

## Chapter 18

# Empowering the Voices of Young Multilingual Learners in the ESL Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this chapter is to examine effective strategies for empowering multilingual students in elementary ESL classrooms. The chapter focuses on six classroom practices that elevate student voice. Multilingual learners participate in project-based learning, restorative circles and debate, reflect on their identity and issues of social justice, and publish their work. Through a framework of culturally responsive pedagogy, young multilingual learners engage in active learning experiences that elevate student voice and strengthen learner autonomy in conjunction with language acquisition. The author shares excerpts of her action research journal to capture authentic reflection and student feedback.*

### INTRODUCTION

A recent study indicated that multilingual learners speak fewer than 10 minutes throughout an entire school day (MacDonald, 2016). This amount of time is clearly insufficient for students to develop their voice, share opinions, engage in academic discourse, and practice vocabulary. Furthermore, these students are not being provided with sufficient time to build confidence. When multilingual learner voices are strengthened and elevated in primary school settings, students are empowered. The chapter begins with an excerpt from the author's action research journal:

*I went to a classroom today to pick up a student for his English as a New Language class. I noticed that his seat had been changed. He was no longer sitting in the center of the class. His desk was in the back corner of the classroom, farthest from the teacher's desk, farthest from the front of the class. The 9-year-old student was on an iPad with headphones on. The teacher walked over to me and said, "He's not making much progress, is he?"*

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This journal entry exposes an authentic example of the ineffective instruction and methods that some classroom teachers use with newcomer multilingual learners. And yet, the question posed by the teacher suggests that the student, in the back corner of the class, disengaged and playing on an iPad with headphones on, should somehow be learning English faster.

In his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Paulo Freire stated that when students are provided with the opportunity to be active learners in collaborative environments where they can voice their opinions, transformation is possible. All students deserve this learning environment (Freire, 1970). Educators can be the facilitators of this transformation by giving students a learning environment that allows them to feel empowered. In the following journal entry, the author reflects on her own transformational schooling experience and how it has shaped her perspective on the learning experiences that educators should provide to students:

*I graduated from a private Quaker high school. I left the local public school in favor of this option because of its reputation as a liberal, artistic environment where students were able to express themselves. From an outside perspective, the students looked free. They walked around the school's campus with a confidence and enthusiasm I had never seen at my public school. I envied them so badly that I convinced my parents to let me switch schools. Oakwood School lived up to its reputation. It was truly a place where individuality was not only accepted but appreciated and valued. The student body was diverse, not only in ethnicity but also in socio-economic background, language, culture, and interests. The teachers were open minded, and the classes were interactive and discussion based.*

Oakwood is a private Quaker school in Poughkeepsie, New York. Formally known as the Society of Friends, Quaker principles are rooted in non-violence and equality. They believe that there is “that of God” in everyone (Smith, 1998). Schneider (1999) stated that “this sense that everyone is equal in the sight of God leads to work that will foster equality and justice” (p. 276). Quakers hold a meeting instead of a service, where anyone who is moved to do so may speak (Schneider, 1999). They believe in elevating the voice of the individual (Smith, 1998), and this took place in and out of classes at Oakwood. Everyone was viewed as an asset to the school community. The author goes on to discuss the impact of this Quaker schooling experience on her own identity as an educator:

*Even though I only attended Oakwood my last two years of high school, the experience had a great impact on my views on education. Over 20 years later as an elementary English as a New Language teacher, I find myself still trying to replicate that educational environment for my own students. How can I give my own students a similar experience? How can I ensure that my students have the opportunity to feel empowered, to feel as if their voices are important, just as I did? Schooling that elevates and empowers students cannot be reserved for those who have the resources to attend private school.*

The author is an English as a New Language teacher in a rural New York school district, about 90 minutes north of New York City. Over the past 20 years, the district has experienced a significant increase in the number of multilingual students. When the author first started teaching, she had a roster of only 12 students, grades K-5. Now her roster is about 60 students in grades K-4. In a single year, the population of multilingual students doubled. The increase was so abrupt, a staff member from the district office called to confirm its accuracy, concerned there was an error in the data. Most multilingual students in the

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