative language. Particularly for newcomer ELLs, they would often struggle with the use of *residue*, *precipitated*, and, to a lesser degree, *essence* and *curious*.

First, I would read the entire paragraph utilizing the read/discuss/write strategy. I would ask students whether the essence of pearl and the essence of men are literal or figurative (having covered the difference between literal and figurative in previous lessons). Then I would ask them to think about what the "curious dark residue" might be. If they are unable to explain, I would ask them what strategies they might employ in order to answer that question. I'd hope they would be able to use the cues from the sentences beyond to determine that the "curious dark residue" equated to greed. Needless to say, wait time for an explanation is sometimes critical. Remember not to get too concerned if students are unable to come up with an astute response immediately. What matters is that they get there in the end. If they cannot answer a question at that point, make a note to return to the phrase later, when they may be better prepared.

To reiterate, I would not read the entire text in this way, but I would pre-select points of text. There are times when their written work from the read/discuss/write activity might reveal a significant gap in understanding that may require going back and looking at a particular section of text more closely. Occasionally I would engage students in close reading by reading student responses to the read/discuss/write strategy, especially if I realized that students completely misunderstood a particular passage or phrase.

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I would find that balancing these strategies made it possible to work through longer texts with ELLs in preparation for critical analysis. Also, when I taught literary works such as *The Pearl*, I wanted students to read and enjoy the story as much as possible before beginning the more analytical phase of the unit. In doing so, they could gain a better sense of the beauty of the language and the compelling nature of the story, and ultimately learn about reading for pleasure.

Educators teach in many different circumstances. While some of us are fortunate enough to work in environments in which our students are valued and well supported, others find themselves in settings where our students, and particularly SIFE, may be overlooked or, worse still, seen as a data problem.

One way to help SIFE is to be intentional about sharing their work with school administrators, specifically student work that demonstrates progress over time. Share the strategies that you have used to help them advance and offer to give a workshop for your peers, as I sometimes did. And maybe, while you're at it, suggest a few of the systemic supports mentioned earlier that would help your students make even more sustained improvements. Who knows? Maybe administrators will implement some of your ideas. If not, at least you know you have tried, and it's possible you have sown the seeds of an idea that will end up being implemented down the road. ☐