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"If I Said Something Wrong, I Was Afraid"

Listening to the voices of elementary school students learning English can give teachers a new perspective.

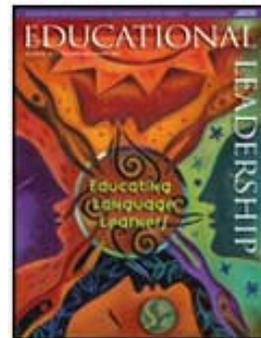
Douglas B. Reeves

Please tell me about your wonderful name," I said to Lucineyda, a student from the Dominican Republic who was in the process of learning English. Lucineyda said simply, "My mom wanted to give me a beautiful name." As I interviewed Lucineyda, I could see that her mother had also given her daughter the gifts of sensitivity, earnestness, and diligence.

Lucineyda is one of a remarkable group of elementary students learning English as their second language at Harrington Elementary School in Lynn, Massachusetts—along with Gladis, Basilia, Harlin, Jeismari, Ivan, Leonel, Nancy, Christine, and Confidence. I asked these children to tell me what it's like learning English in elementary school. I had first come to Harrington as a visiting author in April 2004 but returned as a listener, seeking to learn from the school's English language learners. I asked them what advice they would give to teachers—especially new teachers—helping students learn English, and I was impressed with their gentle wisdom.

As I listened, I wondered why those of us who discuss and research the best ways to help students learn English as a second language don't routinely make students' ideas and perspectives part of the conversation. Why not make a place at the policymaking table for the voices of those most directly affected by instructional policies? A good deal of education research is informed by the relationship among the factors of teaching, curriculum, and student performance, but uninformed by the observations that students would provide if only we listened. Teachers and researchers need to be gentle, encouraging, and patient in that listening. Sometimes we must reach past psychological and cultural barriers that lead students to prefer the safety of silence to the danger of speaking. As Lucineyda said hesitantly, "If I said something wrong, I was afraid."

As a researcher, I am easily seduced by quantitative analysis. But if I have learned anything as a student and teacher of statistics, I have learned that there is always a story behind the numbers. The paragraphs that follow are the authentic voices of students who, with the permission of their parents and teachers, shared with me their joys, anxieties, and frustrations on their journey of learning English.



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These students have no political agenda. Terms such as *ESL* or *NCLB* would be as strange to them as the most obscure English vocabulary. My "student teachers" were patient and kind, considering I was an adult asking what they might have regarded as silly questions. They were also earnest and sincere, displaying a keen sense of obligation to younger siblings and friends who might benefit from their words. Here is their advice to educators and education leaders.

"Don't Worry So Much"

Students have a way of caring for teachers as well as receiving our teaching, nurturing, and love. The Harrington students gave teachers a strong message of reassurance:

Don't worry so much. If we are new in the class, you are new, too. We both are going to learn. We are going to learn English, and you can learn some Spanish.

Few elegies to lifelong learning are as eloquent.

"Help Us Many Times"

Gently but firmly the students insisted that teachers working with English language learners need to not only slow down, but also remain patient when kids need help with the same question or language issue many times. "We need to ask you to help us, maybe three, four, or five times," many of them told me.

Their words reminded me of my first experience teaching students who were new arrivals to this country. Although I behaved like the prototypical American tourist, speaking loudly and slowly, I know many times in those years my facial expression screeched, "I've already said it *twice*—how many more times do you need?" I now know that the answer to that question was probably "four or five times, slowly and patiently, please."

"We Need to Play in English"

One of the most astonishing bits of advice, gleefully endorsed by many students, was the students' desire to speak English in fun, informal contexts: "We need to play in English, not just speak English in school." In a multicultural school within the United States, in which students from Albania and Somalia must communicate with those from the Dominican Republic, English is the common denominator of play. But in too many schools, linguistic segregation is the rule of the playground. In these cases, ESL students may acquire formal English with a falsely academic strain, much as my former students in China and Africa would parrot the British Broadcasting System announcers, declaring in the most unlikely circumstances, "I beg your pardon!" or "How utterly splendid!" When students "play in English" in addition to learning the formal English of the classroom, they begin to acquire the casual informality that enriches any language and gives the speaker confidence.

"My Mom Doesn't Understand"

In a school where I taught years ago, Mrs. Stoyanof would come to pick up her son, Dimitri, every Friday afternoon. With pleading eyes, she always asked the same question regarding her son: "He OK?" I now know just how inadequate my responses were. To each explanation I

attempted to offer, Dimitri's mother provided the same response: "He OK?"

The Harrington students I interviewed removed the mystery of those encounters. One said simply, "My mom doesn't understand the homework—you have to explain it to us." The parents of students who are learning English often understand less English than their children do. This reality is often overlooked in our well-meaning attempts to reach out and include the family. If parents miss meetings, appointments, and drama and athletic performances, the root problem may be that they do not understand the well-intentioned notes from school. Parents cannot help with homework when the instructions are foreign to them.

"Don't Hit Us"

Although U.S. teachers know it's wrong to hit students, we often take this certainty for granted. New arrivals to this country can remind us to cherish the fact that students in our schools need not fear physical abuse from teachers. One student told me,

In my country, the teachers hit you. They even hit animals. One day my teacher back home killed an animal just to show us who was boss. In America, a teacher who hits you would have to go to jail. I'm glad my teachers don't hit me. We are free—that's why we came to America.

The Importance of Listening

Teachers and researchers must use caution when associating the behavior of students who do not speak English with a linguistic, rather than cultural, difference—as illustrated by a story from the work of Tufts University researcher Evangeline Harris Stefanakis (2004).

An elementary student from Haiti had been sternly instructed by his mother to "behave" in his new U.S. school. Doing precisely what he believed his mother wanted, the student sat silent and unresponsive during a series of assessments. The school was doing its best by providing caring teachers and assessment professionals who spoke the native language of the students. But because of an unrecognized clash of cultural expectations, the school labeled this boy "untestable" and told his mother to have him evaluated for special education. Fortunately, Stefanakis and other researchers saw the boy talking with other students, and suspected that he had higher social and intellectual skills than he was showing. The stakes were high in this instance, because, as Stefanakis notes,

Once a language minority child is referred for testing, that same child is placed in special education about 85 percent of the time. Once a child is placed in special education, despite a mistaken assessment, it takes them an average of six years to get out. (p. 7)

No amount of immersion, bilingualism, or Skinnerian behavioral modification will overcome the cultural imperative that equates the requirement to "behave" with silence. Teachers and school administrators must do their best to ensure that all students in their charge feel safe, but particularly students for whom every element of the environment—school, language, and cultural norms—is strange and potentially threatening. People in any culture must first feel safe before any meaningful human and intellectual interaction can take place. When fear becomes a

predominant emotion—as it does for many students learning English—the entire enterprise of learning comes to a screeching halt.

Although I find the words of these children compelling, we must also respect the substantial body of research on language learning that offers practical suggestions for educators and school leaders. For example, Miller and Endo (2004) stress the need for family involvement and sensitivity to individual student needs, and they encourage teachers to link their assignments and illustrations to the daily lives of students. Makkonen (2004) found that migrant children did better in mathematics when their teachers focused on situations common in the students' daily lives. I suspect that few new arrivals to this country have wondered, "If I boarded a train in New York and my cousin did the same in Los Angeles, at what time would we encounter one another in the middle of Kansas?" But many students and parents have grappled with the real mathematical challenges of rent, payroll statements, and credit card bills.

And we must certainly continue to systematically study effective techniques for teaching English language learners. Research, not political agendas or whims, should direct our professional practice. But for every statistic there is a story. We would be wise to listen.

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