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ABSTRACT

A study of 30 Asian high school students (9 males, 21 females), who were in U.S. schools for a variety of reasons, ranging from extended visits to families of relatives to temporary academic or occupational appointments of parents in U.S. universities or corporations investigated student perspectives on English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction and bilingual classrooms. The subjects represented a variety of nationalities and educational backgrounds. The students were interviewed, most individually, and all but one in their native languages. They were encouraged to speak openly about their experience in classrooms, with teachers, and with other students. It was found that ESL classes offer a haven for student to relax and relieve some of the tension of other classes, and also provide students with many more opportunities for active participation. The students were sensitive about being understood. Some negative comments reflect feelings of isolation and lack of incentive to learn. Clear differences between bilingual programs and ESL programs were perceived, and these students preferred an environment in which the teacher: (1) provides good instruction; (2) is sensitive to their needs; and (3) tries hard to engage them in the ongoing life of the classroom, school, and culture. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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ESL: Asian High School Students' Perspectives

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Running Head: ESL

This is one of the individual presentations in the session titled "Crossing Borders: Asian Students' Perspectives on Life in U.S. High Schools" chaired by Thomas Shaw at the Comparative International Education Society Conference in Boston, Massachusetts, March 29, 1995. The research described in this paper was made possible through a research grant from the American Institute for Foreign Study Scholarship Foundation.



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Abstract

A central question in ESL is how to improve the quality of learning, instruction, and interaction that takes place in ESL classrooms. This study addresses the issue by examining newly-arrived Asian high school students' experiences in ESL classrooms. It suggests that ESL classes not only offer a haven to relax and relieve some of the tension these students feel in other classes, but they also provide students with many more opportunities for active participation. The study thus reveals that ESL students are sensitive about being understood and that, therefore, teachers need to create classrooms that maximize participation by students who lack proficiency in English.

ESL: Asian High School Students' Perspectives

Because of rapid social diversification, due in large part to rising immigration from Asian countries such as China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, educational settings are becoming increasingly multicultural, particularly in urban areas in the United States. As the New York Times of April 28, 1993 reported, the number of U.S. residents for whom English is a foreign/second language jumped by nearly 40 percent, to 32 million. There was a notably sharp increase in the number of Asian-language speakers, such as Koreans (127 percent), Chinese (98 percent), and Japanese (25 percent). The inevitable consequence of this spike in immigration has been that a large number of children whose first language is not English are entering U.S. schools. According to the U.S. Department of Education (1992), in 1990-1991, approximately 2.3 million elementary and secondary school students were identified as limited-English-proficient (LEP) children.¹ The Stanford Working Group (1993) estimates that the number of LEP children is much higher, 3.3 million between the ages of 5 and 17.

As described above, more than half a million immigrants from nearly one hundred different countries and cultures enter the United States--a nation of immigrants--every year, most of them speaking languages other than English (e.g., Crawford, 1989; Hakuta, 1986). As language minority children make their way into the schools, therefore, schools need to prepare special programs such as English-as-a-second-language

(ESL) and bilingual programs. A central question in ESL and bilingual program is how to improve the quality of learning, instruction, and interaction that takes place in ESL and bilingual classrooms. This study addresses the issue by examining/looking at newly arrived Asian high school students' experiences in ESL and bilingual classrooms.

This paper does not intend to contrast the experiences of Asian high school students from different national or cultural backgrounds. Obviously, as can be seen in previous studies, differences among Asians do exist. Redmond and Bunyi (1993), for example, gathered self-reports by international students residing in the United States and examined the relationship between the degree of stress caused by intercultural communication and how the students handled such stress. These researchers found that while students from China, Korea, and Japan alike reported that they suffered from a greater amount of stress compared to Europeans and South Americans, Chinese students alone felt more competent in handling such stress than the other two nationalities. Because Asians who live in the United States are from different groups, cultures, and ancestries, extrapolating from one Asian culture and its underlying values to another culture is inappropriate at best, and making sweeping generalizations of Asian cultures lead to erroneous conclusions and stereotyping at worst. Some differences are certainly significant enough to have emerged in some of the comments of the students we interviewed,

although they are not necessarily highlighted. The goals of this paper, nevertheless, are to present characteristic features of Asian high school students perspectives' on ESL and bilingual classrooms.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were thirty young people (9 males and 21 females) who were in U.S. schools for a variety of reasons, ranging from extended visits to the families of relatives, to temporary academic or occupational appointments of parents in American universities or corporations. Only seven out of thirty in the sample were actually exchange students whose excursions to the United States were planned and arranged by education officials in the two countries. Altogether there were two students from Hong Kong, twelve from mainland China, two from Taiwan, fourteen from Japan, and one from Korea. Nineteen students attended public schools and eleven attended private high schools in the greater metropolitan Boston area.

Procedure

Interviews lasted up to two hours and usually took place in a quiet classroom of the school attended by the particular student. Sometimes, but not often, students were interviewed in pairs. Interviewers communicated with students in their native languages (Japanese or Chinese) except in the case of the 1 Korean student, who was interviewed in English, since none of our interviewers spoke Korean. The fact that the

researchers were able to conduct interviews in the students' own language, combined with the fact that they are trained in a school of education and have experience interviewing teenagers, helped facilitate open and honest discussion.

The interviews were based on a loosely structured set of questions designed to encourage students to speak openly about their experiences in classrooms, with teachers, and with other students. A preliminary pilot study of ten interviews helped define which questions would be most productive. The average interview lasted about one hour. Each was tape recorded. The responses of students were then coded, using text analysis software.

Results

One subject that seemed to be a favorite of many of the students who were interviewed was the ESL classroom. The popularity of ESL was due to the fact that this classroom offered many more opportunities for active participation by students who lacked proficiency in English.

I like ESL. I have friends there. I can talk to people from a variety of countries. (Noriko, Japan)

In the ESL class, we are all foreigners. We do not hesitate to talk, and it has a warm atmosphere. Also, it is in the ESL class that I can actively participate. Since there are many Americans in other classes, I feel that I am not considered important. In the ESL class,

on the other hand, I can actively participate. Since members are different from class to class here, we can interact with a variety of people. (Kyoko, Japan)

What is interesting in the ESL class is that although we may know a lot about America even if you are in Japan, we do not know much about the Philippines, Portugal, and Korea. When I came here, I first understood how Brazilians think. That's very interesting. (Ayumi, Japan)

Being understood is very important to foreign students. Not surprisingly for some students, their favorite classroom is the one in which they feel the least embarrassed by their limited proficiency with English.

I like the English [ESL] class best, because there are many foreigners, and, even if my English is terrible, when I speak English, they do not laugh at me, and they listen to me earnestly. (Midori, Japan)

I like ESL, because my English is not good and other students are the same. I don't feel embarrassed. I can talk freely. If I go to a regular class, they will laugh at my bad English. (Yuying, China)

ESL is my favorite subject. In the ESL class I have a chance to learn English and I can speak up without any hesitation. In other classes all the students speak English well. I am somewhat shy. I feel at ease in the ESL class since students who do not speak English come to that class In the ESL class I try to speak up, while in other classes I do not. (Sachiko, Japan)

Of course, I like ESL best. I feel a sense of security. In other places, I need to keep being tense. Otherwise, English does not come to me. When staying here in the ESL class, since everyone is learning English now, I feel secure. (Ayumi, Japan)

ESL classrooms offer a haven for foreign students in which they can relax a bit and relieve some of the tension they feel in other classrooms. Thus, in ESL or bilingual programs, where there is less pressure about language proficiency, students tend to increase their classroom participation. Addressing these students' need to feel some sense of grounding, the ESL classroom provides not only academic support, but it also helps them to feel less like strangers in a new environment:

The ESL program's very good. It's like our foreign students' home. Whenever we are free, we will come here. We are all foreign students. We understand each

other better than we do Americans. American students look very happy every day. They don't understand our problems. So, I like to come to ESL class. The teachers are very helpful. The school cannot force American students to talk with us more. If they don't like to talk to us, the school cannot force them to. I think American students have some prejudice against Chinese students. Asians are not considered very important here. (Gaoxin, China)

The ESL program is excellent. It's like a bridge that connects us between China and the United States. It introduces us to the logic of Americans. We have learned the American way of thinking, which may be different from our own. In addition, my ESL teacher helped me with all my application forms and letters (to colleges). (Lingzi, China)

The ESL class is my favorite class, even though I was told it's really hard and I was scared when I first started it. There are other people who help me, but they're from other countries, not the United States. (Amanda, Taiwan)

I have lunch in the ESL room. It's good. Because if you go to the cafeteria, nobody is there. You feel lonely. But in the ESL room, it's different. You can

talk about everything--what happened (in class). . . .
(The ESL teacher) always helps us and talks to us, so I
think that is the most wonderful part. (Emilia, Hong
Kong)

However, not all students share the same positive
feelings about ESL programs. As with many of their other
classrooms, the degree of popularity of ESL and bilingual
programs depends largely on the quality of the learning,
instruction, and interaction that takes place in these
classrooms:

I don't like ESL, or bilingual programs. I don't think
it is challenging enough. There is no stimulation at
all. It makes you feel that you are still a foreigner.
You don't have to study very much. But if you study
with Americans, you feel pressure, and you want to be as
good as them. In ESL, you don't have an objective and
aspiration. (Shishi, China)

I don't think that the bilingual program is good. You
do not learn much. Later on, you may enter ESL, which
may be different from the bilingual program. But the
bilingual program is really not good. There is no
pressure at all. Only those who didn't pass the
placement test went to the bilingual program, and they
do not learn much. (Mingming, China)

Bilingual classes are very helpful for newcomers. Teachers are very patient. They repeat again and again what they teach to you. But most of the students are Hispanic, so the bilingual program is in Spanish and English. Many teachers speak Spanish. Asians are very few; there are only three. There is no Chinese bilingual program here. (Yuying, China)

There are distinct differences between bilingual programs and ESL programs, which all three Chinese students in these excerpts make clear. In the bilingual program the students' first language is used as a medium as well as an object of instruction. This means that the curriculum of a bilingual program may be different from that of ESL programs, where the medium of instruction is English. To put it in another way, teachers in bilingual programs present the content material of the standard curriculum using the native language of the students. In the ESL program, on the other hand, the emphasis is placed on helping students acquire enough proficiency in English to be able to function well in the mainstream/regular classroom. From these comments, it seems that all Asian students do not necessarily participate more actively in either the ESL or the bilingual classroom simply because they are designed to assist foreign students. The fact is that Asian students' active participation in class is more likely to increase in a classroom in which:

(1) the teacher provides good, solid instruction; (2) the teacher is sensitive to their needs; and (3) the teacher tries hard to engage them in the ongoing life and development of the classroom, school, and culture. These excerpts from three Japanese students make this point quite clear:

There are two ESL teachers. One teacher has been teaching for decades and he is very good. That teacher gives his class only once a week, but it is very interesting. The other teacher uses a workbook. We do the workbook. When we have finished certain pages, the teacher checks them. And we do it again and the teacher checks what we have done. (Eiko, Japan)

My school has only one ESL class, and beginners and advanced speakers of English share the same class. In the class you are given a workbook and do it by yourself. There are not many opportunities to talk to the teacher. And, in my case, there was a lot of time to do the workbook. . . . I thought that it was a waste of time to continue to do that for a year. And I thought that I could do something else. And that's why I stopped going to ESL. (Masayo, Japan)

Since our school has a small number of ESL students, there is only one ESL class and there is only one rank, and so everyone is doing the same thing, and the

material is too easy for some people and too difficult for others. And recently. . . the teacher has stopped teaching and started what they call "own work." The teacher gives a book to each individual student and instructs him or her only a little bit, and so the real situation is that, even if you try, you will not gain anything. . . . The level of the ESL is low. And once you have gone out of ESL, you are in trouble. (Ayumi, Japan)

Although ESL is, by far, the favorite classroom of many of the students we interviewed in this study, it was not the only subject to achieve top choice status. Again, a variety of factors influenced their choices, which ranged in scope from personal interest or natural talent, to the enjoyable atmosphere created by teachers and students in the classroom.

Conclusion

There have been heated discussions for and against bilingual education. There generally seems, however, to be a sentiment across the United States that people from countries with different languages should just learn English (Hakuta, 1986; Huddy & Sears, 1990). This study, however, has indicated that ESL classrooms not only offer a haven to relax and relieve some of the tension these students feel in other classrooms; but it has also revealed that ESL classrooms provide students with many more opportunities for active participation. The results obtained in this study, in fact,

confirm previous studies of different populations. For example, reporting on language-minority students' success in secondary schools, Tamala Lucas, Rosemary Henze, and Ruben Donato (1990) identified important factors that are related to successful outcomes with language-minority students:

- 1) Value is placed on the students' languages and cultures.
 - 2) High expectations of language-minority students are made concrete.
 - 3) School leaders make the education of language-minority students a priority.
 - 4) Staff development is explicitly designed to help teachers and other staff serve language-minority students more effectively.
 - 5) A variety of courses and programs for language-minority students is offered.
 - 6) School staff members share a strong commitment to empower language-minority students through education.
- (pp. 324-325)

Therefore, as Jim Cummins (1986) emphasizes, the role of educators and policymakers should be to empower all minority students, including language-minority students. Cummins has long examined the pattern of minority students' academic success and failure and emphasized ways in which educators can promote the empowerment of minority students and their

parents and communities, so that those children can become confident and capable in academic environments.

The importance of minority students' empowerment is also clear in the writing of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1970a, 1970b), who suggests that the literacy process should be conceptualized as playing a central role in empowering those who are, in many ways, oppressed in a given social system, so that those people can fully participate in the system. Specifically, Freire argues for educational practice based on an authentic dialogue between teachers and learners as equally knowing subjects.

Finally, in relation to empowerment of minorities, I would like to refer to Asians in general, who are often considered "model minorities" in the United States. John Ogbu (1992) classifies minorities into two groups, castelike or involuntary minorities, and immigrant or voluntary minorities. For example, whereas African Americans belong to an involuntary minority, Asians, such as Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese, are representative of voluntary or immigrant minorities. According to Ogbu, involuntary minorities try to preserve linguistic and cultural differences as symbolic of their ethnic identity and their separation from the oppressive mainstream culture. In contrast, Ogbu argues that voluntary minorities generally believe that their lives in the United States are better than their lives in their native countries. They are therefore more likely to succeed than involuntary minorities, particularly in academic achievement.

Voluntary minorities' positive appraisal of their situation is thus likely to have a positive influence on their overall performance.

As this study has indicated, however, voluntary minorities at times feel the same way that involuntary minorities do. In some schools, in the past, voluntary minority students were not allowed to speak their first language in school settings (Crawford, 1989, 1992).² In such situations voluntary minorities may feel that they are treated as if they were castelike involuntary minorities. Therefore, regardless of their status, minority students (either voluntary or involuntary) may feel that they belong to subordinate groups and that they are looked down on or even rejected by peers as well as teachers from mainstream backgrounds. To conclude, this study has revealed that ESL students are sensitive about being understood and that, therefore, teachers need to create classrooms that maximize participation by students who lack proficiency in English.

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Footnotes

1. In a recently published book entitled "Educating Second Language Children" (1994), Fred Genesee claims that using the term LEP is unacceptable because it implies deficiencies in those children who live in language minority households and make substantial use of minority languages. Therefore, the term LEP is likely to be associated with the "deficit hypothesis," which assumes that the parents in some sociocultural groups fall short of the skills necessary to promote their children's academic success at school.

Although I used the term LEP above, I do not intend to imply any connections with the deficit hypothesis.

2. According to James Crawford (1989), for example, "until 1973 it was a crime in Texas to use a language other than English as the medium of public instruction" (p. 26).