

## The Good News about English Learners

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This article describes how one teacher re-discovered the good news about English learners. It offers a counter-narrative to the prevailing negative discourse surrounding these students and offers teachers ideas for engaging their students in tasks that bring out the good news.

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**The strongest** *finding of the study and the lesson which appeared over and over is the good news that English learners are capable of much more than prevailing discourses suggest. These adolescent English learners demonstrated again and again that, when given an opportunity to engage in a non-traditional assignment that called on their creativity and engaged them in multimodal composition, and pushed them to do things they had not done before, they would, could, and did rise to the challenge. They demonstrated an investment in learning, worked collaboratively, and created high quality videos. Their video compositions inspired in these students a sense of pride, and the videos' content and quality impressed their teacher and other adult viewers. (Mantegna, 2014, p. 207)*

In recent years it has become increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of optimism about public education. The national and local media routinely air

negative stories about curriculum and standards such as Common Core State Standards, performance on large scale standardized tests such as SAT and ACT, educational policies like ESE and NCLB, education funding, teachers and more. In Georgia our legislature has cut billions of promised education dollars since 2002, with recent funding shortfalls averaging a billion dollars annually (Shearer, 2014a). Meanwhile, after a two year review and comment period, the state adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010, (Foundation, 2013) and school systems began to implement the standards. In the 2014 session of the Georgia legislature a bill was introduced which would effectively discard the Common Core standards (Waylock, 2014). The bill died in committee, only after strong opposition from education, business and civic organizations (Jones, 2014). The latest blow to teachers who are just now hitting their stride with implementing the Georgia Common Core curriculum standards is a new teacher evaluation system that will tie annual performance evaluation to student test scores (Shearer, 2014b). Beginning in 2014-2015, teacher job performance will be measured in part by their students' performance on large scale standardized tests and/or other measures of student growth. Is there no good news in education? Many would answer that there is not, but I contend that there is and that we must focus on the

good news and forge ahead. I want to share with you the good news about English learners.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to spend time with nine high school English learners on a weekly basis over the course of a semester while doing a research project. My presence in the classroom provided a bit of respite for their teacher and provided a change of pace for the students. Together we explored different modes of communication, modes other than the spoken and written words that filled their day in high school. Using the tools of visual discourse analysis (Albers, 2007; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) we engaged in activities such as examining the significance of colors and the ways they can be used to convey a message visually. We composed photographs to express concepts like alone, invisible, and justice. We experimented with different camera angles, distances, and perspectives and analyzed how these changed the visual messages we composed. We critiqued magazine and TV ads, deconstructed the ways in which the advertisers appeal to our subconscious in order to sell a product, and evaluated their effectiveness in doing so. We cast a critical eye on our school setting; discussed issues such as racism, falseness, and stereotypes that the students confronted daily. We took action on these issues by composing short public

service announcement-style videos that could be used to spark discussions with other members of the school community.

Throughout the semester these students from a variety of cultural and language backgrounds worked collaboratively and creatively within and across groups. They learned and applied the tools of visual discourse analysis to read and analyze a variety of visual and video texts. They critically discussed the effectiveness, audience, purpose, and attributes of visual and video texts, and practiced creating their own texts. They explored identities that were new to them; they viewed themselves and their peers from a different perspective. They used multiple modes of communication purposefully and effectively to communicate a persuasive message in their video texts. They showed pride in their successful completion of a challenging project, and they showed appreciation for the accomplishments of their classmates.

Along the way the students used their English extensively, often engaging in rapid-fire verbal interactions in English, the only language they all shared. The presence of these passionate discussions in a class composed of students labeled English learners is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it signals that students were invested in these interactions. Norton (2000) suggested the construct of learner *investment* as an alternative to the often

used concept of motivation. The concept of investment calls to mind business transactions undertaken voluntarily with a goal of increasing one's capital resources. Applied to a classroom setting, capital resources can take the form of such intangible assets as social position, knowledge, or experience.

Whatever the form, the anticipated return on investment must be sufficient to warrant an investment of time, attention, or effort by the student. Using the construct of investment recognizes that the locus of power lies within the learner; the learner has the choice of whether or not to participate, the choice of participating at a superficial or deeply engaged level. The students' deep engagement in these discussions signaled their investment.

Another reason these rapid-fire discussions are notable is that such a level of participation indicates that our classroom context provided the necessary conditions for students to demonstrate their proficiency with spoken English. The students' interactions were characterized by friendly camaraderie from my first encounter with them. It was apparent that they liked and respected each other, a fact not surprising to me given their previous semester together as classmates. Upon joining their class I introduced a project-based curriculum that included clear goals and procedures while also encouraging students to express and develop their interests and creativity (van Lier, 2004). The combination of positive

relationships with a weekly change of pace, in the form of a project that provided increased opportunities for conversation, seemed to create the ideal conditions for the extensive and wide-ranging discussions they engaged in.

Lastly, and perhaps most important, the students' level of participation suggests that these students identified themselves as English *speakers* rather than as English *learners*. They demonstrated *communicative competence* (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972) as they actively engaged in using English to bid for recognition or show solidarity, to make connections and express their thoughts, to build their identities and sustain their relationships (Cummins, 2001, 2006; Kramsch, 2000). They were using the Discourse of English to enact the socially recognizable identity of English speaker (Gee, 2011). Indeed, these students demonstrated that they were *multilingual/multimodal communicators* (Mantegna, 2014) who drew upon a repertoire of heritage languages, academic and social English registers, and a host of additional embodied and disembodied modes of communication.

The students' identity as *multilingual/multimodal communicators* was reinforced by their use of 21st century skills such as critical thinking and critically analyzing media; creating multimodal / multimedia products; communicating, collaborating, and working effectively in diverse teams; exhibiting flexibility, working independently, managing goals and time. (NCTE,

2008; P21, 2009; PPRC, 2010). Further, they exhibited most of the attributes that characterize the description of college and career ready students provided in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. Such students demonstrate independence; build strong content knowledge; respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline. College and career ready students comprehend as well as critique, they value evidence, use technology and digital media strategically and capably, and they come to understand other perspectives and cultures (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010). Over the course of our time together, the students demonstrated each of these traits as they interacted, negotiated relationships and power, experimented with new identities and connected to imagined communities, all the while using the tools of multiple languages and modes of communication.

Indeed, their actions and interactions served to contest the institutionally imposed identity of English learner. Any visitor to the classroom would have witnessed them discursively enacting identities of English speaker, multimodal communicator, collaborator, media critic, team member, creative thinker, independent worker, goal and time manager, actor, director, cameraman, multimodal composer. How did this occur? What made this possible? These identities were possible due to the nature of the tasks and activities the students were engaged in (Tinker Sachs, 2007, 2009). In

today's high stakes climate, we teachers must recognize that traditional school assignments often serve to limit our students. Those mundane tasks do not offer opportunities to imagine or explore varied identities; they don't give students the chance to demonstrate a wide range of abilities and skills. In fact, such activities deny teachers the opportunity to learn of their students' many abilities and interests.

In contrast, when we design academic tasks that require active involvement, provide opportunities for student initiative, and promote interaction among students as they engage in meaningful tasks we provide our students the opportunity to surprise us with what they can accomplish (Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). In particular those of us who are ESOL teachers must recognize that it is such task based learning and teaching that leads to rich language learning. The student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions and the language processing that students engage in while they perform these meaningful tasks results in rich language learning (Van den Branden, 2006) that does not come from traditional, uninteresting, decontextualized instruction. This, then, is the good news; the students we label as English learners are capable of much more than we typically imagine and we can glimpse these capabilities and possibilities by changing the instructional tasks we design. We can offer our students the opportunity to



use and enrich their language while engaging in meaningful tasks that help them develop skills and abilities crucial for their participation in 21st century careers.

The prospect of changing our classroom instruction may seem overwhelming, particularly in light of the pressures discussed at the beginning of this piece. We already work hard to create classroom environments that lower our students' affective filters and provide comprehensible input (Krashen, 1995); to educate our general education teaching peers about the difference between BICS and CALP (Cummins, 1980); to use the WIDA, CCGPS, and TESOL standards to guide our instruction. Nevertheless, we owe it to our students to forge ahead. We can and should improve the instructional tasks and activities we design. We can start by reflecting on tasks or projects we've used previously and selecting one that yielded unsatisfactory results. Then we must commit to replacing it with a new task or project. We can design a meaningful task that requires our students to interact, to create, to collaborate, to produce; some ideas for such activities, and resources to support them, are listed in the table below. These new instructional tasks will call for us to embrace new classroom roles as facilitator, guide, or coach as our students take on more active and interactive roles in the classroom. We will surely encounter challenges as we change our practice; our students may be

reluctant to step outside the comfort zone of traditional assignments, we may grapple with technological problems or internet service interruptions, we may be reluctant to use applications or technologies that are unfamiliar to us. We must persevere and remember that every challenge presents opportunities. The difficulties we encounter will provide us opportunities for problem-solving, for collaborating with others to find solutions, for modeling flexibility and creativity, for demonstrating to our students that everyone is a learner – even their teacher.

I challenge all teachers of English learners to uncover and share the good news about English learners in their own classrooms by designing meaningful instructional tasks that incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and abilities, that engage English learners in rich use of language, that call for creativity, that promote a classroom culture focused on strengths and possibilities. Through our purposeful design and use of such activities we can reveal the strengths, develop the skills, and expand the possibilities of English learners. Our voices may or may not be part of the public narrative on education, but our actions in the classroom will provide a powerful and enduring counternarrative to the ongoing litany of bad news, and compel others to recognize the good news we have to share about English learners.

## Web resources:

- Educational uses of Digital Storytelling, University of Houston – Includes information about digital storytelling, examples, suggested tools, step by step instructions, lesson plans. <http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/>
- International Reading Association Strategy Guide: Using Glogster to Support Multimodal Literacy – Provides information on the research basis, application, resources and lesson plans.  
<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-glogster-support-multimodal-30789.html>
- Creating Multimodal Texts - blog and collection of resources by Australian educator Annemaree O'Brian. Includes basic information on several types of multimodal texts with linked examples and how-to guidance.  
<http://creatingmultimodaltexts.com/>
- Adobe Youth Voices Community – worldwide network of educators, free to join. Site includes extensive collection of curriculum resources, lesson plans, writing prompts, storyboarding tools, forums, and other resources.  
<http://youthvoices.adobe.com/community/>

### Suggested activities for PK-12 classrooms:

Grade level	Activity	Software applications
PK-2	Create a digital story - based on personal experience, newly learned content, retell a favorite story, etc.	Tellagami Little Bird Tales Doodlecast Toontastic
3-5	You be the teacher - students depict and summarize their learning from an instructional unit by creating video from slideshow and adding voiceovers. Use as review for test, save and use next year for new students, etc.	Mybrainshark Animoto
6-8	Interview a community or family member about his/her views or experiences related to an important world event then create a mini-documentary. ( example: Tell me about when the first man walked on the moon)	Mybrainshark Prezi
	Create public service campaign posters or comic strips about school dress code, anti-bullying, preparing for high school, etc.	Glogster Makebeliefscomix.com
9-12	Identify a problem in school or community, create a video or poster campaign to address it.	Glogster Windows Movie Maker Apple iMovie

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