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Success with ELLs: Working for and with Latino/Latina Immigrant Newcomers in the English Language Arts Classroom

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# Success with ELLs

## Working for and with Latino/Latina Immigrant Newcomers in the English Language Arts Classroom

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“Newcomers” are English learners who are new to the United States and arrive with limited or interrupted formal schooling. These students have below-grade-level literacy skills in their home language and do not speak English. Newcomers’ arrivals to our middle school and high school classrooms often present a formidable “what to do” for classroom teachers and other literacy professionals. However, “what to do” is often clouded in local folklore and even myths about language learning. This situation is frequently accompanied by media messages framing immi-

grant children as drains on public resources or threats to regional identities (Musetti, Salas, and Perez). Simply put, there are no quick or easy answers to the challenges faced by language arts practitioners working with newcomers. However, our goal in writing this column is to argue that what we know about second language literacy from a developmental standpoint should inform the choices English language arts practitioners ought to take—or, at times, resist—in better decision-making for diverse literacy classrooms. Our focus on *LatinolLatina* newcomers results from the fact that 76.9% of all English language learners in US schools are native speakers of Spanish (Hopstock and Stephenson).

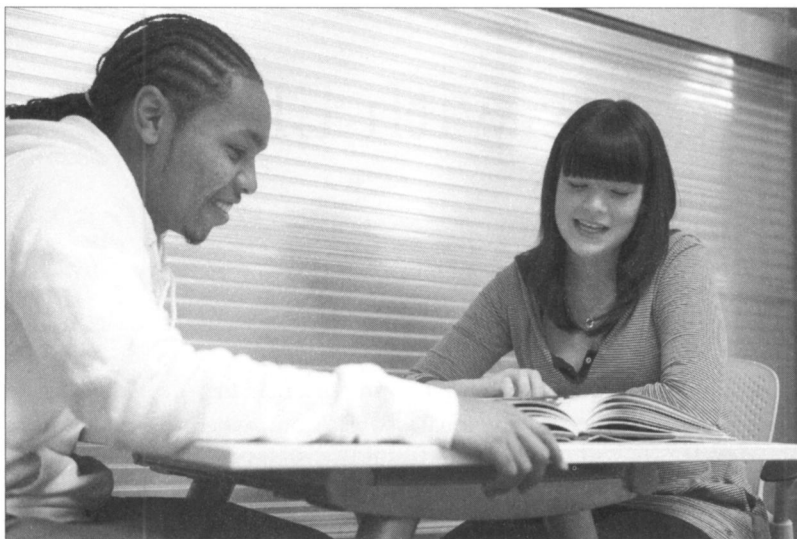
### Linking First and Second Language Literacy

Where students are in terms of reading and writing in their mother tongue matters. On the one hand, some immigrant students may arrive with high levels of formal schooling and first language literacy. On the other hand, “newcomers” are generally well behind their same age peers in terms of literacy in their primary language. Working purposefully with newcomers requires that

practitioners first gauge, and then work from, wherever students are in their home languages.

Even when middle school- and high school-level practitioners are committed to providing sustained, exemplary, and inclusive instruction, newcomers must still make great gains to meet end-of-grade requirements and eventually graduate from high school with credits and skills for the worlds of work and/or higher education. Because “sheltered instructional approaches” at the middle school and high school levels are often designed for English learners with grade-level or near-grade-level literacy skills in their first language or at least intermediate skills in English, newcomers would be excluded from the potential benefits of such approaches. Ideally, newcomers would receive first language support before sheltered instruction in English for that instruction to be maximally meaningful and effective (Collier and Thomas).

Minimally, teachers will want to build on what students know in their primary language as the strongest instructional bridge to English language development. Newcomers must be allowed and encouraged to use what they already know to promote new learning (Nieto).



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### **Finding More Instructional Time and Authentic Curricula**

Because newcomer students are in catch-up mode with native English speakers already performing at or above grade level, they require more instructional time—before and after school, Saturdays, weekends, and summers. All instruction must be maximally engaging and contextualized and address first and second language literacy. Dedicated English language arts teachers must provide newcomers the content they need to continue their educational transitions into high school, while simultaneously facilitating accelerated language development.

Each student is unique. Their individual experiences with formal schooling and first language literacy intersect with their immigrant experiences in K–12 public schools. Many districts and schools with significant numbers of newcomers have started programs to meet the specific needs of this group of students. Accordingly,

one of the main features shared by successful newcomer programs at the middle and high school levels is a focused investment on individualized instruction to the greatest extent possible (Short and Boyson). The students themselves become the starting point for the curricula that follow.

### **Advocating for and with Immigrant Students and Families**

Immigrant parents face enormous challenges in navigating public institutions that are rarely prepared to accommodate the diversity that they and their children bring. Immigrant parents of Latino/Latina newcomers will interact with the school if they are respected and included and there is a welcoming climate where information is shared and accessible (Allen). For many immigrant families a great deal of their time and resources go toward economic survival and realizing the “American Dream.” Immigrant parents do care deeply about their chil-

dren’s education, although their interaction with their children’s schools or lack thereof is sometimes misinterpreted (Valdés).

Most US schools still hold onto monolithic assumptions about what sorts of family engagement and support are valuable and consequently valued. Parental advocacy as practiced in the United States is potentially at odds with immigrant parents’ conceptualizations of what it means to work for and with their children and to support the school and the teacher. Teachers can best serve newcomer students by learning about students’ cultures, families, and backgrounds. It is important for teachers and schools to provide oral and written home communication in the languages of the families. Ideally, a bilingual family liaison will work to coordinate and facilitate communication and interaction between the classroom, school, and the family/community.

### **A Commitment to Newcomers**

Middle school– and high school–age immigrants are forced to make considerable adjustments to succeed in their new communities and schools, and the stresses they have continue long after the twelfth grade and into their adult lives. Literacy educators must grapple with meeting standards. At the same time, they must continue to look for ways to acknowledge students’ struggles with becoming “American” in ways that deflect the negative messages students are likely subject to both in and outside of schools via the popular media and their interaction with individuals and


communities (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco). Wherever they are in terms of academic English proficiency, “at-risk” students are

**Newcomer students need programs that allow them to learn in and outside of school to become socially and academically integrated.**

placed at even greater risk when their identities and cultures are not validated or, worse, trivialized. For these students, and perhaps all students, affect and cognition intersect in unusually powerful ways in classrooms and schools.

Difference is habitually confused with deficiency when it comes to schooling (Delpit; Heath; Kozol). But the reality is that English learners come with vast experiences that are regularly undervalued in classrooms where the focus is on canonical knowledge and traditional conceptualizations of literacy (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Alvarez). Newcomer students need programs that allow them to learn in and outside of school to become socially and academically integrated. Learning the “basics” for these students means receiving instruction that allows them to build on the “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, and Amanti) they bring with them from home to school. Good newcomer programs will ideally include some aspect of

community-based exploration or work, including field excursions, service learning, internships, or other forms of credit-earning “authentic” work.

Perhaps most of all, Latino/Latina immigrant newcomers need English language arts teachers and leaders to advocate for and with them through *cariño* or a more personally invested form of caring, while promoting high levels of literacy (Valenzuela). More effective newcomer literacy development across the middle school and high school levels must be grounded in flexibility, conscientiousness, patience, and creativity in offering a coherent, supported, integrated, and effective plan for students and families. Such a commitment offers newcomers the greatest chance for success. 

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