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Helping ESOL students find their voice in social studies.

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In this self-reflective essay, an experienced secondary social studies teacher and her professor reflect on the new challenge the teacher embraced during the school year—teaching a sheltered English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) World History course to recently immigrated students. The teacher, who is certified to teach social studies and is also ESOL endorsed, and her professor examine continued teacher resistance to working with ESOL students in the context of the teacher’s school, which includes an International Baccalaureate program. Using Noddings’ model of care in schools, they examine teaching practices that the teacher found successful and others that she learned were less effective over the course of the year with her English Language Learners (ELL) students. The voices of the ELL students are conveyed by providing examples of notes the students wrote to the teacher during the year-long journey. The teacher will be able teach the students for a second year in a row, in a push-in model in a U.S. History classroom. Thus, the exploration of helping ESOL students find their voice in social studies classrooms will continue.

Introduction to the History of Bilingual and ESOL Education

Historically, Americans have wrestled with linguistic diversity (Ramsey, 2010). Challenges with religion, race, curriculum, and language became more acute when common schools were established in the late 19th century (Tyack et al., 2001; Watras, 2008). Some teachers feared the “polyglot boarding house” while others welcomed a diversity of languages in the classroom (Ramsey, 2010, p. 2). Bilingual education became the norm, however, in areas of the country where ethnic enclaves grew. Nonetheless, nativist opponents of bilingual education voiced opposition, reminding Americans that English-only should be the language in the schools.

Since the end of World War II, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) education of some fashion has been taking place in the United States. Prior to this time period, rapid assimilation and specific language bilingual education programs were instituted throughout the United States. Originally, the primary purpose of most English to Speakers of Other Languages programs was to allow students the chance to succeed in American society. Since inception, debates over the use of bilingual education in contrast with the practice of English-only teaching have persisted in educational arenas. The dispute over English language policies continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and persists in the present, even when the terminology has changed to English to Speakers of Other Languages.

In this self-reflective essay, an experienced secondary social studies teacher and her university professor reflect on the new challenge the secondary teacher embraced during the school year—teaching a sheltered ESOL World History course to recently immigrated students. The teacher, Aubrey, who is certified to teach social studies and is also ESOL endorsed, examines contemporary and on-going teacher resistance to working with ESOL students in the context of her school, which includes an International Baccalaureate program. The professor, Chara, taught in a predominantly Latina/o school in Texas. Both Aubrey and Chara shared their experiences teaching

social studies to language minority students. Using Noddings' (2005) model of care in schools, they examine Aubrey's teaching practices; some they found successful and others they learned were less effective over the course of the year with her English Language Learner (ELL) students. In the following discussion, Aubrey and Chara reflect on Aubrey's experience teaching sheltered ESOL social studies classes. Both authors hope that Aubrey's description of these experiences will serve to inform other ESOL social studies teachers about effective strategies and ones that need tweaking.

Teaching Social Studies and ESOL: Aubrey's Story

The letters "E", "S", "O", and "L" can be extremely terrifying to many social studies educators. These letters cause feelings of uncertainty in much of the teaching workforce as most social studies teachers do not received in-depth expertise in the field of ESOL education. "Teachers in the United States, who are primarily White, middle-class, and monolingual, have had limited experiences with diverse populations, and they frequently perceive of diversity in a negative way," (Nieto, 1999, p. 132). With today's increasingly diverse student population, these letters are finding their way on to many teachers' schedules and class rosters. The scariest letter of all the ESOL is "S". Teachers know the "S" on a roster represents "sheltered" and often represents a completely new teaching environment. The sheltered classroom can cause many teachers to experience anxiety as they try and collect their thoughts about a room full of English Language Learners (ELLs). "What strategies help an ESOL student be successful in the social studies classroom?" This question is important. In order to answer this question, teachers need to find the keys to unlock the potential their students possess.

In May 2012, I (Aubrey) accepted a new job and the roster included an "S". As a fourth year secondary social studies teacher, I had taught almost all of the core secondary social studies subjects. However, I had not used my ESOL endorsement that I obtained in the earlier part of my undergraduate education program. The ESOL endorsement included three courses and a tutoring placement at a mostly Hispanic elementary school. Although anxious, I was excited to have the opportunity to work with English language learners.

My goal for the year was to advocate for my ESOL students. I wanted to make sure I was not letting the students miss out on opportunities due to their lack of English. Nieto (1999) argued, "Because these are the students who have borne the brunt of devastating educational failure, I have chosen to focus especially on them; moreover, when schools are made better for them, they become better for everybody," (p. xviii). Many teachers believe they are alleviating oppression by teaching ESOL students. Freire (2000) argued that teachers and schools have the opportunity to help stop oppression, but noted they also could be the place where oppression was the most present. Action without reaction is just an impulse and reaction without action is just verbalism. In order to stop oppression, the oppressor must meaningfully try to end the action and not just engage in thought or small action. Many people believe oppression is human nature, and that individuals have to think about not oppressing people. Freire (2000) suggested oppressors should be in constant dialogue with those who are oppressed in order to help with revolution.

As a teacher of ESOL students, it is of utmost importance to end the oppression of these particular students. Due to language barriers, ESOL students are often misunderstood and suffer discrimination. For example, students may be unable to advocate for their accommodations due their lack of English skills. Routinely listening to broken English dialogue has informed me more than I thought possible. Nieto (1999) wrote, "As Paulo Freire (1970b) proposed many years ago, teaching and learning need to be thought of as reciprocal processes in which students become teachers and teachers become students. If this observation is the case, then teachers no longer simply deposit knowledge into students' minds; rather, teachers become actively engaged in learning through their interactions with students" (p. 142).

Aubrey's Self- Study

After working with ESOL students in sheltered social studies classes for one full year, a new passion has been unlocked inside of me. I became extremely engaged in the idea of continuing to teach ESOL social studies. All my fears and anxiety about teaching ESOL students flew out the classroom door as soon as my students walked into the room. The students and I became a family of learners, and this class is the favorite part of my teaching day. Eleven English language learners have transformed my outlook on teaching and the purpose of the classroom. I still love teaching native English speakers, but my ELL students have a special place in my heart.

As a former student of Todd Dinkelman's at the University of Georgia, I recall Todd's encouraging the reflective practice of self-study as grounded in improvement of pedagogy. Dinkelman defines self-study as "an intentional and systematic inquiry into one's practice," (Dinkelman, 2003, p. 8). The use of the self-study methods allows teachers to research areas that are directly related to their curriculum and students: "Self-study highlights the reflective process and yields knowledge about practice that does not arise from daily practice alone" (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, as cited in Dinkelman, 2003, p. 9). As a teacher, I routinely follow Todd's advice, and ask my students to question and reflect on their work as well. I believe it is essential to model this practice. I share with my students what I find in my own reflections.

Each morning, my ELL students developed the habit of greeting me before they head to homeroom. They often need some last minute tutoring and encouragement before they face the crowded English speaking hallways. Throughout the day, my students stop by to say "hello" and ask me how to say certain words or learn the name of an object. The excitement they have when they learn a new idea or new word is contagious.

ESOL classrooms are unique. At Washington High School [pseudonym] where I teach, the ELL students have a strong bond with each other because they spend most of the day traveling around together. The students are often times not comfortable speaking broken English to native speakers. Therefore, they choose to only speak to other ELL students or other students who also know their native language. According to the Center of Education Statistics (2010-2011 school year), Washington High School is a racially and ethnically diverse school of approximately 1700 students. The school population is comprised of students in the following demographics: 45% White, 27% Black, 20% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 3% two or more races. One-third of the student body receives free and reduced lunch. An International Baccalaureate program adds to the school diversity, yet even in this unique setting, the ELL students tend to isolate themselves from the larger student population.

During the year, the students developed the habit of walking into my classroom and arranging their desks like a table. The desk arrangement is referred to as our "family table." Class would typically begin with talking about what we had been doing since we last met. Our daily five-minute conversation not only helps with improving the students' English speaking skills, but allowed me to learn more about each student. This exercise can help build lessons that connect to the students' personal lives.

Small student size limits on the ESOL classroom allow teachers to form individual relationships with each student. As Nieto (1999) stated, "Although teaching is often approached as a technical activity—writing lesson plans, learning effective methods for teaching algebra, selecting appropriate texts, developing tests to assess student learning—anybody who has spent any time in a classroom knows that teaching and learning are primarily about relationships" (p. 130). When students are learning English, a solid student and teacher relationship enables the students to feel comfortable enough to take risks in their speaking and writing. In my time with ESOL students, I have learned that relationships and flexibility take precedence in the classroom. In order to meet my students' needs, I must be able to meet them where they are when they walk in the door.

Extensive ESOL learning aside, care and mutual respect has helped make the classroom successful. Throughout the year, I have kept track of what excites my students each and every day. For example, I journal about my classroom activities and I conduct student surveys and I routinely collect student feedback notecards. I have also had conversations with the students about what they like best about our class and what they would like to see changed. Even though conversations about classroom feedback are difficult for students new to the United States, they can produce great results. I am trying to teach my students about the liberties they are allowed in classroom. Some customs in the American classroom may be different than practices in the students' native schooling. For example, questioning the authority of the teacher and speaking up in the classroom may be typical in some American schools, but is atypical in most Japanese schools (Snell, 1999).

While these experiences are formative, not all ESOL teachers work in a similar environment. The key feature of ESOL teaching is flexibility and adaptability in classroom practices. Furthermore, not all ESOL students are identical, nor do all ESOL students learn the same way in classrooms. Cruz and Thornton (2009) remind educators that it is imperative to understand the stages of cultural adjustment that ESOL students experience as they spend time in the United States. As the students become more comfortable in their surroundings, they have new needs and challenges. ESOL education requires constant exposure to "American" experiences in order for the students to learn to function socially in society.

According to Cruz and Thornton (2009), when students first enter the United States, they enter the "honeymoon" stage. The students are generally full of excitement for the learning that initially takes place. Students are often enthralled by American culture. The other side of this phenomenon is that students may keep to themselves and become observers of the new culture. The second stage quickly approaches and students typically become hostile. The student may begin to be unengaged in the American culture and abandon the idea of trying to acclimate. During this stage, ESOL students classically start to have feelings of anxiety and depression. The third stage is the home stage. This stage is defined by the time period when the student begins to feel more comfortable in the culture. Students often start to show their personality during this time period. Emerging personality is followed which is classified as the assimilation stage. During this stage, the students start to see the benefits and challenges of living in American society. The ESOL students may even begin to assimilate to parts of American culture. In the final stage, students often experience re-entry shock stage when they return from a visit to their home country. The students begin to realize how much they have changed when they visit their home country and often develop an appreciation for their new culture (Zimmerman, 2010).

Noddings (2005) served as a guide for my classroom practice of demonstrating care for ESOL students through experiential learning. She is the author of several books, including *Educating Moral People* (2002), and she advocates a Deweyan approach to education, a pedagogy that works well in the ESOL classroom. Dewey promotes hands-on learning experiences in the classroom to teach students new content. Noddings (2002) wrote that "Dewey urges us not only to conduct education ethically but also to work toward the education of moral citizens, and his discussion of moral education is important even today," (p. 77). Noddings supports experiential learning with respect to moral education. She believes children must be cared for in order to become compassionate individuals. I have found that being considerate of my students has influenced them more than any particular academic content. My students often make comments about how much I care and how they feel loved. Noddings (2002) finds it necessary for students to experience morals before they are able to understand them. She does not think that morals change drastically over time or across the globe. Noddings' approach to moral education uses experiences and stories in the classroom to help teach young people about societal ethics. She writes,

Of course stories may be inspirational, and they may portray heroes. But more important, stories may help us to understand what happens- why people are usually

good sometimes give way to temptation or even evil, how whole tribes and nations can go wrong, how we are led to betray our friends out of fear, how we try to be good and become confused over what “good” means, how throughout dependent on one another we are for our moral goodness. (Noddings, 2002, p. 9)

Noddings believes the purpose of schooling is to prepare young people to participate and be successful in society. As an ESOL teacher, this charge travels at lightning speed. Since the students hail from a variety of backgrounds, they must learn more information about living in a democracy. The true joy of teaching ESOL classes is how excited the students become when they learn about the rights and privileges of American society.

Aubrey’s ESOL Classroom

“Mrs. Southall, thank you so much!!! Helping me... I don’t know I can thanks to you!! If there is anything I could help you please please let me help you.”

Students need a compassionate teacher to be successful. Noddings (2005) noted, “Schools, we are told, must be held accountable for the results they produce” (p. xiv). In my experience, students who are cared for enjoy school more, which results in greater learning gains. I always ask about my ESOL students’ families and their life outside of school. I follow up by asking about concerns they have and also offer to provide help for their families to find resources they may need. I always check on absent students and have their classmates contact them. I let my students know how much I have missed them when they return. I include on my agenda sporting events and after school activities that involve my ESOL students and I attend some of their events, along with their places of work. I am also available for questions throughout the day. Before school my students know that I am available for visits to various offices to help with paper work or with grade concerns for other classes. ESOL students face difficult transition periods. The students have been uprooted from friends and family while trying simultaneously to build a new school and neighborhood support system. Daily words of care can change a student’s day.

“Class is small but I like it because I can concentrate. We always work in a team and we seat in family.”

Students need to feel comfortable in their classrooms. Thus, I structure the class desk so we can sit as a large group and speak as if we are a family. We help each other in times of need. I encourage the students to answer questions their classmates have in order to improve their English skills and understanding. We visit each other at places of work. I showcase the students’ culture and home country at any chance possible. I invite them to visit any time during the day when they have a question or are confused. This type of welcoming classroom environment helps to form a strong bond and a resilient community where the students are able to rely on one another.

“My favorite activity is when we play the game when we where throw in a paper (bomb).”

Students need someone who is transparent, flexible and willing to do whatever it takes to make learning happen. When an observer enters my room, he or she may or may not see me standing on a desk, rolling around on the floor, or imitating an animal. My students learn a great deal from role-playing. I have noticed students gain concepts faster when we act out a part of history, such as trench warfare. Trench warfare is a complicated term to understand until a student experiences making a “trench” and taking on the role of either the Central or Allied powers. Students also grasp concepts more quickly when pictures are used. I have also learned I must

become the teacher of *all* subjects. I help students understand information from their other courses and I am reminded of my own high school curriculum.

"I was very sad because I have more than two years in here and my English its not good...I am happy that you are my teacher you are the best I love you Miss."

Students want to learn functional English that they can use immediately. They want to be able to communicate basic needs and wants. If we are honest as educators, we know that Hammurabi is not general lunchtime conversation. I have learned to inspire my students to want to come early and leave late and I must teach both general and slang English. My students love practicing new phrases and bringing in new words. My students complete the homework at a higher rate when the homework includes practical English skills.

"Miss, do you know what is this One Direction?"

Students need every opportunity to be a teachable moment. As teachers, interruptions to class can often make teachers feel as if learning time is lost. As an ESOL teacher, I take every opportunity to teach my students about our surroundings and incorporate new vocabulary. We had two fire drills in my ESOL class and each time my students have come back with a variety of words based on the areas of the school we passed on our journey to my classroom's safe space. The words turf, artificial, spray paint, garden, drill, practice, and many others have been added to our class vocabulary. I also bring in popular songs and explain what the lyrics mean. Most recently, the students have brought in songs and I use the lyrics as an example of homonyms.

"Oh my gosh teacher, we all made A!"

Students need celebration. We celebrate birthdays, test scores, new words, and reading levels. We are always clapping, singing, and jumping with excitement. I have even tried to learn birthday songs in a variety of languages. My students really appreciate the effort. We celebrate national holidays along with holidays from their respective countries. For example, in advance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day we read several children's books about his life along with listening to his "I Have a Dream" speech with Spanish subtitles.

"I had so bad bad personal experience (coming to American school). I hope I can have you next year!!! You are so nice teacher. The thing is I am so lucky that having Mrs. Southall. I really like your class."

Students need fictional texts to teach life lessons. Narrative stories have worked well in teaching certain aspects of my World History course. *I Hate English* by Ellen Levine is an excellent children's book and can be used at all grade levels. The author of the book tells the story of a young girl and her acquisition of English. My students were able relate to the main character and her struggles. This book broke down barriers and allowed my students to let me know the difficulties they were facing. *Yertle the Turtle*, by Dr. Seuss is another good book to use with ELL students. The story depicts the life of an oppressed turtle society. I have the students think about how people put them down because of their lack of knowledge of English: "I don't like to complain, but down here below we are feeling great pain. I know, up on top you are seeing great sights, but down here at the bottom we, too, should have rights" (Seuss, 1950, p. 19). I explain the reason why self-advocacy is important in all education, especially in ESOL education, is that others may believe the students are not worthy of certain privileges.

What I Learned from Teaching

As an ESOL social studies teacher, I continually reformulated my social studies classroom. The question of “what social studies information is most valuable?” shifted for me as I began working with recent immigrants to the United States. My perceptions of how a teacher should teach World History evolved throughout the school year. Although I continually bring different cultures and perspectives into my classroom, this time my practice is different. I find myself truly learning more about World History as I think about how I will teach it to students without prior background knowledge. I learned that some days, the social studies curriculum is not the most important item on the agenda. My hidden curriculum is expanding from time management, tolerance, unity and effective citizenship to all of those items plus learning sight words, different social interactions, and re-teaching various subjects to students. My classroom has become a place of true differentiation and flexibility where I meet students at their English level and help everyone find their voice in social studies.

Keeping a Classroom Research Collection

As a reflective teacher, I have always kept a journal and wrote notes to myself on a daily basis. Throughout my teaching of ESOL students, I diligently continued journaling. Originally, I was nervous about the idea of teaching students who came from different ends of the world, including various countries such as Japan, Bangladesh, Guatemala and Mexico. The diversified cultures added more to the classroom than I could ever imagine. When an activity was working at the beginning of the year, it truly stuck in my mind as I kept various notepads around my desk. There were days where I would try numerous activities in order for my students to understand complex concepts and when they worked, they were not easily forgotten. I kept files of their work to track their progress throughout the year. The students and I enjoyed reflecting as their language and knowledge of social studies blossomed.

Throughout the year, my students completed oral and written surveys. They also wrote notes to me and emailed me on a regular basis about their thoughts on the class. We held open class discussions about our likes and dislikes. Throughout the year, the students learned I loved constructive criticism and increasingly they felt free to tell me their thoughts. Initially, many of the students were reluctant to provide feedback due to their cultural norms. A few of the students wrote letters to me afterwards saying they were sorry for their comments or that their parents did not feel that they should be “correcting” me. We all learned from each other in these situations.

The Challenge

The ESOL classroom often comes with many challenges such as an unfamiliar curriculum, students of low socioeconomic status, and high dropout rates. Many of my students have never studied World History. During the first few weeks of school it is critical to review concepts and in some cases, learn basic social studies skills, such as map labeling, map reading and continent identification. Since my students have limited prior knowledge, each unit poses new and interesting challenges. Many ESOL students lack the technology or supplies that native English speakers in my school possess. To assist, I supplied each of my ESOL students with a folder and spiral bound notebook for the year. In return, the students demonstrated amazing gratitude. My ESOL students also value time in the computer lab, since computers often are not a part of their daily routine. Since ESOL students may not be familiar with computers, I must leave time in lessons to teach computer skills.

Furthermore, my students hold a variety of English comprehension abilities. I make sure all content is delivered in a way that encompasses speaking, reading, writing and listening, since my

students have different cognitive abilities in English acquisition. Nieto (1999) argued, "...the primary goal of education: to promote the education and achievement of all students, but particularly of students who too often are dismissed as incapable of learning and who consequently end up as the dismal statistics of school failure" (p. xvii). Due to the high failure rate of many ESOL students in their first year and the high percentage of students of low socioeconomic status, many ESOL students drop out of school and begin to work. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2013), "Among eighth graders who reported to the 2000 U.S. Census that they spoke English with difficulty, only 49 percent went on to earn a diploma four years later." ESOL students are often a key source of income to their families. Teachers should emphasize the importance of limiting working hours until a high school diploma is earned, as the degree can enhance students' quality of life and economic potential in the future.

Conclusions

Since venturing into the world of ESOL social studies education, both authors have found a new love for researching the intersection of the two subjects through self-study and reflection. Aubrey implemented many new instructional techniques. She learned how to adapt a student-centered teaching style to meet the needs of ESOL students. Student-centered instruction is still important even when the students are learning to communicate in the same language. Chara was reminded of how theory and practice bolster each other, as she came to see how theorists such as Noddings, Thornton and Cruz, and Freire played out in Aubrey's classroom. Freire (2000) warns teachers against "banking" students with knowledge, as it is a form of oppression. The ESOL students taught Aubrey that an ESOL teacher has responsibilities outside of classroom instruction, such as advocating for their rights as students in the school. A continually recurring question in planning is, "*What knowledge is of most worth?*" a question Herbert Spencer asked in his 1884 essay. We have both learned it is often times essential to teach ELL students a concept they truly are interested in learning in order to use it as a segue for social studies instruction. For a second year, Aubrey has resumed teaching these same ELL students in a push-in U.S. History class. How fortunate! Reflective research on the integration of ESOL and social studies education will continue.

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