The increasing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in public and private school systems in the United States and other English-speaking nations is a reflection of their culturally rich and diverse societies. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006)[1] approximately 19 percent of the U.S. population speaks a language other than English. The enrollment of ELLs can present assessment challenges that are difficult to resolve, especially for small, multigrade Adventist schools. The solution is to use appropriate assessment instruments that incorporate linguistic and cultural elements into the evaluation.

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Getting to Know English Language Learners

A 7th-grade student on her first day in math class sat hopeful, yet uneasy. The classroom, the teacher, the students, the language—everything was new to her. The numbers on the chalk board were the only recognizable feature. The formulas seemed familiar, but the word problems in the textbook looked like gibberish. Because she could not understand a word, the girl remained quiet during class for many months. During that time, nobody asked her name, where she was from, what was her native language, whether or not she knew math, or if she needed help with anything. She did not give up, although that first term she failed all her classes except for math. I was that student.

My experience is not unlike those of some English language learners today. ELLs come from varied cultures and literacy backgrounds. Learning as much as possible about them is the key to effective design and development of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Freeman and Freeman, in "Struggling English Language Learners: Keys for Academic Success," classify ELLs into three categories:[2]

Newly arrived learners with adequate formal schooling,
Newly arrived learners with limited formal schooling, and
Long-term English language learners.

Newly arrived learners with adequate formal schooling usually have been in the U.S. less than five years. They had adequate education in their native country, are at grade level in reading and writing, and are able to catch up academically relatively quickly, although they may still score low on English standardized tests.[3]

Newly arrived learners with limited formal schooling have been in the U.S. less than five years and have had interrupted or inadequate schooling in their native country. They have limited heritage language literacy, perform below grade level in mathematics, and do not achieve well academically.[4]

Long-term English language learners have been in the U.S. more than seven years but are below grade level in reading and writing. There is a mismatch between student perception of achievement and actual grades. Some of these students get good grades but score low on standardized tests. They may have been enrolled in an ESL or bilingual program intermittently.[5]

Students in each of these categories must navigate the turbulent waters of cultural assimilation, English proficiency, and academic achievement. The task can be daunting for students and teachers alike. Even with differentiated instruction and commendable goals for inclusion, teachers sometimes can miss the mark if they evaluate ELLs using unilateral academic assessments rather than multidimensional approaches that include the child's cultural, linguistic, academic, and background knowledge. It is important to take into account ELLs' cultural and linguistic characteristics when collecting and evaluating in order to craft effective instructional and assessment methods.

Linguistic Impact

Experts agree that reading comprehension is a prerequisite for academic achievement. Freeman and Freeman, in *Essential Linguistics: What You Need to Know to Teach*,[6] say that there are two schools of thought on how people learn to read in any language: the *word recognition* view and the *sociopsycholinguistic* view.

The word recognition view emphasizes word identification as the key to reading success. This is a learned process. Over time, students make connections between printed words and oral vocabulary. In order for them to do so, teach-

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ers must introduce and drill the students on the skills necessary to make those connections. Decoding skills come first. Sounding out letters and blending the sounds leads to correct pronunciation, which helps with the identification of words, thereby making the printed symbols meaningful.[7]

The sociopsycholinguistic view focuses on the process of reading as the construction of meaning, with background knowledge and oral cues being central concerns. This means that readers acquire literacy just as they acquire oral language, through meaning. Readers make connections between the printed symbols, previous knowledge, and graphophonics (the sound relationship between the orthography [symbols] and phonology [sounds] of a language) in order to learn and expand their vocabulary.[8]

Languages have very distinct linguistic features. It would be unreasonable to expect ELLs to learn English without accessing their previous knowledge and their heritage language. Yet, for years, we have been doing just that. Palmer, El-Ashry, Leclere, and Chang, in "Learning From Abdallah," recommend that teachers become informed and knowledgeable about their ELLs' heritage languages as well as their culture. These authors state that three questions must be answered before teachers begin to work with ELLs:[9]

• What is my ELL's current status as a reader in his or her heritage language and in English?

• What characteristics of my ELL's heritage language are affecting his or her transition to English?

• Considering my ELL's current placement as a reader and writer (based on questions 1 and 2), what instructional and assessment strategies will be most effective for him or her?

How much do you know about your ELLs' heritage languages? How did they learn to read in Arabic, Korean, Russian, or Spanish? Did they use graphophonics or decoding? Is there a natural order to oral vocabulary and printed symbols? What similarities or dissimilarities are present between their native language and English? Linguistic characteristics such as the ones mentioned above should not go unnoticed by the teacher. However, small-school teachers are faced with the daunting task of providing instruction for ELLs without the resources available to larger institutions. What is such a teacher to do?

Defining which characteristics of the heritage language affect the transition to English is one of the key elements in developing effective instruction and assessment. The teacher can start by answering questions such as these: Is the heritage language read from left to right, or right to left? Are phonetic sounds similar to those used in English? Does the language use an alphabet? Do words represent one meaning? Does the language use verbs in its sentences? (If so, where do they appear—in the middle? At the end?) Are letters always used the same way, with the same sound and emphasis? Do symbols represent words, ideas, or concepts? Does vocal pitch affect meaning? Can the student write in his or her heritage language? Answers to these and related questions will provide the foundation for designing tools that assess English proficiency by using an equitable and wholistic approach.

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Cultural Impact

The student's cultural, familial, and socioeconomic background cannot be separated from his or her learning experience. Even native English-speaking students differ in their vocabulary, grammatical use, and linguistic expression based on these factors. We recognize differences in accents, terminology, and even attitudes from different regions of the United States, and accept them as valid. In the same way, the teacher needs to become acquainted with his or her ELLs' cultural backgrounds in order to understand what aspects of their culture they are likely to bring to the learning process. A student who comes from an educated middle-class family will have a different approach to learning than one who comes from a war-torn region of the world where food is scarce, and tragedy and trauma are daily occurrences.

Developing a base of cultural knowledge, paired with effective pedagogical techniques and content knowledge, is imperative for effective ESL teaching. Geneva Gay, in "Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching,"[10] lists some cultural issues the teacher needs to consider:

• Does the ethnic group give priority to communal living

and cooperative problem solving or stress individual achievement? How will this affect the educational motivation, aspiration, and task performance?

• What are the ethnic group's rules about the appropriate way for children to interact with adults? How might this influence the child's behavior in an instructional settings?

• How does gender-role socialization in the child's ethnic group affect the implementation of equity initiatives in classroom instruction?[11]

Misunderstandings and negative value judgments may occur when the ELL student consciously or unconsciously transfers expectations about language and culture into the ESL environment. This is especially a problem if his or her behaviors are considered strange or inappropriate in the new environment. The teacher, ELL, and his or her classmates must all work toward understanding one another and avoid jumping to conclusions based on their unfamiliarity with the cultural mores of the other person's culture.

Some cultures encourage their young people to interact informally with adults and to look them in the eye as they speak, while others require youngsters to maintain their distance and look down as they speak as a sign of respect. A number of countries consider speaking loudly the norm, while others regard it as disrespectful. Misinterpretation of unfamiliar or "inappropriate" behaviors can cause distress for ELLs and teachers if they do not understand the cultural connotation. The classroom code of behavior and the teacher's learning expectations can also affect the instructional process for the ELL student.

Abdallah, a 9-year-old Palestinian student, was not progressing as expected after being placed in an ESL program. In an effort to help him, the ESL coordinator, a female teacher, enlisted the help of a male tutor who spoke Arabic to test Abdallah's literacy levels in his native language. Instantly the child opened up, becoming more talkative and responsive. When the tutor visited with the family to explain the ESL program, they conveyed concern about the child being surrounded by female teachers.[12] This illustrates the importance of being familiar with cultural traditions that affect ELL students.

Standardized Testing

ELLs are at a great disadvantage if no allowances are made for linguistic and cultural differences when they are evaluated for English proficiency and academic achievement. However, most academic assessment tools are developed with native English speakers in mind. Traditional standardized tests are used widely in the public system for measuring student aptitude, progress, and skills. Cathleen Spinelli asserts that standardized tests cannot provide a true picture of ELLs' background knowledge, linguistic differentiation, academic support (or lack of), limited English proficiency, and cultural differences.[13] Therefore, to meet ELLs' learning needs, standardized tests should be combined with more informal and contextual evaluation tools.

The Standards

ESL standards address four proficiency domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.[14] These, in turn, are divided
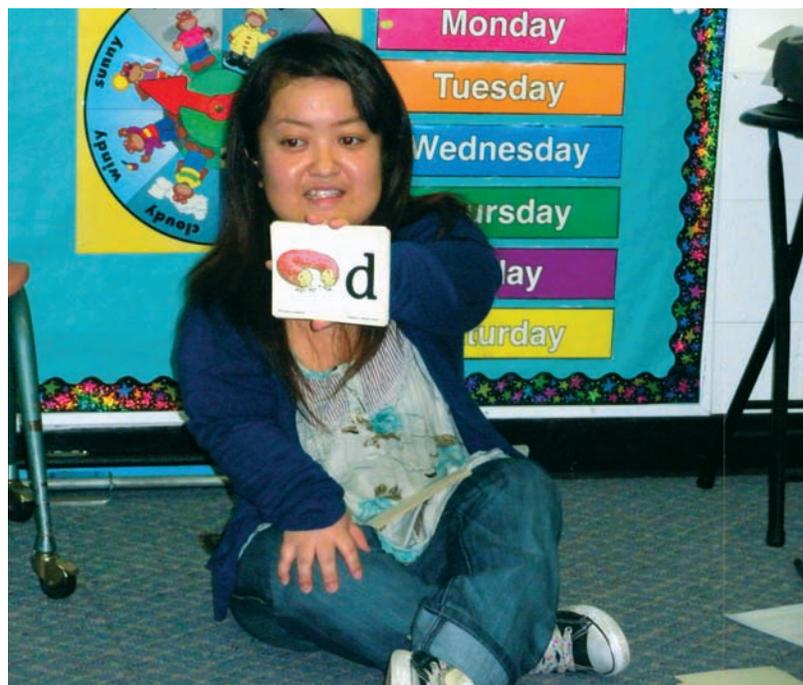
into grade clusters: K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12. ESL standards focus on three major goals: development of (1) social language, (2) academic language, and (3) sociocultural knowledge. The standards aim to develop the language skills necessary for social and academic purposes. When students meet requirements in the proficiency domain, grade cluster, and goal standards, then they can be promoted to the next level. Once all levels have been mastered, ELLs are considered proficient in English as a second language.

Alternative ESL Assessment

Alternative or informal ESL assessments are procedures and instructional evaluation techniques that provide important information about ELLs' academic and linguistic progress. These can also be used just as effectively for other foreign languages being taught, not only English. Several Internet Web-sites list ESL assessment resources available to classroom teachers, such as CIRCLE, at http://circle.adventist.org and Dave's ESL Café, at http: www.eslcafe.com.

Screening and identification of ELL students must come first. Gottlieb suggests administering a simple home language survey that includes (1) the number of languages the student speaks at home; (2) with whom he or she speaks the language(s) and how often; as well as how many years of school he or she has had in those languages (if any) before coming to your school.[15] This will help you determine whether the student will need English proficiency testing.

Jo-Ellen Tannenbaum, in "Practical Ideas on Alternative Assessment for ESL Students," encourages teachers to develop evaluation tools that focus on what the student produces, rather than what he or she remembers.[16] These include nonverbal strategies, oral presentations, and portfolios.

Nonverbal assessment strategies provide a way to evaluate students' levels of understanding during and after instruction. While respecting the students' cultural background, these can

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include physical demonstrations, such as pointing and gesturing. Students can act out events or even vocabulary. Pictures, drawings, maps, and charts (such as K-W-L [Know-Want to Know-Learned] or Venn diagrams) can all be used to illustrate and evaluate vocabulary, historical dates, story characters, etc. Labeling can be used for each content area. It is important to keep a record of the ELL's progress as these strategies are used.[17]

Oral presentations can be used for performance-based assessments. These can include interviews, skits, retelling of a story, and summarizing. This will help the teacher to evaluate ELL students' comprehension and thinking skills, as well as pronunciation.[18] Visual aids (pictures, photos, maps, etc.) can be used by the ELL student to conduct an interview. Skits are another effective way to bring a story to life in a non-threatening way, allowing the teacher to evaluate student progress and encouraging the ELL to participate even if in a limited manner.

Assessment of knowledge can done using *portfolios.* These focused reflections of learning goals combine student work, self-assessment, and teacher evaluation. Be sure to provide a rubric anchored on assessment criteria that match the student's needs and ESL standards.[19]

Working folders, or collection portfolios, hold the student's completed work, showing daily assignments, work-in-progress, and final products. They will contain evidence of language development process and actual work.[20]

Showcase portfolios can be used to display selected student work or best work to share with parents and administrators. All materials are selected to illustrate the student's achievement in the classroom.[21]

Conclusion

Three of the most important components in the process of learning to speak English, or any second language, are background knowledge, linguistics, and culture. Their influence spills over into every academic aspect of learning as well as other important areas such as attitudes, values, and behavior. Unfortunately, teachers have not always been responsive to the needs of ethnically diverse students. Through the process of assimilation and acculturation, we have expected ELLs to separate their learning experiences from their heritage language and culture. Educators have not been intentional in their effort to understand their values and culture; the standard formal assessment instruments to measure their progress reflect this.

Success in teaching is not only demonstrated but also guided by effective assessment. Because ELLs are not a homogeneous group, their linguistic and cultural differences will play a role in the learning process. The time has come to move from unilateral to multidimensional ESL assessment instruments. The key to effectively helping ELL students is getting to know them, their heritage language and culture, and incorporating these key elements into instructional delivery as well as assessment. Imagine the possibilities for ELLs to become students of books and life, as we cooperate "with the divine purpose in imparting to the youth knowledge of God, and molding the character into harmony with His."[22] The challenge is great, but the potential rewards are even greater. ✎

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