



# The First Days: Engaging Newcomer ELLs in the Classroom Community

## SUMMARY

Newcomer ELLs, or children who arrive at school knowing very little English, can face many challenges during their first days of school. In this commentary, the authors describe some of the social and linguistic issues that face newly arrived ELLs, such as culture shock and the silent period. Suggestions for helping newcomers access content, establishing connections to parents, and recognizing the learning resources that newcomers bring to their peers and to their teachers are explored.

*Five years ago, the school courtyard* at JHS 1234 (a pseudonym) in Queens was transformed into a pumpkin patch to celebrate Halloween. As part of the celebration, each student had the chance to select a pumpkin from the patch. Shinwoo, a sixth grade student from Korea, chose his pumpkin and started to make his way to the bathroom where he was intercepted by an English as a New Language (ENL) teacher in the hallway. The teacher quickly scolded him without knowing why he was headed to the bathroom with his pumpkin. Feeling confused and defeated, he returned to the courtyard. Later, the teacher learned that it was Shinwoo's first day of school and that he had been given permission from another teacher to wash the pumpkin. An obvious crosscultural

miscommunication had occurred: what Shinwoo saw as a logical solution to cleaning a dirty pumpkin, the teacher quickly assessed as silly behavior.

When we ask current and former English language learners (ELLs) to remember their first day of school in the U.S., they share vastly different memories. Some students remember sitting quietly and doing nothing, or even falling asleep in class. Others share that they were alert and nervous, ready to learn a new language or a new system for learning. Without a doubt, the first days in a new school are exciting and anxiety producing for any child, but for children just arriving to a new school in a new country where a new language is spoken, these days are especially critical to developing a sense of comfort and confidence in a new academic environment.

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It is understandable that teachers may also feel a level of anxiety in finding even one newcomer ELL in their classrooms. Teachers may think, “How can I incorporate a student who is only just learning his/her first words in English into the curriculum when I have 30 other students to think about?” They also often lack the strategic tools or techniques required to include newcomers both academically and socially into the classroom community, which can easily and unintentionally lead to these new, vulnerable students getting lost at the periphery of classroom activities.

In this article, we hope to expand teachers’ repertoires of tools and training with regard to ELL newcomers. Here, we discuss some of the social and linguistic issues that face newly arrived ELLs when they come to school. Developing an understanding of culture shock and the stages of language development can help teachers understand students’ experiences to a greater extent. We also incorporate suggestions of how to ease the integration process for these new ELLs, and offer ideas for activities that can be easily implemented in any classroom.

### **Language Acquisition and Culture Shock**

It is commonly stated that children “pick up language like a sponge”; however, there is ample evidence that even for the youngest children, language learning can be a taxing cognitive task (TESOL, 1997; 2006). Though their brains are arguably more flexible than older learners, and thus, certain aspects of language may be more easily acquired (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), to say that developing English language proficiency is easy for children is to trivialize a very complex and lengthy process.

Children often experience high levels of anxiety in the first days and weeks of being immersed in a foreign linguistic environment. For newly immigrated students to the U.S., managing feelings of loss and confusion related to leaving their home country is one source of stress. ELLs who have come to the U.S. as refugees may be dealing with trauma and distress related to wartime experiences and friends and family members left behind. Other newly immigrated ELLs are learning to function in an unfamiliar culture, which involves negotiating all of the cultural rules and expectations that characterize that new country, new language, and new school.

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The stress that students feel related to coming to a new school can be, in part, attributed to what has been termed culture shock. Culture shock refers to feelings of disorientation when confronted with a new and unfamiliar culture or way of life (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Oberg, 1960; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

The stages of culture shock, first documented by Oberg (1960), have been described to include Honeymoon, Negotiation, Adjustment, and Mastery phases. Newcomer ELLs often begin school while still in the Honeymoon phase. They are excited and receptive to all the changes going on around them, and are willing to engage in school and with peers with enthusiasm for what their new lives have in store.

After a short time, however, children move into the Negotiation phase, also called the crisis phase, which is described as a time of evaluation, whereby children start to notice how things are different, and often hard, in their new environment. At this phase, immigrants can begin to feel nostalgic for their home country where things were easier in some sense, both linguistically and culturally. The Negotiation phase can linger for some time, and can be characterized by feelings of confusion, sadness, and homesickness. In young language learners, the stress of this phase can manifest itself through behavior management issues, e.g., opposition

to classroom rules, aggression toward other children, or being withdrawn from classroom activity in general.

With time and linguistic successes, children eventually move into the Adjustment period, in which they begin to find their place within this new cultural context, and feel increasing comfort in school. Adjustment is ultimately followed by the Mastery phase, where students have internalized some of the codes and conventions of their school journey and reach a level of stability and ease in the new culture.

Newcomer ELLs are not only faced with the task of learning a new culture, they also need to begin the process of learning a new language. When at the beginning phases of culture shock, ELLs may simultaneously go through a linguistic phase which has been termed “a silent period” — an undetermined amount of time when new learners of English may opt not to communicate productively through speech (Krashen, 1982). Though they may not speak, students are still actively acquiring English through more receptive modes during this phase. Teachers should be counseled to respect the silent period by not forcing ELLs to talk if they are not ready, however, newcomer ELLs should still be given opportunities to engage linguistically to the extent that they are willing or able to participate.

Interacting with students initially with simple yes or no questions or with

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formulaic question/response can help them to begin to construct a linguistic foundation in English. For example: Are you happy this morning? Did your dad bring you to school today? How are you today? Good. Is it sunny or rainy today? Rainy. These small but important interpersonal exchanges give students necessary confidence by providing a space for them to have their first successful interactions in English.

Teachers should also note that ELLs have many linguistic resources available to them in their first language, which can provide an outlet in their initial phases of English language learning. In a fourth-grade lesson about pollution, a newcomer ELL named Aamir could not yet read the school text about a contaminated water source, yet, he was able to translate the words that he understood into Arabic in his notebook as a way to engage with the material academically at a linguistic level that he could manage. Native language use at beginning acquisition phases should be encouraged as it supports children’s attempts to access content.

Translanguaging (García, Kleifgan, & Falchi, 2008; García, 2009; García & Sylvan, 2011), as illustrated in Aamir’s example, is a way for language learners to incorporate a wide variety of discursive strategies in all their languages as a vehicle toward learning. Translanguaging is a beneficial practice for all emergent bilingual children, and one that teachers can nurture by simply giving students

permission to use their L1s. Historically, there has been significant debate surrounding the issue of whether teachers should enforce an “English-only rule” in their classrooms; however, these policies served to encourage subtractive bilingualism (when a child loses proficiency in their L1 as they acquire English), rather than fostering their dynamic bilingualism where students can have access to all their linguistic resources in their quest to learn (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2011).

Even if the teacher cannot understand what the child writes or says, allowing first language content engagement is a beneficial practice since students often have content knowledge on the topic at hand that they can express in their first language. Through practice, students begin to recognize that their prior knowledge helps them learn English as they make use of the vocabulary and understanding that they already have. For example, students can write a response in their first language and follow up by writing a translation with the help of a peer who is able to write in their first language and in English (Fu, 2009) — such an activity is likely to be a challenging linguistic task for both students.

**Pedagogical Techniques to Help Newcomers**

Upon discovering a newcomer ELL in class, teachers should make a concerted effort to interact positively with that

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child to help him/her feel welcome in the classroom environment. Newcomers can feel invisible, and teachers play a pivotal role in helping students feel valued and supported in what is a new, and sometimes scary, world of school. Offering a friendly, daily greeting, for example, “Hello, Roberto. I like your shirt,” can make the difference between a child feeling included or excluded. Although at first Roberto may not respond, it is likely that within a few days or weeks, he will develop the confidence to say, “Thank you.”

Fostering a classroom environment in which newcomers can interact with other children through a buddy system is also a very useful technique.

Encouraging children to make friendships, and allowing them to speak in their first language with their peers are key practices. Same-language buddies can help enormously with translation and negotiation of the new school environment. Speaking their first language with friends will not interfere in their acquisition of English, rather, it will help newcomer ELLs to connect with a warm, classroom community, which in turn, will help English language proficiency to develop.

In the case that a same-language buddy is not available, an empathetic, kind, English speaking peer can also help a newcomer with the school transition. All of these elements contribute greatly to

newcomers’ feelings of connectedness. Like the case of Roberto, even many years later, most students are able to remember the names of the friends and teachers they met on their first day of school who spoke to them in their first language or who tried to engage with them on any level.

Print-rich environments, such as labeling furniture in the classroom, e.g. *cabinet, sink, whiteboard*, can help newcomers make associations that are helpful day to day. These vocabulary supports also give students something to think about when they are taking a mental break. A former student once said, “I remember that sometimes I would just shut down and read the signs that were posted around the class. That made me remember that I really was learning English, even when it felt like I wasn’t.” Common classroom requests, like — Can I go to the restroom? Can I go to the nurse? — can be posted on a bulletin board or written in a notebook for newcomers’ assistance in the case that they need these phrases urgently. By providing this language, the newcomer can begin to develop a sense of confidence and autonomy in class.

In an effort to help newcomers orient themselves to school, ENL teachers at JHS 1234 have collaborated to create a welcome video. The video includes pictures of teachers and school staff, important locations around the school,

students wearing the school uniform and classes participating in collaborative work. Current and former ELLs are working on creating versions in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Urdu and Arabic.

Establishing classroom routines is also a big comfort to a beginner level English learner. At JHS 1234, all newcomer ELLs participate in a fluency program during their ENL classes that allows teachers to assess students' decoding skills and fluency levels. Teachers match students who are at similar levels, and students practice reading a fluency passage at the beginning of each class. The task is at the appropriate level for each partner pair, so all levels of students can participate in the routine. Students also track their improvement using graphs, so it is very easy for them to set goals and monitor their progress.

Routines such as this fluency program that are student centered, engaging, and measurable are ideal for newcomer ELLs. Once a newcomer understands the daily procedures of class, incorporating him/her into classroom life by giving him/her a daily task, for example, handing out or collecting papers, gathering materials used during class, or sharpening pencils, can help to ease the anxiety that a newcomer may feel. These daily tasks can be explained to a newcomer without too much language, using gestures, a demonstration, or buddy support, and will help the

newcomer to know that he/she contributes in a meaningful way to class.

Of course newcomer ELLs, by definition, have linguistic limitations that affect their ability to take part fully at first within a standard, English language curriculum. It is very likely that newcomers will not be able to engage with the same grade-level material in English at the same pace as their monolingual peers; this, however, does not mean that they cannot be productive in class. A variety of separate activities can be implemented to help newcomers develop language skills during their first days in school.

One meaningful activity that students can complete without knowing English involves drawing pictures to match vocabulary words related to curriculum.



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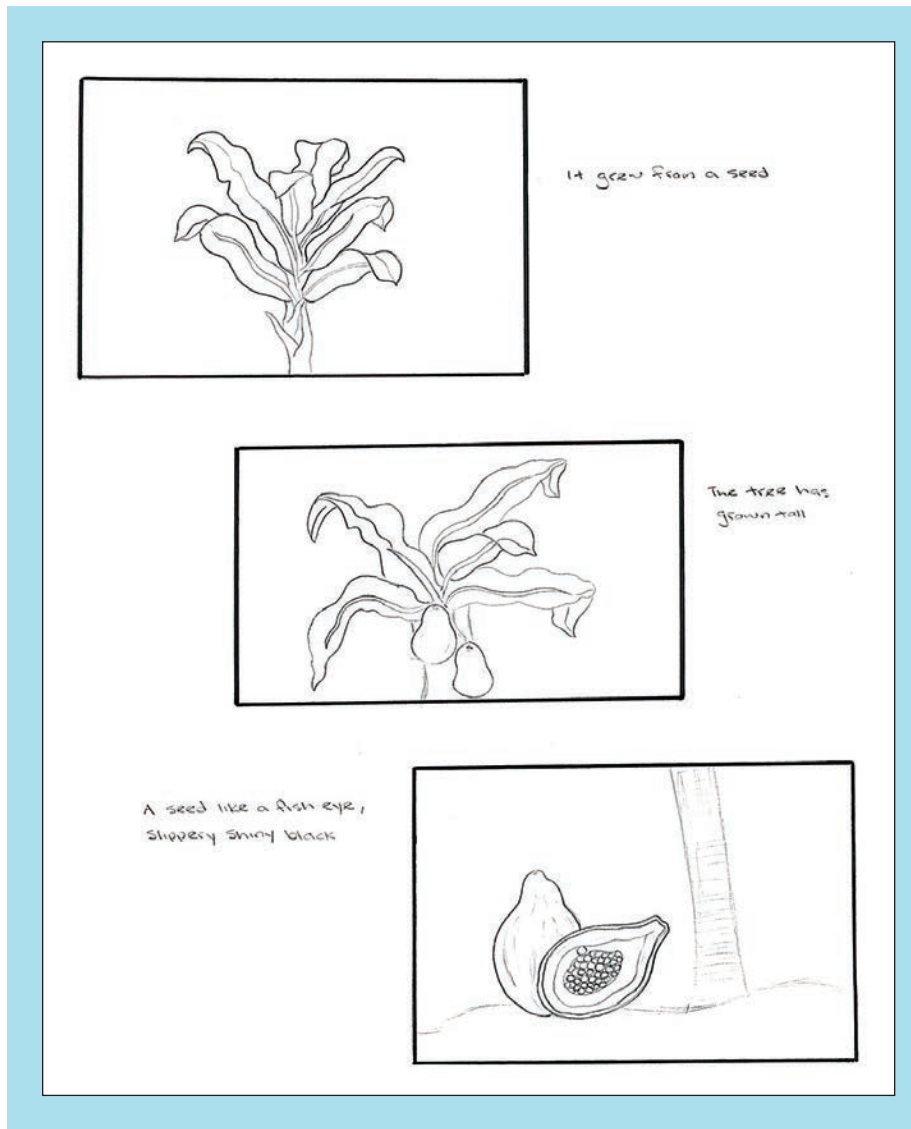
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*A sketch-to-stretch assignment based on the poem "Papaya Tree" from Inside Out & Back Again drawn by an eighth grade ELL at the Emerging level.*

These pictures allow newcomers to demonstrate their growing understanding of English without producing anything orally or in writing yet. Another example is by implementing challenging lessons through the sketch-to-stretch technique. Students visualize the events in a novel or historical event by drawing pictures and writing sentences in English or their native language to interpret their understanding.

Once newcomers have developed some English skills, they can work on separate, independent work packets designed to build beginning linguistic skills. Creating an "All About Me" book with fill-in information about family, country, language, personal information (address, telephone number), and food is always an appropriate activity for any newcomer, regardless of age. Teachers can also use the chunking technique which helps their newcomers increase access to complex and high-level texts. Through this technique, teachers break up the text by adding headings and focus questions, putting important words in bold, and adding a space for notes in the margin. Chunking helps beginning and low-intermediate ELLs to access the text at their level and engage in course lessons (Walqui & Strom, 2015).

Though parallel lessons for newcomers can be justified for a period of time, teachers need to carefully monitor students' progress and increase the level of academic and linguistic challenge until students are ready to be integrated into regular, adapted class lessons. Teachers should also be mindful that the cognitive demands that ELLs face in an English classroom are tiring, and newcomers may need more frequent breaks from classroom activity than an English-proficient student. For example, Carlos, an eighth grader, once walked out of class because his teacher would not allow him to get a drink of water. When



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she questioned him later, he told her that sometimes in class he feels like “the walls are getting close.” He needed to take a break from class, but he did not know how to share this need with her in the moment when he was feeling stress.

Allowing newcomers to stretch, take a walk, or get a drink, can provide a much-needed respite from strenuous language acquisition processes.

**Connections to Parents**

Communication with parents and caregivers is a critical part of establishing a connection between newcomers' families and their new school. Teachers should make an effort shortly after the child arrives to the school to communicate with parents by phone. It may be that a phone call will not be productive because of linguistic barriers, but it also is possible that a family member understands English well enough to make a connection, give some information, or take a message. Teachers can also try to communicate in the home language, if possible, with the help of an interpreter. The New York City Department of Education's Office of Translation and Interpretation allows teachers and staff members to request over the phone interpretation to facilitate phone calls home in the family's native language.

At JHS 1234, the parent coordinator, office staff, administrators, deans, guidance counselors, and teachers are a

critical bridge between school and home for newcomer students. Office staff welcome the families during every visit and ensure that those requiring an interpreter are accommodated quickly.

Once ELLs have been identified, a trained pedagogue, the parent coordinator, and an interpreter host an orientation session for the families. The parent coordinator at JHS 1234 presents families with a parent handbook, which she wrote and had translated into Spanish, Chinese, and Korean. During this session, the families view a Parent Information Video that explains the program choices available to ELLs: Dual Language, Transitional Bilingual Education, and English as a New Language. The video, available in 13 languages, was produced by the NYCDOE Department of English Language Learners and Student Support.

This is also the time when the pedagogue and parent coordinator prepare newcomers by distributing bilingual dictionaries/picture dictionaries and content area glossaries, explaining school policies, and providing information on the state standards and state exams. All these efforts help families who are not able yet to communicate with their child's teachers, to know that their child is in a caring, nurturing environment.

Parent-teacher conferences are also an important venue by which teachers and

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[Newcomers'] experiences offer pedagogical possibilities for storytelling and narrative writing to expand all students' geographical and cultural understandings.

parents can build upon their mutual understanding. With the new, yearly ELL parent conferences that have been implemented through NYS CR Part 154, these school-home partnerships will have more opportunities to grow. During the first two weeks of inviting parents of ELLs to JHS 1234 for meetings with the teachers during the scheduled parent engagement time, the school witnessed an overwhelming response. In just two sessions of one hour each, teachers at the school met with more than 30 families of ELLs for 15-minute meetings. The bridges constructed between school and home are beneficial for all parties — not only does the child develop an understanding that a connection between school and home exists, but parents and educators also can come together on behalf of the child to contribute to the students' academic engagement and interest.

## **Newcomers and their Classmates: Learning from Each Other**

Having newcomers in a classroom provides many beneficial learning opportunities for all students. Though it may seem obvious that newcomers learn a great deal from being in classrooms in the U.S., what is less obvious is that their presence is a gateway to develop their English speaking classmates' interests in different countries, cultures, customs, and geography. Newcomers by definition have rich experiences

associated with their immigration stories, and have traveled and learned more languages than many of their classmates. All of these experiences offer pedagogical possibilities for storytelling and narrative writing to expand all students' geographical and cultural understandings.

One technique that encourages this cultural exchange is linguistic show-and-tell. In this activity, newcomers bring in an item from their home country, and teach their classmates the word for the item in their first language. Depending on their English level, newcomers can give a basic description or demonstration related to the item for their classmates. These presentations can be individual, or facilitated by a teacher or parent, if necessary.

For example, in his kindergarten class, a young Japanese student presented a linguistic show-and-tell for his classmates to make a simple origami figure. With very little English, he was able to showcase his cultural knowledge while guiding his classmates through the steps of making the figure. His classmates were very impressed, and as a result of this activity, they included him more in activities in class and during recess, despite their communicative difficulties. Similarly, teachers can ask students to share pictures of their home countries, and use them as teaching materials about different parts of the world.

Though such activities can be very rewarding, teachers should consider the possible circumstances of immigration before undertaking these lessons. It may be that a newcomer's move to the U.S. was traumatic and not something that she should be required to share. A teacher with knowledge of these circumstances, can give students the option to share their stories if they so choose. Sensitive, welcoming classmates and teachers help newcomer ELLs become a part of the classroom more quickly, and these relationships can be enduring. Encouraging L1 English speakers to develop a sense of linguistic empathy allows them to develop a greater tolerance for cultural differences and, on a broader spectrum, teaches them to become citizens of the world.

In sum, newcomers should be afforded every consideration available during their first days at school. Developing language skills, working through culture shock stages, learning content area material, making new friends, while trying to understand the words coming toward them — all of these processes represent a very arduous task which teachers and students can make easier. Welcoming students when they come to school, immediately involving families in their child's education, designing instruction that they can take part in, and acknowledging that the early days are likely to be hard, can make those initial days in school decidedly easier. By planning for and providing positive classroom experiences for newcomers, teachers can take pride in their role in helping newcomers find their first linguistic successes in a new school.

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