MEETING THE NEEDS
OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS
WITH LIMITED ENGLISH ABILITY

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THE PROBLEM
The number of immigrant students with limited English ability, commonly referred to as English Limited Learners (ELLs), being enrolled in school populations throughout the United States, is growing rapidly (Garrett, 2002a, 2002b; Garrett & Morgan, 2002; Gunderson, 2000). Many content area teachers emphasize that English ability should be a prerequisite for their classes and that English proficiency ought to be a requirement for immigration (Gunderson; Tomkins & Hoskisson, 1995). Having the expectation that all immigrant students who enter schools in the United States will be proficient in English, however, is unrealistic (Gunderson). Many immigrant students become highly frustrated because their learning needs are not being met due to language barriers. Anxiety levels are exacerbated by unreasonable expectations, and these expectations explain why dropout rates among immigrant students have increased concomitantly with declines in academic achievement. Diverse language backgrounds need to be accepted and more appropriately utilized in school systems throughout the country (Garrett, 2002a, 2002b; Garrett & Morgan; Gunderson).
The role of English proficiency in English limited students' success at school, including achievement in reading, was viewed as a matter of importance in one investigation. The researcher also emphasized that Americans lost track of their first cultures and became acculturated in the most undesirable way (Gunderson, 2000). Delpit (1988) asserted that school language represented the "power code" and that any system denying access to the "power code" denies access to the dominant society. It is imperative that school personnel recognize the struggles that immigrant students face. Before schools can meet the needs of their immigrant student population, they must first understand the etiology of the students' frustration and the problems the young manifest when they enter the school system.

Eventual success with the school learning experience requires students to master skills and educational concepts, which can only result from maintaining appropriate behavior. For immigrant children and youth with limited English ability, adaptation has somewhat of a different connotation than what this entails for nonimmigrant learners and includes (a) acquiring English language skills and the ability to communicate with others, (b) understanding classroom routine, and (c) behavioral control in the classroom (Smith-Davis, 2004; Spomer, 2001). Gaining proficiency with English is vital to attaining these expectations. This article discusses some of the struggles that immigrant students with limited English ability encounter in adapting to the American school system, pedagogical strategies that have enhanced the educational performance of ELLs, how this greater educational performance improves relations between the school and community, and legal requirements of school corporations to educate English deficient students.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Commonly it is overwhelming for an immigrant student to be thrown into a large population of English speakers. The typical American-born student in schools across the country is proficient with the English language. ELLs struggle in classrooms, hallways, and cafeterias. These students cannot hide their diverse language backgrounds and some are mocked because of their differences. Such occurrences intensify anxiety levels of immigrant children and youth. In many instances they make every effort to avoid speaking
their native tongue. The following examples of personal experiences of immigrant students offer additional insights regarding some of the challenges faced by the increasingly growing body of ELLs.

Xiaoxia Li, the mother of a Chinese immigrant student named Amy, indicated that when she picked her daughter up at school one day, she spoke to her in Chinese. Amy became upset with the mother and explained that her classmates would usually laugh at her when her mother used the native language with her. Furthermore, Amy reported to her mother that when her teacher occasionally asked class members which of them had made a particular mistake, one of her classmates would point to Amy and say, "The Chinese girl," which was actually not true (Li, 1999).

Lily Wong Fillmore, from a Cantonese speaking family, described what transpired with her two children when they learned to speak English. Chu-mei quickly learned some English, but was able also to maintain a working knowledge of Cantonese. Kai-Fong, however, remained an outsider at school, and his only friends were other Asian children who were also immigrants. Kai-Fong began speaking English and stopped conversing in Cantonese with his family. He eventually began alienating himself from home and spending more time with his friends from school (Fillmore, 2000).

Alejandro, a Mexican American boy who attended a predominantly Latino Catholic middle school, was alienated and ostracized by his teachers and the school staff. Teachers and administrators never openly indicated that Alejandro or the Latino students were inferior but treated them as if they were. One homeroom teacher used a condescending demeanor when she spoke to these students. She would not permit the students to ask questions, and she did not teach them to think independently. Much of the coursework she gave the students contained concepts her students were not familiar with, or that were not in their experiential background (Miller & Endo, 2004).

Meyer (2000) referred to a pedagogical problem called "cultural load," which typically consists of the large body of experiences and knowledge that many immigrant students face. Commonly this "cultural load" is lightened when teachers enable students to pull from their own experiences and knowledge. Alejandro's homeroom teacher, for example, did not provide this opportunity for students. When this strategy is omitted, immigrant students struggle to dis-
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cern when and how to appropriately employ new words (Miller & Endo, 2004).

Krashen (1982) derived an affective filter theory to explain the anxiety levels and pedagogical problems that frequently emerge as a result of language barriers in instructional experiences of immigrant students with limited English ability. According to Krashen, the affective filter is activated when students experience high stress. Language attainment occurs more quickly and proficiently when the affective filter is not activated. A couple of other components that stimulate the affective filter are lack of motivation and lack of self-esteem, the results of which impede students from learning a new language. School principals must provide leadership in creating an instructional learning environment where stress levels and anxiety levels are minimized, and student motivation and self-esteem levels are maximized in immigrant students (Krashen; Meyer, 2000; Miller & Endo, 2004).

ENHANCEMENT OF PEDAGOGY AND CURRICULUM

Immigrant students entering schools in the United States are frequently not accustomed to the teaching styles. Commonly these students are faced with a lack of appreciation for the differences that diverse cultures bring to American society (Garrett, 2002; Garrett & Morgan, 2002). Glasser (1969) investigated several hundred cases of school failure in the early 60s and was surprised to discover that children and youth in those cases he investigated were not the ones who were actually failing. In most of the cases Glasser observed, the actual failure was on the part of significant adults in the lives of the children and youth. This included parents and teachers, as well as some oversight on the part of school administrators who were supposed to be providing leadership. As a result of Glasser’s research and the publication of his book, Schools Without Failure, school personnel began to take a look at what the school was doing or not doing that could be contributing to negative outcomes, as well as trying to determine what they could do better.

Improving the academic performance of immigrant students with limited English ability requires a focus on the prevention of failure as well as attending to early intervention strategies for students whose learning is being compromised largely because of a language barrier (Cummins, 2001; Glasser, 1969). Prevention of
failure among ELLs calls for the creation of educational environments that are safe and conducive to learning, school climates that foster academic success, and empowerment of students (Garrett & Garrett, 2002; Glasser; Snowman & Biehler, 2003). Teachers provide an example, which children and youth closely observe each day. It is imperative that they provide a model worthy of imitation. Teachers must be open, warm, approachable, and appreciative of the differences of diverse children and youth that, incidentally, is what makes them unique and beautiful as human beings (Garrett, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c; Garrett & Morgan, 2002). The classroom needs to have a “welcome feeling” where teachers encourage and help students to feel good about themselves, consequently, teaching the young to have confidence in themselves and resulting in the building of self-esteem. School administrators must also provide direction in selecting appropriate standardized tests for immigrant students, and they must be attentive to this population’s test scores. Additionally, school administrators must provide the necessary leadership to help the young progress in their educational experience (Hughes, 1999; Lambert et al., 2002; Senge et al., 2000).

In order to reduce failure and dropout rates of ELLs, school personnel must act to minimize the difficulty in learning English, and they must provide early intervention strategies for learners who are struggling. Supplementary instructional services should be intense enough to quickly bring these students to a level at which they can profit from high quality classroom instruction. It has been well established that early intervention and general educational support measures early on result in improved academic performance and a reduction in referrals for special services. Interventions that focus exclusively on remediation of students with learning or behavioral problems will yield limited results (Dill & Boykin, 2000; Snowman & Biehler, 2003; Ortiz, 2001).

An approach to curriculum that has had positive results with ELLs, is content-based instruction. This approach focuses on the learning of content through language. It is an approach where students practice an array of language skills in a highly integrated, communicative fashion, while learning content such as science, mathematics, and social studies. Content-based instruction is valuable for all levels of English ability; however, the style of teaching may differ for those who are English proficient. For beginning ELLs
content-based instruction typically includes teaching basic social and interpersonal communication skills. As students become proficient with the English language, as well as more successful academically, content of the curriculum becomes more complex (Oxford, 1990; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001).

ELLs complete communicative tasks in English with an integrated-skill instruction approach referred to as task-based instruction. "Tasks" refers to activities that can stand alone as basic units. These various learning components involve comprehending, producing, manipulating, or interacting in authentic language (Nunan, 1989). With the task-based instruction model, work in dyads as well as group work is often used to enhance interpersonal relations of student and teamwork. For example, students might work collaboratively to write and edit a class newspaper, develop a commercial for television, or participate in other cooperative ventures. The task-based instructional approach lends itself to structured cooperative learning designs and is pertinent to all levels of language proficiency; however, what comprises a specific task varies from one level to another. For example, beginners are typically asked to complete some charge that is basic and literal in nature, such as sharing specific information about each other. More highly developed students are likely to be asked to apply newly learned material by drawing conclusions, contextualizing something learned, or making appropriate inferences about newly learned concepts (Nunan; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001).

**IMMIGRANT STUDENT SCHOOL PERFORMANCE**

It is unexpected for immigrants to perform well in a school system they are unfamiliar with or that is different from that of their previous homeland; however, not all immigrant students with limited English ability do poorly in American schools. Even though immigrant students face hardships coming to a new country, some have surprising resiliency in terms of academic results. Not only do a number of immigrants do exceptionally well on tests, far better than the native-born, recent research has revealed that many of the young, whose parents are immigrants, do better in school on average than children and youth whose families have been in the United States a generation or more longer. Newcomers are racking up high grades despite language barriers, overwhelming poverty, and personal hardship (Conger, Schwartz, & Stiefel, 2003; Ellen, O'Regan, Schwartz, & Stiefel, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).
Consistently studies show numerous immigrant students to be persistent and hard working. Many are high achievers and want to do well at school. Some parents of immigrant youth report that education is not free in their homeland, and these people place a higher value on education than many Americans do. Not uncommonly, some immigrant parents believe it is absolutely critical to perform well in school, and several feel that Americans too often take education for granted (DeVillar, 1994; Viadero, 2000).

Success in education is one of the main goals that many immigrant students pursue. This is especially true of Asians who have joined the population of the United States (Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Chow, 2000). Because academic performance level has generally served as evidence of success for all students, especially ELLs, educators have increasingly been interested in the relationship between the family background and academic performance of the immigrant student (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). The presence of the father in the home has been discovered to have a significant impact on academic performance at school. Research reveals that Asian parents greatly influence their young as they pressure their children to achieve academically (Endo, 1980; Wong, 1990).

On the other hand, too often educators attribute lack of English proficiency with a lack of intellectual ability, when in fact, mobility has prevented students from learning. This is common, for example, in cases of migrant workers who follow farm crops across the country, or from one country to another, and then return home for the winter. Some schools in the United States have resorted to offering intensive English classes for the migrant population. Migrant students have the lowest graduation rate of any segment of the student population in the United States, and their rate for completion of postsecondary education is even lower. In addition, migrant students are more likely to be impacted by an array of health problems, injuries, and disabilities (Romo, 1993). Regardless of student ability or socioeconomic status, however, it has been well established that family involvement in education increases student achievement (Walberg, 1984).

We can see that there have been different degrees or levels of success experienced by ELLs. Certainly the young, as well as their families, must have the desire for a good education. It is important
for schools to narrow the current wide spread of academic achievement levels that exist for ELLs. Even though record numbers of immigrant students with limited English ability are winning prestigious science and mathematics awards in record numbers, the dropout rate among this population of students is high (McDonnell & Hill, 1993).

COMMUNITY AND IMMIGRANT STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

As the population of immigrant students with limited English ability progressively increases, community awareness of their presence will rise as well. The young could be the recipients of a plethora of potentially pathological and racist activities if the darker side of American history, in terms of its treatment of culturally diverse individuals, prevails (Banks, 2001; Donahue, Finnegan, Lutkus, Allen, & Campbell, 2001; Snowman & Biehler, 2003). Learning the English language does not have to be confined to the classroom setting. School personnel are in a unique position to educate community members that we are all different, that no two individuals are exactly the same, and that it is our difference, not our sameness, that makes us unique and beautiful as human beings. The school can embrace immigrant youth and their families through various school functions, such as welcoming parties that honor cultural diversity, ethnic food events, and other activities that honor cultural difference. The school can facilitate the learning of English by offering educational initiatives at school, as well as in the community, that are geared toward enhancing proficiency and bringing people together rather than allowing them to segregate by language, which only puts up walls between people.

In comparison to large urban schools, those in rural and smaller urban areas are more likely to lack certified and skilled teachers for ELLs. In addition, budgets of schools in rural locations are typically more limited, and in many cases possible training or professional development opportunities for teachers with promising potential for helping the young learn is cost prohibitive. Because rural schools typically have not prepared for newly enrolled immigrant students with limited English ability, who are more and more commonly showing up at their doors, rural schools rarely have qualified personnel to address the learning needs of ELLs (Zehr, 2001).

Permitting and encouraging ELLs to participate in athletics is one way to bridge the gap that exists between home, school, and
community for many of these students and their families. A Korean mother, for example, indicated that she felt uncomfortable with the school her two children attended. She felt more at ease, however, when attending their soccer games, and further reported that she felt more of a connection with the community as well (Zehr, 2001).

Schools in urban areas, many having large numbers of immigrant students with limited English ability, face different challenges. Studies reveal that commonly Hispanics and Latinos experience a high degree of segregation from other members of their academic population (Clemente & Collison, 2000; Falicov, 1998). Other studies indicate that immigrants from other countries commonly segregate themselves by language in their residential areas. This practice can readily be observed in large metropolitan areas such as Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, and Los Angeles (Anas, 2002; Iceland, Weinberg, & Steinmetz, 2002). Regardless of the reason, segregation poses a huge socialization problem for many immigrants, and many of the people involved experience ostracism and become alienated as a result. It is well established that ostracism or alienation is frequently harmful to those concerned (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ciarocco, Sommer, & Baumeister, 2001).

School counselors also experience challenges in working with immigrant students with limited English ability. One researcher reported that an inordinate amount of time and energy has been expended on remedial interventions with these students, and that school counselors have felt inadequate and overwhelmed in their efforts to support related emotional and psychological needs manifested in this student population (Clemente, 2000). This finding is in line with several recent studies reporting that the counseling needs of many students, including those of ELLs, are not being met (Garrett, 2002c; Garrett & Morgan, 2002). It is vital that principals and counselors work together in addressing the various counseling needs that ELLs bring to our nation’s schools.

THE SCHOOL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

The impact on schools of the huge influx of immigrant students with limited English is commonly negative. Schools simply are not prepared for the drastic change in the composition of their student populations. ELLs are distressed from overcrowded schools, limited
resources, standardized testing mandates, school accountability issues, and the lack of preparedness of schools to adequately meet their learning needs (Feinberg, 2000; Greene, 1998; Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991). School districts, however, must get to the acceptance stage. The growth of immigrant students with limited English ability is going to intensify for several years, and schools are going to be affected.

The prescribing of medicine is a reactive behavior to diseases or other medical problems that arise. Taking steps to prevent medical difficulties from occurring in the first place is a more desirable and proactive measure. A similar statement can be made about schools and their dealings with immigrant students with limited English ability. If schools wait until these students arrive at their doorstep, with little or no preparation for meeting their learning needs, it seems obvious that schools are going to be inclined to respond in more reactive ways because they have done nothing proactively to prepare for the influx of immigrant students with limited English ability. For decades much has been written about the problem. Schools have been alerted to the fact that immigrant students with limited English ability are going to be increasingly enrolling in their student population.

By moving away from denial and toward acceptance, schools can more rationally plan for this change and better prepare themselves for adequately meeting the needs of the new changes in school populations that are coming. Failure to do so could result in more lawsuits, as in the landmark case of Lau v. Nichols, in 1974, which laid the groundwork for ELLs to receive an equal or adequate education. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits federally funded programs from discriminating on the basis of race or national origin. The Lau case contended that the Title VI act required school districts to take affirmative action steps to rectify the language deficiency of students with limited English proficiency (Zirkel, 1998; Zirkel, 2002; Zirkel, Goldberg, & Richardson, 2001). The United States Supreme Court chose not to mandate specific instructional methodology for ELLs. Instead, the court provided some autonomy for schools to make appropriate treatment decisions in this area. School systems chose either to employ bilingual teachers or to teach ELLs in the English language. Most schools preferred the latter alternative because schools cannot justify hiring a bilingual teacher for only a handful
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of students. Bilingual teachers are hard to find in some languages and impossible to find in others. ELL programs are easier to modify and change (Zirkel, 1998; Zirkel, 2002; Zirkel et al., 2001).

School officials better attend to any legal requirements obligating them to provide an adequate education to immigrant students with limited English ability. By ignoring the law or failing to take legally mandated corrective measures, school officials are not putting students first and they are setting schools up for lawsuits. Commonly school districts have handbooks that reflect important laws and policies of the school board. It needs to be clearly stated that all students are to receive an adequate education. It might be helpful, in addition, to include a special statement in policy handbooks that specifically supports immigrant students with limited English ability. By taking steps to insure that all students, including ELLs, receive a quality education, the school district reveals that its entire student body is important, and the district promotes intercultural community (Zirkel, 1998; Zirkel, 2002; Zirkel et al., 2001).

REFERENCES


