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Creating an inclusive environment for language support



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What does it mean to be a ‘newcomer’?

There has been a considerable amount of discussion regarding the impact of increased diversity in the classroom – although admittedly there has never been homogeneity in the classroom; all students are unique and individual. Still, having a number of students who have little to no knowledge of the common (or ‘vehicular’) language normally used for organizing the school and classroom activities and for directing the learning process in class can seem overwhelming for teachers and school administrators. It also presents a challenge for teachers to both acknowledge their students’ (often multiple) linguistic repertoires and promote meaningful use of the vehicular language of instruction of the school.

‘Newcomers’, (‘newly arrived students’) are usually understood as students who have joined the school system in the past 24 to 36 months (this varies according to region and country) and whose family language or linguistic variety (and often times, sociocultural background) is different from the language of instruction of the school. Students in need of language and social support usually refers to pupils who are not strictly newcomers but who still require some support in order to follow the core curriculum.

Strategies for ensuring an inclusive environment in the classroom

Comparing different policies that are published around the world, we can list some of the common core strategies for creating inclusive environments for newcomers into the classroom.

Before arrival

Teachers should begin preparing the reception of newcomers well before they actually arrive to the classroom. Some key steps are:

- Make sure the rest of the class is aware of their arrival. The announcement should be accompanied by open dialogue that deals with the other students’ expectations, worries, knowledge about the country the student(s) is arriving from, misconceptions, doubts, and a critical discussion of (secondary)

information received from others regarding these students (information from family, community, etc.).

- Engage the rest of the class in the welcoming of the new student. This should be seen as celebratory, not patronizing.
- Frame the arrival of the new student as an opportunity for everyone to expand on their knowledge of languages and cultures, and discuss the advantages of knowing about other languages and cultures for their present and future lives.
- Get the other students to participate in their welcome, ranging from coming up with ideas of ways to make the classroom hospitable and friendly to setting up a rotational, voluntary 'buddy system' of peers.
- Learn words and phrases from the newcomers' language(s) and encourage the other students to do so as well.
- Ensure that all cultures and languages represented in the classroom are given attention and recognition of their value through classroom displays, materials and learning activities.
- Perhaps most importantly, diversity in the classroom should be seen as an opportunity and as a potential resource for learning for everyone.

Building relationships

Of course, welcoming the newcomer into the classroom goes beyond providing a warm entry. A process of constructing mutually respectful relationships must be ongoing. Here are some ideas:

- Reserve time in the classroom schedule for open discussion regarding the social cohesion of the classroom. Do not judge students' interventions and comments (e.g. do not 'punish' negative remarks) but always try to steer dialogue towards constructive attitudes and behaviour.
- Some students may prefer to make comments privately. Provide opportunities for everyone to have a voice (e.g. a 'mailbox' for notes, a 'suggest a topic' billboard, etc.). You may need to allow students to write comments in their own language and use a translator to get the gist.
- Create spaces for students' home languages to emerge and be used within classroom activities, and produce materials that display the linguistic diversity of the classroom as a collective asset (see for example language biography portraits by Busch 2006 or Prasad 2014).
- Bring in 'dual-language' reading and story-telling activities (see materials designed by Zaidi, 2018 – thematic modules at konectproject.com).
- Maintain contact with the newcomers' family. Whenever possible, use their cultural and linguistic knowledge as learning resources for the whole classroom (see Vallejo & Nogueroles, 2018).
- Provide the newcomer with an agenda (if they do not have access to one). Make sure all work and homework is duly noted. Discuss the importance of the agenda with the student's caretakers.

Sustaining support

Creating an inclusive environment is not only about making the students feel comfortable. The teacher is also responsible for ensuring that the newcomer has the maximum support possible for engaging in the same learning as the rest of the class. Here are some ways in which the teacher can help:

- Ensure that the materials are adapted sufficiently to be accessible for the newcomer without oversimplifying the cognitive demand.
- Give simple and direct orders (one or two instructions at a time).
- Accompany instructions and explanations with visual or hands-on support (e.g. illustrations, speech bubbles, modelling the activity, real objects, process graphs, etc.).
- Find out about the students' interests, preferences and skills and include them in the activities (e.g. drawing, football, reading comics, playing computer games...).
- Include recognizable features from children and youth culture to provide a common ground with other peers and a space to display knowledge and skills that can be appreciated by their classmates.
- Create multimodal activities that allow the newcomer to display other communicative resources and modalities (through technology, dance, art) along with the language.
- Set up shared gestures and phrases with the students to convey they have understood instructions and key concepts as well as safe ways to signal incomprehension that does not embarrass them.
- After introducing an activity to the whole class, begin working on the exercise with the newcomer and then let him or her continue alone once they demonstrate they are able to do so.
- Prepare guidelines that help with the execution of exercises (templates, annotated keywords, multiple choice questions, etc.).
- Permit attention breaks. It takes a lot of effort to learn when the school language is not the family language of the student.
- Always try to provide positive reinforcement and focus on effort rather than on output. Gains made in the use of oral and written language such as understanding the gist, enthusiasm for learning, etc. should be acknowledged.
- Don't assess work only through written correction and comments. Review work done orally with the student to confirm they understand what they have done well and where they need to work more.

Teachers should be aware that they are often the first and most visible contact with the vehicular language. Keeping in mind that many years are needed to learn a language (two to three years to communicate in informal conversation settings and between five and seven years for more academic language). Consequently, language must be stimulated throughout the entire compulsory education. Here are some ideas on how to do so:

- Remember that teachers are language models. Be aware of the way in which you use the target language. Make the language seem accessible, not an impossible barrier.

- Understand and accept the ‘silent period’ of the newcomer – a phase the language learner often goes through before being able to produce output in a new language.
- Being in the silent period does not mean that the newcomer should be excluded from classroom activities. Group work can be especially stimulating for eventual oral output.
- In group work, allocate roles that acknowledge the newcomer’s possibilities and limitations to ensure that he or she finds a way to have relevant participation in the group dynamics.
- Prioritize group activities that pay attention to diversity (e.g. two teachers in the classroom, heterogeneous groups, activity corners, paired use of technology, etc.).
- Design individual language learning activities that complement everyday classroom activities (e.g. content materials with a special language focus). These can be designed together with the language specialist.

It is also important that the teachers understand the different stages of language acquisition of the newcomer and that they know how to interact with the student during the years-long process of language development in ways that support, and not hinder, the on-going development of each child. Understanding the stages and adapting teaching strategies to each phase is not always easy. For more information about these stages, see the document called ‘Identifying levels of linguistic competence’.

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