

# One Mainstream Teacher's Journey Toward Understanding the Needs Of Her English-Language-Learning Students

## Introduction

As teachers, we are taught to reflect on our practice. You know, reflect on your successes and pat yourself on the back. Make slight changes where needed and move on. Well I had the horrifying realization after my first year at my current school that I let down several of my students *for an entire school year*. When I looked around and asked a few questions of other teachers, I had the bigger realization that it wasn't just me and it wasn't just these particular students.

These students were my English Language Learners (ELLs). More specifically, there were the ELLs who had transitioned from our school's bilingual program as 5<sup>th</sup> graders into my mainstream 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. It was my first year at this predominantly Asian school and I had not worked with such a large population of ELLs nor at a school that had a bilingual program. Should I have been doing something special as a mainstream teacher to help address their academic and social-emotional needs? To help answer this question, I enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement program during my second year at this school; once I received my endorsement, I decided to conduct my own action research to investigate further.

## Research Question

Based on my own reflection and what I learned during my ESL program, I wanted to better understand what my ELL students needed during this important time in their academic lives. As a result, I spent this year determining:

*What happens when I use social-emotional and academic supports for students who move from bilingual classrooms into mainstream classrooms?*

### **School Context**

This is my third year teaching at John C. Haines Elementary School. We are a neighborhood Chicago Public School, located in the heart of the city’s Chinatown. Haines services approximately 650 students from pre-kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade and has been rated a top-level school in the Chicago system, with a current rating of Level 1+.

According to our mission statement, Haines offers a student-centered learning environment that emphasizes reading, math, science, technology, shared leadership and ongoing professional development.

Almost 84% of our students are of Asian descent. The next largest demographic is African American, with approximately 12% of our student body represented by that group. Hispanic students represent approximately 2% of Haines’ students, with another almost 2% being Caucasian and other. The vast majority of our students, 85%, are considered low income. We have a diverse learner population of almost 5%. Importantly, almost 32% of our student body is considered Limited English Proficient.

In 2014, our student growth (i.e., the percentage of students growing academically year-to-year) was considered far above average, in the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile for reading and 86<sup>th</sup> percentile for math. Student attainment (i.e., how well the school performed at a single point in time) also was far above average, with 90% of

students attaining in reading and 98% in math. While we have outstanding scores and a top-level rating, Haines' year-end survey required for all Chicago Public Schools demonstrates that our school's culture and climate is only "partially organized." This means that the school's culture and climate has a few strengths, but also has several weaknesses, based on student, teacher and parent responses to the My Voice, My School 5Essentials survey. Only 70% of students and 34% of teachers responded to the survey.

Many of our students speak Chinese at home and their parents speak little-to-no English. They interpret for their parents during parent-teacher meetings or through a translator. This puts a wall between the teacher and the family for ongoing communications. Additionally, many of our parents work in neighborhood restaurants, so are unable to attend school events and/or chaperone field trips.

There are two classrooms at each grade level, plus one bilingual class. Because of budget cutbacks, some of our bilingual classrooms include more than one grade level (a 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade split, and a 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>-grade class). Students transition into the mainstream classrooms after successfully passing the state's ACCESS test and being in the bilingual program for three years. There is a bilingual coordinator who services the entire school and conducts pull-out classes. Only two of the middle school teachers have English as Second Language teaching endorsements, although another speaks fluent Chinese. When students transition into mainstream classrooms, there is little formal support for either student or teacher.

For the second year in a row, Haines was awarded the designation of "Breakthrough School," receiving a \$260,000 educational grant. We have been

implementing a new learning design in which Haines teachers are finding innovative ways to personalize and individualize instruction via Blended Learning. There is a 1:1 student to laptop ratio for all upper grade students and more computer access for all other grades. Haines has secured \$500,000 in grants and donations in the last three years to advance student learning.

Haines has many after-school programs that attract a large number of students. Many students participate in the Chicago Park District program that is conducted at our school, as their parents work long hours in the local restaurants. Other after-school offerings include student government, intramural sports, STEM and robotics programs, math homework help and yearbook. Additionally, many of our students participate in community-based tutoring programs, either in the public library or through local Chinese organizations.

I serve as the middle school mathematics coordinator and this year spearheaded the selection of new math curricula. I saw four classes for 60 minutes daily: three six-grade classes and one seventh grade. Our principal makes every attempt to keep class sizes as small as possible, and as a result my largest class contained 23 students.

Our students' social-emotional health was a major focal point during the 2015-16 school year, and all teachers participated in a 2½-day professional development training for a new program at our school called Capturing Kids' Hearts. During the year, we began each day with a morning meeting so that students could talk about what was on their minds and get to know each other and the teacher better. This was sometimes difficult considering students' culture, as many Asians don't like to

discuss their feelings openly. For the second year, we also conducted PE in the Classroom so that all students could be energized first thing in the morning. Classroom teachers were responsible for leading students in these activities.

## **Literature Review**

### **Growth of English Language Learners**

There is a clear shift in demographics occurring in our country that will have a clear and long-lasting impact on our nation and in our schools. That means for public school teachers like myself, there is an ever-increasing chance that we'll have ELLs in our classrooms. According to Krogstad and Fry for the Pew Research Center (2014), during school year 2014-15, minorities were projected to outnumber whites enrolled in public schools, due mainly to the fast growth of Hispanic and Asian children being born in the United States. Even though these students are American-born, according to Pew, 70% of children enrolled in schools who are immigrants or have immigrant parents speak another language at home and will require English language instruction.

This mirrors the reported growth in ELLs in our nation's schools. According to Kena, Musu-Gillette, Robinson, Wang, et al. for the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), the overall percentage of ELLs enrolled in public schools in the United States was 9.2% for the school year 2012-13, the last year for which data is available. During that same school year, according to Ruiz Soto, Hooker and Batalova for the Migration Policy Institute's ELL Information Center (2015), my state of Illinois was slightly above the national average, with 9.3% of students being classified as ELLs. In my city of Chicago, the number of ELLs is well above the national norm:

13.3% of our K-12 student population is considered ELL. For my district specifically, it's even higher: 16.7%, according to Chicago Public Schools for school year 2014-15.

The ELL Information Center reports that Spanish is the most common native language spoken in ELL student's homes (71%) nationwide, with Chinese (both Cantonese and Mandarin) accounting for 4% nationally (2015). The other eight languages that round out the top 10 are Vietnamese (3%), French/Haitian Creole (2%), Arabic (2%), Korean (1%), Filipino/Tagalog (1%), German (1%), Hmong (1%) and Yiddish/Jewish (1%). In my state of Illinois, however, the top 5 home languages for school year 2012-13 were Spanish (8%), Arabic (3%), Polish (3%), Chinese (1%) and Urdu (1%). For CPS, Hispanics are the largest demographic category totaling 45.6% of all students; Asians represent 3.6%.

### **Effect on Schools**

The increase in the ELL population is having a impact on schools; Mitchell (2012) states that this shift in demographics is placing more pressure on schools. As expected, ELLs score much lower on high-stakes standardized tests than their native-English counterparts in language and literacy. This is especially damaging to schools during our current era of increased accountability based on high-stakes testing. As Mitchell points out, students, teachers and schools also face negative consequences of this severe accountability measure, which pushes ELLs - who may still be working on their academic English proficiency - to take such pressure-filled end-of-year tests. As a result, there is a significant need for school districts to focus on the academic needs of ELLs or face potential penalties.

Schools employ a variety of strategies to support this growing population, including English-only immersion and its antithesis, sheltered instruction programs. My school uses the Transitional Bilingual Education model, which prepares students for mainstream classes usually in 2-3 years.

### **Students and Teachers**

Once transitioned to mainstream classrooms, there is no standard for how or what special assistance these students receive, unlike the mandated support provided to students with disabilities through their Individualized Education Plans. This potentially can leave both student and teacher feeling vulnerable. As stated by Hamayan (1990), it is not likely that mainstream classroom teachers receive much training in supporting these students, and the perception is that the education of limited English speakers is the sole responsibility of the English as Second Language (ESL) teacher and/or bilingual teacher. When I joined the faculty of my current school, this is exactly what I believed. I also did not understand that the shyness of the newly transitioned ELLs in my classroom was not simply a facet of their personality, instead of an attribute of their transition, a problem identified by Layzer (2000) in teachers of such students. I had not received any training in multicultural issues and how to instruct such students, unlike the courses that focused on students with disabilities. This is affirmed by Peceny (2011), who stated that teachers during their teacher preparation programs typically receive little background on how to work with ELLs and are uncertain about how to help students during the transition. Ingerson (2011) also finds that the majority of mainstream public school teachers in

the Midwest who have ELL students in their classroom have little-to-no preparation for how to work with this population.

Students making the transition also face uncertainty and unease. Peceny also states that the transition to mainstream classrooms, while seen by many as a positive move, can be difficult for students. This is especially true for middle school students, because some may not have fully developed literacy skills in their native language, let alone English (Harris, 2012). The use of academic vocabulary increases greatly after fourth grade, making it increasingly difficult for ELLs to keep up. The author additionally states that if ELLs don't become proficient in English during their middle grade years, there is less of a probability that they will become adept in using academic English.

### **One Teacher's Experience**

I am like many other teachers who have found themselves with ELLs in their classroom. Upon beginning at my current school, I had received no substantive training in the instruction of ELLs, a typical situation according to Hamayan. As mentioned above, my school has a mostly Asian population (approximately 84%), with African Americans comprising the next largest group (13%). Almost 30% of our student population is considered ELLs. Nevertheless, as a school last year, our reading growth rate was in the 97<sup>th</sup> percentile and our math growth rate in the 96<sup>th</sup> percentile. This masks an underlying weakness: only 53.3% of our ELLs are meeting their annual growth targets, although up almost 10% from the previous year.

When I arrived at this school, I didn't think about the special needs of ELL students and admit that I believed that the bilingual coordinator and/or bilingual

teachers would better prepare students for the transition into my mainstream classroom, a common perception according to Hamayan (1990). After my first year, I realized that my original perception was incorrect and that I may not have been providing enough emotional and/or instructional support for my students who had just transitioned out of the bilingual classroom. I did not realize that I should be collaborating with their previous bilingual teachers and/or the bilingual coordinator, as suggested by Hamayan.

### **Working with ELLs**

I know that there are a number of “must-dos” when working with ELL students, based on my ESL coursework and additional research. First, teachers should create an environment that is welcome to all students, whether ELL or not; however, the more cultures from which students originate, the more multicultural the classroom environment should be (Hamayan, 1990). Hamayan also suggests that teachers match ELL students with peer tutor/buddy who is more proficient in English.

Importantly, teachers should be aware of the length of time it takes for ELL students to acquire the academic language necessary for successful instruction. As expressed by Hamayan, many teachers do not realize how long it takes for a student to successfully understand the vocabulary important to specific subjects and that this increases ELLs’ anxiety in the mainstream classroom. Performance expectations must be more realistic in this context. Harris (2012) also recommends that teachers plan and use both English and content standards when lesson planning to help ensure that both are considered during classroom instruction.

Teachers of ELL students also should organize their classroom to allow them to participate in ways that foster learning, both affectively and academically, according to Layzer (2000). This means shifting from a culture of teaching to one of learning. Classroom teachers also should understand that ELLs' tentativeness and seeming shyness in class isn't necessarily a true personality trait of this student, but possibly a lack of confidence in speaking English. As a result, ELLs may feel more confident through working with partners or small groups, or even working independently.

Finally, Schall-Leckrone and Pavlak (2014) offer these tenets for helping culturally and linguistically diverse students:

1. Activate prior knowledge and build background
2. Provide comprehensible input
3. Teacher learning strategies and strategic thinking
4. Create varied opportunities for student engagement and interaction
5. Provide opportunities for students to practice and apply knowledge using all communicative modes
6. Review and assess learning objectives and provide feedback to students

### **Implementation**

I had five ELL students transition: BA, SA, MI, ER and ZI. Based on the literature review and knowledge from my ESL program, I implemented several best practices focused on two different areas: social-emotional well being and academic needs.

#### **Social-Emotional Well Being**

To ensure their social-emotional well being, I established a welcoming environment that also did not put a spotlight on these students. I ensured that I constantly smiled at these students and encouraged their participation. I also used proximity to demonstrate personal interest and foster connections.

However, I didn't just focus on my transitioned students, whom I only had in my classroom for one hour each day. I allowed all students to choose where they wanted to sit and by whom. I had the desks arranged in a "U" shape with a fishbowl in the middle. At the beginning of the year, very few wanted to sit in the middle; that changed as the year went along. My ELL students all sat together in a long line in the back of the U (furthest away from the front of the room), which was their choice. In the middle of the year when I changed some seat assignments, I did allow them to sit together again, but broke them up a little bit. The three that always work together (SA, ER and MI) I kept together but moved a little closer to the front on the side of the U, with ZI right around the edge near them. Because BA clearly needed extra academic support, I moved her even closer to the front, with good English speakers surrounding her.

Additionally, I welcomed students into my room during recess if they chose. There were many days that SA, ER and MI were with me working on their math. Occasionally they asked me questions; often the questions were in writing so they didn't have to speak (this was especially true for MI, a painfully shy but mathematically advanced student).

During these times together, and during math class as well, I tried to use smiling as a way to let them know it was all right to speak and ask questions. When

this didn't occur, I realized that being made to feel welcome was enough - I didn't have to hear their voices to ensure that they were feeling comfortable. The fact that they would show up during recess and the small gifts (for example, a hand-made origami heart at Valentine's Day) that were presented to me during the year demonstrated to me that they felt supported by my actions.

### **Academic Support**

On the academic front, I instituted a laser-focus on academic language. I concentrated on improving my comprehensible input and provided all students with a list of key terms needed (beyond that in my current curriculum). Additionally I carefully reviewed my lessons and curriculum to identify terms and language that I believed would confuse my students. I used grouping strategies to make my students more comfortable in class so that my ELL students would communicate more often. Importantly, I created purposeful classroom activities (some as whole class, some as small groups) that helped my ELLs improve their mathematical skills. I also identified opportunities to create connections to their lives when activating prior knowledge.

To make better mathematical connections for all my students, not just my ELLs, I worked to activate as much prior knowledge as I could. I did this on two different levels: one, I tried to connect our lessons to the work they did in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and second, to connect it to real-world examples. For my transitioned ELLs, I used China as an example wherever possible. For example, when discussing units of measure, I mentioned that China uses the metric system (along with almost the entire rest of the world), but here in the United States we use the customary system.

### **Data Collection Methods**

I collected data by using:

1. Student Questionnaires
2. Teacher Journal
3. Bilingual Coordinator Interview
4. Standardized Test Data

### **Data and Interpretation**

#### **Student Questionnaires**

Students completed two questionnaires. The first was administered in October, when I felt that they were comfortable with me as their teacher; the second was given in May, after they took their year-end achievement test. These questionnaires were designed to elicit their feelings about making the transition into the mainstream classroom, their successes/difficulties, and what teachers could do to make their transition easier. Students were allowed to fill out the questionnaire at home, so they would be more comfortable completing it in a non-academic setting and in writing, without having to directly communicate with me. Once I received their answers, I interviewed them in person to probe for additional information.

#### **Pre-Questionnaire**

Students were told by their 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at the end of the year that they would be leaving the bilingual program. The majority did not express any fear about leaving the program, but were excited about the opportunity. Two did not answer the question. They were mixed about leaving some of their friends and whether it made a difference since it was their first year in middle school. One said, “Yes (it

made a difference). It is one of the important grades.” Another agreed and stated that the math and reading concepts would be new for her.

All wondered about the academic differences between the programs, but interestingly three of the five did not desire having a Chinese-speaking teacher. One stated that, “Nope (I don’t wish I had a Chinese-speaking teacher). Because I can’t really always understand Chinese.” SA, whose reading achievement test scores were the highest of the group, made this last comment. The two students who said that they would like to have a Chinese teacher also said that the thing that they missed about the bilingual program was talking in Chinese. They did sometimes miss their friends in the bilingual program as well.

At the same time, all five answered “no” to the question about whether they wished they were still in the bilingual program. BA, the lowest-performing student, said, “No, because most of the time the teachers speak Chinese and most of the time I don’t understand what they say.” SA added, “No, because the teacher talks too much Chinese and I get confused.”

Four of the five students said that the mainstream teachers have made them feel welcome in their classrooms, either through academic help or just by being “friendly” and “explaining their life and what they like.” The fifth student simply answered, “I don’t know.” Students suggest that mainstream teachers could be even more helpful by reaching out to them individually for extra help and teaching them new skills, like taking notes. They especially asked for teachers to speak more slowly “because I don’t understand that fast,” according to ER. They also want ELLs to be grouped together so “they can talk together about what it means and tell each other what to do.” ZI and SA

both wrote that teachers could just simply help the students who are getting bad grades and need extra support in the English.

Their biggest academic successes by October were just learning more, including vocabulary. One expressed that his biggest success was just being in English-only classes. They all stated that vocabulary inhibited their success. SA wrote, “I don’t know some words but other people do so I pretend to.” Another stated that the “reading words are so long” and ZI said that he didn’t “even know what they (words) were” sometimes.

The types of activities that they enjoyed most in mathematics were just working with friends and/or in small groups. Almost all of them felt more successful this year except ZI (an outstanding student even with vocabulary struggles). He said, “I don’t feel more successful this year because it is getting harder.” Three of them wrote that they were learning “a lot” of new things and SA was proud that she could “get good grades by myself sometimes.”

The most interesting item to me was these students’ answers to the question, Would you have preferred to stay in bilingual? Not one answered yes. Three out of the five mentioned that the bilingual teacher spoke Chinese and they didn’t understand all the time. SA said, “No, because the teacher talks too much Chinese and I get confused.” ER stated, “No because I kind of don’t understand that much Chinese.” BA wrote, “No because most of the time the teachers speak Chinese and most (of the) time I don’t understand what they say.”

Post Questionnaire

At the end of the year, very little changed in students' responses. When asked 'What, if anything, did they miss about being in the bilingual program?', the two answered, "Saying Chinese" (the same two who previously answered this). The other three replied that they didn't miss anything; two of the three again expressed issues with speaking Chinese.

To feel welcomed and supported, two of the students wanted teachers to let them sit with the friends with whom they transitioned. ZI simply stated, "Make me a member in the class and teach the skills." BA wrote that teachers should ask about their day and "tell other people to be nice to each other."

All five felt positive about the school year. Two mentioned their grades, one mentioned being with her friends and the other two remarked on language issues. ER said, "I am so happy. I stopped saying Chinese, but I miss it." BA, an academically challenged student, stated, "I could understand what the teachers said during class."

Four of the five felt successful academically. ZI said, "I have learned many things from the teachers", while ER stated, "I learned a lot of new things. MI and SA mentioned grades: "My average of math and reading is A and B," said MI, while SA wrote, "Kind of (successful). Because I did get Cs in all quarters." BA was the only one to say no. She said, "Not really because I have a really low (standardized test) score."

Not one said that they missed being in the bilingual program by years-end. Their responses:

- “No, because I don’t have many friends in the bilingual program and I can still play with them. Also bilingual did not help me (as) much.” (ZI)
- “No, because my closest friends are with me.” (MI)
- “No, because I learned more in regular than I did in bilingual.” (SA)
- “No, because I’m used to it now.” (ER)
- “Not really, because I get to understand what the teacher says.” (BA)

All five also answered affirmatively that they felt vocabulary got in the way of their success. ZI and MI said that because they didn’t understand some vocabulary words, they didn’t know what the question was asking. ER was more explicit: “Yes, like in NWEA (standardized test), I didn’t understand the words and I just guess(ed).”

Finally, when asked what they might suggest to make the bilingual program better for students, they answered quite candidly about language.

- “Try to let the students use English to communicate or when answering the questions.” (ZI)
- “Talk more English with friends, not Chinese.” (MI)
- “If a student doesn’t understand, don’t talk Chinese until (it) is absolutely necessary so they can increase their vocabulary.” (SA)
- “Let them try whatever they can do.” (ER)
- “Understand other languages.” (BA)

### **Student Standard Achievement Test Data**

The one quantitative measure in this study is these students’ scores on the Northwestern Educational Assessment (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress.

Students took this test twice in 2015-16, at the middle of the school year and at the

end. Student growth and promotion at the benchmark grade levels of 3, 6 and 8 are based on this standardized test, along with school accountability levels. Student growth is measured from the end of the previous year to the end of the current school year (spring to spring).

Here are the results for my five transitioned ELL students:

NWEA Mathematics				
	EOY RIT Score Grade 5	EOY Percentile Grade 5	EOY RIT Score Grade 6	EOY Percentile Grade 6
BA	209	22	207	13
ER	220	46	229	58
SA	224	56	239	79
ZI	246	93	254	95
MI	246	93	254	95

NWEA Reading				
	EOY RIT Score Grade 5	EOY Percentile Grade 5	EOY RIT Score Grade 6	EOY Percentile Grade 6
BA	191	8	197	10
ER	205	32	203	19
SA	222	75	232	86
ZI	213	52	220	61
MI	211	47	219	68

The NWEA is particularly difficult for 6<sup>th</sup> graders. The test “shifts” from a 2-5 grade test to a 6+ test; since the test is adaptive, students are asked questions on topics to which they’ve never been exposed and encounter academic vocabulary that

is unfamiliar. As a result, according to NWEA personnel, it is common to see scores fall for those at the upper percentiles in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Even with this, four out of five students increased their RIT (raw) scores and percentiles by year-end.

### **Teacher Journals**

To identify important themes that emerged from my teaching, I captured key moments in my classroom through a biweekly journal. Upon reviewing these entries, it was clear that making these students feel welcome and needing to emphasize academic vocabulary were important parts of this school year. This was true not just for my ELL students, but for the entire class. In the following section, I have analyzed my journal entries into the most important themes.

### Social-Emotional Support

On the social-emotional side, I tried different strategies to see what would help these students feel welcome and boost participation during whole class. Several of my entries mentioned proximity and smiling with my transitioned students and having success in having them speak during class. For example in October I noticed that by moving closer and smiling in encouragement, especially with MI, the transitioned students were talking more. As I wrote on October 22, “I’m trying some different strategies in the class with my ELLs. I’m moving closer to them and trying to smile. Seems like a minor thing, but I think it’s working! With MI, I have a built-in excuse to move closer to her, since she barely speaks above a whisper. But I tried today to move real close to her, look her in the eye and smile when I asked her a question. I think the proximity helped her feel a little more confident in speaking. I’ve also noticed that SA also is talking a bit more. It’s nice to see some movement.”

MI throughout the year used ER as her “spokesperson,” answering questions on her behalf. In January I tried to get MI to help BA with some math, but that didn’t work even though they were sitting side by side. From my journal of January 12: “I tried to get MI to speak and help BA today, since they’re sitting side by side. That didn’t work, as she is too shy. She asked ER on her left to speak to BA instead. I guess what my ELL coordinator is correct -- MI doesn’t like to speak to anyone really. It’s just her personality.”

MI even would not speak when presenting me with a Valentine. This is what I wrote on Friday, February 12: “What a nice surprise! MI gave me a beautiful hand-folded heart today for Valentine’s Day. Of course she had ER actually hand it to me while she stood by, but it was nice to have. I’ll put it on my bulletin board next to my desk so that she sees how much it means to me.”

I decided to make her feel comfortable by not asking her to speak out loud unless it was a short answer directly to me. If I did this, I moved close to her so that she did not have to speak loudly.

#### Language Issues and Academic Language

During the year, another theme that emerged from my journal was how teachers take for granted routinely used phrases in English and expect all of our students to understand. A great example of this occurred in early Fall. One of my transitioned ELL students asked me a seemingly easy question. The math question was about finding the number of miles traveled during a car trip. On October 13, I entered this into my journal: “I constantly am amazed at how much I take for granted, language-wise. I know that idioms are difficult for ELLs to distinguish, as

they want to translate literally. I try not to use idioms during class, unless it's an interesting link to our curriculum and I think to immediately explain. I also know that the academic language used in math especially can be daunting ... (ER) asked if she needed to multiply the miles twice because of having to both get there and get back. I pointed out the chart from which she was getting her information from the book - it said "round trip." I asked if she had seen this heading and she looked at me and then whispered that she didn't know what that meant. Oh my goodness. Who would have known that such phrase would be a problem for ELLs?"

A few weeks later several students asked about question involving a basketball team exchanging handshakes. The first question asked if the starting five all shook hands with each other, how many handshakes would there be in total. The add-on question was this: If the "spare" player were included in the high fives, how many high fives were exchanged? From my October 26 entry: "Students asked how many spare players there were. As an English reader, I see the clue "the spare player," implying one, but my Chinese students didn't see that clue. Once again, another language issue that I hadn't considered."

There were other words and phrases that confused my ELL students. For example, before the holiday break, I tried to connect math to "real life" as much as possible to demonstrate how math is relevant. I kept repeating that phrase until one of my ELL students asked, "What's 'real-life'?"

At other times the students asked about: refund, matinee, horsepower, mentally, hand weights, square root, slope, asymptotes, hypotenuse and the trigonometry words of sin, tan and cos (the latter five specifically were on the NWEA test).

What makes this even more difficult is that sometimes curriculum writers use different words to mean the same thing - even in the same problem. While this is especially problematic for ELLs, it's an issue for all students who have not been exposed to this more relaxed language. A great example of this was in a problem that interchangeably used “earns” and “makes” to indicate profit. But in the next problem, instead of using those two words, they use “profit,” which is the academic vocabulary that they've been taught.

Using prior knowledge to activate students' academic language is a useful strategy. While a somewhat successful strategy, this was nevertheless difficult depending on the language being addressed. For example, after the new year, we worked on identifying dependent and independent variables. As I wrote in my February 1 journal: “Imagine reading the following if you are an ELL student: A baker used a certain number of cups of batter,  $b$ , to make  $p$  medium pancakes. Which variable,  $p$  or  $b$  is the dependent variable? Explain. I am teaching all of my students to ignore the variables (letters) when they first read the problem, then just identify them during the second reading. I hope this makes it easier for them to understand what is being asked. Of course all students must know what “dependent variable” means in order to answer this question. I've tried linking independent/dependent variables to their prior knowledge and use of input/output machines in 5th grade.”

Curriculum publishers state that they are aware of the needs of ELLs, yet I wonder if they truly understand how an ELL student first needs to translate a

question into their home language, then try to understand the academic vocabulary, then work the problem using their mathematical skills.

One strategy that I used this year that helped provide access to such rich mathematical problems for all my students is called Three Reads. During the first read, students read the problem silently to themselves and then one student reads it aloud. Then the numbers/quantities in the problem are discussed and what they represent. What is most important is discussing those numbers that are *inferred*. For instance, the word double (meaning times 2) or just the article “a” implying the number 1 (e.g., a baseball) may be problematic for some students. The third read involves discussing what the problem is asking students to find. On March 4, I entered this into my journal: “Another interesting day with vocabulary. This is the opening of the question - ‘Mrs. Wu wants to tile her hallway, which is twice the size of the pattern of tiles shown. She needs to buy boxes of tiles. She cannot buy a partial box.’ We did a Three Reads strategy to ensure that students realized twice meant times 2 and understand what the phrase ‘cannot buy a partial box’ meant. I definitely needed to explain that to all my students, not just the ELLs.”

Utilizing Three Reads helped all of my students access the high-cognitive-demand problems in my curriculum.

### ESL Endorsement

I know that earning my English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement the year prior to this study has made me much more aware of the needs of ELLs. It surprises me when others don’t have some basic understanding of the needs of this population even without the formal endorsement. I mentioned this in a journal entry

on February 10: “During a math Teacher Leader Institute today, I heard somebody talk about ELLs and how frustrated she was that these students seem to be able to talk with each other but won’t use good vocabulary in class. Perhaps all teachers should go through English as a Second Language courses or professional development. If they don’t understand the difference between social language (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills - BICS) and course vocabulary (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency - CALP) then they will not be able to empathize with their ELLs or help them through the academic language. All teachers should know that it takes 5-7 years for ELLs to catch up on academic language; it does not come at the same time as general communication.”

Being ESL endorsed makes me feel more responsible for the ELLs in my classroom, especially the newly transitioned students. Yet I don’t think my peers embrace this belief. As I wrote on February 26: “I’ve been thinking about this project and whether my observations are the same as the reading teacher’s. Based on their NWEA scores, clearly she has more of an uphill battle than I do, since math can be seen as a universal language. I was surprised that she didn’t know who the transitioned ELL students were that she taught. Then again, I don’t remember our bilingual coordinator telling us at the beginning of the year.”

### **Conclusions and Implications: The Big Picture**

Given the growth in numbers of ELLs in our schools, it is highly likely that a teacher will have these students in their classrooms. Additionally, schools will increasingly be held accountable for their progress and success. My experience this year tells me that ELLs, teachers and schools will need more support - and

understanding - than currently provided. School districts should ensure that schools with a very high population of ELLs should be given more funds, especially to ensure that these schools have more than one bilingual coordinator and an increased number of bilingual/ESL endorsed teachers. For students, more after-school programs should be funded to help them increase their academic language beyond what is already taught in the classroom. For teachers, increased professional development should be offered, perhaps required.

But policymakers as well need to better understand the needs and early limitations of ELLs. The new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) leaves in place much of No Child Left Behind's requirements regarding ELLs and accountability. According to the American Federation of Teacher's ELL position statement, as posted on Colorín Colorado's website (2016), ESSA provides two options for states regarding the inclusion of ELLs in school accountability measures. States have these options:

- Exclude ELLs for one year after enrollment from taking the Reading/English Language Arts portion of the test and from counting the results of either or both the Reading/Language Arts or mathematics portions of the test, or
- Compel ELLs to take the tests and report on the results, but have these scores excluded from accountability measures during year one; after year two, include a “measure of student growth on both tests” and for year three, “include proficiency on both tests in the accountability system.”

In my experience, students can be somewhat traumatized by these high-stakes tests. While ESSA seems to provide a little bit more leeway for this population, I don't think it lessens the anxiety ELLs may have when taking the test or of

teachers who will be held accountable for these students' growth. I know that my ELL students wanted to do well and demonstrate how much they learned; I saw the look on BA's face when she showed me her year-end NWEA mathematics score and can only imagine how ER felt when she completed her ELA NWEA test.

Time is not the best measure of whether students are prepared to take a very word-heavy test - even the mathematics portion is language dense, leaving students with the task of both deciphering the words and understanding the academics of how to answer the question. While some ELLs are ready after one year in the school system, many are not.

The majority of my students' parents speak Chinese in the home. Prior to working with these students and receiving my ESL endorsement, I did not understand the additional academic support many of them needed to improve their language skills that will help them be successful in the classroom, nor did I attempt to find out. But transitioning ELLs need as much support as possible. When students transition into mainstream classrooms, they are allotted "minutes" for small group or one-on-one work with the bilingual specialist. But my students did not receive these "pull-out" minutes because of my ESL endorsement. (If mainstream teachers have an ESL endorsement, that counts toward "pull-out" minutes.) This means that my transitioned ELLs had less of an opportunity to work with a bilingual coordinator for support beyond what I was giving them.

Additionally, these students were not offered any special after school programs.

The biggest surprise for me during this research was the lack of desire by my transitioned ELLs to be in the bilingual classroom. Clearly, not all ELLs feel this way, but policies should be in place to determine whether bilingual students can transition prior to passing ACCESS and/or completing three years in a bilingual program. Several of my students clearly felt that they were being held back academically by being in the bilingual classroom. Simply because a student is classified - by definition - as an ELL student doesn't mean that he/she can speak the same language as the bilingual classroom teacher. Possibly there should be a "grace period" where the student gets acclimated to the school, but if they are ready - social-emotionally and academically - for the mainstream classroom, they should be transferred (especially if that teacher has an ESL endorsement). That way they will not be taught in two languages they can't understand well! Give them the opportunity to learn and thrive. They deserve it.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- ELL students should be given three years in the American education system and/or have achieved a specific level of English proficiency as measured by ACCESS prior to having to take high-stakes accountability tests.
- Students also should receive appropriate bilingual resources and not be penalized because their mainstream classroom teacher has his/her endorsement.
- Prior to the start of a new school year, bilingual coordinators (or teachers with ESL endorsement) should provide all teachers with professional development. These should focus on the difference between BICS and CALP and how best to

support the students in both the bilingual and mainstream classrooms and provide teachers with the names of the transitioning students.

- All teachers in schools with more than 50% of ELL students should be encouraged to seek their ESL endorsement.
- ELL students in bilingual classrooms should be monitored to determine if they would be better off academically in mainstream classrooms.

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