



Educating Vietnamese American Students

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Promotion of English proficiency for students from disadvantaged backgrounds was one of the major provisions of the *No Child Left Behind* federal act of 2001. This act mandated that limited English proficient (LEP) students or English language learners (ELL) “learn English as quickly and effectively as possible,” and receive instruction “through scientifically based teaching methods” delivered by “high quality” teachers in every core content classroom (U.S. Department of Education, Major Provisions of the Conference Report to H.R. 1, the NCLB Act, August 23, 2003).

In California the teacher population is 74.2% Caucasian and 25.8% ethnic minority, but the students they teach are 32% Caucasian and 68% ethnic minority. Over 1.5 million of those students are ELL (California State Department of Education, 2001-2002).

Many ELL students struggle to function in English-only classes and to compete with their native English-speaking peers, and tend not to fare well on high-stakes testing (Cummins, 2000). Regardless of student demographics, locales, staffing, and available resources, schools must, by law, provide necessary means for all students to achieve.

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City Middle School

At City Middle School (a pseudonym) we identified 14 Vietnamese American students whose reading levels ranged from an alarming 1.5 to 4 (mid-year first grade to fourth grade), and English language development (ELD) from level 1 (beginning) to level 3 (Intermediate). Although there were far more ELL middle schoolers in need, there were only three pre-service teachers available to help, so we had to identify the most needy, which amounted to 14. What support would these middle school students (MSS) need in order to function in their English-only classes?

Although their *basic interpersonal communicative skills* (BICS) in English were passable, their *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP) severely lagged behind that of their native English-speaking peers (Cummins, 2000). The school administration, some of the teachers, and the MSS themselves recognized that they had been experiencing difficulty in their English-only core subject classes.

In order for these ELL students to become proficient in English (L2) and in content area knowledge, it would be logical and theoretically sound that instruction be delivered in their heritage language (L1), a language with which they would be more familiar. Reading and writing skills acquired through L1 provide a foundation for L2 development, being that academic skills and knowledge transfer across languages (Cummins, 2000).

Standardized tests have placed un-

due pressure on school administrators and teachers to push their ELL students to gain speedy English acquisition, overlooking the fact that it takes three to five years to develop oral proficiency and four to seven years for academic proficiency (Cummins, 2000).

Under Proposition 227 in California, ELL students would receive English-only *structured immersion* or *sheltered English immersion* (SEI) instruction for just one year. Rossell (2004-2005) reported that most immigrant children in mainstream classrooms “...seem to swim, not sink” (p. 36) after one year of SEI instruction. However, Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) argued that the one-year time period of “sheltered English immersion” (SEI) was “wildly unrealistic” (p. 13). This arbitrary one-year period was a broad-brush determination, but it does not paint an accurate English acquisition picture for many ELL students, including the fourteen middle school students described below.

Context for My Involvement at City Middle School

In addition to teaching required core courses at a local university for CLAD (Crosscultural, Language, and Academic Development) certification in the Single Subject Credential Program, I have also been supervising the practicum of Multiple Subject Credential Program pre-service teachers (PST)—also known as student teachers—for CLAD and BCLAD (Bilingual Crosscultural, Language, and Aca-

demographic Development) certification at various schools in different school districts.

The administration and school achievement teacher (SAT) at City Middle School sought my guidance regarding fourteen “at risk” students from grades 6 to 8 in need of support (I had worked with this administration in the past). Three out of five of the PSTs under my supervision were placed at City Middle School to fulfill their CLAD certification practicum; thus, it made sense for these three PSTs to work with the fourteen MSS and fulfill their BCLAD certification practicum hours at the same site as well.

Based on the school’s needs and schedule, I recommended an after-school program with class sessions meeting twice a week, totaling to four hours, to which the administration agreed. The administration, the teachers in charge, the PSTs, and I realized that it would be unrealistic to expect formidable growth results from the MSS after a brief semester in terms of their CALP, but the MSS could use some assistance.

With data provided by the ELD teacher (in charge of all of the school’s ELL population) and in consultation with me, the PSTs developed lessons and activities collaboratively based on the English language arts content standards. Each PST was responsible for the instruction of her own group of MSS in English and in Vietnamese, but a few sessions were conducted with all fourteen MSS together. Each PST took turns in teaching those lessons and activities during said sessions, which gave the MSS an opportunity to work with their peers and the PSTs to become acquainted with all fourteen MSS, both in a small group and a large group setting.

Twelve of the MSS were born in Vietnam, one in Oslo (Norway), and one in Malaysia. All arrived in the United States with their families from various destinations, one in 2001, one in 2002, three in 2003, one in 2004, and eight in 2005. Similar to the background of their MSS, all three PSTs were born in Vietnam and arrived in the U.S. with their families as refugees in 1975. Two of the PSTs started pre-school in the U.S.; the third was French-schooled in Vietnam and resumed her education in the U.S. in 11th grade. She made a career move in her mid-forties.

In addition to informal conversations, a writing sample, student interactions, and class discussions, the PSTs and I hoped to learn more about the MSS, so we designed a 20-item survey (in English and in Vietnamese) and administered it to the MSS at the end of the after-school program.

Table 1: The Survey

Survey Items 1-3: Personal Information

1. I arrived in the U.S. on _____ (date/month), in _____ (year) with _____ (family members or others).
2. I was born in _____ (city & country) in _____ (year).
3. The first school I attended in the U.S. was _____ (name) in the city of _____ and the state of _____.

Survey Items 4-14: Quantitative Section

(Based on a rating scale of: Agree, Strongly Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

4. I speak more Vietnamese than English with my parents, brothers, and sisters at home.
5. I speak more English than Vietnamese with my parents, brothers, and sisters at home.
6. I am more comfortable speaking and writing in Vietnamese than in English.
7. I am more comfortable speaking and writing in English than in Vietnamese.
8. In my opinion, English and Vietnamese are equally important.
9. I like to be taught by the three Vietnamese American student teachers.
10. Having a Vietnamese teacher helps me to learn my subject matter and do better in my regular classes.
11. Students must always show respect to their teachers.
12. Teachers must also demonstrate respect toward their students.
13. Respect for teachers in the Vietnam means the same as respect for teachers in the U.S.

Survey Items 14-19: Qualitative Section

14. What did you learn from your parents about respect for others?
15. In what ways have the Vietnamese American student teachers helped you with learning your subject matter?
16. Of the lessons and/or activities that the Vietnamese American student teachers taught you, which one(s) did you like the most and why? the least and why?
17. What do you think about the style of teaching of the Vietnamese American student teachers?

Survey Item 20

You are invited to write any additional comments. Thank you for your input and participation.

Table 2: Results of the Quantitative Section Questions

Question	Agree	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4. I speak more Vietnamese than English with my parents, brothers, and sisters at home.	5	6	0	0
5. I speak more English than Vietnamese with my parents, brothers, and sisters at home.	1	1	9	0
6. I am more comfortable speaking and writing in Vietnamese than in English.	4	2	5	0
7. I am more comfortable speaking and writing in English than in Vietnamese.	5	2	4	0
8. In my opinion, English and Vietnamese are equally important.	7	3	1	0
9. I like to be taught by the three Vietnamese American pre-service teachers.	6	5	0	0
10. Having a Vietnamese teacher helps me to learn my subject matter and do better in my regular class.	1	10	0	0
11. Students must always show respect to their teachers.	2	9	0	0
12. Teachers must also demonstrate respect toward their students.	7	4	0	0
13. Respect for teachers in the Vietnam means the same as respect for teachers in the U.S.	0	0	1	10

Survey

The survey (see Table 1) consisted of three parts. The first set of three items (1-3) consisted of fill-in-the-blank statements or questions regarding personal information about the participants' initial U.S. arrival and schooling experience both in the U.S. and the country of origin. In the second set of ten items (4-13), participants responded to statements of a quantitative nature based on a rating scale (*agree, strongly agree, disagree, to strongly disagree*), culminating in Table 2. The last set of six items (14-19) consisted of open-ended questions asking participants to elaborate on specific questions, and the last item (20) was reserved for any additional comments. Although there were 14 MSS enrolled in this after-school program, three were absent on the day this survey was administered. Respondents had the option to write their answers in English, Vietnamese or both; seven did so in English, the other four in Vietnamese, and all remained anonymous.

Discussion of Survey Results

Items 4-7 aimed at finding out how MSS felt about Vietnamese and English. Respondents unanimously agreed that Vietnamese was their predominant language of oral communication in their respective families (items 4 and 5). However, since items 6 and 7 included speaking and writing skills, the responses varied from those in the previous items.

For example, seven MSS agreed or strongly agreed that they were more comfortable speaking and writing in English, but four disagreed. The latter four were more truthful in their self-assessment in indicating that their oral proficiency (BICS) in English was functional, but their academic proficiency (CALP) was another matter altogether. (Judging by the written responses on the survey by the other seven respondents, it was clear that their CALP needed much refinement).

This is consistent with Cummins' (2000) finding that it takes three to five years to develop oral proficiency and four to seven years for academic proficiency, and that the one-year time period of sheltered English immersion (SEI) as proposed by Proposition 227 was inadequate for ELL to acquire academic proficiency (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

In terms of the importance of English and Vietnamese, ten out of eleven students were in agreement that these languages were equal in that regard (item 8). As far as being taught by the PST, all MSS unanimously agreed or strongly agreed

that they liked the additional assistance they received (item 9), which they felt have helped them to improve in their regular English-only classes (item 10).

Insofar as items 11-13 were concerned, the notion of respect (in the students' cultural frame of understanding) often came up in informal discussions with the MSS or among themselves. All of them agreed or strongly agreed that students should demonstrate respect toward their teachers but believed that the reverse should hold true as well.

Interestingly, the group observed that "American" teachers did not have the same level of respect as their teachers did in Vietnam (item 13). The MSS shed light on the meaning of respect, elaborating on how important it was to them and to their parents who insisted that they respected their teachers (and elders) and looked to them for directions and sage advice (items 14-19).

Hence, they were surprised to find that respect was not as valued in U.S. classrooms and that "American" teachers tolerated disrespectful behavior from students far more often than they should have. According to the MSS, such student behavior would not have been tolerated in Vietnam and would result in severe punishment.

In terms of L1 support from the PSTs, the MSS benefited from having abstract concepts and ideas explicated in Vietnamese and supported with relevant examples deriving from familiar cultural practices which made learning refreshing, less intimidating, and more comprehensible. For example, in a story some of the MSS had read in their regular class, the author described a family's harvesting and preparation of an authentic dish with potatoes, unique to a U.S. region. The MSS were unfamiliar with that American dish, potatoes, and the region where this story took place.

The PSTs contextualized the story by referring to a U.S. map, pointing to the region in question, and explaining that it the farming community relied on its own harvest to sustain its families. When translating "potato" to "khoai," (a term in Vietnamese), the PST brought realia (real objects) such as a potato and other roots (e.g., yam, sweet potato, taro), and paralleled this American dish to other Vietnamese stew-like recipes which used a couple of these roots, but that potatoes could have been substituted.

The MSS were excited about this lesson because it tapped on their prior knowledge. They each wanted to share a mouth-watering dish that their mother

used to prepare with these ingredients. This is an example of making learning relevant to students' lives by connecting the story to the students' experience made possible because the PSTs and MSS shared a similar background and cultural practice.

Through L1 support, the MSS were able to ask the PSTs for clarification or elaboration without the anxiety of formulating questions in English instantaneously while monitoring their pronunciation, proper vocabulary and syntactical usage (items 15-16). Moreover, the MS discussed how the hands-on approach to teaching (e.g., visuals, manipulatives, Total Physical Response or TPR, and so on) helped them tremendously, particularly when it came to figurative language (e.g., idioms, metaphors, analogies, inference) often found in literature. Through the analogy below, a PST described how she viewed Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) strategies:

As an umbrella shelters a pedestrian in a rain storm, the SDAIE techniques or sheltered classes offer these ELL students some protection from the storms of concepts and language, thus giving them an opportunity to progress academically, as they are still acquiring the language and U.S. cultural ways. [JT_5-17-06]

Although one could not claim that this brief after-school program will have a long-term impact on the learning outcomes of these middle school students, it would be difficult to disregard the apparent joy with which these students bonded and related to one another and the PST in charge and pride in using their L1. It appeared that the MSS were comfortable with disclosing their struggle with balancing between being an American teenager and adopting U.S. values and being a Vietnamese son/daughter bound by traditional familial values.

Seven Key Factors

What factors should teachers take into account when working with students of a similar language and culture as these Vietnamese Americans?

Develop Students' Background Knowledge and Foundation of Subject Matter

It would be dangerous for teachers to assume that ELL students entering their classrooms would have had a literacy base in their heritage language (L1) and/or in English (L2) as well as adequate exposure to using L2 in conversational and academic settings. Therefore, teachers would need to provide ELL students with basic knowledge and foundation of the subject matter

being taught, including the usage of SDAIE (e.g., slower speech, clear enunciation, quality visuals, gestures, facial expressions, and contextualized vocabulary, and so on).

If the classroom teacher was bilingual or had a bilingual aide, the use of L1 to support student comprehension of subject matter would be ideal. In this case, concepts would be previewed in L1, followed by the teacher's direct instruction in L2, then reviewed at the in L1 to make certain that the ELL students understood key concepts and ideas and asked related questions.

Recognize and Build Upon Students' Dual Identity

Being a bilingual individual (including U.S. born) means to be part of both cultures. Many ELL students struggled with being perceived as less intelligent and less capable because they had not adequately demonstrated strong command of English, familiarity with cultural ways of the U.S., and difficulty with fitting in to the total school population. Build on what they know. Validate who they are and the familial resources they bring. Never insist on their shedding their L1 in order to acquire their L2.

Allow for Think Time and Wait Time

Though many ELL students have been considered as conscientious and hard working by some of their teachers, they often felt shy and uncomfortable about classroom participation. Slow in raising their hands, they had to process the question and the answer in English as well as the terminology in that subject matter, and tended to become frustrated when their classmates' hands went up immediately after the teacher had posed a question.

If longer think and wait time had been allowed, these ELL students would have stood a better chance of formulating their answers before making their responses public and risking "losing face" in front of others. How about signaling to ELL students that they would be called on and giving them appropriate time to get ready? What about broadening the definition of "participation" to include other ways of responding to questions to include writing assignments, small group discussion, pair-share, use of post-it notes, thumbs up/thumbs down, or individual erasable white boards as part of participation? Lack of verbal participation may not necessarily equate to lack of understanding.

Deliver Instruction at a Slower Pace

For ELL students, instruction and

class discussion in English-only classes seemed to occur at a mile-a-minute pace, leaving them inundated with information and overwhelmed with English "noise." How about verbally communicating key concepts and terminology and write these ideas on the board (supported by relevant examples)? Guide students in taking notes of important ideas and in making sense of essential concepts in order for them to demonstrate their understanding of the material in course assignments, discussions, and examinations.

For instance, content standards are written in such a way that even teachers can find them confounding and ambiguous. Therefore, break content standards into smaller chunks and help students to read between the lines in terms of what teachers are expected to teach and students are to learn and be able to do.

Emphasize Note Taking and Organization

Teachers often assumed that by the time students, including ELL students, arrived in middle school, they would already have learned how to take proper notes from class lectures and organize them into folders/binders from one class period to the next. However, some may not have mastered these skills. If a teacher taught her students how to take notes from a reading assignment, students would be able to focus attention on key concepts and ideas in order to study for exams.

Furthermore, it is important for teachers to make a habit of reminding students when and what to take notes of so that it becomes a pattern for them. For ELL students, this process may take some time. How about assigning a percentage of the total course grade to note taking and organization?

Maximize Multiple Learning Modalities

To minimize teacher talk and to increase student understanding of material taught, teachers might employ visual, tactile, and kinesthetic modalities (Kellough & Roberts, 2002) in order to tap upon the multiple intelligences of learners (Gardner, 1983) and to allow more than one way for students to demonstrate knowledge. Strategies such as TPR and SDAIE should be used as much as possible to make input comprehensible and concepts less abstract (Asher, 1965; Krashen, 1995), thus benefiting not only ELL students but other students as well.

Establish a Support System

Besides the teacher, an older student, an English-proficient classmate, a teacher/

college aide, a parent or a community volunteer could also assist the ELL students with class work by supplementing, not supplanting, the teacher's role. Hence, the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) of the ELL students would be "stretched" from their current level of understanding to their potential state of development (Vygotsky, 1962).

One of the reasons ELL students hesitated to raise their hands was because they preferred not to call attention to themselves for fear of being labeled as "braggers" or "know it alls" by their classmates. Furthermore, ELL students rarely asked questions even if they did not understand. Why show others what they did not know?

Teachers should make time to talk to and connect with ELL students personally as much as possible. For many ELL students, group success is far more important than individual success. Teachers do affect the lives of students who cross their paths and to ensure that giving up should not be an option for teachers or students. No child should be left behind.

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