

Introduction

Immigrant adolescent and adult second language learners enter educational and training programs with a wide range of backgrounds and needs. Many of them may progress well and move beyond basic language needs into more advanced programs. However, there is also a large group of second language learners who do not progress smoothly in their language acquisition and who are at risk of dropping out. While there can be several explanations for why some learners struggle in their attempt to master a new language and to accomplish their educational or vocational goals, a great number of them may be struggling due to “cultural dissonance” (Ibarra, 2001). It is this perspective that we adopt in addressing the difficulties faced by this group of learners.

One of the most significant differences within the population of second language learners, hereafter referred to as L2 learners, is the extent of their prior exposure to the Western-style formal educational paradigm in their new classroom setting. Those learners who are familiar and comfortable with the expectations and assumptions of such education, as well as the target language itself, are likely to progress satisfactorily through the courses and levels of their programs, eventually functioning alongside native speakers in school and/or work settings. However, those learners with no, minimal, or limited exposure to formal education generally do not share the expectations and assumptions of their new setting. Thus, it is these learners who are likely to struggle and find themselves confounded by the ways in which the language and content are presented, practiced, and assessed. In addition, their prior knowledge is not the knowledge expected and valued in formal education. Compounding this problem, many educators fail to consider cultural differences in ways of learning and orientations toward learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010a; Nieto, 2010). To prevent these learners from feeling so overwhelmed that they disconnect and turn away from education, institutions and teachers must tailor their instruction to the specific populations enrolled in a given program (Zacarian & Haynes, 2012).

This book, *Making the Transition to Classroom Success: Culturally Responsive Teaching for Struggling Language Learners*, focuses on these struggling L2 learners and examines how understanding their learning paradigm, rooted deeply in their past experiences and cultural orientations, provides a key to the solution to this lack of progress. *Making the Transition* builds on and expands on two of our earlier books, *Meeting the Needs of Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal*

Schooling: A Guide for Educators (2009) and *Breaking New Ground: Teaching Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education in U.S. Secondary Schools* (2011). These previous books focused specifically on a subset of struggling L2 learners, those with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) in secondary schools in the U.S. *Meeting the Needs* is a handbook for teachers and administrators of SLIFE, while *Breaking New Ground* introduces, explains, and demonstrates specific applications of our instructional model, the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP). *Making the Transition to Classroom Success* expands our work to assist teachers working with *all* struggling L2 learners, both adolescents and adults.

Our theoretical framework and instructional model come from the tradition of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). This tradition encourages us to question the relationships among the students, ourselves as teachers, the school curriculum, the school, and society as a whole. What it does not do is “exoticize diverse students as ‘other’” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 483). The three major tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy are: conceptions of self and students; social relations; and perceptions of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2009). CRT argues that to reach their diverse populations, teachers must develop awareness of the many assumptions they make based on their own cultural orientations, assumptions that one normally does not need to focus on for students who share mainstream experience and backgrounds. We believe it essential that educators understand how *cultural* values, beliefs, and practices influence *educational* beliefs and practices.

CRT uses as a starting point the “cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, 106). Doing so makes learning more meaningful to such students, leading to higher achievement. Gay identifies five areas where teachers need to have expertise in order to implement CRT: (1) developing a cultural diversity knowledge base that includes both content knowledge and pedagogical skills; (2) developing a culturally relevant curriculum and instructional strategies; (3) demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community; (4) understanding the dynamics of cross-cultural communication; and (5) creating cultural congruity in the delivery of classroom instruction. In our work, we have explored these areas with respect to unsuccessful L2 learners, leading us to design an instructional model that addresses their needs and strengths. While our model incorporates all five areas, the primary focus lies in the fifth area, creating cultural congruity, which we see as the weakest in the many classrooms we have observed. The most immediate need for teachers implementing CRT is a roadmap to create this cultural congruity, thereby lessening the cultural dissonance (Ibarra, 2001) many L2 learners may encounter.

In designing this roadmap, we have complemented and extended CRT by introducing a mutually adaptive approach in which the priorities of both the learner and the formal educational setting are taken equally into account. Following CRT, the culture of learners includes more than the visible aspects of culture, which are readily accessible and easily incorporated into instruction. It is the invisible aspects of culture, those that establish the means by which one accesses new knowledge and skills (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004; Hall, 1966) that elude superficial examination and require an in-depth analysis.

The struggling L2 learners we address in this book are caught between two worlds: Western-style formal education with its scholastic and literacy expectations and the pragmatic, informal world of their previous learning experiences. Even the most practical, everyday activities, such as taking a written driver's test, require formal components that are anchored in the norms of Western-style learning. The two approaches that most immediately present themselves are: (1) teach according to the learners' assumptions about learning to ensure that they are comfortable and will respond well to instruction; or (2) teach according to the Western model but simplify it, continuing to cover material until learners have mastered it so that the learners are exposed to what is required of them in their new setting. The first approach, while laudable in the short term and culturally responsive, ultimately will not result in their success in the system. To move forward in a system of formal education, all learners must perform and be assessed in the Western-style in order to earn credentials, diplomas, or certificates. The second approach, in practice the more common one, while designed to result in eventual academic success, in fact results in what is referred to as an "achievement gap." Many L2 learners can make progress through this approach, but others, because they cannot rely on any of their own ways of learning, continue to struggle. Their progress is minimal or at least slower than expected; therefore, both they and their teachers can become quite frustrated. For these learners, teachers continue to simplify the material and reteach it, which perpetuates the Western-style educational paradigm. When they still don't get results, teachers conclude that the students cannot learn the material. At the same time, students, not seeing tangible results, become disenchanted with schooling and/or the programs and often drop out.

Calls for CRT have encouraged teachers, teacher trainers, and administrators to work toward bridging the gap between the two approaches by incorporating the lives of the students and their cultural knowledge, as well as community resources, into classroom settings. Efforts in many different areas of the world have demonstrated the effectiveness of developing and implementing CRT strategies, pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom environments in promoting the

participation and success of struggling learners (e.g., United Kingdom: Andrews & Yee, 2006; Australia and the United States: Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; India: Guha, 2006; Canada: Kanu, 2007; New Zealand: Sexton; 2011). CRT offers valuable contributions to making curriculum more meaningful and relevant to L2 learners of diverse backgrounds and educational experiences.

The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm, or MALP (Marshall, 1994, 1998), extensively described in our book *Breaking New Ground* (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011), provides a framework for teaching that transitions struggling L2 learners from their preferred and customary ways of learning to Western-style formal education. The goal here is to use a strong theoretical foundation from CRT to create an intercultural framework, the Intercultural Communication Framework (ICF), and to expand on MALP so that instructors have a concrete, practical set of guidelines to follow in designing and delivering instruction to struggling L2 learners. The MALP model embraces key assumptions about learning held by L2 learners who struggle as a result of cultural dissonance and places them into a framework that also integrates key elements of Western-style education. The resulting mutually adaptive learning paradigm serves as a roadmap for teachers as they incorporate knowledge and understanding of the expectations of such learners into their pedagogy.

We believe that all adolescent and adult learners who want to participate in the new culture need to adjust to the different expectations they encounter in school settings. Adolescent learners often think of themselves as adults and commonly arrive in their new nation expecting to be considered as such. Their prior (and even current) experiences often include adult lives out of school and in their society. Whether the struggling L2 learner attends a program in a secondary school setting or in an adult educational setting, the issues faced regarding Western-style formal education remain the same. The remedies for the learners in both settings are similar and can be implemented appropriately for the specific context and program of those learners.

Although there are myriad issues related to the lack of progress by this student population, we focus solely on pedagogy; issues outside the teacher's control, such as economic concerns and matters of policy, are beyond the scope of this book. (See, however, Bigelow, 2010; Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2007; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Mencken, 2008.)

In *Making the Transition to Classroom Success*, we explore cultural differences and pedagogical implications, within the context of a continuum of the ways of learning and teaching. We begin by considering both Western-style formal education and informal learning, follow with an exploration of the Ways of Learn-

ing Continuum, and then examine the cultural aspects of individualism and collectivism and their impact on assumptions about teaching and learning.

The first two chapters concentrate on culture and its implications for education and communication. Chapter 1 explores the foundation of culture and how it relates to learning in the tradition of CRT. Chapter 2 builds on this and presents the theoretical framework for the approach taken in the book, the Intercultural Communication Framework, and its guiding principles.

The following three chapters present the instructional model, MALP. Chapter 3 outlines the model and describes its key elements. Chapter 4 is devoted to the most challenging element of MALP, scaffolding ways of thinking and responding derived from basic tenets of formal education. Chapter 5 presents steps to follow in creating a project using the model and gives examples and analysis of one project.

The next two chapters describe what MALP looks like in terms of the instruction itself. In Chapter 6, we move into the classroom to observe and describe the delivery of instruction guided by MALP and introduce the flipped classroom as a possible means for enhancing learning opportunities. Chapter 7 continues the examination of a MALP classroom by exploring the physical environment, including material on the classroom walls, available resources and equipment, and arrangement of furniture.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, presents the MALP Implementation Rubric designed for an assessment of MALP in the classroom. At the conclusion of this book, teachers should feel competent to implement the model and assess their implementation.