

# Chapter 5

## Resource vs. Deficit Views About English Language Learners in Classroom Practice

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### ABSTRACT

*Grounded in a critical sociocultural perspective, this ethnographic case study explores two ELL teachers' views about ELLs and their classroom practices over one academic year using linguistically oriented critical discourse analysis methods. Findings indicate that one female teacher with resource views about ELLs, who focused on what ELLs have and can do in her utterances, demonstrated shared production of knowledge in the classroom. However, another female teacher with deficit views about ELLs, who emphasized what ELLs do not have and cannot do in her utterances, enunciated and embodied teacher-scripted classroom practices. The findings illuminate how critical it is for educators to have resource perspectives toward ELLs. Resource perspectives cause teachers to recognize and use in their instruction the linguistic and cultural resources that ELLs bring to the classroom and thus foster the positive identity construction and academic achievement of ELLs.*

### INTRODUCTION

At the moment I arrived at Ms. Johnson's (pseudonym) classroom, I could see the writing above the front door: "Ms. Johnson's ESL classroom: Challenge yourself to new knowledge and understand it." On the white wall of the classroom near the back door, I saw a picture of Mahatma Gandhi in white clothing with a very skinny body, who was squatting on his heels. Below there was his quote: "An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind." On the dark green board in the back of the classroom, a poster of Albert Einstein with his quote appeared: "I have no particular talent. I am merely inquisitive." Next to the poster, there was a painting of a handshake between a black hand with a white hand, with the name of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. below, and his quote: "Life's persistent and most urgent question is, 'what are you doing for others?'"

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I wrote these classroom descriptions on the first day that I visited Ms. Johnson's class. Those posters with the quotes allowed me to draw speculative conclusions about Ms. Johnson's teaching philosophy. Gandhi represents the ethical mind, Albert Einstein symbolizes the creative mind, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. denotes the respectful mind to all people including minority persons. If we own these three figures' minds, we can become a whole person. I thought these images described above might indicate the signifiers representing Ms. Johnson's teaching philosophy for her linguistically and culturally diverse students.

In the back of the classroom, there was a shelf with four file boxes with summary charts and participation sheets inside indicating what levels of students Ms. Johnson was teaching that semester. On the back of the classroom, where the windows overlooked the playground, there were two bookshelves with various Spanish and English books and English Spanish bilingual dictionaries. Next to the two bookshelves, there were two computers and literature books written in Spanish and English. Just by looking at this classroom environment with various kinds of bilingual books and dictionaries, I could tell what views Ms. Johnson possesses toward ELLs and how she would enact her classroom practices.

Almost one week later, I visited another classroom, where Ms. Smith (pseudonym) was teaching her 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Walking up to the second floor of the building, outside of the classroom wall a little above head level, was a sign indicating that this classroom is Ms. Smith's class. Entering the classroom, I was immediately disappointed by the arrangement of desks and chairs, which were all facing forward. I felt interactions between and among students might not occur with such an arrangement of the classroom. On the front wall above the whiteboard, many posters with colorful pictures and captions appeared. From left to the right, a female athlete running on a track with the caption: "You are not finished when you lose, you are finished when you quit." In the center, a picture of two green frogs staring at each other captioned: "There was homework?" Underneath, on a cloud shaped paper with a picture of a yellow light bulb, the following words were displayed: "Welcome to class. Turn on your brain." Next were "Sentence fluency" on a musical note, the word "Conventions" with four wheels, the Uncle Sam recruiting poster, "I WANT YOU FOR U.S. ARMY," and a girl feeding chocolate to a boy captioned "A kiss for you: HERSHEY'S SWEET MILK CHOCOLATE KISSES."

Ms. Smith's classroom environment disappointed me, not only because the desks and chairs were all arranged facing the teacher, but because there were too many humorous posters like the Hershey's chocolate advertisement and the "Elvis Presley BLVD" license plate. The retro art decors made me think that I were in some kind of mainstream American café, rather than in a classroom for linguistically and culturally diverse students. Not only were all the posters printed in English, but there were no books to be found in any other languages at all, not even a bilingual dictionary. All the books in the classroom were written entirely in English. Here are some examples of the reading materials in the classroom: books (*American Revolution*, *American Traditions*, *Pinduli*, *A is for Abigail*, *Animals*, *The Davinci Code*, *Cinderella*, etc.), an English-English Webster Dictionary, and textbooks (*Writer's Choice*, *High Point*, *Basic English Composition*, and *Prentice Hall Literature*).

In those two classrooms, I met two teachers whose professed beliefs about ELLs and ELL pedagogy contrasted tremendously, despite their similar appearances, i.e., white, female teachers with medium heights in their early thirties. Their very different, almost opposite, perspectives about ELLs prompted me to conduct research on their views about ELLs in their classroom practices.

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