

Judith Rance-Roney

Creating Intentional Communities to Support English Language Learners in the Classroom

Judith Rance-Roney calls on teachers to form intentional learning communities within their classrooms. The Culture Share Club, initially conceived to provide scaffolding for ELL students to acquire English and pass the statewide test in English, legitimized student knowledge by benefitting all students as they prepared materials for lessons and invested in shared experiences and responsibilities for classroom learning.

Earlier in my career, I taught in a large suburban district in New Jersey. In my junior English class, side by side in the front row sat Tu and Phan, two Vietnamese brothers whom I estimated knew a few hundred words other than “Hello, how are you?” I thumbed through my minutely planned unit on *Beowulf* and early English and I felt like crying. How would I teach *Beowulf* to these brothers who were struggling to learn the basics of English grammar and vocabulary? How could I teach the new language of early English to my “regular” students while teaching “real” English to these young men? I was an English teacher and I was stumped. I know that more and more teachers are facing these questions.

According to Diane August, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of teachers who will encounter at least one English language learner in the mainstream classroom (August and Shanahan). In 1991–92, only 15 percent of all teachers would instruct an English language learner, but in 2001–02, the percentage had risen dramatically to 42.6 percent (45). In addition, statewide mandates moving the English language learner out of bilingual and ESL classrooms into the mainstream English curriculum have occurred in some of the states with the greatest populations of English language learners (ELLs), such as California and Arizona.

Federal legislation, too, has put the spotlight on these students. For the English language learner (LEP—limited English proficient in government

terms), No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation means good news and bad news. The good news is that these students can no longer remain in the darker corners of our classrooms, exempted from state achievement testing because of their English as a second language status. Schools have had to implement a more effective and grade-appropriate education for ELLs. However, the bad news contained in such legislation is that for new learners of English entering high schools for the first time in the United States, meeting the grade-level content standards, especially in English language arts, is difficult or nearly impossible for all but the most educationally ready learners who arrive in our schools with strong literacy and content knowledge in their first language. Key researchers Jim Cummins and Virginia Collier contend that it takes five to seven years of English exposure before English language learners can demonstrate academic English proficiency equal to their native English speaking peers. However, in spite of this finding, NCLB demands that ELLs who have been enrolled in US schools for more than one year must demonstrate progress on English proficiency measures *and* meet grade level content mastery determined for high school graduation. For Tu and Phan to graduate with a high school diploma, they must earn

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enough credits but also pass the rigorous state assessment, a requirement similar to that of about half the states. While the more rigorous standards take a toll on students, the effect on school districts

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and teachers can be equally challenging. Thus, the welcome mat, by and large, has not been rolled out for students like Tu and Phan at the macrolevel of district and school nor at the microlevel of the classroom community.

NCLB makes districts accountable for ensuring that subgroups, such as English language learners, achieve Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) targets or risk penalties. School districts with significant populations of ELLs may be labeled as schools in need of improvement because of the performance of the ELL sub-

group alone; this designation will then trigger schoolwide interventions even though only the subgroup has failed to meet the target. According to the 2005 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) reading reports, while 74 percent of non-ELL twelfth-grade students score at or above the basic level, only 31 percent of ELLs score at or above the basic level and of those students, only 5 percent are deemed proficient or advanced. Finger pointing has escalated at the English language arts teachers who may be facing the daunting task of bringing these learners to proficient level, yet language arts teachers may be untrained or minimally trained in fostering language development for ELLs.

Thus, at the school level, a shuffling game often occurs; teachers who are untenured or who have the most to lose strategize to avoid these students. English teachers who in past years have been sensitive to the needs of ELLs find their classes filled with students who are struggling with the language, but they also find that they are not fully prepared, lack support systems, and are unable, even with their best effort, to adequately help these students with language development needs. In this climate of rigorous accountability, English language

learners are often seen as liabilities and not as resources in the daily life of a school.

When Tu and Phan entered the doors of my classroom, I must honestly admit that I, too, saw them for a fleeting moment as yet another chore in my stress-filled day even though I had a strong background in TESOL. The other members of the classroom community, their fellow students, merely stared dispassionately past them. How could I create a learning community where these English language learners were defined, not by “lacks,” but by the potential resources they brought to the classroom: diverse experiences with the world, novel perspectives of the world, and linguistic and cultural knowledge to be shared with others including their fellow students?

Marginalization and Interaction

Tu and Phan, like many other new immigrants (newcomers), arrived mid-high school with little English, with little knowledge of how to “do school” in American culture, and with a realization that they may not be welcomed socially into the school community. In her book about newcomers in an American high school, *Made in America: Immigrant Students in Our Public Schools*, Laurie Olsen writes, “The point from which newcomer students observe, learn about, and begin to interact with ‘America’ is always from the sidelines. . . . Their view of the other students and of the life of the school is truly a view from afar, a view from the margins of the life of the school” (44). In the first few weeks, Tu and Phan remained together but alone, sitting by themselves in the corner of the cafeteria, walking together silently in the halls, and talking sometimes to me in class, but never to the non-ELL classmates sitting around them.

From the perspective of second language acquisition, this spells disaster. Researchers have begun to explore the synergy among the language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. There is an obvious practice effect; when learners engage in academic conversations and listen to others, the syntax and vocabulary of academic English is internalized and becomes automatic. But also, recent research points to the role of oral language development and aural comprehension in the fostering of reading comprehension skills. Talking to

others about deep questions and co-constructing knowledge seems to increase comprehension, perhaps because of the exercise of critical-thinking skills and a motivation for deeper inquiry (Meltzer and Hamann 27).

Tu and Phan were immersed in a language they could barely understand throughout the long school day. As most language learners, they paid attention to critical messages that they judged would immediately affect their well-being. However, like most language learners, “listening fatigue” would set in quickly and so they seemed to take the sensible route of staying in the bubble of silence they were able to build around them. Some ESL advocates will allow the bubble of silence to stay intact, citing references to the existence of a “silent period” (the preproduction phase) in which ELLs are building critical language mass before having to produce the language. However, the advisability of allowing this period to continue for more than a few weeks in adolescents has been questioned by practitioners because, for many, the silent period becomes a habit that may extend to the end of the high school years.

Adding to the challenges of teaching ELLs in the mainstream, Tu and Phan, like others, had experienced what has been labeled “interrupted formal education” and had not been in a content classroom in almost two years. Back in Vietnam, their schooling may have been strong but their sense of cultural dislocation and the real challenges of setting up life in the United States had also influenced their ability to concentrate on academic work even if their English had been proficient.

The diversity of prior background knowledge and schema development among all learners is a challenge that English teachers face when teaching the language of *Beowulf* and Chaucer; but for Tu and Phan, the cultural connection to monsters, to the Viking images, and to the history of the English language required taking a further step back.

Tu and Phan came to school every day and appeared motivated to succeed, but the language, new content forms, and their reticence to talk to their classmates were hampering their acquisition of English and the new culture. How could I help them to acquire English, and how could I leverage the English skills they were able to grasp so that they could pass the statewide test in English

required for graduation that would be administered in the spring?

An Intentional Classroom Learning Community

Seeing the marginalization of Tu and Phan in my classroom, I soon realized that it would be important to re-envision the dysfunctional culture of the classroom community that was rapidly solidifying and allowing the brothers to exist in the bubble of silence. I recognized that I needed to take steps not only to support my two English language learners in their English acquisition, but also to invest all the students in creating a classroom culture that encouraged shared experiences and a construction of knowledge that legitimized all class members. In the second language field, there has been an increasing awareness that a web of potent social factors and the motivation that follows from those factors is a strong predictor of second language acquisition. Bonnie Norton Peirce talks in terms of “investment” (17): For a new learner of English to take the risk of using the fledgling language in spite of the fear of being misunderstood or laughed at, the learner must believe that there is a substantive payoff in language use. The user’s social identity in the new language and new culture is being formed, and for the time being, the new identity is fragile. By creating the bubble of silence, Tu and Phan were protecting their fragile identities but were also missing valuable chances to practice and experiment with their new language and were not building confidence in social English. They did not see themselves as authentic users of English.

In the high school English classroom, English language learners need to see themselves as worthy and legitimate contributors to co-constructed knowledge and to possess the deep belief in their ability to interact in the English language. Thankfully, the teacher can take intentional steps in fostering that environment; it not only takes a

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Challenging Conventional Classroom Dynamics and Values: The Culture Share Club

I began by observing the subtle classroom interactions that started before the bell rang. Tu and Phan were always the first to leave the chatter of the hall and choose their front-row seats. I observed Renee, a smart and popular young woman, smile and say hi

to the brothers as she passed by. Edgar, whom I suspect may have once learned English himself, tapped Phan on the shoulder saying, "What's up, man." With those simple acts, I found hope that I could still alter classroom dynamics.

I started the process by handing out a flyer announcing that I was forming an

informal Culture Share Club of volunteer student helpers who were willing to work collaboratively on special projects in class and to meet twice during the school year to talk and to journal about what they were learning from each other. I encouraged those thinking about a career in teaching to join a group. I promised to print certificates at the end of the year and promised to write college recommendation letters for all who gave their best effort. I felt I needed an initial vehicle to legitimize the classroom moves I would soon be making. By the end of the week I had five enrollees in addition to Tu and Phan, whom I had "strongly encouraged" to join. From the volunteer group, I formed two smaller groups to act as support systems for each of the brothers. As a firm believer in controlled seating, I physically surrounded each of the brothers with their group members. I put Renee, Edgar, and Phan in a triad. When I gave out project assignments, I provided the option for either individual work or for Culture Share group collaborative projects. As the year progressed and more students wanted to do projects in collaborative groups, I formed more groups.

My first assignment was for all students to interview a class member whom they felt had a

background different from their own and to write an essay about that person. For the Culture Share groups, the assignment was to interview one another and to put together a multimedia presentation about the similarities and contrasts among the members of the group. For this first assignment, I became a participating group member of each of the Culture Share groups for several reasons. I wanted not only to model effective group interaction when a member has limited English (drawing, writing words in addition to saying them, using a two-way bilingual dictionary for all group members to translate unknown words, talking about cultural differences in power-neutral language) but also to allow Tu and Phan to get to know me as a person and for me to get to know Tu and Phan. One of the most critical steps in the education of an English language learner is for the teacher to understand the learner's unique needs and motivations and for the learner to develop a personal relationship with the teacher. From the learner's perspective, a mutual interview begins the establishment of a mentor relationship with the teacher and provides a culturally responsive connection between home and school. Many ELLs come from cultures in which the teacher is *in loco parentis* and respect for the teacher is a motivating factor in academic achievement.

The Culture Share group interview project assignment served several purposes. First, because the report was to be in a multimedia format, the new English learners could assist the group in finding images and writing the abbreviated script needed for the slides. This differentiated format used their artistic strengths and the English language resources they had. The collaborative discussion that went into the preparation of the project and their role in the class presentation gave Tu and Phan a chance to practice their spoken English. Further, this presentation allowed them to begin speaking about their Vietnamese culture and to teach others, thereby establishing their legitimacy as contributors to co-constructed knowledge. Their group was building a global view of community and developing critical-thinking competence as the members tried to describe cultural differences and similarities. This competence would serve all the members well when they faced statewide testing in the spring.

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Learning Support Projects

For each major unit in my eleventh-grade English class, students had to complete a unit project. The project could be either a prequel (pre-unit) or a sequel (post-unit) project. I asked the Culture Share groups to consider prequels that were service-learning projects, thus helping each other as learners by developing learning support materials.

Jump-Start Files

To provide content access for English language learners, Jana Echevarria, MaryEllen Vogt, and Deborah J. Short advocate the use of “jump-start” lessons (32), which entails pre-teaching small groups of struggling students the background material and vocabulary needed to understand the upcoming lesson. In my teaching practice, what I have found equally effective is a jump-start packet, a collection of preview materials that the English learner would take home or cover in a tutoring session prior to the start of the whole-class instruction in that unit. There are typically three components in a jump-start packet: (1) a preview of essential vocabulary; (2) visual scaffolding of the content; and (3) proficiency-appropriate prereading text that parallels the upcoming class readings.

For a prequel unit project, I asked that a group member of each Culture Share prepare a jump-start packet for the group. Two weeks ahead of the unit, he or she compiled important words, collected and labeled pictures relating to the unit, made a list of helpful Web sites about the topic, and found simple articles or printouts about the key ideas in the topic. This would constitute the unit project requirement. Before our Shakespeare unit, several students prepared elaborate file folders filled with labeled pictures, maps, history timelines, and even videotapes of Shakespearean plays. I used these files as jump-start material for Tu and Phan before beginning the unit.

Adapted-Text Files

Another popular choice for the prequel assignment was adapting or scaffolding the text in some way for greater comprehensibility for English language learners and struggling readers.

Text highlighting and annotating are some of the strategies that are least time intensive. The

teacher sets aside one or two textbooks for ELLs or makes photocopies of text pages on which a student helper highlights key terms and elaborates on difficult concepts. This helps English learners who know little English to focus exclusively on the highlighted text and translate as needed. They can begin to make sense of the text that otherwise seems overwhelming. I found that when the student helper explains a concept, the comments are audience-sensitive and scaffold the reading for English language learners. For the final act of *Julius Caesar*, one student not only highlighted important lines in the play but also drew a graphically accurate storyboard of the various actions in the scenes.

Another adapted-text technique that students chose included the audiotaping of text material. I taught the student helpers to read with expression and to highlight verbally important terms or words. I found that the student helpers, being aware of the audience, also made parenthetical comments, defining a word that they felt would be difficult for an ELL to understand or explaining an American or British cultural tradition that may be unknown to the newcomer student. I made copies of the audiotapes of the literature and distributed them to Tu and Phan and kept copies for use with future English learners.

Turning the Tables

While initially it was obvious that the service-learning projects were designed to scaffold the English language learners, the student helpers soon realized the value of the projects for their own learning. They reported that doing these pre-quel projects led them to read more critically and to think more clearly about the key ideas of the literature. The students seemed more engaged in the classroom as an outcome of sharing responsibility for the learning of the Culture Share members, most notably for Tu and Phan.

Later in the year, as Tu and Phan became more confident about their linguistic and social skills, I introduced a unit on contemporary Vietnamese poetry. This time, I asked the brothers to create a jump-start file for the class to prepare them for the experience of reading this lyrical verse, and I gave them the opportunity to co-teach the file material with me. That morning in my classroom

two crocks of soup, a large pile of Vietnamese spring rolls, and a platter of cakes appeared along with an assortment of cultural objects the family had carried from Vietnam. In class, we all learned how to wrap a delicate spring roll and about holidays and the education system in that country. A few days later, I handed out a poem in Vietnamese to the students, and Tu and Phan read the poem to their classmates and worked with the class translating the poem into English and comparing this poem to the British poetry of the same time period.

English Language Learners as Resources

Tu and Phan graduated with their class the next year in spite of the predictions that it would take much longer to master academic English. Their English expanded and so did the social network that was forming around the brothers. Tu and Phan demonstrated Bonny Norton and Kelleen Toohey's contention that "the proficiencies of the good language learners . . . were bound up not only in what they did individually but also in the possibilities their various communities offered them" (318).

What is the bottom line? When teachers reorient their beliefs about the nature of English language learners, seeing them as authentic and legitimate participants in constructing classroom knowledge even when their English is limited, these students are able to grow academically and develop language proficiency. However, beliefs alone will not change the secondary classroom culture that isolates and

marginalizes these students. Teachers need to form intentional communities of learners that both support these students and integrate the resources that ELLs bring to the English classroom.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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To make the English language learners in her classroom feel more welcome and part of the community, Rance-Roney asked students to interview each other so they could get to know each other better. "The Feature Story—Fifteen Minutes (and 500 Words) of Fame!" asks students to write a profile of a classmate, with a particular focus on a talent, interest, or passion of that classmate. In the process, students learn how to differentiate between a news story and a feature story, practice interviewing techniques, develop voice, and write for an audience. Perhaps most importantly, they come to celebrate their individual strengths. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=987