

Building Bridges: Making Literacy and Democracy Accessible in a Curriculum for Students with Interrupted Formal Education

Lisa Auslander and Magdalen Beiting
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Abstract

The following is a qualitative exploratory investigation into the potential impact of a critical-thinking-based literacy curriculum for Students with Interrupted Education (SIFE) with Developing Literacy. This initial research sought out examples of the power- and citizenship-based themes of the curriculum as viewed through classroom observations and interviews with teachers, administrators, and students. Creating a curriculum for SIFE that allows these students to access critical thinking and higher-order themes, such as power, identity, and citizenship, not only provided these students with access to an education they otherwise would not receive, but also gave students access to the discussion around complex issues such as citizenship and immigration.

Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) are a heterogeneous group of English Language Learners (ELLs) who have been in the U.S. for less than twelve months and who, upon initial enrollment in school, are two or more years below grade level in literacy in their home language due to interrupted to schooling prior to arrival in the United States. These students frequently need pedagogical supports, curricula, and supportive environments to help them to make up the large gaps in their education (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2017). SIFE with Developing Literacy (SDL) are those students who come to the United States at or below a second grade level in their home language; many are new to print. SIFE are an extremely at-risk population. According to one study, approximately 70% of these students will drop out without receiving their high school diploma (Fry, 2005).

Many SIFE have had several years’ gap in their formal schooling due to their home country’s limited attendance requirements, the need to work for their families, or some combination of political turmoil and refugee status (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). SIFE from Central America are frequently unaccompanied minors, meaning that they

do not live with parents, and they often come to the United States expecting to be able to work immediately to support themselves, and find that they are also legally required to attend school. Many SIFE are also undocumented immigrants, a factor which creates additional challenges. Even those who have applied for refugee or other legal status are still burdened by constant court appearances and meetings with immigration lawyers.

Pedagogy for SIFE with Developing Literacy

Due to the large gaps in their formal education, SIFE are most likely to be successful with targeted pedagogy and specific intervention from educators. In an ethnographic year-long classroom observation, Hos (2016) described various pedagogical choices that impact SIFE. Some of the most important things educators could do to assist these students are demonstrating flexibility and empathy, as well as placing pedagogical importance on routines and phonemic awareness for supporting student learning.

Dávila (2012) conducted a qualitative study examining qualities of newcomer SIFE and found that these students were frequently underserved within the high school context. The research shows that most of the decisions regarding this population's academics were chosen for them; the students had a very small role in choosing their academic trajectory or schooling. Along these lines, Dávila (2012) found that these students were kept in remedial tracks that contributed to student lack of motivation. As a result of these pedagogical choices, these settings frequently set students up to be unsuccessful and unable to graduate. The researcher suggests that these students need to have a place to discuss their experiences and to share their culture, as well as to be allowed to make decisions regarding their own education. The overall implication of these findings is that even students who are extremely motivated can become disillusioned and discouraged by being placed in a permanent remedial track. In addition, SIFE need to have a curriculum by which they can discuss meaningful topics while reading rich literature, not focusing solely on remedial skills, which can become demoralizing, particularly for older students.

Nykiel-Herbert (2010) also focused on examining newcomer SIFE students, more specifically on elementary school-age Iraqi refugees. This study reveals that the students were initially given educational materials that were developmentally and culturally inappropriate. Within this schooling system, the administration decided to create a

protected classroom for these students instead of having the students scattered throughout several mainstream classes where they simply sat in the back working on remedial texts and materials. Nykiel-Herbert (2010) found that these students gained strength and academic competency by being in a group where they could learn together and focus on their culture. The researcher found that allowing the students to learn in a culturally-relevant environment improved their academic outcomes, which led to long-term success.

Hickey (2015) also found that SIFE benefit from cultural and social support. This researcher suggests that helping SIFE is best done as a departmental effort that relies on action plans and cooperation among teachers. These students also need to be aware of the relevance of their education and how it relates to their daily life. Overall, the findings of Hickey and Nykiel-Herbert both suggest the importance of creating a protected classroom environment in which students are receiving age-appropriate, culturally-relevant materials that can support student success. Moreover, SIFE need classrooms in which they can be with peers who have similar backgrounds and can receive targeted language instruction.

Similarly, Menken (2013) detailed some of the current findings around how to support SIFE, especially those who have refugee status. In this review, she noted that one of the largest issues that high school SIFE experience is that they are placed in 9th grade when they arrive in the United States, despite lacking the academic skills necessary to be successful in a traditional 9th grade classroom. Menken (2013) also problematized traditional schooling for SIFE, particularly in language instruction, as most 9th grade curricula already assume that students have strong language skills when they enter high school. In 9th grade, there is not much support for students who struggle with basic language skills, much less complex academic language. These findings suggest that SIFE and SIFE with Developing Literacy (SDL) need additional support and a sheltered curriculum in which they can work on attaining both basic English language proficiency, as well as support with learning complex academic language.

Importance of L1 in Supporting L2 Learning

In addition to overall language learning findings, Menken (2013) also found that even when SIFE receive some language support, this is usually in the format of traditional ESL, focusing on learning English. However, these students also need support in strengthening their home

language skills in order to improve their English skills. There is an overall pattern of English language learning such that ELLs benefit from support in their first language to support their growth in their new language (Halasa & Al-Manaseer, 2012). Since SIFE have not received appropriate formal schooling in their home languages, they may not be aware of the grammar or language structures of their home language, which can also impact learning and comprehension of English as a second language.

As an example, Blom, Paradis, and Duncan (2012) found that children who had larger vocabularies in their first language had an easier time learning English vocabulary than those who had smaller vocabularies in their first language. Yamashita (2004) also found that student attitudes towards reading in their first language(s) (such as value, comfort, anxiety, and self-perception) transferred to their attitudes towards reading in their second language. Yamashita (2004) also found that students' positive perceptions of reading transferred to increased success in a second language reading class. Overall, these findings suggest that strengthening first language skills, as well as positive attitudes towards general schooling in the first language can improve success in second language learning.

Making ELL Education Democratic

In addition to encouraging language learning, it is also important to support ELLs in such a way that they are able to have an equivalent educational experience to “mainstream” students. ELLs should have an equal chance at long-term academic success and high school graduation, as well as college readiness. One way in which ELLs are marginalized is they are frequently “leveled” and placed on the lowest track, which can limit future opportunities; these students essentially have no access to advanced coursework or academic challenge once they are placed in a low-level course (Mcintyre-Mccullough, 2016). In addition, Jiménez-Castellanos and García (2017) found that ELLs experience intersectionality regarding their language status, race, immigration status, socioeconomic status, religion, and culture. They described how important it is that educators and policymakers understand the context these students live in and also realize that ELLs dwell within a rich community. These students and their families need to feel that they are understood and that they have agency in their academic futures.

In relation to the description of ELL inequality, Soria and

Ginsberg (2016) described a school context that performed a series of equity audits to examine ELL performance relative to “mainstream” students. The researchers found that, in this study, while many ELLs had strong rates of attendance, they were earning twice as many low grades compared to “mainstream” students. They explain that seeing this difference helped the administration and teachers to be able to focus on inequality within the schooling context and better support ELLs. Trujillo and Woulfin (2014) also described a community-based educational equality program, and found that the intermediary program provided the teachers and administrators with training and information sessions. As a result, the teachers demonstrated an increased understanding of standards-based and democratic education. Trujillo and Woulfin (2014) caution that an over-attention to standards-based pedagogy can lead to a decrease in the democratic nature of education, and more needs to be done to support making education equitable such that all voices are heard. Currently, the standards-based educational system that relies on high-stakes educational testing contributes to a system of educational inequity that is already damaging ELLs’ chances of being able to succeed academically.

Purpose of the Study

This exploratory qualitative study sought to examine examples of teachers and students contributing to positive classroom culture in service of our team’s curriculum contracted by the New York State Education Department (NYSED), designed to provide SIFE with access to the English classroom. The construct of classroom culture is complex, and we examined a variety of different features, such as democratic classroom cultures, encouragement of first language use, differentiation for different kinds of learners, and encouragement of collaborative student work. We also looked for examples of teachers who encouraged their students’ direct participation in democratic education by fostering political discourse through discussion of current political issues and the rights of immigrants.

Methods

Participants

This was a cross-case study of four different schools located in New York City and the surrounding area across the 2016–2018 school years. We observed and interviewed a total of 11 teachers, interviewed five

administrators, and observed over 150 students, 21 of whom we also interviewed in small focus groups. These students all attended Bridges English as a New Language (ENL) classrooms, and the students at one school attended Native Language Arts (NLA) classes that were developed using the Bridges curriculum as a model. The vast majority of these students were Spanish-speaking SIFE from Mexico, Central America, and South America, but several students were from the Middle East and Africa.

Curriculum

All of the schools involved in this study were using the ENL curriculum designed by Bridges to Academic Success, a group of developers and researchers funded by NYSED. This curriculum includes two courses: Stand-alone ENL and Integrated ENL/ELA. Together, these courses foster conceptual knowledge, academic language and literacy, and foundational skills for SDL. The Stand-alone ENL curriculum consists of four different centers: an independent reading center, an independent writing center, a foundational literacy center, and a teacher-led group reading and writing center. Each center is designed to support students with materials at their particular level of literacy, as measured by the Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA) (Hileman & Cline, 2014). The Integrated ENL/ELA curriculum is a language arts curriculum that includes language and content scaffolds, as well as instructional protocols and strategies to support language learners who may struggle with foundational literacy as a result of interrupted schooling in their home language. The curriculum consists of three units focusing on reading comprehension and writing skills as they relate to universal themes such as resources, power, and identity.

Instruments

A team of two observers went into all classrooms to observe teachers in practice using an instructional observation protocol based on elements from the curriculum and specific principles including use of home language literacy (García & Menken, 2015) and gradual release of responsibility (Fisher & Frey, 2014). This led to a total of 42 observations across the two school years. These observations lasted for the entire 45- or 90-minute period, depending on the length of the class in a given school.

All of the teachers and administrators were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview protocol throughout the course of

the school year. The interview questions included probes about the strengths their students bring into their contexts, questions around non-cognitive support, such as counseling and support from families, and questions around immigration as it impacts students. Some of the students were also interviewed in small groups or in focus groups.

Qualitative Analysis

The data was collected and an initial system of codes was developed. This system was used to code the data and a second set of codes was generated iteratively from the qualitative data, which were the codes most used in the following analysis. This paper focuses on the theme of “creating and sustaining classroom culture”, which is the umbrella term for the following themes: supporting students struggling with home language, differentiation strategies, small group collaborative instruction, understanding political contexts, informal teacher counseling, and teacher empathy. We focus on teacher and administrator interviews and observation notes as the main corpus of source material.

Results

Supporting Home Language Development

All of the teachers we observed encouraged their students to use Spanish or their native language in all aspects of the learning process as a way of making the learning process more equitable for all students. The Bridges curriculum encourages teachers to allow their students to translate the key vocabulary of a new text before reading, which we saw frequently in our observations. In addition, Spanish and other home languages were clearly an integral part of the Bridges classrooms that we visited. All four of the schools had either a bilingual teacher, a teacher’s aide who spoke one or more of the students’ first languages, or both in most of the Bridges courses to support student success. In one of the classrooms we visited, the teacher was bilingual in Spanish and English, and the school was also able to provide two teacher’s aides who spoke Arabic and French and were able to support students from the Middle East and Haiti in their home languages. This was the most diverse representation of home language we witnessed across all four schools, and its use was a very intentional and part of the school’s culture. One of the administrators at this school noted:

When you think about, “How do you best teach students content

and English language development simultaneously?” one of the most important things to recognize is that translanguaging is happening. What do I mean by translanguaging? It means that the student is actually going to need to use their primary language to acquire the new language. General things that we do across the board for all students, regardless of their literacy levels in their home language when they enter our school, is allowing students to use their native language to acquire more English through interpretations, through various texts that are translated, through the dictionaries in English to their home language.

We also saw this same adherence to the importance of home language use in another one of the schools we visited; this school provided the students with a daily period of NLA in addition to the three periods of the Bridges curriculum. The administration at this school provided SIFE teachers with additional summer pay and time to create a NLA curriculum for SIFE based on the structure and themes of the original Bridges curriculum. These teachers were also given materials and training in using the Estructura para la Evaluación del nivel independiente de lectura (ENIL) (Sánchez, Hileman, & Cline, 2017), which is a Spanish system analogous to the IRLA, the reading level assessment the Bridges program uses to measure English reading growth and progress. This school also provided a Spanish-speaking teaching aide in each of the traditional Bridges classes to support first language growth and to facilitate use of both Spanish and English. Overall, all of the teachers and schools we observed encouraged the use of home language in the classroom and encouraged the use of dictionaries, Google Translate, talking with more knowledgeable peers and the teaching aide, where possible, and using teacher-translated classroom labels and anchor charts.

Differentiation Strategies

Another way that teachers tried to make the classroom more accessible and equitable is through the use of differentiation strategies for supporting students at their level. The Stand-alone ENL class has centers that have materials for all student levels of reading and writing ability in English, and these materials can be adjusted as the students learn. Some teachers we observed had homogenous reading level groups at each center and some teachers paired students who were lower-level readers with students who were slightly higher-level readers. For example, at the foundational literacy center of the Stand-alone ENL

class, two of the classes we observed included students quizzing each other on vocabulary words and encouraging each other to keep going. We observed all of the teachers in the Stand-alone ENL classrooms leading a guided reading center, in which the teacher picks a small group who are at a similar reading level and picks a “stretch text” to support student reading. In these cases, the guided reading centers focused on the skill of inferencing meaning from text.

We also observed differentiation strategies implemented in the NLA classroom. These teachers modeled their instructional materials after the Bridges curriculum. For example, in one of the teacher’s classrooms we observed:

Anna reminds her students to use their levelled basket to pick out their books when they’re finished. Groups vary in Spanish [reading] proficiency from a Kindergarten level all the way to 8th grade. Anna goes about passing out baskets to groups and tells me these are levelled books that exist in baskets for each group of students. She then tells me that this is a nonfiction unit, so all of the books are nonfiction, with the long-term writing goal that students will be able to write their own nonfiction papers.

The NLA teachers also saw the importance of providing materials for their students that were at their appropriate levels in Spanish. One of the classes spent significant time working in guided reading groups with Spanish language texts. The students within the NLA class were a blend of SDL and emerging ELLs, so these teachers had to differentiate for students who were new to print and students who were approaching 8th grade reading comprehension in their home language.

Student Collaborative Instruction

An additional way in which these classrooms demonstrated equitable education was by encouraging students to work collaboratively so that they could support each other in their English language learning as well as home language learning in the NLA classroom. In all of the classes we observed, students worked together to develop their literacy and general language learning. We saw students doing different kinds of activities together: students working on “turn and talks,” supporting each other with worksheets, helping each other to translate words, proofreading each other’s writing, supporting each other with translations during class share outs and discussions, and working together on collaborative chart-making. All of the teachers we observed felt comfortable allowing their students to work in groups and to support each other. The most

powerful evidence for the success of collaboration as supporting the students came from the students themselves . All names have been changed to provide anonymity:

Marco: I also like the groups, someone knows something, they understand and can explain it to the others in the group.

Jose: I feel that other students in the classroom help me to learn more and we learn together. And we all work together.

Jaime: When I don't know something, I know there is someone in the room I can ask for help.

Lara: I like that we're in groups and that now we're learning a lot because we work together. Each group has something to do. Sometimes I work with the teacher, sometimes I read, sometimes I look at the board for the words I need to translate. This helps me a lot, the books do, too.

Overall, the students recognized that collaboration was supporting them to be better learners. They all mentioned ways they use others as a resource for learning. For example, if a student didn't know the answer to a question or a certain word, he or she was able to find someone else in the class who could support them. The teachers also described ways that students in each class created a learning community in which they tried to support each other to be successful.

Understanding Political Contexts: The Rights of Citizens and Immigrants

Within the classrooms we observed, the teachers were very encouraging of their students' discussions of current political issues, such as the rights of citizens, the deportation of immigrants, and the recent school shootings. These teachers all believed that part of their job was to help their students to understand the political context of the United States as well as to be more aware of the culture of their new home. For example, one teacher found that it was very important to dispel some of the myths around the rights of police to deport immigrants:

Teacher: So... can I arrest Wendy if I don't like her?

Student 1: No, it's unjust.

Student 2: You really have to have a reason to arrest her.

Teacher: I have a really good question. If you are just walking on 5th Avenue and a police officer comes up to and tries to arrest you, can they arrest you?

Student: No, because you aren't doing anything wrong.

Teacher: Can police deport you if they take you from the street?

Students: No!

Teacher: That's right, police cannot. Police are not ICE. Only ICE can deport you.

This teacher later spoke to us about this lesson and said that she had realized that many of her students were scared of the police and thought that the police were here to deport them. She realized that, along with the curriculum about human rights, she could make the lessons more relatable by tying them to the students' daily experiences.

In addition to this lesson, the NLA teachers we observed were especially concerned with teaching their students about the rights of citizens as they related to the rights of immigrants. These teachers believed that it was important for their students to understand that they had rights as immigrants, despite the current anti-immigrant political climate. In one lesson we observed, we saw one of the NLA teachers helping her students to create concept maps around the rights of immigrants versus citizens:

Teacher: What's a citizen?

Student 1: A person from the United States.

Student 2: A person who has the right to live here.

Teacher: What's an immigrant?

Student 3: A person who moves here from another place.

Student 4: An immigrant is someone who isn't born in this country.

Student 5: They might have a visa or citizenship.

Teacher: What we're going to do is work in groups. Each group will have a chapter and they will each read it as a group. They will then create a map of the rights of citizens and immigrants.

We also observed classroom artifacts around current political events. One of the classrooms we observed required that students research information about the Parkland school shootings. The students had created a chart paper with annotation around these news articles. Another teacher also reported that students were confused when the school allowed a walkout protesting gun violence, but wanted to learn more, which led to a set of lessons around school shootings and violence.

Summary and Discussion

Overall, these classrooms were rich environments for SIFE to be able to learn and grow. These teachers and administrators all discussed the

importance of making education accessible to SIFE with developing literacy so that these students can have a chance at an equitable education and a deeper understanding of their new country's culture. In our classroom observations, many of the teachers were consistently working to maintain positive classroom culture and positive environments for learning. The teachers we observed all worked consistently to make their classroom a joyful and comfortable place where the students could learn.

The teachers, administrators, and students also mentioned the importance of classroom culture and some of its features throughout their interviews. Teachers created classrooms that respected their students' home languages and cultures by encouraging them to speak in their home languages and to work collaboratively with students who share their language or cultural experiences. These teachers and administrators also believed that education for SIFE should be equitable to that of "mainstream" students. This was evident in that classrooms employed differentiation and encouraged important classroom discussions around political contexts and human rights. The students were encouraged to have agency in their own educational trajectories by being agents in the classroom through active collaboration and discussion. This study provided an opportunity to re-envision classrooms as democratic spaces for all students, particularly ELLs and SIFE, by not only providing access to the curriculum but also transforming the curriculum and the classroom into places where students feel welcome and can participate meaningfully.

Limitations and Further Research

This was a very small sample of students across only four different schools in one geographical urban region. The vast majority of the SDL in this sample were Spanish-speaking from Mexico, Central America, and South America. There are refugee SIFE from many backgrounds who were not represented within our sample. One further direction for this research is to examine schools with different populations of SDL, particularly additional schools with multilingual populations. Another next step would be to collect quantitative data around specific student literacy growth in order to triangulate the experiences of the teachers and students as they relate to measurable educational outcomes. Finally, it would provide insight into the lives of students to follow a cohort of SIFE throughout their high school journeys to examine the ways in which the students adjust to American schooling.

References

- Blom, E., Paradis, J., & Duncan, T.S. (2012). Effects of input properties, vocabulary size, and L1 on the development of third person singular -"s" in child L2 English. *Language Learning*, 62(3), 965-994.
- Custodio, B., & O'Loughlin, J.B. (2017). Students with interrupted formal education: Bridging where they are and what they need. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Dávila, L. (2012). 'For Them it's Sink or Swim': Refugee Students and the Dynamics of Migration, and (Dis)Placement in School. *Power and Education*, 4(2), 139-149.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2014). Better learning through structured teaching. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Fry, R. (2005). The higher drop-out rate of foreign-born teens: The role of schooling abroad. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.
- García, O., & Menken, K. (2015). Cultivating an ecology of multilingualism in schools. In B. Spolsky, O. Inbar-Lourie, & M. Tannenbaum (Eds.), *Challenges for language education and policy: Making space for people* (pp. 95-108). New York: Routledge.
- Halasa, N.H., & Al-Manaseer, M. (2012). The use of the first language in second language learning reconsidered. *College Student Journal*, 46(1), 71-81.
- Hickey, P. (2015). Behind the acronym: Multilingual learners with interrupted formal education. 104(6), 81.
- Hileman, J., & Cline, G.Z. (2014). IRLA: Independent reading level assessment framework. King of Prussia, PA: American Reading Company.
- Hos, R. (2016). Caring is not enough. *Education and Urban Society*, 48(5), 479-503.
- Jiménez-Castellanos, O., & García, E. (2017). Intersection of language, class, ethnicity, and policy: Toward disrupting inequality for English language learners. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 428-452.
- Menken, K. (2013). Emergent bilingual students in secondary school: Along the academic language and literacy continuum. *Language Teaching*, 46(4), 438-476.
- Mcintyre-McCullough, K. (2016). The issue of equity in English language arts classroom. *English Journal*, 105(3), 94.
- Nykiel-Herbert, B. (2010). Iraqi refugee students: From a collection of aliens to a community of learners--the role of cultural factors in the acquisition of literacy by Iraqi refugee students with interrupted formal education. *Multicultural Education*, 17(3), 2-14.

Ruiz-de-Velasco, J., & Fix, M. (2000). *Overlooked and underserved: Immigrant students in US secondary schools*. Urban Institute: Washington, D.C.

Sánchez, L.C., Hileman, J., & Cline, G.Z. (2017). *ENIL: Estructura para la Evaluación del nivel independiente de lectura*. King of Prussia, PA: American Reading Company.

Soria, L.R., & Ginsberg, M.B. (2016). Questions that lead to action: Equity audits motivate teachers to focus on English learners' needs. *Journal of Staff Development*, 37(5), 28-31.

Trujillo, T.M., & Woulfin, S.L. (2014). Equity-oriented reform amid standards-based accountability: A qualitative comparative analysis of an intermediary's instructional practices. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(2), 253-293.

Yamashita, J. (2004). Reading attitudes in L1 and L2, and their influence on L2 extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 16(1), 1-19.