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The 2002 Census data reveals that the United States is home to 32 million children between the ages of 10 and 19, and of that number, around 4 million were born in another country. They come from all over the world, with a variety of language and cultural backgrounds. While these students add much to our lives and our schools, they also bring with them language problems that challenge them and us.

In general, research has shown students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds are much more likely to be low achievers than high achievers, as well as more likely to be behind in school or even drop out. These data alert educators of all levels that there is an urgent need to find effective strategies for serving the educational needs of this sizeable student population.

Logistical Strategies

Bilingual and sheltered ESL[1] programs are highly recommended for helping ELL students make transitions linguistically and academically to their English learning in mainstream classrooms. However, there are significant numbers of ELL students with limited English proficiency who are learning alongside their English-speaking peers in regular classrooms due to the lack of resources, teachers, or teaching aides who can speak the students' home languages. In these circumstances, our regular classroom teachers encounter tremendous challenge and dilemma in their instruction. They must ensure that all the students in their classrooms make steady progress, including those with limited English proficiency. The concern is our regular classrooms are not well prepared to face this challenge. According to the survey by the National Center for Education Statistics, out of nearly 3 million public school teachers, only 12.5% have received eight or more hours of training in the instruction of students with limited English proficiency (NCELA, 2002). Most regular classroom teachers have to rely on workshops and personal reading in order to learn about ESL instruction. This article is intended to support regular classroom teachers as they help ELL students develop language and overall literacy proficiency while working with native English speakers on reading and writing.

Forget the Grade-level Curriculum—Just Teach from Where They Are

To ensure that ELL students are learning each day, regular classroom teachers have to forget the grade-level curriculum and even forget they are secondary English teachers; they must teach from where these students are and move them to their next level. I often hear the English teachers at secondary level complain: "These students don't even have basic English skills, and here they are in the middle school where they are supposed to read chapter books and novels and do literature study. I am an English teacher; I should be teaching literature, not the ABCs." We teach students, rather than materials or curriculum. We are responsible

[1] *Editor's note:* Throughout this issue, our authors make frequent use of two terms: ESL (English as a Second Language) and ELL (English Language Learner).

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for all our students' learning. If ELL students need us to start with ABCs, or basic English skills, we do just that. We cannot expect that these students will simply walk into our rooms, join our chorale, and immediately start where we are.

We need to pay special attention to these students. To expect them to drag along and catch up eventually is unrealistic; most of them would sink. They are unable to read the same books, do the same literature study, or complete the same writing assignments as their mainstream peers. They might need lesson plans specifically tailored for them; they might need separate lessons. Whatever adjustments you make, plan to use them for quite a long time, maybe throughout the whole year.

The challenge is how to do this when we have 25 or more other students to teach. Obviously, we can't afford to give ELL students all of our attention, but their direct instruction should not be limited to the isolated ESL classes, either. New York law mandates that ELL students be given 180 or 360 minutes weekly ESL service, depending upon their English proficiency level. With the push-in or pullout model, these students receive this individual or small-group instruction from ESL specialists, but they spend most of the school day (5–6 periods) in regular classrooms with English-proficient students. In that larger portion of the day, our ELLs need more than just our spare moments.

Collaborate with ESL Teachers

In order for ELL students to make steady progress in language and overall literacy learning, regular classroom teachers and ESL teachers need to plan their instruction collaboratively. Usually, the regular classroom teacher and the ESL teacher have different agendas. The former worries about literature and composition, while the latter focuses on the basic skills. Even when ESL teachers push in (come into the room to work with ELL students), they often take the students to the corner and work on lessons that have little to do with the regular classroom curriculum. When the ELL students come back to join the class, they tend to be even more lost and disconnected from the current lesson. Day by day like this, they make slow progress as language learners. This results in frustration for the students and both teachers. The students will become more marginalized and fall farther behind. The regular classroom teacher wonders why the ESL teacher can't help these students learn English basic skills more efficiently? The ESL teacher also utters frustration: "Is the regular classroom teacher teaching them anything? These students spend most of their time in that room but only have me for an hour or two a day. How can they expect me to teach them everything?" Both sides seem to make sense. But it is the disconnection between the ESL and regular classroom instruction that makes this system so ineffective. The solution is to combine efforts from both fronts.

We cannot expect that these students will simply walk into our rooms, join our chorale, and immediately start where we are.

In one of the New York Chinatown schools where I worked, we conducted a teacher-research project on the collaboration between regular classroom and ESL teachers. In this collaboration, these two teachers met regularly to:

- share their objectives and instructional content;
- assess their students' language and literacy progress;
- set instructional plans and goals weekly for individual students;
- make teaching and learning coherent in regular and ESL instruction.

As a result, the ESL teachers learned to confer with ELL students on their reading and writing from the mainstream class work, and the classroom teachers learned to use ESL strategies to improve editing skills and vocabulary (reading/writing) and pronunciation (speaking and reading frequency). The collaboration was time-consuming, but the teachers found it worthwhile: "It was fun to collaborate. We enjoyed learning from each other and helping each other, but the real joy was to see these

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students making such obvious progress, though we do sometimes have to compromise our own agenda." Most teachers don't mind spending more time for their students' learning, but they do mind wasting time on teaching with little result.

Diversify the Instruction

ELL students with limited English proficiency don't benefit much from a whole-class lecture style or a single book or activity for all students. My suggestions above are only possible in a classroom with diversified ways of teaching. Teachers who don't believe in using multiple books, having small-group instruction, or giving different assignments to meet individual needs shouldn't be teaching ELL students with limited English proficiency. According to research (Cummings, 1989), it takes 2–3 years for ELL students to develop their everyday (communicative) English proficiency, and 5–7 years to develop their academic (cognitive) English proficiency. ELL students in our classrooms are developing communicative and academic language skills as they learn new concepts and content knowledge. Though sitting in a middle school classroom, they may have the English proficiency of a four- or five-year-old, or even lower. In order to make any gains in learning, they have to read books at their level and have small-group instruction that meets their needs.

Remember that ELL students know more than what their English language ability enables them to express.

However, this doesn't mean that ELL students can't participate in regular classwork. Let's look at one example from a middle school class in New York's Chinatown. This class had 25 students, 5 of whom were ELL students who came to the U.S. at the beginning of the school year. This class was doing a study on biography related to the Civil War. They were learning about Abraham Lincoln. The teacher had multiple books with different levels on Lincoln: chapter books, picture books, and books (or magazines) with photos and captions. The students could choose books that were appropriate for them to take home to read. The newly arrived ELL students were given books with photos and captions along with tapes that the teacher made so they could practice reading at home.

The next day, the teacher started class with a reading workshop. While the other students were reading the books they chose about Lincoln, then writing their reading response or their questions for further study, the teacher was doing shared reading with the ELL student group. She walked through the pictures and photos with them, read aloud, and had the students practice their reading fluency with her. Before she left for other groups, she assigned them to the listening center and to paired reading among themselves. For the end-of-unit presentation, the ELL students joined the class by each holding a different photo of Lincoln and speaking out two or three sentences to describe Abraham Lincoln. Together they gave a brief introduction of Lincoln's life. They received a big applause from their classmates and had proud beams on their faces. Their work took a lot of practice on their part and guided instruction from the teacher.

Don't Over-teach

We need to remember that ELL students know more than what their English language ability enables them to express. We need to understand that they are as intelligent as other students of their age, taking care not to over-teach the concepts they already know. Because of their limited English proficiency, we often have to use texts with simple English and equally simple content. This is a dilemma for ELL instruction at the secondary level. It is hard to find books that match their interest and knowledge level with their English language ability. For example, one teacher I observed was working with a group of beginning middle school ELL students in a shared reading group activity. She asked (while pointing at a picture with birds on the tree): "What is this? A bird or a tree?" "How many leaves are there on the ground?" "What is the color of the leaves?" "What is the bird doing?" No doubt, these 12-year-old students knew these concepts. From their facial expressions and

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voice tones, I could tell they were bored to death and showed little interest in learning. To be asked these types of questions could be insulting to these youngsters, so when we use simple books like this for the middle school age children, we should just focus on oral language development rather than on concept building.

Along the same line, we need to trust that secondary ELL students can do more than it sometimes appears. To teach from where ELL students are does not mean to teach less or have low expectations. These students have a lot of catching up to do, so we need to help them work hard, not frustrate them with work they can't handle on their own. All students have the same length of school day, and we have limited time for individuals or small groups of students, so we need to offer our ELL students strategies for preparing on their own.

Most ELL middle school students have some self-learning skills, and we need to take advantage of that. For instance, if the students can preview a reading text as homework the night before by listening to the prepared tapes, practicing reading fluency, referring to a dictionary, and preparing a reading response, they will begin the class period with a general understanding of the text, making them more fluent and more willing to participate by asking questions or sharing their reading response. The key to preparing these students is to assign *appropriate* homework. Challenging students is desirable; frustrating them is not. Constant frustration only makes them feel defeated, and *un*ables them rather than enables them to learn.

Recognize that Oral Language Development Is Essential

Helping ELL students develop their oral language ability is crucial in their overall literacy development. They cannot master the language unless they can speak the language. Regular classrooms often neglect this aspect of ELL students' learning. As middle school English teachers, we tend to think that developing students' oral language ability belongs to the primary school or separate ESL classrooms, but being able to speak reinforces listening skills and develops the sense of language. Being able to express oneself orally helps one write better and think more clearly. Also, oral language ability is a basic communicative skill with which one connects with others, functions in a community, and enjoys freedom and confidence.

This thinking leads to a central priority—everything our ELL students read and write is to be part of their oral language development. They read, not only to develop their reading fluency, but also to use the words in the text to talk about the reading. Then they create new texts with similar writing format and share their creations orally. They also write weekly journals and share them in class. Here is a teacher who talked about how he used weekly journals to help his ELL students develop their oral language ability:

They cannot master the language unless they can speak the language.

> I have my ELL students write journals once or twice a week, and I help them talk about what they wrote. Sometimes they speak broken English, such as "I in America." I leave them alone, as I believe it is better than not speaking in English at all. If they can bravely speak broken English, they will improve their English speaking faster. I realize when they speak better, they write better.
>
> I push everything oral for these students. What is the point of having them write their experiences just for me to read? I want them to be able to express, to talk about, to tell others about their lives. Just like letting them write any way they can in their journals, I let them use any ways to express themselves orally—broken English, English with a few words from their home language, as long as they tell us about their lives. I want them not to be afraid to speak out in English. At this stage, I help them to write, to speak, to use their writing to speak, to read aloud, to practice using English in public. Our class is the public place since there is no place in Chinatown they can practice their English speaking. It is hard at first, but they struggle, they do it. Now they want to do it.

This teacher used the students' weekly journal writing as the reading text to help them practice reading fluency and learn to express themselves about their lives. Before his ELL students spoke about their lives to the class, he went over their writing with them one by one to make sure it was

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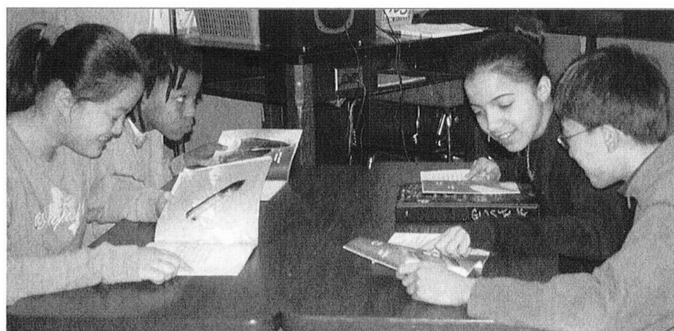
understandable, but he didn't correct all the errors, just as he refrained with their spoken language. Through working with his ELL students' writing and speaking about their daily lives, he helped them develop the necessary daily vocabulary and basic sentence patterns they needed to communicate with others.

As middle school teachers, we anxiously hope that our students are able to read, write, and speak academically, such as doing book discussions on literature elements or character comparisons. But for ELL students with limited English proficiency, developing oral language from functional to academic means first expressing the details of their everyday lives, and then gradually learning to share talk about books. I say this for several reasons. First, from the linguistic perspective, academic language (both vocabulary and sentence structure) is more formal and complicated, and less frequently used than everyday language. It is hard for any language learners to express themselves academically without gaining some frequency in everyday communicative language. Second, from the cognitive perspective, the ideas and content presented through academic language need to be well thought out and better organized than everyday language. It is hard for ELL students to express themselves for academic purposes with limited English proficiency. Third, from the social or psychological perspective, it is hard for people to have the confidence to demonstrate academic competency when they haven't developed enough everyday functional skills in language. The lack of ability to express themselves for daily use makes people feel socially handicapped and academically inadequate.



ELL students practice discussing their reading with others.

I understand it is hard for regular classroom teachers to imagine that they can spare any time to help ELL students develop their oral language; it is time consuming. The dilemma in our teaching profession is we never have enough time for our students, but we know "the more the better," especially for the struggling learners that include our ELL students. What I suggest is to include both reading and speaking fluency as necessary parts of every reading and writing assignment. In order to help these students develop their functional language before the academic, we need to forget the middle school curriculum and start with what these students need and can do.

Pair Students Purposefully

A common practice adopted in our regular classrooms with ELL students is peer help. We rely on our other students to orient, help, guide, and even translate for (if there are students who understand their home language) ELL students, as it is impossible for us to guide them through every step. It is a workable strategy and does help ELL students make transitions and feel included in the class activities, but we need to make it more purposeful. Often, regular classroom teachers tend to pair ELL students with either other students who share similar backgrounds or more patient students. Therefore, the same students become peer helpers over and over, and many of them eventually become tired of this commitment. I found this to be true in a school where I worked. One day, two new ELL students arrived who understood no English. When we took them to a class, we asked a student who we thought spoke their language to help us get some information about these newcomers. He shook his head saying he didn't speak their language. Then we turned to others we were sure could help, but one after another, they begged off. We were puzzled and had a talk with these students. Finally a student

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spoke up: "We don't want to end up always pairing with these students. We are tired of always helping others; we want to learn and need time to do our own work." These students helped us understand that we needed to revise our teaching strategy, even one as simple as pairing students for peer help.

Together with the teachers, we listed the purposes of the peer-pairing strategy for ELL students:

- To help them ease their transition
- To provide them with opportunities of getting to know all their peers
- To challenge them to use English
- To give them a chance to learn from their peers

Stating our objectives clearly helps us use this strategy more purposefully and effectively. For helping ELL students ease their transition, teachers paired them with the students who spoke their language or had the same background. For helping them get to know all their peers (a way to help them join the community), teachers had the students in class take turns working with them. For challenging them to use English more, teachers paired them with patient students who only speak English. For helping them to learn from their peers, the teachers paired them with the students who loved to teach. With this kind of purposeful planning, peer-help works much more effectively and also helps ELL students overcome that initial loneliness and become part of the community.

Teach Them to Write in English

The frequently asked questions about teaching ELL students to write in English are: "How can we help them write when they barely know their ABCs?" "Should we wait until they master the basic English skills in reading and speaking?" My answer to both of these questions is "No." ELL students, just like the others of their age, have a burning desire to express themselves, though they can't do it in English. Coming to a new culture, joining a new community, and starting a new life in a strange land means they have much adjusting to do. They need channels for expressing themselves, both orally and in writing, and as they participate, they become more confident. Frequent writing teaches much about language—spelling, syntax, punctuation, and usage—and constant exposure to oral exchanges enhances speaking and listening skills. In the New York Chinatown middle school, the teachers help their ELL students develop their English writing skills in the following ways:

ELL students, just like the others of their age, have a burning desire to express themselves, though they can't do it in English.

- Let them use drawing or photos to tell about their lives, past and present.
- Give them the vocabulary and sentence structure to describe their pictures or photos.
- Use their stories as the reading text.
- Have them practice speaking what they wrote in English.
- Gradually help them write more and more in English, first about their lives and then about their reading and learning (academic work).

Their drawings tell us what language they need to express themselves. We teach them that the language they write will become, in turn, the text for their reading and speaking. Some teachers let their ELL students write captions for the picture books they read, and sometimes, they simply let them write in their first language during the writing workshop time. Though they can't understand what they write in their first language, these teachers believe these students should simply write for themselves. After all, writing is to think and to develop cognitive skills, no matter what language we use. With good literacy skills in the first language, ELL students learn to read, write, and speak in English much faster.

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Parental Involvement from a Cultural Perspective

I would like to discuss one last important issue—parental involvement. Though this issue is not directly related to our teaching of ELL students, understanding the family dynamic of diverse cultures is essential to our interaction with them. Often I hear comments from our teachers and school administrators bemoaning the lack of parental involvement in our ELL students' schooling. Through many years of working with new immigrant families, I have gained a better understanding of their situations in this new culture and have realized that parental involvement is a cultural-bound perception. I would like to share a section from my recently published book, *An Island of English: Teaching ESL in Chinatown* (Fu, 2003, 158–160), where I discuss parental involvement from the Chinese culture's perspective.

But we have to recognize that different cultures value different ways to support their children's education.

> Parental involvement is crucial for the children's school performance. But the parents of most Chinatown new immigrant students are not able to be as involved with their children's education as we desire. The Chinese believe that the best way to help their children's education is to manage to send them to a good school. Those parents feel they have done that once they put their children in an American school, as they believe America is a better society than China, so logically its school will also be better. Once they put their children in a good school, then it is the task of teachers to educate them, not the parents. They respect teachers as professionals who should know better than them how to educate their children. I was an educator in China, but I was rarely involved with my son's day care. I felt that I didn't have an early childhood degree, how could I know better than the staff, faculty or administrators there? It is this kind of trust and respect for teachers as professionals that makes many Chinese parents seem less involved with their children's education. To volunteer in the school, to assist on a field-trip, to correspond with the teachers regularly about their children's education may sound strange or even be seen as intrusive in the eyes of many Chinese parents.[2]

The parents of our new immigrant students work day in and day out to provide their families with food, shelter, and a stable life, and perhaps a chance for a good future. This is considered to be the most these parents can do for their children and their family. They see their role in their children's education as making sure their children listen to the teachers, follow the teachers' directions, and do homework. In this country, it is hard for them to fulfill even this role, because making ends meet takes all their energy and time. In addition, they feel that they're less adequate to help their children, due to their lack of English language proficiency.

America is a print-literate society. We expect parents to read to their children and to help them with their homework. Most of our students' parents rarely saw their parents read or write, and they were never read to while growing up. This kind of parental involvement may sound very strange to them. I grew up in a very literate family in China, with two parents who were professional writers and a home filled with books. But I don't remember my parents ever reading to me. They checked my homework once in a while and only showed interest in the grades I received. But I knew if a teacher called home, I would be grounded for days.

I do believe parental involvement plays an important part in our children's education. But we have to recognize that different cultures value different ways to support their children's education. For most of the new Chinese immigrants in Chinatown, there is no time for volunteering at school, and they feel inadequate assisting their children with their schoolwork. If we see their absence at school as disinterest, then how can we explain the fact that they bring their children to this country for what they deem a superior education? Chinatown residents have told me recently that fathers bring their children to this country and

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leave their wives in China because it is very hard to get visas for the entire family. In order not to delay their children's education in the U.S., many couples prefer to be separated physically themselves rather than to leave their children in China. This separation could last 10–15 years or even longer. Obviously, their children's educational welfare is the impetus behind their emigration. For this goal, they are willing to sacrifice nearly everything.

And therein lies a cultural difference in the concept of family values. For centuries, Chinese men (now women, too) have left their families (parents and spouses) to travel to a faraway land for education or a better life. To the Chinese, maintaining a sense of family structure means that someone in the family has to sacrifice the present to make sure the family can survive and be prosperous from generation to generation. On the other hand, many Americans would see these same decisions as detrimental to the family structure. Their context and traditions are completely different.

Though I have discussed this perception of parental involvement from the Chinese cultural perspective, I believe the same principles apply to other ethnic cultures and home situations. Because of cultural and language differences, and lack of time and resources, our ELL students' parents are not able to support their children's schooling as we expect. These students are generally "school-dependent" children (Allington, 2002), and their learning achievement rests mostly on our shoulders. We need to teach from where they are, adjust our teaching to meet their needs, carefully and purposefully plan our instruction for their learning, and make the most of every precious hour they spend in our classrooms.

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Program to Recognize Excellence in Student Literary Magazines

The deadline for submissions to NCTE's Program to Recognize Excellence in Student Literary Magazines (PRESLM) is July 1, 2004. This program recognizes student literary magazines in senior high, junior high, and middle schools. The National Association of Secondary School Principals has placed the program on its advisory list of national contests and activities for 2003–2004. Obtain the instruction/registration brochure from NCTE at http://www.ncte.org/about/awards/student; send an e-mail to preslm@ncte.org; or call 800-369-6283, ext. 3608.

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