Preparing Secondary Subject Area Teachers to Teach Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students

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More and more subject matter area teachers find themselves working with students whose native language is not English. A report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) showed that close to four million students nationwide were classified as English language learners (ELL) in the school year of 2001–2002, a 30 percent increase from a decade ago. In Queens, New York City, one in every six high school students is an English language learner (New York City Department of Education 2003). These students spend a few periods a day in English as a second language (ESL)/bilingual classes. However, they spend most of their school day with subject area teachers in either self-contained ESL content classrooms composed of ELL students or regular content classrooms filled with both ELL students and non-ELL students. To advance in their academic careers, these students are under pressure to not only catch up to their native English-speaking peers but also meet state standards and pass Regents exams in English. Therefore, there is an urgent need for all teachers to develop culturally sensitive and language appropriate instruction so that all students can succeed.

Carrasquill and Rodriguez (1996), Cummins (1997), Genesee (1993), and Mohan et al. (2001) emphasized the importance of developing all subject area teachers' abilities to work with linguistically and culturally diverse students. Second language researchers have identified four major areas of teacher preparation: building empathy toward second language learners' language difficulties and cultural differences, increasing understanding of the process of second language acquisition, adapting the curriculum and instruction to these students' cultural and language needs, and integrating discipline specific language and literacy skills into area of instruction (Genesee 1993; Meyer 2000; Mora 2000; Teemant et al. 1996). Teachers who have had training in these areas have shown great sensitivity toward these diverse learners and have subsequently developed effective language and content integration strategies to work with them (Byrnes et al. 1998; Dong 2002; Duff 2001; Franson 1999; Harklau 1999; Verplaetse 1998). However, teachers who have not had adequate preparation for these challenges in their teacher training programs often feel ill-equipped to deal with the changing student body. As a result of this frustration, they unwittingly reduce these learners' opportunities by diluting the course content, providing few modifications to the way they speak, and ignoring or excluding these students from class discussions and learning (Byrnes et al. 1998; Duff 2001; Penfield 1987; Verplaetse 1998). To better prepare preservice teachers for working with non-native English speaking students at the secondary school level, New York State's Department of Education requires teachers to have teaching credentials in this area. This requirement ensures all teachers at this level have the knowledge, skills, and sensitivity necessary to work with students whose native language is not English. Secondary teacher education programs at Queens College, an inner city public institution serving one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse cities in the nation, also established competency requirements and developed a course entitled "Language, Literacy, and Culture in Education." As a required course for all preservice teachers, the course focuses on "knowledge about the principles of first and second language acquisition and sensitivity to the needs of their students with limited English proficiency, and an awareness of the differences in language, backgrounds, expectations, needs, roles, and values held by the teacher and the students in their classrooms" (New York State Department of Education 1999).

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In fall 2002, twenty-six graduate students enrolled in my Language, Literacy, and Culture in Education course. These students had backgrounds in various academic disciplines but were all working toward the New York State initial teacher certification (grades 7–12). A majority of the students (85 percent) came from European backgrounds and had no knowledge about other languages except English. Students were required to do a 25-hour field observation in one of the secondary ESL/bilingual classes. Course readings included Carson (1991), Herrell (2000), Fu (1995), Matalene (1985), Richard-Amato and Snow (1992), and Shen (1989). Through the course readings, fieldwork, discussions, and writing reflections, students critically examined how second language students' home culture, language, and previous education come into play in their learning of both English and curriculum content. Students also addressed how working with these learners impacted their classroom practices. Key concepts and issues included: the relationship between language and culture; the comparison of first language and second language acquisition and learning; language policies, bilingualism, and bicultural identity; and the integration of language and content in various subject area classes.

Establishing Empathy toward English Language Learners

The class began with a language sensitivity exercise. Students wrote about an incident in which a language barrier prevented communication. They were also asked to compare and contrast their own experience with the learning experience of the English language learners they observed. Guided by the course readings, many discussed the feelings and emotions they had when confronted with a language barrier. In doing so, they looked at English language learners in a new light, with a sympathetic eye. Sam,[1] a preservice science teacher, expressed his feeling of isolation and anxiety as soon as he stepped out of the plane at an Indian airport:

> As soon as I stepped out of Indira Gandhi International airport, I had this strange feeling as though I had suddenly been transported into a different world. It was late in the night. The air smelled different, and the people and buildings looked different also. There were crickets chirping, and there was the sound of a strange (to me) language in the air. I felt out of place, and thoughts of how I would be received by these natives crossed my mind. I wondered what would we do if no one came to pick us up at the airport, neither I nor my friends understood Hindi; this caused me to be anxious and afraid. Now I understand how students coming from other countries must have felt when they first got here.

Associating their communication breakdown with the experiences of many English language learners, preservice teachers saw the urgency and importance of addressing language issues, particularly the difficulty for non-native English speaking students, in their subject matter classes. Carl, a preservice art teacher, vividly recalled how death threats resulted from his inability to read a sign in Arabic while touring pyramids outside Cairo, Egypt:

> This experience proved to be very humbling. Furthermore, the inability to communicate was both frustrating and made me feel lost and threatened. This experience made me even more sympathetic towards ESL students. They have to use the new language to not only communicate the basic needs, but also pass the challenging tests, such as Regents, and time is not on their side. This must be terrifying.

Some students realized that language difficulties led to not only communication breakdowns but also identity issues. According to Janet, an English preservice teacher, the ability to speak a language meant gaining cultural acceptance and becoming a social insider. In contrast, her inability to speak Chinese made her feel alienated and out of place during her travels to Hong Kong:

> Although I am Chinese–American and do speak Cantonese at home with my parents, my level of fluency in Chinese is mediocre. On our first day in Hong Kong upon our arrival to the cafeteria, to my dismay, I saw that all items on the menus and poster boards were written in Chinese. I tried to look for menus written in English, but to no avail. As the clerk behind the counter looked at me expectedly, I began to panic inside. I felt so foreign and so out of place, but yet, I looked like I belonged. It wasn't until after this episode that I started to get an idea of how immigrants must feel when they first settled into the U.S.

Involving English Language Learners in Class

Students' empathy led to their increased awareness of English language learners' classroom presence. Through observations, tutoring English language learners, and interviews with ESL/bilingual teachers, many identified and described specific ways to involve nonnative English speaking students in bilingual classroom discussions. In doing so, they questioned their preconceived notions about English language learners while critically examining their own teaching.

In the beginning, John, a social studies preservice teacher, was skeptical about whether any intelligent classroom discussion could occur, given that the ESL class that he observed was filled with newcomers. However, he was pleasantly surprised to find that these students were capable of thinking and talking intelligently when the ESL teacher showed a sincere interest in students' views and used a series of strategies to involve students in the discussion. John wrote:

> Clearly, this subject was of intense interest to the students. The teacher's way of opening up the discussion by using her personal story and by modeling the ways of [talking] really got students involved. Students had formed strong opinions on the question and had a free, spirited discussion.

During his observations of an ESL class, Philip, an English teacher, focused on how long the teacher's waited for an English language learner to respond to a question. Before the experience, if a student did not respond, Philip would give the answer. However, Philip observed that the ESL teacher gave the students more time to let them use their pocket dictionaries to define certain words, think about what they wanted to say, or, in some cases, even look up the answer in the text itself before asking for a response. Philip learned that behind the seemingly slow responsiveness, there was an active learning mind. Philip wrote about his new discovery:

> I went into the ESL classroom with a notion that second language learners did not want to learn. However in the past few weeks, I saw how much learning second language students drive themselves through. Once the teacher asks a question, you can see students immediately punching electronic translators, flipping through dictionaries, etc. It takes time for them to process the question, translate words into their native language, and phrase their answers. I was inspired. If you ever want to see the importance of learning, I say it is in the ESL classroom.

Jerry, a science preservice teacher, observed an advanced level ESL class. The teacher and the students read a passage from a play in which one of the characters said that he now felt what it was like to be "in the skin of" another character. The teacher stopped the class from the reading and asked if anyone knew what the character meant by to be "in the skin of someone else." Seeing the students' confused looks, the teacher did a minilesson on the expression. Jerry was impressed by the ESL teacher's insight and sensitivity. He wrote:

> She did not take for granted that the students will know the meaning of the phrase. She stopped the reading even though the class gave no indication that they didn't understand it. The lesson to learn here is that teachers should not take for granted even those commonly used words or phrases.

Before taking the course, Dan, a middle school science teacher, saw no sense of teaching his English language learners' science before they had acquired basic English language skills. Through semester long observations, interviewing ESL teachers, and tutoring a newly arrived Chinese student, Dan understood the urgency for these students to catch up with their native English speaking peers and graduate. His interview with the ESL teacher challenged his thinking. He realized that many English language learners did not have the luxury of time to develop basic English skills before learning specific subject matter. Instead, they had to use the language that they were still learning to learn new academic content to prepare for statewide tests. Dan talked about the change in his view:

> This class placed me in an environment that I would otherwise have actively avoided experiencing. To say that my understanding of second language and second culture learning has changed would be a drastic understatement. Now, I realize the importance of subject matter area teachers' getting involved in educating second language learners. I also learned that with a little bit of patience and practice, there is always a way to get through to someone, even with a newcomer.

Integrating Language and Content Instruction in Subject Matter Classes

Through their observations, students saw effective ESL pedagogy in action. Guided by the course readings and the field experience, the class, as a whole, worked on adjusting instruction to meet English language learners' linguistic and cultural needs. The three main instructional modifications were as follows: setting up language objectives along with content curricular objectives, anticipating ESL-related difficulties, and providing cultural background information. Realizing the challenging nature of the discipline–specific language used in their individual classrooms, students sought vocabulary support for their subject area through glossaries and preteaching key words and used a multisensory approach to get across meaning. Jackie, a science teacher, planned her ESL oriented science lesson by highlighting the key concepts. Anticipating the difficult concept of an isotherm map for the students who did not grow up in American culture, she asked herself: "How do I get this across to the ELL learner? More importantly, how can I break down the communication barrier?" She looked up the term in several dictionaries and decided to use the root word to teach: isotherm—*iso* means equal and *therm* means heat. Therefore, isotherm is a line drawn on a weather map connecting points having the same mean temperature. Being mindful that second language learners might have a different set of cultural knowledge than what she expected, Jackie decided to compare and contrast two terms used to describe temperature, Fahrenheit and Celsius. By asking students from different countries to tell the class what the weather was like in their hometown, Jackie engaged students in activating their prior knowledge, thus preparing them for the new knowledge.

Lucy, a social studies preservice teacher, pointed out that teachers cannot assume that an English language learner will know commonly used words. Therefore, subject matter area teachers should be prepared to check for understanding when teaching a class filled with second language learners. One day, Lucy's tutee came to her filled with frustration about her math class. The second language learner complained that she did not understand any of the probability lessons because the teacher kept using the term "fair die." The problem stated: If you roll a fair die, what is the probability of getting a number less than three? The textbook did not have any illustration to show students what a fair die was, so Lucy drew a picture of one. Her tutee finally understood it. Lucy reflected on her experience:

> This episode really opened my eyes a great deal. Math is usually a subject that most people would think that an ESL student would have the least trouble as far as language is concerned. I found that there was so much terminology in the math book and so many concepts. I am convinced that as subject matter teachers, we have to lighten the language load of the text for our English language learners using whatever we can, including physical movements, facial expressions, drawings, real objects, etc.

To Sean, a social studies preservice teacher, English language learners' difficulties learning U.S. history was compounded by the fact that they might lack appropriate American cultural knowledge or they might have a different set of cultural knowledge. Therefore, in his planning, he often paused and questioned himself on whether his non-native English-speaking students might have had access to this part of American culture. For example, in his preparation for teaching the preamble of the U.S. Constitution, Sean wanted to address cultural knowledge first before going into the text. He said: "I will ask students if they are familiar with the written laws, if there are any, from their native country. They will write about or talk about with others and then respond to these two questions: What law is that? How important is it for a country to have laws?" To ensure comprehension, Sean designed a series of language objectives for his lesson plan:

- Students will rewrite the Preamble into an easier text for the class to understand.
- Students will practice skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening by talking to their peers, reading the document, writing the simplified version, and presenting it to the class.
- Students will expand their vocabulary using a glossary provided by the teacher and practice sentence structuring.

Sean reflected on his changed view toward ESL learners:

> Before taking this class, I looked at ESL learners and thought what is so hard about learning English? What I did not think about was the uneven playing field that ESL learners are placed upon. I did not factor into my analysis the lack of education and the wide variety of cultural differences, which would affect the learning process for these children besides the language. . . . Planning a lesson from the perspective of a non-native English-speaking student made me see the problematic areas for preparation which I might have taken for granted before.

Conclusion

The series of field experiences, reflections, readings, and discussions provided these students with a different perspective on English language learners. These new insights led them to explore new ways of reaching out to those students to teach them effectively. By the end of the semester, the majority of the students expressed increased confidence in their abilities to design a lesson tailored to second language learners' needs and create a culturally sensitive classroom environment. Rachel, an English teacher, best summarized students' reflections on their growth as teachers of linguistically and culturally diverse students:

> This course was a reminder to me to remember what it feels like to be an outsider in society. I think that I have learned not only to be more sensitive in a general way, but also now I have the techniques for teaching ESL students to back up my compassion for them. I no longer just feel bad that they may not know what is going on in the classroom while I am teaching, but I can actually take action and make them understand better because I can adapt the materials to better suit their needs, and I have gained confidence to work with students with even the most basic understanding of English.

As beginning teachers, many of these students will find themselves assigned to classrooms with large numbers of second language learners. Secondary teachers need to be knowledgeable about both the developmental patterns of their second language learners' second language acquisition and also about the language and vocabulary used in their specific academic disciplines. This awareness helps teachers tailor their instruction and classroom discourse to the students' linguistic development. English language learners are no longer solely the responsibilities of ESL or bilingual teachers but the responsibility of all teachers.

Key words: bilingual education, English language learners, non-native English speakers

NOTE

1. All students' names used here are pseudonyms.

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