Scaffolding Pedagogy: Integrating, Involving, & Engaging New Immigrants & ELL/ESL Learners in the Classroom.

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Abstract

This inquiry will be exploring the various teaching strategies that can best be deployed by educators to teach new immigrants to ease their journey into the classroom environment wherein they will be learning a new language. I will be looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of Anna (not real name) who arrives in the classroom with no prior English background.

This research explores why Anna hated school, what went wrong and how it can be fixed so that other new immigrants and teachers will not encounter the same problem(s) in future.

Keywords:
- Immigrant
- ELL/ESL students
- Teaching, learning English in Canada
- Scaffolding Pedagogy
- Engaging new Immigrants
- Integrating English learners

Introduction

I was inspired to become a teacher in 1994 after a friend invited me to a Junior High (Middle) school in the Ikebukuro ward of Tokyo to speak to his students about Japanese identity and discrimination of things, not Japanese. After my speech, I was surprised to see some students openly weeping and some very sad. While the teacher and the students thanked me for coming to visit their school, other teachers who came to listen to the speech were not thankful. My inquiry revealed that in Japan there was a cultural phenomenon called the “inconvenience truth” which in my interpretation, means not all things should be spoken about, even if it is known that there are good and bad things to be said about it. Days later, I received a lot of letters from those same students and some of them wanted me to introduce them to international cultures and traditions.

Compared to my job as a business consultant then, I felt for once very satisfied with the work I had done. Since that sunny day in the streets of Tokyo, I have promised myself never to look back, but to become a teacher that shares their knowledge to make a better community and society. My passion for the profession has taken me to many of the K-12
and post-secondary institutions in different cities and communities around Japan and the United Kingdom (UK).

In all these schools and communities I have taught, nothing has caught my attention or affected me so deeply compared to the ‘culture shock’ I received in my observation of a classroom teacher in the lower mainland of British Columbia concerning their handling of a newly landed immigrant student in the classroom. As it happens, this student was my daughter who at the time was in Grade Seven and was moved to Canada in 2011 with no prior knowledge of English language. As a newly landed immigrant, she was tested by the Settlement Center and classified as ‘no prior knowledge’. The outcome was submitted to the catchment’s school with other required documents needed for registration. She was assigned to a grade seven class.

Interestingly, after the first day at school, the grade seven teacher had a discussion with the other teachers, and from the second day Anna (not real name) was asked to go to the Kindergarten class to study with the kindergarten students. Because of this she hated school. For more contexts I will briefly review her cultural and educational background.

In Japan, elementary school is a six-year program compared to Canada’s seven years. Before coming to Canada, Anna had already graduated from elementary school and was in Junior High (Middle) school. In Japan, there is a culture of seniority or class status which is well embedded in the educational system and therefore with students. That is, high school students do not interact socially with junior high students because of status, just as grade six students do not socially interact with grade four or five students. This is one of the many reasons that grade mates or classmates stick together in virtually all social interactions both within and outside the school, and even after graduation.

Educationally, Anna was a straight ‘A’ student throughout her education in Japan. She led her elementary school to the quarterfinal round of the national science competition and won the gambate (Fighting-Spirit) award of the competition. She was the class President and gave the graduating class valedictory speech at her elementary school. According to her recommendation letter, signed both by her homeroom teacher and the school Principal, Anna is a “Star student in class…her exit from this school will create a gap hardly to be filled by any student…”

But here in Canada was a situation where Anna was asked to go to the kindergarten class every day to study with kids aged five to six years old. She felt humiliated, ashamed, and refused to go to school. She hated to go to school not because she did not like to study or attend school, but simply because her Grade seven teacher would ask her to go to the kindergarten class. She did not want to take the Grade seven graduating class photograph; neither did she want to be part of the class activities during school. Even with my continuous insisting that she did not need to be in the kindergarten class, her teacher told me that the kindergarten class was the best place in the school for her to learn. My sister, who is a Secondary school teacher in Calgary, came to Vancouver and went with Anna to school to speak with the teacher but the teacher insisted that it was better for Anna to stay in the kindergarten class. The teacher went further and blamed me for not speaking English with Anna at home, even with the “…overwhelming evidence in favor of practices that view students’ native language as an asset rather than a deficiency” (Lopez & Iribarren, 2014:108).

This paper, therefore, will be examining what went wrong with the practice of integration and involvement concerning new immigrant students into the class, and pose
the question, why it happened, and ends by suggesting how this situation can be prevented in future, especially with the forthcoming arrival of refugees into Canada and its classrooms.

Reviewing Historical Literatures

Most educators places emphasis on English fluency as the sole indicator for understanding and academic knowledge in school, and while this might be true to some degree, Callahan’s (2005) research suggested that though English is necessary for academic success, but a strong content-based is inevitable that is, students should also be judged based on their previous knowledge and the length of time they have been enrolled in school. Valdes (2001) studied four Mexican children in American middle schools who were struggling to learn English. Using an analysis of the children’s oral and written language skills, along with an examination of their classrooms, schools, and communities, the author concluded that the students’ first language (L1) should be a reference point when teaching the students a second language. According to the Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) for the Immigrant Youth (2011) reports, research indicates that when new immigrant students are integrated gradually into the classroom through ELL professionals or teachers, the student’s self-esteem and sense of maturity and importance in the family will increase dramatically. New immigrants who arrive in Western countries where English is the first language need to develop social skills using English to chat with friends, and they need between four to seven years to develop the academic English necessary to graduate from high school (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Lee, 2012; Gunderson, 2014).

Research conducted by Gunderson (2014) showed that immigrant students’ prior educational experiences play a central role in their educational achievement and learning abilities in their new countries, and this prior knowledge should not be ignored but embraced in teaching them a new language (Lopez & Iribarren, 2014). But unfortunately, these immigrant learners are forced into ELL classes that focus almost exclusively on acquiring English, often to the exclusion of academic content (Callahan, Wilkinson, Muller, & Frisco, 2009). The reason for this teaching method is that teachers often assume newcomers to Canada cannot do well in academic work until they are fully proficient in English (Callahan, 2005). Instead of offering students access to academic subjects such as math and science, which offer “… the opportunity for them to develop critical and independent thinking, schools too often subject ELLs to vocabulary drills” (Lee, 2012:66). English language learning is a dynamic social activity that requires interaction with peers both in formal and informal space. Through these interactions the ELL learners gain knowledge by observation, practice and experience (Hobbs, He, & Robbgriecco, 2015).

Although much research has been conducted on engaging new immigrants and ESL/ELL students in the classroom, none of these researchers have written about their individual experiences concerning dealing with teachers in the classroom or school. Canada’s schools continue to promote diversity, but data for B.C. shows that with the coming of new immigrants and refugees, etc., according to Welcome BC (2015), in general, the percentage of immigrants to B.C. with official language ability is less than
Canada overall. Recent research have shown that the number of immigrants arriving in Canada with English or French language ability is declining. Statistics BC data indicates that in 2010, 81.4% of immigrants to Canada had official language ability compared to 72.5% of B.C. immigrants. 27.5% of the total youth and adult immigrants to B.C. arrived with no official language ability in 2010 compared to 28.7% in 2009 and 28.2% in 2008; there is urgent need for educators and researchers to find a way to boost the language ability of these new arrivals. This research is timely and will be exploring various instructional methods that teachers can use to engage and involve immigrant students and ELL/ESL students in the classroom.

**Research Method**

As mentioned above, this research is subjective. The research is based on the ethnographic notion that the persons involved in the phenomena are best placed to describe their experiences or feelings in their own words, rather than using statistical analysis. Data was gathered by observation, meetings with the participants, and interviews with the teacher and principal involved. As Wridt (2003) put it, “Rather than viewing children’s lives, behaviors, and cognition from a positivist, removed, and neutral position, adopting a more collaborative approach to the research process encourages the active participation between the researcher and the researched” (pg.28).

This research involves my family’s experience with the Canadian educational system. To Anna, it was a very personal and emotional experience. In a postmodern era, there is no authoritative standpoint from which to know the world (Bauman, 1992). This is the reason that stepping out from the crowd of researchers and using a different lens to investigate this phenomena may enable me as an educator, and perhaps researchers as well, to look beyond the traditional surface of social research and see more clearly “… the possibility of portraying a complex lived experience” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p.248).

Anna still recalls her everyday ‘lived’ experiences in the school and she remembers how difficult it was for her to walk into the kindergarten classroom every day with the eyes of the much younger kindergarten students all staring at her. According to her, the experience was *taihen* (torturing) and *kitsu*i (tough). To be able to describe the way the phenomena affected the family, the feelings that were involved, and provide in-depth knowledge, using a social research method that encompasses the “…realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity within the frame of reference of the participant as opposed to the observer of the actions” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 28) became necessary. When she refused to go to school, I then knew something was very wrong. As a father who is used to seeing all A grades in his daughter’s report cards, it was shocking and very discomforting to see the reaction on my daughter’s face when I spoke about school.

Embarking on a research like this is tough for any researcher, educator, or teacher. Teaching students in the class who have been out of school for a long time due to war or displacement from their homeland is not an easy part of the teacher’s job; in some of these cases, they are teaching students who do not have any knowledge of the English language before arriving in the classroom. But as teachers we should continue to strive to make our classrooms a safe and comfortable place to be for the students. A more diverse classroom brings with it more diverse ideas and opinions into the classroom. All students learn from that diversity which is the very foundation and strength of the Canadian
identity and our commitment to multiculturalism. This being the case, what, one might ask, happened in Anna’s case? With a large population of new immigrants in Canada’s and BC’s classrooms, and with the government working with the communities to integrate newcomers into the society, should a teacher, school or school district have the power to limit a student’s rate of development? Should the school not have had an inclusive policy for all newcomers or was the district not aware of the school’s or teacher’s attitude towards new immigrants inside the classroom? These questions are what this research will attempt to suggest answers in the forthcoming section.

New Understandings and Findings

The above questions were all in my mind when I started my research and so I decided to dig deeper into the problem for a solution. In the following I make suggestions based on my findings regarding how the schools might deal more effectively with new immigrant students.

Lack of positive classroom environment

In the case under investigation here, there was a noticeable lack of positive encouragement towards students in the class. Anna was not encouraged to learn, or to even try to learn, the English language. The teacher felt that her presence in the classroom, including her lessons, was distracting other students. As teachers we are trained to provide a safe and comfortable environment for students, irrespective of the student’s educational or ethnic background. Without the teacher’s knowledge of Anna’s previous educational accomplishments, the instructor’s assessment of her was negatively influenced. Anna refused to go to school because she did not feel happy and safe in the Kindergarten class and she felt where she belonged was not a place where she was accepted, and for that reason she did not want to go to school. With the lack of a positive learning environment, Anna missed the Class Photograph for the graduating class.

Lack of passion and care for the students

There was no care for students in the class. Anna did not feel wanted by the teacher. Anna recalled, in one instance, the teacher saying to her:

Because you don’t understand my English and what your classmates are saying, it's better you go join the Kindergarten class for you to learn how to communicate in English

(Anna’s class teacher, 2011)

This teacher’s lack of affection and care about students contributed greatly to Anna’s disrespect for the teacher, and hated the school where the teacher was teaching.
**Inclusionary and Exclusionary school policy**

There was the in-the-invisible, but visible, policy of inclusion for students who could read, write and speak the English language as against students who cannot speak and write the language. This reality was more pronounced because within the school there was an after-school program where immigrant students could meet to socialize together. Interestingly, Anna made more friends in the after-school program than in the regular school. She even came back to the after-school program to volunteer for two years after she graduated from the school.

**Lack of Relationship Building**

The teacher and the school’s principal failed to build a classroom relationship that could have helped Anna to grow and develop her ability to learn English. Even when my sister, who is a teacher with the Calgary Board of Education, visited her classroom to observe Anna in class, the teacher complained that Anna could not participate in her classroom:

> Anna really needs to be in the Kindergarten class for her to learn English… She doesn’t understand anything anyone is saying in this class… She doesn’t speak to anyone, nobody understands what she’s trying to say…
>
> (Anna’s teacher to my sister, who’s a teacher in Calgary)

When I had a meeting with the teacher and the principal about ways to move forward, the teacher’s complaint was that I caused Anna’s problem, because I do not speak English with my daughter.

> If you were speaking English with Anna at home, she would be able to understand and speak English very well...
> Why do you speak only Japanese with her?
> (Anna’s teacher to Anna’s father)

The opportunity for relationships that could have developed from our meeting and the meeting with my sister was lost. Similarly, with the teacher’s stereotyping of Anna and her implication that students from Asia are only good at math and athletics, and her maintaining she could not communicate in English with Anna, meant that there was no need to try to build any form of relationship with Anna. But she did allow Anna into her class during math and P.E. She advised Anna to join the volleyball team, which Anna had never played previously. According to Anna, her teacher told her that girls from Asia can play volleyball very well, even without practicing, just as they are good in math class.

*The teacher knows all attitudes*
The teacher felt she knew everything about dealing with students in the classroom. This attitude made her and the school principal fail to read Anna’s previous school reports from Japan that were all written and translated into English by the Settlement center. The teacher even boasted to me that her class was one of the best classes in the school because students are always quiet in class. The confidence the teacher had in classroom management ability due to long teaching experience contributed a lot to mistakes in the teacher’s practices, which negatively affected the students which the teacher was not aware of. The teacher failed to recognize the difference between student’s being quiet in class due to the fear of being sent to the office, or telephone/ emailing their parent at home/ work as against student’s being quiet in class due to their respect for the teacher’s personality, knowledge and classroom management.

External Influence & Lack of interest in the profession

In 2011, the BC Teacher’s Federation (BCTF) was having a dispute with the provincial government over contract negotiation and signing. There were high levels of distrust between the provincial government and teacher’s association, and teachers were actually calling on their union for a strike. It was at this time Anna came to register in the school, when teachers were not happy with their contract and some wanted to go to the picket line. Anna’s teacher was one of the union leaders in the school, and this may have added to the teacher’s lack of interest in trying to help the student learn in the classroom.

Implications and Applications to Practice

Teachers are continuous learners. It is imperative for all teachers to continue to update their knowledge on each subject area and related fields of interest. The dynamic teachers bring to the classroom can make or break a student’s ability to learn and become successful in future endeavors. Teachers teach us who we are. Due to this, teachers must strive to become role models instead of being a student’s adversary.

The implications of this research and what teachers can learn from it is to first acknowledge what kind of teacher you are or wish to become irrespective of the situation in or outside of the classroom. Do you as a teacher not understand your student’s language, culture, beliefs, behavior or mental health issues inside the classroom? This should not be an excuse for you not to treat all students equally and fairly. Another thing to consider is your external affiliation with the union which may be influencing your teaching skills, ability and attitude inside the classroom. These are considerations all teachers should be constantly reminding themselves about when dealing with students both in and outside of the classroom.

However, to move away from these findings to a way I think this research will assist other teachers to further develop their style of teaching and learn new dynamic teaching strategies to implement in their classroom, this research argues that for educators to be able to function as student’s mentors, instructors, facilitators, friends, coaches etc., we have to embrace the following:
Gunderson et al (2014) urges teachers to always remember to take newcomers first language (LI) into consideration when dealing with ELL students. Taking into account the cultural background of English learners not only helps teachers to deploy a relevant teaching strategy to help the student learn but also creates an opportunity for the teacher to learn about an international culture that they may not have been familiar with previously. Lee notes, “…cultural immersion and ELL language classes at school help new immigrant students to overcome social and educational barriers in their new countries…” (Lee 2012:69). Howard (2003) went further to argue that this teaching method is a win-win for both the teacher and the student. The introduction of games that are particular to a student’s culture might help to motivate an immigrant or ELL/ESL student to join class activity. For instance, if the student is from Japan, asking the student to bring from home the traditional Japanese calculator seeds on a stick to use during accounting class. As calculators are part of the class requirements, I am sure Anna would have been very happy to see that her own culture could be incorporated into the class.

**Know and understand the student prior to school or class**

I think any teacher’s first task in the class is to know his/her students. Not just knowing their faces in the class only, but also knowing their names and calling them by their first names. Before the start of school or class, it is also important for the teacher to read the student’s files from the previous year, in order to know more about the students coming into their class. In Anna’s case, this was a major factor in the teacher’s not knowing who Anna was before she joined the class. Maybe, if the teacher had taken the time to read the previous school’s comments, she could have known more about the student and maybe developed an instructional strategy on how to deal with her in the class instead of sending her to the kindergarten class.

**Relations Building**

Building a relationship with students does not involve a lot of work or energy, as teachers; it requires our attention and interest in our students. It simply involves greeting students coming into the classroom at the beginning of class and ‘high-fiving’ them as they walk out of the class at the end of the day. It also involves playing games and doing activities with the students during class and engaging them in conversation and discussions, even though you know that as a newcomer to Canada they do not understand English. By letting the student know that you are trying to strike a conversation with him or her gives that student a reason to trust you as a teacher and even as a mentor. Engaging students in the hallway by chatting with them may also help.

By starting a conversation with ‘what sports do you like?’; ‘what food do you like?’; ‘Is your country very hot or cold like Canada’? etc, and by gesticulating and demonstrating with my body movements will make the student laugh while seeing these acts as funny, but the message or communication aspect of it to him/her is clearly understood. This research suggests that the student will feel more at ease when the teacher is trying to be friendly instead of the reverse. From October to June, when Anna
was in Grade 7, the teacher was always speaking to her through other students: that is, the teacher never made an attempt to speak directly with her, but spoke through other students, and the students were demonstrating what the teacher was trying to say to her. As a teacher, I personally think this was ridiculing and embarrassing Anna in front of the other students, which in the 21st century should not be allowed in the teaching profession.

While some research (see Linsin, 2011; Ferlazzo, 2013; Clement & Whatley, 2013) has suggested that teachers should not be too friendly or be the student’s friend, this research suggests otherwise. While it may be harmful to the teacher/student authority relationship for teachers to be too friendly with students who are native English speakers, the reverse is the case for new immigrant and ELL/ESL students. This research strongly encourages teachers to ‘reach out and touch the lives’ of these new students in their classrooms without any hesitation. A teacher in class is like a radio station that students tune in on when there is a good program, but students easily tune off when there is nothing interesting to hear.

**Teacher’s Empathy as against sympathy**

As a teacher, I have and will continue to develop empathy for my students at all times, irrespective of the student’s cultural or educational background. As Catapano (2016) puts it “…empathy is foundational for building bridges between individuals, understanding each other’s’ complex emotions, gaining a diverse perspective, and leveraging relationships for collaboration and progress” (Pg. 1). Anna’s teacher did not have empathy for her students but instead was sympathetic with the situation. The reason being that the teacher did not know how to handle the situation or she thought because of her long service as a teacher she was more capable than she was about how to handle newcomers in the classroom. In Anna’s case, the teacher was helpless. According to her, when Chinese or Indian students came to the class she would pair them up with the new student (bilingual buddies), but in Anna’s case, there was no student from Japan to help her. For this reason, according to the teacher, she stated:

> I feel very sorry for her… and when we can’t communicate with each other I see her face looks so sad for not understanding my instructions.

**Ensuring all students belong**

It is the duty of all teachers to ensure that all students are treated equally, fairly, and respectfully in the classroom. It would be unfair for me as a teacher to continue picking one student to answer questions simply because this student is gifted or the student understands the topic. Neither would it be fair as a teacher for me to assume that because one student does not know the subject, it is irrelevant for me to assess that student’s understanding in class.
Perceptions and Realities

I strongly believe in the teaching profession that it is a teaching ‘crime’ for a teacher to assume or based his/her perception about a student based on first impressions or on the student’s previous file prepared by past teachers. Anna was perceived as not capable by her teacher because she did not speak English. Though the teacher had the perception, and also shared it with Anna that students from Asia are good in math and athletic, she thought the only subject Anna was good at was math. For that reason, Anna was welcome into her classroom during math only, in other subjects, she has to go to the kindergarten class.

Commitment, Communication, and Compromise

For newcomers to feel welcome and accepted in the classroom, the first job of the teacher is to commit to welcoming the student into the classroom and the school at large. The second part is to communicate with the student to better understand them, and for the student to also understand the school rules and regulations. The teacher should also be able to compromise with the students by being flexible in his or her dealings with a new student. The teacher needs to understand that the student’s is entering a new environment and a new school where things and ways of studying are different. Educators should not forget the student’s mental and emotional state of mind after leaving behind former friends in the old school for the new school and complete different ways of life in a new country. As a teacher, your lesson plans should be scaffolded to account for the student’s moral and mental health issues, while also reflecting the 3Cs (Communication, Commitment, and Compromise) when introducing the new immigrant to class.

Moving beyond the Classroom management

While Anna’s teacher saw her class as a model for the school because of her ‘good’ classroom management skills which she had developed over the years, she forgot that a student being quiet in class does not mean that the students are learning or the students are well-behaved. Educators should move beyond the notion of ‘good’ classroom management to creating an environment that is safe and trusting for all students. Ideally you want a situation where all students are welcome in the class and ready to learn while empowering them with the right tools to learn themselves, as against relying on the teacher to continuously teach them before they can learn. The key phrase suggested in this research is ‘empowerment through critical thinking’. Students should be empowered to learn themselves by creating a critical thinking environment in the class. As mentioned above, students should be emotionally supported and nurtured instead of being robotically controlled in the class with “…go to the office” or “…I will be calling your parents.”
Conclusion

This research has explored the instructional methods that teachers can engage in and integrate with their ELL and immigrant students in the classroom. Though the terms ‘ELL students’ and ‘Immigrant students’ were used interchangeably in this research, in the classroom the situation can sometimes be different. ‘Immigrant students’ coming from the US, UK, Australia, South Africa or New Zealand are not ELL students: this means that a teacher does not have to go through all the processes suggested in this research of teaching students from these countries because their LI is English. Because these students do not need ELL assistance, this does not mean that teachers should not pay attention to them in class, but instead, teachers should continue to use the social-emotional instructional strategies which go beyond the traditional classroom management ideas in dealing with these students. The reason for this is because of the need to gradually integrate students into the classroom.

On the other hand, ‘ELL students’ with which this research is primarily concerned, and using my daughter, Anna, as a case study proposes an encompassing instructional method for engaging students like her in the class. This research has successfully explored the problem and suggested ways that teachers can resolve similar problems in their classrooms. Though there are no clear-cut solutions to the problem of the engagement and involvement of these newcomers into our classrooms, teachers still teach students who they are to a point. Teaching is not about the long years of experience or techniques for doing the job; it is simply about the teacher’s identity and integrity. As @Teacher Goal Twitter (2016) account reads, “The mediocre teacher tells; The good teacher explains; The superior teacher allows students to create their own knowledge; The great teacher inspires students to go beyond the standards” As demonstrated, unfortunately, Anna’s teacher falls into the mediocre group of teachers.

The question that remains to be answered is the role and policy in place of the school board when dealing with ELL/ESL and immigrant students. I hope future research will explore this crucial part of integrating and involving ELL, newcomers, and new immigrant students into the classroom.
Bibliography


