

# Serving English Language Learners: Placing Learners Learning on Center Stage

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*In this article, Brock uses two vignettes to illustrate issues important for teachers working with English language learners in their classrooms.*

The population of children who do not speak English as their first language has increased dramatically in the United States (August & Hakuta, 1997; Genesee, 1994). While children from a wide variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds will comprise from 75% to nearly 100% of the student enrollment in America's 15 largest school systems in the next few years, it is also important to note as well that enrollment of children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds has increased in many states and cities across the nation (Cummins, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1995).

Scholars argue that quality bilingual programs staffed by qualified teachers can provide optimal learning contexts for English language learners (Cummins, 1994; Garcia, 1990; Krashen, 1998). Unfortunately, there is a shortage of qualified bilingual teachers and programs. In fact, the vast majority of the teaching force in the United States is composed of European American women from lower-middle- to middle-class backgrounds (Florio-Ruane, Raphael, Glazier, McVee, & Wallace, 1997). Consequently, monolingual European American teachers—who may lack the requisite training and expertise—are called upon to serve increasing numbers of English language learners. While monolingual European American teachers cannot take the place of qualified bilingual teachers, there is much that those of us who are monolingual teachers can learn in order to improve the educational opportunities of the English language learners in our classrooms.

This article<sup>1</sup> is divided into three major sections. In the first section, I focus on important background information for working with English language learners. In the second section, I use two vignettes to illustrate some important issues that teachers may wish to consider when making instructional decisions with their English language learners. In the third and final section, I step back from the vignettes to explore best practices for working with English language learners.

## **WORKING WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS**

Learning to serve English language learners involves (a) knowing about the second language acquisition process, (b) maintaining high academic expectations for English language

learners, and (c) valuing the linguistic and cultural backgrounds that English language learners bring to our classrooms.

### **The Second Language Acquisition Process**

Acquiring a second language is a long and complex process (Collier, 1989). According to Collier (1989) it takes from five to seven years for most children to become proficient in a second language. However, not surprisingly, a host of factors contribute to the complexity of the second language acquisition process and to the length of time that it takes to become proficient in a second language (Krashen, 1985). For example, a child's competence in her first language significantly affects the amount of time it takes for her to become proficient in her second language. Scholars suggest that if a child has had excellent academic preparation in her first language, the literacy proficiencies and academic competence in her first language will transfer to her second language (Cummins, 1994; Farnan, Flood, & Lapp, 1994). Other factors such as desire and motivation to learn the second language, the nature of participants' interactions in classrooms as communities of practice, the complex interplay of power relations between teachers and students, and teacher attitude and expectations contribute to the length and complexity of the process of acquiring a second language (Angelil-Carter, 1997; Cummins, 1994; Krashen, 1998; Toohey, 1998).

The issue of what it means for children to become proficient in their second language is one of utmost importance for educators to consider. Cummins (1994) makes an important and useful distinction between conversational competence and academic competence in second language acquisition. Conversational competence involves the ability to use the new language to engage in "small talk" such as greeting others and talking about the weather. Cummins (1994) maintains that children often acquire conversational competence in their second language within a year of learning the new language. Conversational competence, however, is very different from the kind of academic language competence required to understand science, social studies, and mathematics concepts in a new language. Cummins (1994) argues that acquiring academic competence in a new language takes many years. Moreover, it is important for us to be aware that English language learners need considerable support in order to develop complex academic understandings in their new language. Without sustained and adequate support, English language learners can fall behind in subject matter learning while they are in the long process of acquiring academic competence in their new language.

### **Maintaining High Expectations and Valuing English Language Learners**

Although the process of acquiring academic competence in a second language is a lengthy one that requires us to extend considerable support to the second language learner, it is crucial that we not lower our expectations of what the English

language learner is capable of. Lack of English proficiency does not indicate lack of cognitive capability or potential (Au, 1993). We must uphold high expectations for our English language learners and provide the necessary academic support to help them meet those expectations (Delpit, 1995). Additionally, we must help all of our children—including our English language learners—to set high academic expectations for themselves (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). As Bloome (1986) convincingly argues, our expectations for our children are crucial; our expectations affect student learning by preparing some children to be managers and others to be managed.

An important contribution that we can make to the learning of English language learners is to value, respect, and acknowledge the languages and cultures that they bring to our classrooms (Au, 1993; Lake, 1990; Nieto, 1992). We have known for some time that the tone a teacher sets in her classroom has a significant impact on the learning that occurs there (McDermott, 1977). In fact, in his seminal work completed over a quarter century ago, Rist (1970) asserted that trust and accountability deeply affect a child's capacity to learn. In short, those of us who are European American educators must think carefully about our expectations for English language learners and about the ways in which we facilitate interactions in our classrooms. Our expectations and the nature of the interactions we foster in our classrooms play a significant role in children's opportunities for learning (Gee, 1996).

### **LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: LESSONS FROM CHILDREN**

Several years ago, Jean Lave won the prestigious Sylvia Scribner Award presented by Division C (Learning & Instruction) of the American Educational Research Association. In her acceptance speech, Lave (1996) made many insightful comments about teaching and learning. I was taken aback, however, by several of her comments. I introduce some of those comments here and draw on them to frame the remainder of this paper. Lave (1996) said:

A close reading of research on how to improve learning shows that questions about learning are almost always met by educational researchers with investigations of teaching. *This disastrous shortcut equates learning with teaching.* It reduces teaching to narrowly specific prescriptions for what should be transplanted into the heads of kids. *It takes the teacher out of the teaching.* It reduces teaching to curriculum, to strategies or recipes for organizing kids to know some target knowledge. *It also takes learners learning out of the picture.* (p. 158, italics added)

By cautioning educators not to equate learning with teaching, Lave (1996) alerted me to the seductive—but potentially disastrous—tendency to assume that what I teach is what my children actually learn. By warning educators to not take the

teacher out of teaching, Lave (1996) reminded me that I should devote attention to the “what” of teaching (i.e., my beliefs about effective literacy teaching and learning, and the educative nature of my interactions with children) rather than the “how” of teaching (i.e., the materials, strategies, and curriculum). Finally, when Lave talked about not taking learners learning out of the picture, she reminded me that I must place emphasis on the business of what, how, if, when, and why learners learn. After all, what I teach is of little use unless it effectively facilitates my students’ learning.

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I began to ponder how Lave’s (1996) ideas might be used to think about “best practices” for working with English language learners. I wondered what it would actually look like to highlight learners learning, to not equate teaching with learning, and to focus on what the teacher does rather than on materials, frameworks, or strategies. In the remainder of this section, I draw on several vignettes to explore what it means to look closely at learners learning, teachers teaching, and the dangers that can arise by equating teaching with learning. The vignettes are based on detailed stories of two learners: Mei, a child from Vietnam; and Deng, a Hmong child from Laos. Additionally, I couch discussions of both vignettes in the context of related literature.

**MEI: A SECOND LANGUAGE  
LEARNER AS TEACHER**

Mei came to the United States from Vietnam when she was in third grade. She had gone to school for several years in Vietnam prior to emigrating to the U.S., and she spoke only Vietnamese when she arrived in the United States. Mei was a participant in various research projects from Grades 3 through 6. In one longitudinal study (Raphael & Brock, 1993), Mei’s participation from Grades 3 through 5 in a literature-based program called Book Club was explored (see McMahon & Raphael with Goatley & Pardo, 1997 for more information about Book Club).

The Book Club program includes daily reading, writing, instruction, and opportunities to talk in small peer-led discussions. In January of Mei’s fourth-grade year (after she had only been in the U.S. for about a year and a half—which means that she was in the initial stages of gaining academic competency in English according to Cummins, 1994) Mei and her small group of peers began to discuss relationships between the text they were reading and the experiences of Mei’s family in the years since the Vietnam War. As the various, small, Book Club

groups finished their discussions for the day, they began to migrate over to Mei’s group to listen to Mei talk about her family’s experiences in Vietnam. Soon, the teacher and almost all of the students in class were attentively listening as Mei talked about her life experiences and as she related them to the text she had been reading (Raphael & Brock, 1993).

Stepping back a bit, you might ask what this scenario has to do with (a) teachers teaching and (b) learners learning. First, Mei’s teacher made a crucial instructional decision by following the lead of her children regarding the manner in which Mei’s storytelling moment played out. Typically, in the Book Club framework, the teacher brings the whole class together and directs a large-group discussion after the children have had the opportunity to talk in their small groups. Mei’s teacher made a conscious decision to step away from the “typical” framework and to assume the role of student as Mei taught the class about her experiences in Vietnam. Mei’s teacher was clearly more concerned with facilitating meaningful, quality interactions than with merely implementing the Book Club framework!

Second what did Mei learn? What did her classmates and teacher learn? Mei had the opportunity to assume a leadership role in her classroom; she learned that she had important ideas to teach others. Moreover, all class participants—including Mei—saw that her knowledge and experiences were valued by her peers and her teacher. As is emphasized in the first section of this article, valuing children’s languages and cultures can facilitate their learning opportunities (Au, 1993; Lake, 1990; Nieto, 1992). Additionally, even though Mei was still in the process of acquiring academic proficiency in English, she used her new language to communicate for a real purpose to an audience interested in what she had to say. Gee (1996) argues that learning a language requires much more than merely learning the form, or grammar, of the language; rather, learning a language involves understanding and engaging effectively in the cultural practices in which that language is embedded. Finally, this vignette illustrates how a teacher can facilitate the development of children’s academic competence in English. Myriad opportunities, such as the opportunity that Mei and her teacher constructed in Mei’s classroom, to experiment with meaningful language use may serve to facilitate the process of acquiring academic competence in English (Cummins, 1994; Gee, 1996).

Much work has been done on the manner in which different participation structures—and ways of interacting within those different participation structures—can have on the nature of the language used in the classroom. As well, the nature of language use merits serious consideration because language use in classrooms shapes children’s learning opportunities. For example, Au’s (1980) work pertaining to Hawaiian “talk story” showed that when teachers interacted with native Hawaiian children during small reading group instruction in ways that were consistent with the ways in which the children interacted at home, the children’s reading comprehension increased significantly. That is, when teachers allowed children to orally

co-construct their ideas and interpretations of stories rather than waiting passively to be called on one at a time by the teacher, native Hawaiian children's comprehension of the stories improved.

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470 In her anthropological work on the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon, Philips (1972) showed that there were significant differences between the ways in which Native American children interacted in their communities and the ways in which teachers and other students in the local school system interacted. This mismatch between ways of interacting as well as the lack of knowledge that each group had about the other group's ways of interacting contributed, in large part, to the Native American children's lack of school success. For example, during whole-group instruction, European American, middle-class students typically raised their hands and sought the teacher's attention when they had knowledge to display that pertained to the teacher's questions. Native American children did not interact and use language in this way because, in their culture, setting oneself above and apart from others in such a manner was considered prideful and boastful. Consequently, the European American teachers often considered their Native American students to be uninterested in or incapable of participating in ongoing class discussions.

Clearly, the ways in which teachers structure classroom interactions, advocate for the use of language within and across those participation structures, and interpret children's interactions within and across those structures impacts the learning opportunities that occur in classrooms (Cazden, 1988; Florio-Ruane, 1989). Because Mei's teacher was open to structuring her classroom literacy lessons in ways that allowed the children to be active participants in the classroom community, Mei had the opportunity to teach her peers and teacher about her life experiences in Vietnam and to relate those experiences to the children's book that the class was reading. Capitalizing on the languages and cultures that English language learners have to offer—rather than viewing their backgrounds and experiences as deficit because they differ from the life experiences of the monolingual English-speaking children in American elementary school classrooms—can promote powerful learning experiences for all members of a classroom community, including the teacher.

**DENG: TEACHING DOES  
NOT EQUAL LEARNING**

Deng is a Hmong child who was born in Laos in the 1980s. Deng and his family escaped from Laos and lived in Thai refugee camps for three years prior to emigrating to the

United States. Upon arriving in America, Deng spoke Hmong, Lao, and Thai, and he knew a few English words. Deng entered U.S. schools at the end of his third-grade year. I met Deng at the beginning of fifth-grade just over a year after he arrived in America, and I spent his fifth- and sixth-grade years collaborating with him to study his literacy learning in school (see Brock, 1997, for a fuller description of Deng's literacy learning). While Deng and I discovered a lot about his literacy learning over the course of two years, one event that occurred in his fifth-grade classroom stands out as particularly educative. I call that event *The Hand Scene*. After providing important background information, I will describe the event and its significance.

There were 23 children in Deng's fifth-grade classroom; about half of Deng's classmates were European American, one-third of the children were African American, and the remaining children were Hispanic and Asian American. Deng's European American teacher, Mrs. Weber, had been an elementary school teacher for nearly 30 years. She was recognized by her principal and district administrators as a being caring, competent professional who continually strove to grow as a professional. She was doing graduate work at a nearby university, and she was working on university and public school literacy-related research teams.

Mrs. Weber used a combination of materials and approaches in her literacy instruction. While she did use the district adopted basal series, her children also engaged in a variety of different novel study projects across the year. For example, one novel-study project conducted in mid-year involved an all-encompassing, interdisciplinary, thematic unit whereby Mrs. Weber and her teaching partner linked almost all subjects across the day to a month-long study of Japan. The final novel-study of the year in Mrs. Weber's classroom was a smaller scale project that focused on one of Mrs. Weber's favorite children's books entitled *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990). Prior to beginning the study, Mrs. Weber's children engaged in several activities to remind them about famous African Americans and issues that they had studied during Black History Month. For example, the class listened to and discussed an audiotape of Dr. Martin Luther King delivering his "I Have a Dream" speech. During these initial activities, Mrs. Weber also introduced several important themes—including those of racism and prejudice—that she wanted to focus on during the study of the novel *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990).

The novel study involved a total of 18 lessons. Most of the lessons were approximately 40 minutes long. Mrs. Weber would sit on a chair in a large open area of the classroom each day and the children would bring their chairs to the same area placing their chairs in a semi-circle about Mrs. Weber. Throughout each lesson, the group alternately read and discussed small portions of the novel. The tone of the whole-group discussion was informal. Each day, Mrs. Weber read aloud and then chose different children to read aloud each day. She told many personal stories that related to the lives of the characters, events in the

text, and so forth. Students also told personal stories about connections between their lives and the text. Mrs. Weber asked the children many questions as they read and discussed the book, and students typically responded to her questions informally without raising their hands. Six times during those 18 lessons, Mrs. Weber had the students either talk in small peer-led groups or write in a journal about the story they were reading.

All 18 of the lessons pertaining to *Maniac Magee* were audio- and videotaped. Although I analyzed all 18 of the lessons, I studied very closely with Deng a subset of five of the lessons that were chosen from a variety of times, settings, and contexts. I enlisted Deng's help by taking videotapes of the five lessons to his house and, with the assistance of a Hmong/English interpreter named Vue, Deng gave an ongoing commentary in Hmong and/or English of what he interpreted to be happening during the lessons in which he had participated. When Deng wished to comment on a lesson, he stopped the videotape to talk; thus, he was in control of when, how, and what we discussed as we watched the five lessons in question.

One of the places Deng stopped a videotaped lesson was at the Hand Scene Episode that is the focus of this section. I briefly describe what occurred in Deng's classroom during the Hand Scene Episode, then I discuss Deng's interpretation of the event. Finally, I comment on the event and Deng's interpretation of it.

At the point in the lesson when the target event occurred, *Maniac Magee*, the main character—a homeless, European American boy—had unofficially been adopted by the Beals—an African American family—who lived on the east end of a town called Two Mills, Pennsylvania. Maniac noticed that the people on the East End of town referred to themselves as black. Mrs. Weber read the excerpt below about Maniac's perceptions of those around him:

Maniac loved the colors of the East End, the people colors. For the life of him, he couldn't figure why these East Enders called themselves black. He kept looking and looking, and the colors he found were gingersnap and light fudge and dark fudge and acorn and butter rum and cinnamon and burnt orange. But never licorice, which, to him, was real black. (Spinelli, 1990, p. 51)

Mrs. Weber paused shortly after reading the above segment and told the children that it was a significant passage. She explained that Maniac did not see people in categories of "black" and "white"; rather, he literally saw variations of shades of skin colors of all people. Figuratively, he saw people as individuals. He did not place people in categories called "black" and "white" and then assign stereotypical attributes to each category.

As the class discussed this notion of skin tones, Mrs. Weber asked the children to move off of their chairs to the center of the semi-circle and put their hands out. Because the children in class were from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds, there was an astonishing array of different skin tones on the hands that appeared in the center of the circle. Mrs. Weber

talked with the children about the different colors of their hands and ended the episode by saying, "I have the feeling that the author wants you to know that Maniac spends time looking at the person rather than at the skin tone" (Brock, 1997, p. 121).

As Deng watched the videotape of his class participating in this event, he stopped the videotape of the lesson, and asked a question:

DENG: What is she mean put your hand out?

[Deng and Vue spoke in Hmong so that Vue could clarify what Deng was asking, and then the following discussion ensued:]

VUE: She . . . she mentioned something about, like, put your hand out and stuff like that, and he doesn't understand. He wants to know what it means.

CINDY: [Looking at Deng.] What does it mean for . . . are you asking what does it mean to put your hand out, or why is she asking you to do it?

DENG: Why is she asking?

CINDY: Ohhh. Good question, why is she asking the kids to do it? Can I, could I let you watch it for the next couple of minutes and then you can tell me why, and what you think about that, and then we can talk about it a little bit?

DENG: Yeah.

We resumed playing the videotape of the lesson. After the discussion segment of the Hand Scene was over, we continued our earlier conversation. I asked Deng why he thought the teacher had asked the children to hold out their hands:

DENG: Because the teacher want to know the black and the white people their hands, what color are their hands.

CINDY: Are there any other reasons?

DENG: Because the teacher want to know what color the kids in the classroom are?

Deng and Vue then began speaking in Hmong, and a few minutes later Deng added that the teacher wanted the black people and the white people to be friends and not fight. I asked Deng if he thought of that idea by himself or if Vue helped him think of it, and Vue responded, "Actually, I just gave him some ideas. He knows that too, but I just gave him some ideas."

This exchange around the viewing of the Hand Scene is fascinating for a variety of reasons. First, Deng identified this activity as being confusing to him. It wasn't clear to him why Mrs. Weber wanted the children to look at and discuss the different shades of their hands. Even after viewing the entire discussion segment, Deng believed that Mrs. Weber had asked the children to engage in the activity so that she could see the colors of their hands. Recall earlier that during the lesson, Mrs.

Weber asked the children to put their hands in the center of the circle so that she could "see the colors of their hands." Deng seemed to interpret her use of the word "see" literally; he thought she really wanted to just "look at" the different colors of children's hands. Thus, Deng made a literal reading of the episode. Others, however, (including the teacher, Vue, and me) saw the incident figuratively: That is, those individuals privy to a particular way of schooling (i.e., the expectation that one thinks figuratively about "texts") knew that the activity was not about the teacher seeing colors.

One potential explanation for Deng's interpretation of the Hand Scene may be that he did not understand the issue of racism in America—particularly the story of racism between blacks and whites. Consequently, his understanding of racism may be significantly different from those children who know about racism in America. A key point is that the cultural cues that children draw on to make sense of texts can vary significantly and have a tremendous impact on the ways in which they read texts—including the actual books they read and the class interactions around those books. Whatever Deng's interpretation had brought to bear on his take on the Hand Scene, however, this difference in "seeing" or interpreting school-related events could signal a crucial difference between English language learners such as Deng being "in" the system and knowing what's intended and their not knowing what is intended and simply participating on the margins (Brock, 1997).

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**We can help our children to learn  
to monitor their own understandings.**

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Interestingly, I was in Deng's classroom taking fieldnotes as the Hand Scene was actually unfolding. My initial response to the unfolding moment was that it was an impressive and powerful learning event for the students. Mrs. Weber had, in my opinion, masterfully related events in the story to students' personal lives. By having the children compare their own skin colors, she drew the children in to Spinelli's (1990) discussion about different shades of skin color and the problems of attributing people's character to the color of their skin. Through this discussion, she also discussed with her students important ethical and moral issues pertaining to racism and prejudice. Finally, by the manner in which she helped the children interact with the story, Mrs. Weber seemed to be striving to help the children to personally connect with the events and people in the story. In my initial interpretation of this event, I focused on the nature of the strategies and activities that constitute "good teaching." I left the learner (i.e., Deng) out of learning and equated teaching with learning. Clearly, while this event may have been a powerful learning experience for some children, it was not for Deng. He did not understand the event or its significance.

When I share The Hand Scene Episode with colleagues, I am often asked what the teacher might have done to help Deng. One of my first responses is that we need to monitor continually individual children's understandings in our classes. We can also help our children to learn to monitor their own understandings and those of their peers. In Deng's case, almost all instruction in the novel study was in a whole group—there were very limited opportunities for writing or small-group discussions. Moreover, Deng never voluntarily spoke in any whole-group lessons. Consequently, Mrs. Weber did not have a window into Deng's thinking and understanding during most of the novel unit. My second response to that difficult question of what the teacher might have done follows from my first. Children need myriad meaningful, daily opportunities to write and talk. This not only facilitates their own learning, but it helps the teacher and other class members gain access to each individual child's thinking and understanding. It is through these daily, meaningful, and guided opportunities to write and talk that children can engage effectively in the long and arduous process of acquiring academic competence in English (Cummins, 1994; Gee, 1996).

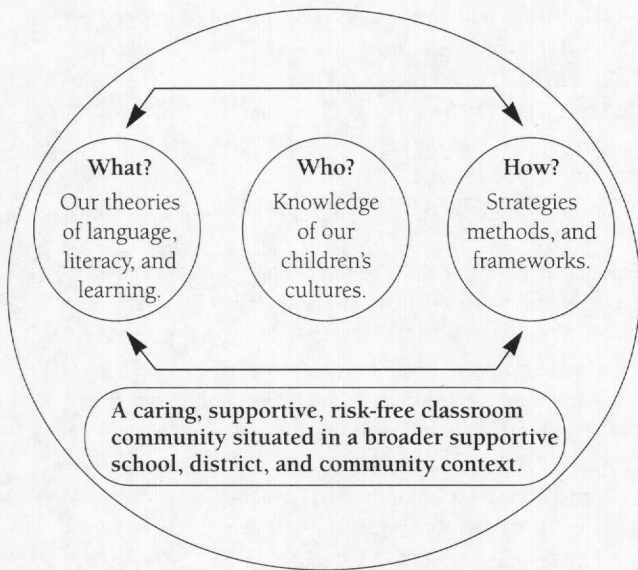
In her discussion on the topic of accommodating diversity, Clay (1998) says:

The mismatch between what schools require and the individual diversity of learners has been accepted as inevitable and institutionalized in school systems. The delivery system for education is group or whole-class instruction because societies believe they cannot afford to instruct individuals, so classes are instructed. But classes do not learn. Only individuals learn. (p. 223)

Equating teaching with learning is a seductive trap that is easy, for me at least, to fall into. Powerfully worded images like Lave's (1996) notion of the disaster of equating teaching with learning and Clay's admonition that individuals, not classes, learn can help to shake me from that comfortably coded cultural practice of attending to teaching and the group rather than learning and the individual. Re-centering the learner—as I did in the study with Deng—by listening to him and realizing that he had a perspective that I needed to attend to also helps me to place my focus on individual learners learning rather than the generic act of teaching.

**STEPPING BACK FROM THE STORIES  
AND PONDERING BEST PRACTICES  
FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

How might these vignettes and the research of others inform us about best practices for working with English language learners? Figure 1 illustrates key domains that I have discussed thus far that merit attention when considering best practices for English language learners. These domains include attending to (a) who we teach, (b) how we teach, (c) what we teach, as well as (d) the nature of the educational community we



**Figure 1.** Important domains for determining best practices for working with English Language Learners, as developed from ideas in Compton-Hall (1998).<sup>2</sup>

construct with our students and others. In actuality, I believe that these domains are intricately intertwined; however, for the sake of discussion I tease these domains apart.

*Attending to Who We Teach.* Knowledge of the second language acquisition process and knowledge of the individual life experiences and the cultural backgrounds of each of the children we serve is crucial for effectively serving English language learners (Geertz, 1973). For example, Mei's teachers realized that Mei needed ongoing, long-term, meaningful opportunities to use language in order to acquire English. Thus, over the three years we studied Mei's literacy learning in her elementary classrooms, her teachers provided daily opportunities for her to use her new language in ways that were meaningful to her as well as others in her classroom. Moreover, as was illustrated in the vignette presented earlier, Mei's fourth-grade teacher was willing to alter typical classroom participation patterns in order to give Mei an opportunity to teach others what she knew. Thus, Mei's teacher demonstrated one important way that we can learn about the life experiences and cultures of our English language learners: We can thoughtfully listen to our children (Erickson & Shultz, 1992).

*Attending to How We Teach.* The frameworks, strategies, participation structures, and methods we employ in our teaching are important only insofar as they facilitate the learning of the individual children that we serve in our classrooms. For example, as illustrated with the Hand Scene Episode involving Deng and his classmates, while the whole-group reading, discussion, and demonstration format may have been helpful for

some children in Deng's fifth-grade classroom, it was not very helpful for him.

In my own teaching, I often find myself easily ensnared in the trap of assuming that particular frameworks or activities are the answers to my questions about how to facilitate the learning of English language learners. I must continually remind myself that I have to look to learners learning to determine whether or not my teaching is "working."

*Attending to What We Teach.* As an educator, I must recognize that my personal and evolving belief systems or theories about language, literacy, and learning shape the instructional decisions that I make about all aspects of my work with children. That is, my personal beliefs shape what I choose to "teach" my children, how I choose to teach my children, and my perceptions of who my children are as learners. If I believe, as Mei's fourth-grade teacher did, that children learn best when they have ongoing opportunities to engage in effectively mediated social interactions with others (including teachers and peers) in their classrooms, then I will structure my classroom to facilitate these types of interactions. If I believe, as Mei's fourth-grade teacher did, that I must constantly assess my children's developing thinking by responding to their writing and oral discussions daily, then I will make daily ongoing observation and response a part of my classroom instruction.

*Attending to Community Context in Educating English Language Learners.* The classroom communities we create shape the nature of the learning that occurs there (Au, 1993; Delpit, 1995; McDermott, 1977). For example, Mei's fourth-grade teacher worked with her children to develop a community where, daily, students talked to students, and students and teacher talked with one another. Additionally, in Mei's classroom community it was acceptable to alter the participation structure in order to promote the learning of all classroom participants. Moreover, at times, a child could be the one to alter the participation structure. Thus, effective classroom communities for English language learners are caring, collaborative, and supportive places where taking risks is okay—and even encouraged.

It is crucial to note, however, that classrooms are situated in schools, districts, communities, states, and regions. It is important for us to attend to the broader layers of communities in which our classrooms are situated because those broader communities can have a direct impact on our classroom communities. For example, school district priorities and state and national mandates can directly affect the materials and services that are available for the instruction of English language learners (Krashen, 1998; August & Hakuta, 1997).

Recently, in an undergraduate literacy course, my students and I read and discussed Allington and Walmsley's (1995) book *No Quick Fix*. Our discussions of the book yielded two important themes in the book that relate to making decisions about what we teach and the community contexts in which we teach. First, we must constantly question beliefs (our own and others') by asking ourselves questions such as: How are our

current beliefs about language, literacy, and learning affecting our children's learning? Second, we should constantly question the systems, structures, and communities in which we are operating by asking ourselves questions like: Are our systems, structures, and communities serving effectively the individual children we teach?

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I conclude with three general comments and a quote from Jean Lave (1996). First, best practices for second language learners do not take the teacher out of teaching by placing emphasis primarily on materials, curriculums, frameworks, and strategies. Second, best practices do not equate teaching with learning. That is, what I do as a teacher is only useful if it facilitates the learning of each of my students. Third, best practices do focus on individual learners learning. This means I must know and attend to the language acquisition process that my English language learners are undergoing. Moreover, I must strive to understand their individual backgrounds and respective cultures.

I draw on Lave (1996) for a final thought about educating English language learners. When contemplating best practices "it seems useful to begin with learners, because they constitute the working conditions for teaching rather than the other way around" (Lave, 1996, p. 159). ●

### Notes

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2. This figure is based on ideas discussed in Compton-Hall (1998) and in a collaborative conversation with the following colleagues: Nancy Anderson, Margaret Compton-Hall, and Claudia Haag.

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