

APPLIED LINGUISTICS RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

Balancing the Social-Emotional and Academic Needs of English Language Learner and  
Immigrant Students

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Applied Linguistics Research and Reflection: Balancing the Social-Emotional and Academic  
Needs of English Language Learner and Immigrant Students

**Statement of the Problem**

As a teacher at Jane Stenson School, I work with students from many different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Historically a community of predominantly middle-class, Jewish families, Skokie School District 68 now services speakers of over 50 native languages and recently has seen an influx in the number of refugee and immigrant families. I enrolled in Loyola University's English Language and Teaching Master's Program to grow as an educator of English language learners (ELL) and learn about the policies and historical context that affect education for ELL students in today's classrooms.

Throughout my time at Loyola, I have learned strategies to meet the needs of a diverse class and the importance of helping my students maintain their identity and culture in the classroom. Last January, a student transferred into my classroom from Iraq. She spoke a small amount of English and was unfamiliar with the school setting and routines of the United States school system. During this time, the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and I collaborated on ways to meet her social-emotional needs and make her welcome and comfortable in the school setting. Per district 68 policy, all students labeled as ELL receive daily ESL instruction with an ESL teacher through a pull-out method. The length and frequency of sessions varies by student growth and progress. Because this student was a newcomer, she received the required 90 minutes of ESL instruction daily as stated in school policy. Due to these policies and her difficulties to complete the same academic work as the rest of the students, it was challenging to make her feel comfortable and welcome in the classroom.

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I began to wonder how I could continue to meet her social and emotional needs, while at the same time balancing her academic needs as well. Unfortunately, this student only attended Jane Stenson School for a few weeks before her family moved again. However, this situation made me realize that with the growing number of immigrant and refugee families in Skokie, my colleagues and I need to better prepare ourselves for working with ELL and immigrant students. Therefore, for my language problem, I delved deeper into how teachers can balance the academic and social-emotional needs of ELL and immigrant students in the classroom. In the next section, I review the related literature to this language problem by beginning with a broad lens on immigration and then focusing in on school and classroom practice necessary to meet the needs of ELL students in the classroom.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Broad Lens on Immigration**

To begin my research on how to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of ELL and immigrant students, I first explored the challenges and social needs that immigrant students may face in the community. In order to educate students in the classroom, teachers need to first understand the needs and emotional feelings that students may be experiencing and bring into the school setting.

Rothe and Pumareiga's (2010) work focuses on immigrant families and their social-emotional needs within the community. According to the authors, the United States has the highest number of immigrants and refugees in the world and therefore an increasing need for community services to meet the demands of the rapidly changing population. These immigrants and refugees experience stressors such as loss of language and family support (extended and

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nuclear), discrimination, multiple moves, new customs and schools, and the conflicts of values and beliefs. These stressors often cause a loss of identity, which can lead to mental disorders and needs among immigrant children (Escobar & Vega, 2000). However, despite these needs there is a strong disparity between the health services provided in the community for immigrant families and children. This is a need that many communities are beginning to address by providing family-based, culturally informed interventions designed to reduce anxiety, raise self-esteem and build family and community supports. At the same time, it is important for communities to work towards integration or biculturality, allowing immigrants to maintain their culture while learning to navigate the host cultural environment.

This article relates to the language problem of balancing academic and social-emotional needs, as it discusses many of the social and emotional needs and challenges that immigrant children bring into the classroom. It highlights the importance of helping students maintain their identity while bridging American culture and students' home culture. It stresses the importance of teachers building trust as a foundation with children and creating a sense of belonging and community. In order to meet the many needs of ELLs, specifically immigrant students, teachers need to first become aware and understanding of the challenges and outside stressors that students may carry with them into the classroom and school setting.

### **Classroom Practice: Integration and Collaboration**

While many immigrant students are facing emotional needs outside of school, educators are facing the challenge of balancing language learning with content learning while making students feel part of the school community. The changing demographics in the United States require districts to shift their traditional roles of ESL and mainstream teachers and create a community where all educators are responsible for ELL student learning. According to

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Nordmeyer (2008), this changing paradigm requires teachers and administrators to view students along a development continuum of English language proficiency and recognize that all students will benefit from the intentional integration of language and content instruction. Two keys to understanding this shift in thinking are integration and collaboration. By integrating ELL students into mainstream classes and focusing on oral language and literacy skills across content (through scaffolding and differentiation), educators can teach language through content. Along with this integration, collaboration and a shared vision across school personnel is necessary to support ELL students in the classroom and school community. This collaboration includes planning, developing units and assessments to serve all students. The final component of the article addresses the importance of professional development to assist teachers, administration and staff in collaboration, co-teaching and educating ELL students in the classroom.

As this article discusses the changes that need to take place in schools to meet the needs of ELL and immigrant students, it pertains to the challenge of meeting the academic and social-emotional needs of students. Nordmeyer (2008) explains that professional development and collaboration between ESL teachers, mainstream teachers and administration is critical to create a shared vision of students' roles in the school community as well as meet their academic and language needs. By doing so, educators will meet the social-emotional needs of their students while also developing an awareness of the important role of academic language in the classroom. By incorporating collaboration and integration into the school, teachers will become more aware of strategies to best meet their students' language and academic needs and share the responsibility of improving learning for all ELLs.

Kelleen Toohey (1998) further emphasizes the importance of integrating ELL students into mainstream classes and explores three classroom practices in a first grade classroom that

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contribute to creating a community stratification that excludes some students from activities, practices and identity. Her article focuses on students with a wide range of heritage languages and discusses the practices of physical arrangement, management of materials and the source of intellectual resources needed to complete classroom tasks. Toohey believes that these three practices led to the “breaking up” of students in the classroom she observed. When observing the students’ seating arrangement, Toohey noted that students with an L1 other than English were located in the middle of the room, near the hexagonal table. This placement allowed ELL students closer proximity to the teacher and easier access to assistance. However, no students speaking the same L1 were sitting together. Also, due to their close proximity to teacher supervision, these students were given less opportunity to interact with native English speakers or other students in the classroom. Students in the first grade classroom were also responsible for providing and caring for their own materials. Borrowing and movement around the room to share was not permitted. From her observations, Toohey stated that it seemed evident that the borrowing and lending practices were reflective of the social relations among students. Some students had more resources than others and individual children had the power to decide whether or not they would share their resources. The final practice analyzed was the source of intellectual resources. As with sharing and borrowing, students were not permitted to copy or repeat other’s ideas or words. The teacher often reminded students to “do their own work” and helping was only allowed during small group tasks. These practices, taught students that words, like things, were individually owned and not community resources and contributed to the notion that the individuality of children must be established and protected (Toohey, 1998, p. 80). This article demonstrates how classroom practices can affect student’s identities and create feelings of inferiority and exclusion.

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A major component of the language problem being researched is the social-emotional needs of ELL and immigrant students. Through Toohey's article, it is clear that simple classroom practices can have a large impact on the social and emotional growth of students. By creating opportunities for students to interact and practice their oral and written skills, along with creating an environment that fosters sharing, collaborative and promotes learning from others, teachers can lay the foundation for a community that values all students.

### **Classroom Practice: Language as An Asset**

Tropp Laman and Van Sluys (2008) also conducted studies in classroom settings to examine how classroom practices affect the learning of ELL students. By focusing on two classrooms in a multilingual and multiage Midwestern school, the studies illustrate how multilingual children's voices and writing practices extend and transform writing communities and literacy practices. In many English-dominant classrooms, ENL (English as a new language) students are often forced to leave their own social and literacy practice at the door, as they conflict with the English-dominant school practices. In this article, the two classroom teachers find ways for the writing curriculum to be personally relevant and position ENL students as assets to the classroom community.

The students in these classrooms participated in a daily writing workshop model that included a minilesson, independent writing and sharing time. Teachers were consistently rethinking how to best meet their students' needs and encouraged students to write in the language they felt the most comfortable in. Language choice varied and students were seen making deliberate decisions based on genre, purpose and audience. Teachers also often used texts as tools in the classroom. Not only did this allow for multicultural and linguistically diverse exposure to literature but students used mentor texts as a resource for copying lines and

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borrowing themes and ideas. These practices furthered oral storytelling, written English skills, learning to write in new ways and allowed ENL students to feel a sense of belonging and connections to peers.

In the classrooms, students also explored linguistic possibilities by writing in their first language and English. Students felt comfortable sharing their first language knowledge with others and teachers encouraged students to collaborate and share ideas and experiences with others. By creating this environment, teachers helped students position themselves as contributing community members. In classrooms like this, all students are positioned as language learners. While multilingual students explored connections, differences and insights into their first language and English, monolingual students began to study and compare different languages and understand the value of identity and culture.

This article addresses the academic area of writing and also touches on the social climate of the classroom. One of the lines of the article states that “All students are positioned as language learners” in these classrooms. While some students are learning English (while also maintaining their L1), the monolingual students in these classrooms are encouraged and curious about the assets and language their peers bring into the classroom. This type of classroom community is necessary to meet the social-emotional needs of ENL students. By creating a space where they feel comfortable to explore and experiment with their L1 and English, as well as collaborate and learn with peers, students can begin to reflect and think about their linguistic repertoires and literacy practices. At the same time, students’ literacy skills are progressing as they can use their L1 as an asset and build on their funds of knowledge during writing.

### **Classroom Practice: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Both of the articles previously mentioned explore the importance of classroom and teaching practices that allow students equal access to curriculum and create opportunities for dialogue between ELL and native English speaking students. These ideas are also important components of culturally relevant pedagogy. Jin Sook Lee emphasizes the need for teachers to practice culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) by recognizing the different linguistic, cultural and experiential backgrounds of students as assets in the classroom. By doing so, research has shown growth in student progress and teachers will not only address the mismatch between home culture and school culture that many ELL students face, but also create an avenue for students to maintain their cultural identity while succeeding academically. This shift in pedagogy will allow ELL students equitable access to curriculum and allow them to use their funds of knowledge in the classroom. Lee discusses ways that CRP can be implemented in schools and the importance of teacher's attitude towards ELL students and their ability to succeed. By creating an atmosphere of appreciation for all students, providing opportunities for student dialogue and designing curriculum that is relevant and personal to students, ELLs can develop language skills as well as become engaged in their learning. This article discusses CRP at the classroom level and lists the following as major characteristics of CRP teachers; socioculturally conscious, works as agents of change, designs challenging curriculum that encouraged self-discovery and critical thinking, promotes learner-centered education and has affirming beliefs of students with diverse backgrounds. At the school/district level, a shift to CRP education requires the shared responsibility of all ELL students, placing a high value on culture and language, encouraging

students to study/maintain their heritage language and supporting staff with culturally sensitive training to help teachers effectively practice CRP.

This article discusses the challenges that many schools are facing today due to the increasing number of ELL students and how CRP can help schools meet the needs of their population. Instead of forcing students to fit into U.S. school culture, Lee emphasizes the importance of schools changing to fit the culture of their students. To do this, schools and administrators need to make an effort to train teachers to practice CRP. This important shift to CRP will benefit ELL students' academic needs by allowing them the opportunity to build on their funds of knowledge and heritage language literacy skills. CRP also addresses the social and emotional needs of ELLs as well. The CRP learner-centered education will empower students to work towards high standards set by their teachers while also providing instruction that is authentic and personally relevant. This shift in pedagogy needs to take place at the classroom level with teachers but also at the school level, allowing for equitable access to curriculum and creating a climate that values cultural identity.

### **School Culture**

Many of the articles discussed examine the need for highly qualified teachers that employ strategies to meet the social-emotional and academic needs of ELL and immigrant students through culturally relevant pedagogy and an understanding of the many challenges, strengths and feelings that ELL students bring into the school setting. In order for schools to meet these needs, administrators and teachers need to closely examine the programs and curriculum being used, as well as the school culture and climate. Pardini's (2006) article focuses on the St. Paul Public Schools in Minnesota and their efforts to meet the needs of the increasing population of ELL students in the district. In efforts to close the achievement gap among ELL and native English

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speaking students, the St. Paul school district evaluated their ELL programs and chose to eliminate the ELL pullout programs that were being used throughout the schools. These programs have been replaced with a collaborative model of co-teaching between mainstream and ELL teachers. This shift in programming was a district-wide effort to change the way the schools and teachers viewed and educated their ELL students. The goal of the new collaborative model is to teach language through, not prior, to content. The results of this program show a narrowing of the achievement gap, while at the same time, meeting the academic and social-emotional needs of ELL students. Because students are integrated, ELL students felt a sense of belonging and are learning the same curriculum as their native speaking peers. Teachers have also reported that they feel a greater appreciation and celebration of cultures which creates a welcoming classroom environment. At the same time, the collaborative model allows mainstream teachers to provide curriculum while ELL teachers simultaneously provide language support through pre-teaching, re-teaching and clarifying vocabulary. According to the article, a major component of this program is professional development for teachers. Along with professional development through workshops, ELL resource teachers are intensely trained to assist principals and teachers and to respond to specific issues and questions.

The language problem of balancing academic and social-emotional needs in the classroom is addressed by this article, as it discusses an ELL program that addresses the needs in both of these areas. This article gives an example of how students can be a part of a classroom that values their culture and identity, while accessing curriculum through language supports provided by the ELL teacher. Pardini gives insight into how a district responded to their diversifying population to make the changes necessary to meet the needs of their students. It also makes clear that this shift in programming is one that takes collaboration among all school staff

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(mainstream, ELL, specials teachers, administration) and requires a large amount of professional development and effort. A shift like this is not easy and without the careful planning, true “collaboration/co-teaching” and support for the teachers, it would not truly meet the student’s needs. This article relates to the balance of academic and social emotional needs as it explores the need for schools to critically analyze their programs, policies and culture to ensure that ELL students are given equal access to curriculum and are integrated in all areas of education. This analysis will assist schools in their shift to an asset based approach towards multilingual students to meet their needs.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

After reviewing literature on the topic, I have identified recommendations for balancing the academic and social-emotional needs of immigrant and ELL students in the classroom. These recommendations stem from the previously mentioned literature and others I have read through my time at Loyola. The first recommendation is that teachers and schools need to encourage and assist students to maintain their cultural and linguistic identity. At the school level, this involves an asset based approach to language learning and school policies that celebrate and appreciate cultural and linguistic identities. By creating a culture of achievement and diversity, school faculty can make decisions and changes to help bilingual students feel valued and appreciated (Heineke, Coleman, Ferrell & Kersemeir, 2012). In order for a creation of an asset based environment, schools may find it necessary to examine and consider their choices of curriculum, programs, materials and assessment practices to explore the value that is being placed on different languages (DeJong, 2011). From this examination, schools and teachers need to collaborate to define a mission and unifying goals to emphasize additive

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bilingualism and encourage students to be proud and maintain their linguistic identities (Heineke, et al., 2012). This recommendation will address the social-emotional needs of ELL and immigrant students by creating a space where they will feel accepted and welcomed in the school community while being encouraged to maintain their identity.

While schools work towards creating an environment that values cultural diversity, teachers need to do the same in their classrooms. In order to meet the linguistic, social-emotional and academic needs of ELL students, teachers need to be highly-qualified and properly prepared to work with bilingual students. According to Pumareiga and Rothe (2010), fostering a sense of belonging and building a sense of trust with students are key components of culturally sensitive teachers and the first steps to building relationships that will need the social-emotional and eventual academic needs of students. Without the foundation of a mutually trusting and understanding relationship between student and teacher, students will not be motivated to learn and grow academically.

After creating a sense of trust with students, teachers need to continuously display their appreciation and belief in value of linguistic diversity. By allowing and encouraging students to use their native language in oral and written form (Tropp Laman & Van Sluys, 2008) and incorporating funds of knowledge into the classroom, teachers can not only address the social and emotional needs of ELL students, but also use native language knowledge as a resource for academic growth. As stated by Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez (1992), teachers need to be the bridge between the student's world, their family's funds of knowledge and the classroom experience. By doing so, teachers can build on their students' strengths and experiences to connect to curriculum and experiences taking place in the classroom. Not only will this assist in

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academic language and learning, but will also validate student's experiences and life outside of school to motivate them to learn and make connections.

Another recommendation for addressing academic and social-emotional needs of ELL students in the classroom is for teachers to use culturally relevant pedagogy. As referenced in Jin Sook Lee's (2010) article, research has shown growth in student progress and teachers' ability to connect home and school cultures in classrooms using culturally relevant pedagogy. Not only does culturally relevant pedagogy create an atmosphere of appreciation, but it also provides opportunities for student dialogue and the designing of relevant and personal curriculum for students. By including culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom, students will become engaged in their learning (as it is relevant and personal to their own experiences), be encouraged to use critical thinking and collaborate with peers in a student-centered education. All of these characteristics of culturally relevant pedagogy allow students the opportunity to maintain their identity while also scaffolding learning to address academic needs.

Incorporating multicultural literature in the classroom is another recommendation that is important to the needs of ELL and immigrant students. By including multicultural texts through read alouds, classroom libraries, small group projects and other classroom activities, ELL and immigrant students will have the opportunity to see themselves in texts. Not only will this create a classroom culture of respect and appreciation, but will motivate students to participate in their learning and validate their feelings and experiences (Gopalakrishnan, 2011). This inclusion of multicultural literature will act as a window and a mirror, allowing students to connect to characters and themes but also learn about cultures other than their own, addressing both social and academic needs. Teachers using culturally relevant pedagogy and including multicultural

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literature will give students the resources to validate their feelings and create tolerance and empathy to work towards social justice.

A final recommendation for addressing the balance of academic and social-emotional needs of ELL students is the importance of a shared responsibility of the school community and all students. Every teacher, community member, parent, counselor and administrator should work together and share the responsibility of meeting each student's needs. By creating a meaningful collaboration, school and community members can work towards academic achievement and diversity (Heineke, et al., 2012). Within the school, teachers need to collaborate, plan, design lessons and provide support for ELL students. By promoting a co-teaching model, complete with appropriate language supports and scaffolding and providing shared planning time, schools can make necessary changes to address the needs of the students (Pardini, 2006). This collaboration includes mainstream teachers, ESL staff, administration, specials teachers and all other school personnel. Continuous professional development to assist teachers with strategies and supports to teach ELL and immigrant students is also a necessary component of collaboration among teachers and school staff (Seigel, 2006).

At the school and community level, shared responsibility of all students involves communication between teachers and parents, as well as between teachers and community resources. A recommendation in this area includes engaging parents in education through volunteer opportunities in the classroom but also in the social and political aspects of education. By creating a critical partnership, parents and teachers can work together to bring cultural awareness into the classroom but also reach common goals and aspirations (Olivis, Ochoa & Jimenez-Castellanos, 2010). A final form of shared responsibility can take place between schools

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and community resources. By utilizing community organizations and resources, schools can partake in service-learning projects and bring community assets into the classroom. By doing so, students will gain a better understanding of concepts while they contribute to their communities and become actively engaged in learning (Billig, 2006).

### **Reflection on Learning**

Through my research into the language problem of balancing the academic and social-emotional needs of ELL and immigrant students, I have examined my own teaching practices and discovered ways that I can better meet the needs of my students. I enrolled in Loyola's program to reflect on my teaching and become better equipped to meet the needs of the growing ELL population of my school and the United States. This shift in diversity has been challenging as I needed more training to become a qualified teacher of ELL students. From this research, I have come away with new beliefs, strategies and goals for my future teaching.

In many of articles I have read for my language problem research and other courses through Loyola, the idea of an asset-based approach to language teaching is emphasized. This is something that I plan to incorporate in my teaching moving forward. Yes, I will most likely face challenges when working with my ELL students, but I need to address their needs and strengths from a positive approach. Instead of viewing linguistic diversity as a challenge to overcome, I plan to view it as an asset to use in my classroom for all of my students, monolingual students included. From the articles and courses I have taken, I have discovered a variety of ways that I can do this. By incorporating cooperative learning activities, allowing students to engage in dialogue, encouraging the use of written and oral native languages and structuring my classroom

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to support linguistic diversity, I can create an environment that is welcoming and accepting to all students. Not only will I create a sense of belonging and empathy for others' similarities and differences, I will also strive to teach for social justice by helping students build connections and caring and interdependent relationships. As Troop Laman and Van Sluys (2008) explain, when all students are positioned as language learners, students can begin to study and compare different languages and understand the value of identity and culture.

To meet the academic and social-emotional needs of my students, I have also learned the importance of incorporating students' funds of knowledge into the classroom. By bridging student's home and school cultures, I hope to draw on students' personal and cultural experiences to form connections and build on prior knowledge. By doing so, I can provide opportunities for students to construct new knowledge and engage in authentic learning experiences. My goal, after completing this research, is to use culturally relevant pedagogy and set appropriate, high standards and goals for my students, regardless of cultural and linguistic background. By doing so, I hope to give each of my student's a voice and allow them to feel impactful and important in and outside of the classroom.

One of the most important things I have learned during this research and my time at Loyola is the importance of teachers as advocates for bilingual students. Today, we too often see inequalities in education and treatment of immigrant and ELL families. As an educator, I have learned the importance of my role as an advocate for all (including ELL) students to give them equal access to curriculum and education. To do so, I need to become aware of the policies in place at the national, state and school level to provide context to the education of ELL students. By doing so, I can examine policies at my school and evaluate our programs, curriculum and

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school climate to advocate for positive changes. At the same time, I plan to better familiarize myself with the WIDA and Common Core Standards to address any curricular mismatches and strive for social justice in terms of access to curriculum. Some other areas I can examine include materials for ELL students and multicultural texts, professional development for teachers in the area of ELL education, and collaboration.

Collaboration is an area that I hope to improve on in the upcoming years. Through my research and ELL courses, it is clear that a key to addressing the social-emotional and academic needs of ELL students is collaboration and shared responsibility of all students. My school has an ELL pull-out program and many teachers see this program as separate from their mainstream classroom setting. Unfortunately this creates to a very isolated setting for ELL students and leads to a curricular mismatch between mainstream and ELL classes. From the literature, I have learned the importance of collaboration and I plan to collaborate closely with the ESL team at my school. By planning common meeting times to share assessments, goals and curriculum, my hope is to build a bridge between my classroom and the ELL-pull out sessions and find time for possible co-teaching lessons. This communication will lead to scaffolding of concepts and allow for the sharing of strategies and methods to best meet the students' academic needs. As an advocate for bilingual students however, this needs to take place in the school setting and not just my classroom. To begin to address this issue, I hope to have a discussion with the school principal about the needs of allowing ESL teachers to attend grade level meetings and common planning times. By doing so, I hope to promote the idea of shared responsibility and guide other staff members to see the importance of working together to meet the needs of our school's increasingly diversifying population.

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