Whose Definition of Success? Identifying Factors That Affect English Language Learners’ Access to Academic Success and Resources

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Ganda, a ninth grader from Nepal who was in the United States while his father completed a doctoral degree, and Nicholas, a ninth-grade immigrant from Ukraine, burst into the ESL room minutes after the seventh-period bell had rung. After checking out who was in the room and having a small conversation about the location of Kathmandu on one of the classroom maps, they sat down and attended to the task that had brought them to the ESL room. They told Judy, a volunteer tutor, that their science teacher had sent them there to get help completing their quizzes. One question read, “You are at station two. Look at the model and describe the processes.” Ganda and Nicholas were allowed to bring their quizzes but not the models to the ESL room, thus complicating how much help a tutor or teacher could offer. “What’s happening in your science class now?” Judy asked. “Oh, the teacher is going over the quiz with the students. He’s explaining the answers to them,” Nicholas replied (field notes, October 22, 1998).

BACKGROUND

Interactions such as this one were instrumental in the designing of a qualitative case study that investigated the role of teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and practices in facilitating or hindering English language learners’ (ELLS’) access to academic success and resources. The purpose of this brief report is to present an overview of this in-progress case study and the preliminary findings.

During the 1998–1999 school year, we served as volunteer tutors in the ESL room at a U.S. public high school. We did not have a research agenda when we began tutoring, but as full-time doctoral students immersed in the discourse of research (in which every life encounter is reframed to fit a qualitative inquiry), we wrote weekly field notes for the tutoring sessions. Once a week, we went to the ESL room during the last two periods of the day, which were study hall periods, and assisted students in any way we could. We also engaged students in conversations

1All names, with the exception of the authors’, are pseudonyms.
about school and home life, academic plans, interests, and our cultures and languages. Our interests in the relationship between language and power, and our knowledge of the low academic success rates in U.S. public schools of students whose L1 is not English, greatly influenced the types of questions raised by our interactions with the students and the head ESL teacher. Anecdotal evidence from our field notes suggested that the bi- and multilingual students viewed the ESL room as a safe haven, a second home. They were marginalized in their mainstream classrooms; their languages and lived experiences were devalued; the mainstream teachers viewed the ESL room as a content tutoring center; and the ESL curriculum did not help the students acquire the academic proficiency required for meaningful, comprehensible completion of tasks in their mainstream content courses. We realized that these assertions were premature and that further investigation was needed.

APPROACH AND RESEARCH QUESTION

When designing the study, we worked with Susan, the head ESL teacher, and Tom, the social studies ESL teacher, to generate a list of possibilities. They expressed a keen interest in knowing more about the mainstream teachers’ beliefs and attitudes in regard to the ELLs in their classes. We shaped our study with this interest in mind.

Yin (1994) states that the case study approach is the best strategy when “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has no control” (p. 9). For this study, the case is bounded by place (one particular high school), by participants (teachers who have ELLs in their classrooms), and time (6 weeks), with the classroom as the unit of analysis (Creswell, 1998).

Our overarching research question was: How do teachers’ attitudes, beliefs and practices about ELLs influence ELLs’ access to academic resources and success in mainstream classrooms?

Although we sought to investigate numerous factors that have an impact on classroom context, including administrative policies and practices and the way the bi- and multilingual population is portrayed in the school and local community, in this report we focus on the role of teachers in shaping ELLs’ classroom learning experiences. Although we recognize that students are active participants in shaping as well as negotiating context, we did not focus on them because we wanted to stress the importance of context. Because “the world [is] not a neutral medium” (McDermott, 1993, p. 273), we wanted to avoid placing the burden of success solely on the individual.

Academic resources and academic success were two sensitizing concepts (Patton, 1990) that we brought to the study. According to Patton, “the inductive application of sensitizing concepts is to examine how the
concept is manifest in a particular setting or among a particular group of people” (p. 391). We use the term academic resources to refer to people, practices, and physical items that facilitate a student’s academic success. College guidance counselors, advanced-level classes needed for college admission, and computers are some examples. We defined academic success as the achievement of or progress toward the students’ desired career goals. For example, we knew that two seniors, Nam Hee, the daughter of a visiting professor from Korea, and Véronique, an immigrant refugee from Rwanda, were applying to colleges, so we wanted to understand the role of the classroom context vis-à-vis their academic goals.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our work is informed by critical and feminist theories and pedagogies (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997; Weedon, 1987; Weiler, 1988, 1991). Research projects that operate within this framework recognize that power is distributed unequally, seek to understand the factors shaping unjust practices and structures, and suggest alternatives (Carspecken, 1996; Weiler, 1988). Like Peirce (1995b) and other critical researchers, we reject the notion that any research project can be unbiased or claim objectivity. Our view of the world and our commitment to and involvement with students like Ganda and Nicholas inform our studies and shape our questions.

Our study has been influenced by a number of researchers in TESOL (e.g., Peirce, 1995a; Toohey, 1998; Willett, 1995) whose work emphasizes the importance of analysis of social contexts. They criticize traditional second language acquisition (SLA) theorists for focusing almost exclusively on the individual learner (e.g., motivation, innate capabilities) while ignoring or diminishing the role of context in learning. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) extends this sociocultural perspective to reinforce the notion that not only is learning socially mediated, but social contexts can construct unequal access to resources necessary for success. As the opening anecdote indicates, the well-meaning science teacher is denying Nicholas and Ganda access to the content they need for their academic success. The concept of LPP, specifically the focus on the role of social context in constructing access to resources, helped us understand these students’ situation and shape our main research question.

LPP focuses on the types of social engagements necessary for learning to take place. The term refers to the type of participation required of members (of a learning community) for learning to occur. LPP is not a strategy or device; Lave and Wenger (1991) themselves characterize it as an “analytical viewpoint on learning” (p. 40). One element of LPP that is
particularly helpful for analyzing classroom contexts is the role of language in gaining access to practice, which is essential to participation, which in turn is a crucial condition for learning.

Research in classroom discourse provided a framework for understanding how language is used to maintain control, disseminate information, and legitimate certain types of knowledge (Cazden, 1988) and for understanding the implications of such language use for L2 learners (Harklau, 1994; Johnson, 1995).

METHOD

Context

College High, with a student body numbering approximately 2,300, is located in a predominantly White, middle-class community clustered around a large public university in rural central Pennsylvania. In 1993, College High was recognized as a Blue Ribbon School, one of the top 200 secondary schools in the country, by the U.S. Department of Education. According to published data, 82.0% of graduating seniors enrolled in 4-year colleges, and 2.5% enrolled in 2-year or technical colleges. The student body was described as 91% White, 4% Asian, 3% African American, 1% Hispanic, and less than 1% other. Seven percent were classified as low-income; 2% were classified as ESL students. The bi- and multilingual school population consisted of children of visiting faculty, researchers, or graduate students; immigrant refugees (political and economic); and exchange students. These students came from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

The ESL Program

When students whose L1 is not English were registered at the high school, they took the English Placement Test. Students who scored below 85 (out of 100 items) were classified as ESL students and took one to three periods a day of ESL in addition to one to three periods of mainstream courses. Students who scored above 85 were classified as ESL transition students. They took only mainstream content courses but could come to the ESL room during study hall or other free periods to get help with assignments. Susan played an active role in selecting the ELLs’ mainstream classes.

During the 1998–1999 school year, approximately 35 students were enrolled in ESL classes. Another 10–15 students were classified as ESL transition students. Susan, who had received an MA in TESL in 1981, designed and implemented the ESL curriculum. At the beginning of the school year of this study, the school had assigned a mainstream social
studies teacher, Tom, who was not trained in teaching ESL, to assist Susan by teaching social studies ESL courses. According to Susan and Tom, the goals of the ESL program were to help the students feel more comfortable in the high school culture and feel comfortable using the language (i.e., English).

We found that students, even those who had transitioned out of the ESL program, often came to the ESL room just to be in a friendly environment. When we asked Edouard, an immigrant refugee from Rwanda, why the students always came back to the ESL room, he said, “Look at this place. It’s like a home. Who wouldn’t want to come back here? You can see your friends here” (field notes, December 10, 1998). Edouard was not alone in this opinion. Susan and Tom created spaces where the ELLs felt comfortable, safe, and welcome. As a result, these students went to the ESL room whenever possible.

Data Collection and Method of Analysis

The preliminary analysis presented here is based on the following data: a two-page survey (adapted from Penfield, 1987; see Appendix A) distributed to the 48 teachers of academic subjects who currently had ELLs in their classes (35 surveys were returned); semistructured, open-ended interviews (30–50 minutes each; see Appendix B) with 10 teachers (8 mainstream; 2 ESL); and observations of 26 periods (47 minutes each) in the following subjects: science (5), social studies (4), language arts (4), math (3), health (2), general ESL (6), social studies ESL (2). The purpose of the survey was to gain a general understanding of teachers’ perceptions of ELLs and to generate possible areas of focus for interviews and classroom observations.

Description of the context is an important part of case study analysis (Creswell, 1998). We used “contextualizing strategies” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 79) in our analysis; that is, rather than coding the data, we attempted to find relationships between actions and statements in the data within the context in which they occurred. The contextualizing strategy we used in analyzing the interviews and surveys was cross-case analysis: clustering the answers that different respondents gave to the same questions. We also built small individual cases for each teacher based on interviews and classroom observations before comparing beliefs and practices with those of other teachers. As mentioned above, LPP focuses on the types of social engagements necessary for learning. Therefore, in our observations, we looked at the types of participation required by the teachers and initiated by the students. This meant keeping track of who talked when, with whom, and for what purpose.

For triangulation, we compared teachers’ stated beliefs and practices with what we observed in their classrooms. Susan met with us twice after
we had given her an outline of our findings and a copy of her interview transcript.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

We found that teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and practices affected ELLs' access to academic success and resources in three important ways: (a) ELLs' placement in mainstream classes, (b) teachers' expectations of ELLs (i.e., notions of success), and (c) classroom interaction.

Placement of ELLs in Mainstream Classes

The practice. It was common for ELLs to be placed in lower track classes. This practice grew out of Susan's belief that ELLs would feel more comfortable in those classes. When asked to describe how ELLs were placed in mainstream classes, Susan stated that there was "no policy regarding the placement of ELLs in lower track classes" but rather that "it's pretty much an individual prescription" (interview, June 7, 1999); "we always try to place them in a situation [where] they can succeed and which has a good chemistry" (written response, August 5, 1999). In response to our concern (stated in the outline of our findings) that the students seemed to be placed in classes with little consideration of their academic aspirations, Susan stated that she and the counselor did consider students' goals when deciding their course schedules, adding the caveat:

Upon suggestion of the admissions officers at [local university], where most of our kids go to school, they [admissions personnel] feel it is better to have a higher grade on the transcript than it is to have a "college bound" course with a lower grade, hence the lower placement. It is always with the student's approval that this is done. (written response, August 5, 1999)

We did not interview students or their parents, but we feel further information is needed in order to understand how much choice and input the students and parents feel they have. Susan may be underestimating the weight that her advice carries with students and their parents, especially those who are unaccustomed to questioning teachers' knowledge and are unfamiliar with the workings of U.S. high schools.

The lower track classes. Five of the six mainstream teachers in our study taught subjects that had two tracks, and the ELLs were always in the lower track (referred to by teachers as care classes, general classes, or regular classes). Two of the five teachers explicitly described their lower track

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classes as not being for college-bound students. “Earth Science is for the regular kids; general kids, [who] are not going to go to college but need the unit to pass high school” (Mr. Szymanski, interview, May 7, 1999). “English 12 [is] basically your lowest level kids, kids who have a history of failure . . . obviously most of them are not planning on going to college . . . there’s nowhere else for them to go really . . . there’s nowhere else to put them and they have to have English, so that’s why they are in there” (Ms. Federoff, interview, May 7, 1999). However, in these two classes we found five ELLs who were planning to go to college. In fact, the three ELLs in Ms. Federoff’s class had already been accepted to college at the time of this study. In the English 12 class that we observed and that Ms. Federoff described as “typical,” she was explaining the students’ next project: to make a puppet show based on children’s books. During the summer, we ran into Véronique, who had been in English 12 and was currently enrolled in college summer courses. She was finding both the quantity and the level of reading to be very difficult; her comments indicated that she was unprepared for college reading.

Ms. Giles, a social studies teacher, described the difference between students in regular and advanced World Cultures II (10th-grade social studies) class: “What you end up seeing is the interested students take advanced and the nonmotivated students take regular” (interview, May 6, 1999).

We conducted classroom observations in both “general” and “advanced” levels of the same course subject in Earth Science (9th-grade science), World Cultures II, and 10th-grade English. In interviews prior to the observations, teachers mentioned issues related to learning-support students in the general-level courses. “They have learning disabilities, or learning support, a lot of emotional support kids, so you end up with behavior becoming a real issue” (Ms. Giles, interview, May 6, 1999). Mr. Szymanski and Ms. Federoff also mentioned the special needs of the students in their classes. These reports were corroborated by our classroom observations; in the general-level courses, teachers focused more on classroom management—keeping students on task and “selling” the course content. It was common for a few vocal students to dominate the classroom space, sometimes physically (e.g., constantly roaming, roving, touching classmates or their possessions) and often vocally (e.g., shouting out answers, causing digressions). For example, when Mr. Szymanski made a connection between a question about sea scorpions and the worms in the movie Tremors, a student shouted, “Hey, did anyone see Speed II?” Five minutes later, another student shouted, “Hey, look at the bunnies!” and rushed to the window, beckoning to fellow classmates (classroom observation, May 13, 1999). In contrast, in the advanced-level courses, students in group work stayed on task longer, and teachers spent more time attending to content questions. In
Advanced World Cultures II, students were offered opportunities to decide which task to work on. Ms. Kinski, a math teacher, noted that the students in the lowest track math class had so little language that verbal explanations were often left out or severely limited (interview, May 14, 1999).

**The consequences.** The following excerpt from the interview with Mr. Szymanski captures the situation and the academic consequences of placing ELLs in lower track classes.

Mr. S: I find that those [ESL] kids are a heck of a lot more motivated than anybody else in my class, especially the general class. And they always put them in the general class, too. Well, I don’t know if that’s a good place to put them.

Judy: Why?

Mr. S: [after mentioning the learning support and special needs students] So, when you get a mix like that, who gets slighted as far as most kids? It would be the ESL kids because I have to worry about everybody else in class. Those kids are never any problem most of the time. I just feel it’s a disservice to those kids. They need to be, I hate to say it, they need to be all in one room until they learn the language and then split them up. After they have some idea of what’s going on. And most of them are smart, and they shouldn’t be in that earth science class. They should be in Earth Science I [the advanced class].

Judy: So, then if you’re in Earth Science I, it’s easier to get into other science classes later?

Mr. S: Yeah, Earth Science I then you can go to Biology I, then you can take second-year classes, a semester of meteorology, semester of microbiology—if you’re going into biology and stuff like this, in this school. And if you’re in the general track, unless they really learn their English and then do something the following year to show somebody that they can do higher level work, they’re are not going to do higher level work. (interview, May 7, 1999)

If the rationale behind placing students in lower track classes was to make students feel more comfortable or to reduce the linguistic challenge, the strategy failed on both counts: We observed (a) that ELLs tended to be isolated or overlooked in their classes (see below) and (b) that the limited language of lower track classrooms both restricted their access to discipline knowledge (subject-area knowledge) and impeded their English language learning by not providing opportunities to engage in language interactions.

**Teachers’ Expectations of ELLs**

**Criteria for success.** In the individual interviews, we asked teachers, “What does a student need to be successful in your class?” The response given
by Ms. Urbaniak (an English teacher) was typical: “Do their homework and ask questions when they don’t understand. Kids who just hang in there and do their work, pass” (interview, May 20, 1999). The sentiment “just try” was repeated by three other teachers. Thus, the first criterion for success for ELLs in their mainstream classes was whether they expended any effort to accomplish the tasks set for them in the class. Mr. Szymanski stated that the students “need to know English” and Mrs. Daniels (a health teacher) stressed the importance of communication skills (for which she provided structure for all students to develop).

In contrast to Mrs. Daniels, two teachers also mentioned school skills and abilities that they expected students to possess but that the teachers did not feel it was their responsibility to teach. For example, Ms. Giles (social studies) said, “They need to know how to take notes,” but she also added, “but I don’t know how to teach them that” (interview, May 13, 1999). Mr. Smith (science) commented that “they need to know how to ask for help, they need to stop me and say they don’t understand; they need to know they don’t know how to take notes and ask for help” (interview, May 18, 1999), adding that he would take off points when students needed help but did not ask for it.

Susan measured ELLs’ success by the degree of cultural assimilation (i.e., into the high school culture) they were able to attain. She described a Japanese exchange student as “one of the most successful students” because of her involvement in extracurricular activities. This student was “a B-minus student probably,” but “her studies [were] not her priority, so she’s found it to be a very satisfying experience” (interview, June 7, 1999). However, after reading the first draft of our findings, Susan said that upon further consideration of the question, she would say that “one needs to achieve a balance which includes mastery of skills and knowledge (which is measured by the English Placement Test); a demonstrated effort at acculturation and integration; as well as completing tasks and putting forth effort” (written response to draft report, August 5, 1999).

The consequences. One plausible explanation for the teachers’ assertions about success is that teachers were stating beliefs about necessary traits required for success, such as hard work and motivation, rather than outcomes that indicate success, such as mastery of content. In this respect, the teachers’ attitudes reflect core values in U.S. society: attributing individual success to personal effort and hard work. However, our classroom observations confirmed that expectations based on traits and values were foregrounded whereas mastery of content was often not checked or specifically facilitated: As long as ELLs completed the worksheet, with correct or incorrect answers, they were considered to be successful.
These findings reveal the complexity of the issue of defining success for students. All of the teachers in our study expressed concern for the welfare of their students. Indeed, the high percentage of surveys returned (73%) and the complete cooperation of all teachers whom we asked to participate indicate that the faculty at College High were interested in and committed to meeting the needs of the ELLs. They attempted to attend to the affective needs of their students, which most educators would agree is important in learning. However, focusing on the affective needs of students to the exclusion of their cognitive needs has negative consequences.

By acting through the “benevolent conspiracy” (Hatch, 1992, p. 67), that is, attempting to provide a comfortable environment without checking or facilitating the development of academic content knowledge, teachers were effectively blocking access to the acquisition of academic content knowledge. Listening to Véronique’s struggles with college-level reading confirmed that expending effort in a lower track class did not prepare her for the academic challenges ahead of her. Thus, a question for teachers is how to provide a balance of affective support and cognitive challenge.

Classroom Interaction

By classroom interaction we are referring to types of classroom communication patterns and participation structures. Drawing on research in classroom discourse, we looked at the ways language was used in classrooms and the implications for the ELLs in those classrooms. Given our theoretical belief that learning is a socially mediated activity, we adhere to the proposition that SLA is facilitated by opportunities for L2 learners to interact with speakers (native and nonnative) and use the L2 in meaningful ways (Spolsky, 1989). In this study we looked at access to interaction rather than linkages between interaction and SLA. Although we do not equate access with learning, we believe that it is a condition for learning, and without access, learning is impeded. In addition, some forms of classroom interaction can also impede learning, so it is necessary to examine what kind of interaction takes place rather than simply whether interaction occurs.

As mentioned earlier, one purpose of the survey was to generate possible areas of focus for classroom observations. One of the open-ended survey questions asked teachers to describe the interaction of ESL students with other students in their classes. Most respondents (69.7%, or 23 of 33 who answered this question) reported that ELLs had little or no interaction with other students in their classes. Of these, 17 teachers explicitly mentioned interaction (e.g., “usually little or no interaction”), and 6 implicitly indicated limited interaction (e.g., “ESL students are...
polite, sweet but rather shy”). Four teachers indicated that there was little interaction because the ELLs were seen as “different or strange” or “ESL students are usually loners”; “they often remain isolated,” “sometimes secluded from others.” Seven teachers (21%) characterized the interaction as good, though one respondent qualified this somewhat: “limited though positive.”

The surveys and our classroom observations indicated that although there was a range in the quality of ELLs’ interaction in mainstream classes, the dominant pattern was one of limited interaction. In other words, ELLs rarely spoke or were spoken to. It is important to note that the dominant patterns of classroom interaction were different in the regular and in the advanced classrooms we observed. In the latter, students more commonly had choices in managing their own time, opportunities for structured collaborative work, and tasks that were more cognitively demanding but reinforced links between concepts and lexical items (sentence-length or paragraph-length responses rather than the one-word answers on worksheets more common in regular classes). The regular classes were more heavily dominated by the inquiry-response-evaluation pattern, with students doing seat work individually; less collaborative work; and less cognitively demanding work.

In the survey responses, interviews, and observations we noticed that teachers held varying attitudes regarding their role in shaping classroom communities. This ranged from the laissez-faire (“what ever happens, happens”) to a proactive stance: “I have a feeling that he [Edouard] is a little bit left out. He has moved his seat to the back row and I don’t force assigned seats because [very softly] I don’t care [laughs] . . . I just haven’t tried to manage the situation basically. They do it. I trust them, so go ahead” (Ms. Giles, interview, May 6, 1999). We observed three of Ms. Giles’s classes in which there was one ELL. Edouard never spoke during the lecture format, and during group work his desk was physically outside of the small circle of his group. While the other students in his group talked with each other, one girl asked Edouard, “What did you come up with?” in the last 2 minutes of the 30-minute group activity. The teacher went to several groups, checking in and asking questions, but never came over to Edouard’s group (observation, May 12, 1999). This laissez-faire attitude is present in the surveys, placing the responsibility to interact on the ELL: “[There is] very little [interaction] unless they instigate [sic] it” and “[I] try—the other kids make an effort. I wish I could do more.”

Mr. Szymanski, Mr. Smith, and Mrs. Daniels grouped the ELLs together, believing that they would interact with and thus support each other. In these three different classrooms, the ELLs occupied different places: at the back of the room in Mr. Szymanski’s class, in the front row in Mr. Smith’s class, and in the center in Mrs. Daniels’ class. We did not
see these teachers encourage the ELLs to interact with other students but did see them call on the ELLs during class time.

Ms. Kinski took the most proactive stance in helping ELLs interact with classmates. At the beginning of the school year, she arranged the seats in rows—which were eight seats across—and assigned seats with the following pattern: (front row) native speaker, ELL, ELL, native speaker; (second row) same pattern. At one point she told the native speakers that they were responsible for making sure the ELLs understood what was going on, explaining things if necessary and helping them ask questions (interview, May 14, 1999). She said that she felt this worked very well. In our observations, which were toward the end of the school year, Ms. Kinski's class was the only one in which native speakers and ELLs interacted freely. ELLs seemed to have greater access to academic resources in this class, speaking with and engaging in practice with the other members of the learning community (teacher and peers). In addition, although it is beyond the scope of this study to predict or comment on outcomes of this situation, in this classroom the teacher was clearly attempting to attend to both the affective and the cognitive needs of the learners.

The surveys also revealed attitudes about ELLs as “shy,” “timid,” “not talkative,” or “tentative in interacting.” Such attitudes place the burden of interaction on the students while leaving the classroom context unchallenged. For example, in an interview, Ms. Federoff stated that she thought the reason why Vironique was quiet in her class was because of her “very undeveloped language skills” (May 7, 1999). From our work with Véronique throughout the school year, we knew her to be very outspoken on a variety of topics from local employment opportunities for high school students to school policies and actions taken after the shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado that year.

To complement our observations of mainstream classes, we observed 2 consecutive days of Tom’s social studies ESL classes. Seven of the students in this class were in the different mainstream classes that we observed. These same students, who in mainstream classes were very quiet and did not tend to interact with their mainstream classmates, demonstrated that they were not shy, quiet, or “tentative in interacting.” When Tom asked questions to the whole group, many of the students would raise hands or shout out answers. They also would stop Tom when they did not understand his meaning, and they joked with Tom and each other. They demonstrated that they did know how to interact in U.S. classrooms. We remembered a comment by Véronique in December. She said she never spoke in her mainstream classes, but she did speak in the ESL room because “nobody laughs at your English here” (field notes, December 10, 1998).
The consequences. One consequence of students' limited interaction in their mainstream classes is that access to academic resources and success was impeded. If students' academic English language proficiency is to develop, they need numerous opportunities to interact in substantive, meaningful ways with others (i.e., native and nonnative speakers). As Johnson (1995) points out, students must have opportunities to use multiple aspects (social, cognitive, cultural, linguistic, and paralinguistic features) of the new language, and "paradoxically, to acquire this knowledge, they must participate in interpersonal interaction in the language, but without this knowledge, their chances for such interactions remain limited" (p. 52). Students are placed in lower track classes because of the belief that the reduced linguistic challenges will benefit them. However, the reduced language restricts their language development, and the special needs of their native speaker classmates result in the ELLs being effectively hidden from their teachers.

It is also worth reiterating that the type of interaction as well as the quantity is important. For example, in Tom's classroom, students appeared to achieve his stated goal of their becoming more comfortable participating orally in class (interview, May 25, 1999). However, it was unclear how the content or the interaction would help students' proficiency in academic language. Again, this points to the complexity of the students' needs. Clearly, the ELLs enjoyed being in Tom's classroom, and the way he spoke of these students indicated a sincere concern for their well-being. All students could benefit from having such caring teachers. However, Tom seemed to be emphasizing the affective to the exclusion of the cognitive needs of the ELLs. This imbalance could have been due partly to his lack of understanding of their linguistic needs, as he did not have a background in SLA. Appropriate grounding in SLA could help Tom build on his pedagogical strengths to develop new strategies for effectively addressing both affective and cognitive needs of students.

Thus, the three areas—placement, expectations, and interaction—overlap to construct a context in which access to academic content knowledge and academic English proficiency were impeded. Lack of an academic focus in the ESL program exacerbated the problem.

IMPLICATIONS

Our study indicates that the ELLs at College High were being denied access to academic success and resources (even though the denial was cloaked in a discourse of well-meaning concern). There are no quick fixes, for many of these practices are embedded in larger structural issues. For example, Pennsylvania does not have an ESL or bilingual certification for teachers, thus making it easier for College High to hire an ESL teacher with no background in SLA. College admission policies
that favor an empty A over a B or C in a course more appropriate for college-bound students also work against ELLs.

Our findings raise more questions than they answer for College High, a school that prides itself on its academic achievement yet seems to have left out the ELLs. One crucial issue, then, is who defines success for these students, how that success is defined, and what the consequences of such definitions are. When schools equate success with level of comfort rather than with the meeting of students' affective and cognitive learning needs, those schools foreclose students' opportunities for learning. A discussion of success that included academic opportunities would challenge the school community to face up to lowered expectations of the bi- and multilingual population. The discussion would also address the issue of equal access to educational opportunity. Collier and Thomas (1999) recommend that programs aim for parity between the average test scores of ELLs when they leave school and the average test scores of their native-English-speaking counterparts.

Parents and students should be included in the process of defining success (Nieto, 1996, pp. 17–18) and redesigning appropriate curriculum (Cummins, 1996). Engaging the whole school community in this conversation and critically examining notions of success could lead to a better understanding of the learning needs of ELLs in the classroom and appropriate instructional strategies to address them. We hope that our work will help stimulate this discussion.

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REFERENCES


**APPENDIX A**

**Survey**

How many English as a second language (ESL) students are in your classes? ______________

Please list the course subjects you teach that have ESL students: ___________________________

How many years have you been teaching? ______________
How much experience have you had with ESL students in your classes? (Check one.)
_____ This is my first year with ESL students.
_____ I have had ESL students in my classes for ________ years.

Do you think some subjects are easier than others to teach ESL students? No ___ Yes___

If yes, which subject do you think is easiest to teach ESL students? ___________________________

And, which subject do you think is the most difficult to teach ESL students? ______________________

When ESL students have difficulty doing well in your courses, what are some of the problems they have?

When ESL students do very well in your courses, what are some of the strategies/abilities that facilitate their success?

How would you describe the interaction of ESL students with other students in your classes?

How important are the following factors for ESL students' success in mainstream classes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>______</th>
<th>______</th>
<th>______</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English proficiency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting to a new culture</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic status of the family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual motivation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous schooling/level of schooling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In what ways do you communicate with the parents of ESL students?

Which of the following would help you most in dealing more effectively with ESL students?

___ Better communication between ESL and mainstream teachers
___ More time to adapt regular assignments / lessons to ESL students
___ Techniques on how to teach content to ESL students
___ More familiarity with materials for ESL students
___ Information about cultures represented by ESL students
___ Other: ____________________________________________

Which subjects or skills do you think the ESL teacher should teach during ESL class?

What is the role of the ESL teacher as you see it?

Have you had any in-service or preservice training related to ESL students in mainstream classes? ___No ___ Yes

If yes, what? _____________________________________________________________________________

If no, are you interested in knowing more about this issue? ___No ___ Yes

If you are interested in knowing more about issues related to ESL students in mainstream classes, which of the following would be most useful for you?

___ an in-service report
___ an article or report
___ other: _________________________________________________

Please write below any comments/concerns you would like to add.
(adapted from Penfield, 1987)
APPENDIX B

Interview Schedule

How long have you been teaching?

Can you tell us about the course subject, the scope, and the overall objectives?

How are students placed in this class? (Who is eligible to take this class?)

What does an English language learner need to do in order to be successful in your class?

Can you tell us about some of the experiences you’ve had with ELLs in your classroom?

Are there any specific challenges that ELLs face in this class? (Any specific challenges posed by the content?)

What is the role of the textbook in your class?

Is note-taking important?

If the ELLs have the textbook, is that enough for them to get help from an ESL teacher or parent?

How do you use other materials (videos, dittos, etc.)?

How about evaluation—what kind of criteria do you use for the students’ work?

Do you use the same criteria for the ELLs?

Have you noticed any change over the year in ELLs’ performance or understanding?

Is there anything related to this issue that you’re interested in knowing more about?

[for the ESL teachers] How does the ESL program/your class help students be successful in their mainstream classes?

Authors’ address: 42 Fairmont Street, Belmont, MA 02178 USA.
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Judy Sharkey; Carolyn Layzer
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**References**

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Elsa Roberts Auerbach; Denise Burgess
Stable URL: [http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0039-8322%28198509%2919%3A3%3C475%3ATHCOSE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0039-8322%28198509%2919%3A3%3C475%3ATHCOSE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E)

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