

Background Information:

On December 18, 2003 a new student arrived in our second grade classroom. This young lady, who we will call Sue, came to us from Korea. We were told that she spoke English and Korean in the home, but she would still qualify for ESL services. Her parents accompanied her to school on her first day. We were able to communicate with them without any problems. Sue was understandably shy and quiet. During the four days she was in our room prior to the Winter Break she did not speak at all. Even when spoken to she would ignore the speaker and turn away. When we returned in January this pattern continued. Everyday we greet each of our 22 students individually by saying “Good morning” and they respond with “Good morning.” When we greeted Sue she would turn and walk away. Other adults in the room experienced the same behavior when they spoke directly to her. The only time she initiated communication during her first month in our classroom was to whisper, “May I go to the bathroom?” She had very limited interactions with her peers. It was not until the beginning of March that she began to use limited English communication. She responded with a very quiet “Good morning” when greeted by the teacher. She also used the word ‘sharpen’ to indicate her pencil needed to be sharpened. At the present time, Sue occasionally interacts with her peers and participates in class activities by using a more extensive English vocabulary. More

often than not, she refuses to speak or acknowledge the speaker. This seems to be a conscious decision.

After speaking to Sue's parents and consulting with her ESL teacher, we have discovered that her behavior at home and with the ESL teacher is inconsistent with her behavior in our classroom. Both parties agree that Sue is more proficient in English than her classroom behavior indicates. They also agree that she is very shy. Her parents acknowledged that she likes her new school and her classroom. The ESL teacher suggested that we allow her more time to become comfortable in her new environment. According to the State College Area School District's English as a Second Language Resource Guide, English Language Learners (ELLs) go through five specific stages before they completely accept and are integrated into their new situation. The first stage is the "Honeymoon Period", where the student is fascinated with their new surroundings and often rejects one's own culture. Typically after the first stage, ELLs reach the "Culture Shock" stage, which is characterized by the student discovering it is often hard to communicate in the new culture and they may go through emotional and mental distress. The "Initial Adjustment" stage follows and is the stage where everyday activities do not pose a problem and the ELL becomes much more comfortable in the new culture. During the fourth stage, "Mental Isolation", the ELL feels isolated from family and friends. There is usually a loss of self-confidence in this stage. Hopefully, ELLs will reach the final stage of

“Acceptance and Integration.” This is the stage where an ELL is completely secure in their new culture and is using the new language fluently. Unfortunately, not all ELLs reach this stage (Mawritz, 2003). Through classroom observations and examination of Sue’s work we tried to determine which stage best described her behavior. Our initial analysis of her behavior and the descriptors for each stage leads us to believe that she is currently in the “Mental Isolation” stage. We feel that Sue exhibits behaviors that show she may feel lonely and still feels as if she cannot express herself in English as well as she can in her native language. Frustration and sometimes a loss of confidence seem to show in her behavior as well.

Another inconsistency is her display of aggressive behavior toward her classmates. It is not uncommon for Sue to remove materials from other students’ desks or become physically aggressive towards her peers. Students have complained that Sue had taken their pencil or book from their desk or Sue had pushed them or kicked them. In several instances, adults working with Sue have expressed that she is uncooperative and believe that she really understood what they were asking her to do. We have discovered that Sue uses many of these behaviors to avoid completing tasks that she does not want to do but is capable of doing. According to an article by JeHong Jun, “Trouble in Korean Schools: Bad Kids or Bad Teachers?” Korean schools are experiencing similar problems with their students as schools in the United States are experiencing with their students. Korean teachers are complaining

about unruly students and are being forced to change their teaching style to deal with increasingly rebellious and apathetic students (Jun, 2003).

Our Wonderings:

Does our dilemma become one in which we are dealing with an insecure ESL student who is coping with a new environment or are we dealing with an aggressive young lady who manipulates the situation to get what she wants? Or is it a combination of both factors? Our goal of this project is to determine what strategies we could employ to help Sue feel comfortable in her new environment and be a part of our classroom community.

Inquiry Plan:

We began our inquiry by observing Sue's behavior in the classroom and recording our observations. We were interested in discovering if she used the English language in our classroom and if she interacted with her classmates. We also looked at the work she was producing to determine if she understood the written text and if she could put words onto paper. We specifically looked at the areas of reading, word study, and writing. We felt that these areas would give us the best clues to her understanding of the English language. We also directed our questions to Sue's ESL teacher and to her parents. Through these frequent discussions we were able to gain insights on Sue's behavior outside the classroom. This information was important in helping us get a better picture of Sue's personality. We gathered

and read several articles (See Appendix A) regarding ELLs to look for patterns in their behavior and to discover what methods have been successfully utilized to help the ELL student adapt to their new environment.

To analyze our data we compared our anecdotal records with the information we had gathered from the articles about ESL students. To help us clarify our information and to answer our questions we used the information obtained from the ESL teacher and Sue's parents about her behavior. We looked for clues and patterns in her work to help us understand her proficiency in the English language. We also looked at specific situations in the classroom in which Sue acted as if she did not understand the English language as a way to avoid completing the task. We tried to determine if there was a pattern in these situations. We also looked for patterns of positive and negative peer interactions.

Claims:

1. Sue has a greater proficiency of the English language than she leads us to believe.

According to the results of her word study work, Sue is able to write and correctly spell words most frequently used on a second grade level. This was most evident on the preview activity where students are required to write five words from dictation prior to direct instruction on those words. Sue frequently spells three or four of those words correctly with minor errors in the other words (See Appendix B).

After direct instruction, Sue scores on the proficient level on both word study reviews. On the review that uses the cloze technique Sue can identify the missing words and can usually spell them correctly. Sue has greater difficulty with the dictation of several sentences in the second part of the review, but more often than not she is able to write most of the words in the sentence, so that the sentence can be understood. Her parents have also indicated that she and her sister speak English at home. Sue's ESL teacher has reported that Sue has a high level of proficiency in the language. Our observations also indicate that Sue understands verbal communications in the classroom.

2. Sue uses her proficiency in the English language to manipulate situations to her advantage.

For the first several weeks after Sue's arrival she refused to write. She would pick up the pencil and continue to play with it even during one-on-one instruction with an adult. This behavior continued regardless of the assignment or subject area. We discussed this issue with the ESL teacher. She provided samples of Sue's writing from her ESL class. This work was inconsistent with the writing that she was producing in our classroom. We decided that the ESL teacher would come to our room to share Sue's ESL writing. We arranged a time when the ESL teacher could meet with us and Sue together. We manipulated the situation so that Sue was a part of the celebration of her writing and that the ESL teacher was sharing Sue's

successes with us, her teachers. It also served the purpose that now Sue knew that we were aware that she was a capable writer and our expectations would be the same as in the ESL classroom. From our other observations in the classroom, we discovered that Sue would ignore the directions of one adult in the room but would respond to those same directions from another adult.

3. As Sue is becoming more comfortable in the classroom, her interactions with others in the classroom are occurring more frequently.

During Sue's first month in our classroom she did not speak or initiate conversation with anyone in the classroom. By the middle of February, Sue was communicating by using one or two words in her responses. On March 29, she actually responded "Good morning" when greeted by the teacher. Sue is also demonstrating more positive behaviors when interacting with others. Currently, she is initiating more contact with adults in the room and utilizing a much greater English vocabulary. These contacts are still infrequent and she does not have a consistent relationship with any particular student. There is a clear and consistent pattern in our observations that shows an increase in positive interactions and in verbal communications since Sue's arrival in our classroom until the time of this project.

Conclusions:

Larry Rotz

As an elementary teacher with over 24 years experience, Sue certainly has been the most challenging English as a Second Language Learner I have encountered in my classroom. I have had the opportunity to work with numerous ESL students from many countries. There have been years where I have had three or four students in my classroom who have had very little experience with the English language or the American culture. As was expected with most of these students, they were shy, insecure, and spoke very little when they arrived. But in most of these cases the students were eager to learn the language and become a part of the classroom community. Even those who struggled with the English language attempted to communicate with the teachers in the room and their classmates. I have been very surprised by Sue's lack of respect for the adults in our room and the way she treats her classmates. This is certainly very different than my past experiences with other ESL student in my room. It has caused me to take a much closer look at how I evaluate ESL students to determine the best curriculum to meet their needs.

Lindsay Turnbull

Since this is my first year in an elementary classroom, I have limited experiences working with students, especially ESL students. I was first introduced to the ESL program at the beginning of the school year during an inservice seminar. Our school's ESL teacher spoke to us about the ESL program and told us about the information she was receiving from classes that she was taking. Shortly after, I

found out that our classroom would have two ESL students. We were not sure how much English these two students knew or how far along they were in the ESL program. As these two students arrived in our classroom and became a part of our classroom community over the next few months, I noticed that their English vocabulary and communication skills had greatly improved. They always seemed eager to participate in classroom activities and to interact with their peers. These two students seemed to immediately fit in with their peers and enjoy spending time in the classroom. When Sue arrived in our classroom, I was expecting that her transition from the Korean culture to the American culture would be similar to what I had witnessed with our other ESL students. In the beginning, it appeared as if this was going to happen. Sue seemed shy and unsure of herself and rarely initiated conversation. Over time, however, I have noticed that Sue is much different from our other ESL students, because she does not seem to be interested in making friends with her peers or interacting with her teachers. I think that the different experiences that I have had with ESL students this year are very beneficial for me, as I will be better prepared and aware of what I need to take into consideration with an ESL student in the future.

Rotz and Turnbull

Based on the evidence from our project, we believe Sue is proficient enough in the English language to successfully communicate with the adults in our classroom

and her peers. We continue to provide many opportunities for her to interact with adults and peers in nonthreatening situations throughout the school day. We vary our instruction to allow students to interact in small group situations as well as with the whole class. We have encouraged Sue and structured our lessons to give her ample opportunities to be successful as she participates in these types of formats. Sue's participation has gradually increased as we give her more chances for interaction. She appears to be more comfortable and secure since she chooses to participate more often.

It has become obvious from talking with Sue's ESL teacher and her parents that she can become very stubborn and obstinate when she does not want to complete a task. During our parent conferences, Sue's mother was not surprised to hear about her behavior in school. She also confided that they experience these same problems at home. From these conversations, we can conclude that her behaviors are more a part of her personality than her lack of understanding of the English language. Now that we understand the motives for her behavior, we made it clear to Sue that she would be expected to participate and complete the assignments just like the rest of her classmates. We made these expectations clear to her in the presence of her mother. Now when we give assignments to Sue we make sure that she understands the directions and our expectations. We are also careful to observe after the directions are given as to how she proceeds. Does she need further prompting?

Further explanations? Is she really trying to accomplish the task or is she trying to avoid it?

Future Implications:

From this project we have come to the realization that not all ESL students arrive in our classrooms ready and willing to speak English. As in the case of Sue, she refused to participate in the classroom. We first need to determine what level of proficiency these students have in the English language. Can they understand what is being said and do they have the capability to respond? According to Jonathan Snell, “A common problem with [ESL] teachers is dealing with a passive class, where students are unresponsive and avoid interaction with the teacher. This is especially true when a teacher seeks interaction in a teacher-class dialog, such as asking questions to the class as a whole, expecting at least one student to respond” (Snell, 1999, p. 1). As with any other student in our classroom we need to develop strategies to help the ESL student become more proficient in the language and to identify those services that would be most beneficial for the student.

If we do have a student who is somewhat proficient in the English language but refuses to participate we need to identify the reasons for their behavior. We should not accept behaviors from an ESL student that we would not accept from other students in our classroom. The lack of English proficiency should not be used as an excuse for inappropriate behaviors or as a refusal to complete work. ESL

students need to understand class rules and parameters for functioning in our culture. Charles L. Glenn explains, “Bilingualism is a very good thing indeed, but what language-minority children need most is schools that expect and enable them to succeed through providing a demanding academic program, taught very well and without compromise, schools which respect the ways in which children differ but insist that these differences not be barriers to equal opportunity” (Glenn, 1997, p. 21). Our goal from this project is to provide our ESL students with appropriate academic programs where they are capable of experiencing success to enable them to feel comfortable and secure in their new environment. At the same time, our goal is to help them understand the expectations and social norms of our culture so they can be successful in their interactions with others in the classroom.

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