Understanding and Meeting The Needs of ESL Students

There are many problems students may come across when trying to learn a new language, and although a lot of us think that it is up to the teachers to teach the students how to speak English it’s actually not the teachers’ fault if the student has a hard time learning how to speak English as the “problems stem primarily from linguistic and cultural differences, which is not the fault of teachers” (Endo & Miller pg.786). Although it is not the teachers fault, it is the teacher’s responsibility to teach their ESL students in ways in which they are able to succeed. It is just as hard for the teachers to teach a student how to learn the dominant language as it is for the ESL student to learn the dominant language.

The first thing that teachers need to realize this understanding that students will struggle with new language. If the communities dominant language is English it would obviously be harder for someone who speaks another language to learn English as compared to someone who grew up speaking English. Now this may be the case for most places, but when dealing with difficult situations like this, I like to put myself in the ESL students shoes and realize what if I was a student who moved to Mexico where there dominant language is Spanish, how would I feel? It is of course easy for those who have been speaking the dominant language their whole life. In both situations, student will surly experience a phenomenon known as Language shock, which is “anxiety an immigrant experiences when first entering a community in which he or she does not speak, or is not proficient in, the dominant language” (Endo & Miller pg. 787), when this occurs ESL students will tend to be self conscious about being successful, pronouncing words correctly, getting made fun of, which all hinder the success of the ESL student in terms of learning the communities dominant language.
According to Stephen Krashen’s affective filter theory “When a student experiences high stress, the affective filter is switched on and the student will have difficulty in acquiring the new language, where as if the affective filter is down, language acquisition occurs more efficiently and quickly” (Endo & Miller, pg. 787). With that said this is where teachers need to come in and provide an atmosphere that will diminish stress and anxiety but also boost drive and confidence for their ESL students. Another way teachers can help ESL students is by “reducing the cognitive load” which is having student assignments relate to prior knowledge. This is not only true for ESL students but for all kinds of students. If you assign an assignment and hope the student does well you simply cannot give them a task that they do not have knowledge about, in this case you are setting students up for failure. Another thing teachers need to take into consideration is evaluating their teaching strategies and approaches. As individuals we all have different ways of learning, which can make it difficult for a teacher to meet every student’s learning style but despite what strategies and/or strategies teachers use, the main priority is being able to communicate with students to recognize if the learning and understanding process is being communicated and process.

Instead of focusing so much on the communities dominant language/culture teachers should take into consideration of the ESL student’s language/culture. As an alternative, make the ESL feel special by having him or her present about where they come from, usually these students have a hard time fitting in but once the other students get to the know the ESL student and where (s)he comes from this will produce a more welcoming feeling of acceptance which will then lead to ease of acquiring language proficiency. Another way by reducing the culture load is by simply “building personal relationships with the student and their families” and simply “learning how to pronounce each student’s name correctly” (Endo & Miller, pg. 789).
important aspect of reducing the culture load is having an understanding as the teacher that students will pronounce words differently from how other pronounce them and may use words in a different context than it should be, but in any case teachers should be tolerant of this.

When I did my interview assignment I found that many of my interviewees stated that the hardest thing about learning how to speak English was the fact that teachers did not reduce the language load. Students are learning a new language, so it’s only right to start them off with simple vocabulary words and supply resources they can use to help them understand harder vocabulary words but also assuring that they understand what the word truly means and are able to use them correctly. I know for one of my interviewee’s the heavy language load made learning and understanding the language and content of the English language and assigned assignments very difficult to complete.

As a student who can only speak one language fluently but who is bicultural, I believe the most important part about teaching students how to speak the community’s dominant language whether it be English, Chamorro or any other language is to have the students understand that it’s okay to speak in their primary language and that in the long run it’s what separate people from one another. As an adult I see how important it is to be able to speak multiple languages. Our younger students may not see it that way, but by the time they realize it, they may have lost most if not all of their native tongue. We have seen and heard the expression of “melting pot” so if we are able to except people from other cultures we should be able to accept their language as it is a part of their culture. Instead of only talk and teaching in the community’s dominant language let’s learn from those who come from different places so that we can too set ourselves a part from one another.
Endo, H. & Miller P. *English-Language Learners: Understanding and Meeting The Needs of ESL Students*. PHI DELTA KAPPAN

**In-text reference:** (Endo & Miller, pg.__)