

Changing Contexts in Secondary Classes by Altering Teacher Assumptions

- While teachers always try to do what is best for their students, some teachers of bilingual students base instruction on assumptions that actually make learning harder and limit student potential. Such assumptions are: (a) Learning involves the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student; (b) oral language skills must be developed before literacy skills are introduced; and (c) learning proceeds from part to whole. This article examines each of these assumptions and shows the kind of classroom practices that follow from them.

Then a second set of assumptions is introduced: (a) Learning is an active process of meaning construction that occurs during social interaction; (b) reading, writing, speaking, and listening develop interdependently; and (c) learning proceeds from whole to part. Extended examples of learning activities taken from classes in which the teachers ascribe to these assumptions are provided. The examples come from middle and high school classes with both Hispanic and Southeast Asian students. In classes based on this second set of assumptions, all students, but especially bilingual students, find learning easier.

Every classroom is different. Students are different, teachers are different, and the interactions that take place are different. Yet, many students complain that they "do the same thing every day" and that their classes are "boring." Indeed, the first impression a visitor to many junior and senior high schools would get is that most classrooms are more alike than different. In many of these classrooms, teachers give assignments out of textbooks and then sit behind their desks as students silently complete what was assigned. If "everything we do in the classroom is founded on a set of assumptions about learning and teaching . . ." (Newman, 1987, p. 727), then these teachers' practices reflect their assumptions.

Yet, not all teachers view their students as passive learners who must master the content of the textbooks to be successful. Some teachers approach teaching and learning in a way that reveals a very

different set of assumptions. In these classrooms, students and teachers work together, allowing all learners, including bilingual learners, to achieve academic success.

Two Classroom Scenarios

A look at two classroom scenarios highlights the differences between the two sets of assumptions. In one high school social studies class, the teacher has just passed out a worksheet. Silent students are busy searching through their textbooks to find information about the early settlers of the United States. As they locate each answer, they fill in the blanks in their worksheets. By the end of the period most of the students have completed the assignments. The blanks on their answer sheets are all filled in. However, as the teacher moves to the back of the room, he notices that the papers of two students have almost none of the blanks filled in. The teacher is concerned because the two students, Chang and Juan, have both been leafing diligently through the chapter during the period, but their hard work has not given them success on this assignment, a completed worksheet. He decides that they probably need a lot more practice speaking English before they can be expected to do the written work required for his class.

In a second class, the students are also studying early settlers in the United States. They have just seen a video on the first colonists to land on the East Coast and have met in small groups to discuss the film and decide what aspect of colonial life they would like to explore further. Mai's group has chosen to draw a large map to show where the colonists of each state came from originally and where they settled. The students in Jose's group have decided to research what kinds of food the different groups of colonists ate. Jose is working with another group member, Ann. They are looking through reference books and magazines for information on food grown and eaten in Georgia during colonial days. Both Jose's group and Mai's group will present their findings to the class at the end of the unit.

Why do students such as Chang and Juan in the first classroom scenario have so much difficulty in school while Mai and Jose find success in the second setting? Chang and Juan's teacher likes them. They never cause much trouble in class. But they aren't doing very well on the class assignments, and they almost never complete their homework with correct answers. When the unit tests come around, Chang and Juan usually score at the bottom of the class. When questioned, the teacher explained that these two students have a poor home environment and that their family is not interested in their progress in school. Since their teacher believes that there isn't much he can do with them by the time they have reached high school, he leaves Chang and Juan alone to do the best they can.

Mai and Jose, on the other hand, are doing well in their class.

They participate in all the activities, and their English improves as they research topics of interest to them and interact with the other students. Their enthusiasm for learning is shared by their peers and their teacher, who eagerly shows samples of her students' work to other teachers, fellow graduate students, and her college professors. Mai and Jose are finding academic success in their classroom. Their teacher does not view their bilingual backgrounds as a deficit. Instead, she conveys to them her belief that they can and will succeed.

Unfortunately, Mai and Jose are exceptions. There are many more students like Chang and Juan in secondary schools throughout the United States. In California, for example, minority students will comprise 52% of the school population by the year 2000 (Cortés, 1986). Statistics from the California State Department of Education indicate that over 36% of the Hispanic students who enrolled in the 9th grade in 1981 failed to enroll in the 12th grade in 1984. And, despite the publicized success of certain Asian students, many minority students, including Southeast Asians, are failing at alarming rates (Olsen, 1988).

Many reasons have been proposed for the academic failure of language minority students in U.S. schools. Cortés (1986) cites genetic inferiority, cultural deficit, and cultural mismatch among reasons that have been proposed. That is, the problem for school failure has been attributed to the student, the student's culture, or the difference between the student's home culture and the school culture. Cortés rejects all three of these explanations and suggests that more complex factors are involved. He proposes a contextual interaction model to explain why members of some minority groups tend to do more poorly in schools than mainstream American students. This model holds that a number of nonschool factors contribute to the societal context within which schools operate. These social and historical forces influence three aspects of the context of education: student qualities, instructional elements, and educational input factors, "including the knowledge, skills, expectations and attitudes of teachers" (p. 19).

An awareness of how nonschool factors affect their students, particularly their language minority students, is important for teachers because that awareness may alter the teachers' expectations for the success of these students. While teachers may not be able to substantially change the nonschool factors, they can change what Cortés refers to as the "educational input factors" and the "instructional elements."

Educational Input Factors

Among the educational input factors is the way that teachers view learners. When learners are seen as plants, passive recipients of knowledge, teachers hold one set of assumptions. If, on the other

hand, students are seen as active explorers, teachers assume that their students have a great deal of potential (Lindfors, 1982).

One way for teachers to change the educational input factors, then, is by examining their own expectations and attitudes about their language minority students. As Harts, Burke, and Woodward (1984) point out, "The assumptions we make limit what can be learned. Alter those assumptions and the potential for learning expands" (p. 70).

Three limiting assumptions teachers of language minority students frequently hold are: (a) Learning is the transfer of knowledge from teachers or texts to students; (b) learning oral language precedes learning to read and write; and (c) learning proceeds from part to whole.

The first history lesson we described contains all three of these elements. The teacher assumed that his students could learn history as the result of a transfer of knowledge from the text to their minds. He also decided that Chang and Juan did poorly on this assignment, in part, because their oral language was not well developed (and development of oral language was not his task). Finally, his assignment that broke the learning down into a series of questions about isolated facts comes from the assumption that history is learned from part to whole. In his classroom, students are passive as the teacher feeds them the knowledge the teacher chooses in the way the teacher believes is best.

Mai and Jose's teacher appears to have been operating on a different set of assumptions: (a) Learning is an active process of meaning construction that occurs during social interaction; (b) reading, writing, speaking, and listening develop interdependently; and (c) learning proceeds from whole to part. These assumptions allow this teacher to expand, rather than limit, learning potential for her language minority students. She is making it possible for all her students to succeed. Students in her classroom become active participants in the learning process.

Assumption 1: Learning is the Transfer of Knowledge from Teachers or Texts to Students

A closer look at the two classes reveals that specific assumptions the teachers hold determine the kinds of activities that typically occur in their classrooms.

Juan and Chang's teacher assumes that learning is the result of the transfer of knowledge from teachers or texts to students. As a result, he frequently lectures or assigns his students sections of the textbook to read. Many teachers share this view. In fact, Albert Shankar (1987), president of the American Federation of Teachers, has pointed out that for most students, success in school depends on

being able to listen and read and that students who do not learn well through these two modes fail in our school system.

Inherent in this assumption is the notion that what is explicitly taught is what is directly learned. For this to be the case, students need to be viewed as plants (Lindfors, 1982). Plants are passive and need nourishment from outside sources in order to develop and bloom. For students, the nourishment comes from teacher talk and textbooks. Teaching from this perspective is the act of putting knowledge into students, who are essentially passive recipients.

Teachers who see their students as plants often adopt what Freire (1987) calls the "banking concept of education." In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Students passively receive deposits of knowledge to file and store. In this process, "The teacher teaches and the students are taught . . . the teacher talks and the students listen meekly . . . the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply" (p. 59). Although this banking approach to education is harmful for all students, it is especially pernicious for second language students such as Chang and Juan, who have to compete with native speakers of English as they complete assignments that emphasize reading and listening.

Not all teachers are like Juan and Chang's teacher, who accepts the banking concept of education and views his students as plants. Mai and Jose's teacher conceptualizes her students as explorers. Lindfors (1982) describes "explorer" classrooms as places where students and teachers interact with the environment and with one another as they learn about the world. In an explorer classroom the teacher does not simply transmit knowledge about religion, geography, or economics. Neither does she rely on a text to transmit that knowledge. Instead, she explores topics with the students, drawing on what they know, and she involves them actively in the process of discovering more.

Research in language acquisition supports teachers who hold this explorer image. Vygotsky (1962) argues that as students work with adults or more knowledgeable peers, they gain new concepts while working in their "zone of proximal development," the area just beyond what they can accomplish working alone. Dewey and Bentley (1949) point out that we learn by doing, and more recently, Ferreiro and Teberosky (1979), two Piagetian scholars, have concluded that "Obtaining knowledge is the result of the learner's own activity" (p. 15).

What are some characteristics of an explorer classroom? First, students engage in a variety of activities that they choose to do. Teachers in such classrooms invite students to participate in expeditions of learning. They believe that learning is intrinsically motivating so long as students can choose what it is they are learning.

In explorer classrooms, students frequently work together in cooperative groups. Kagan (1986) argues that cooperative group work is especially valuable for second language students. As they work with their classmates they have opportunities to improve their language skills. Long and Porter (1985), for example, found that group work improved both the quantity and quality of student talk. Group work also improves students' social skills. Often second language students are better accepted by their peers as a result of working with them in cooperative groups.

One teacher promoted social interaction by bringing to class an article from the local newspaper about Ban Vinay, a refugee camp in Thailand. When she pinned it on the bulletin board, students crowded around the article to read it because many of them had been in that camp or had relatives or friends in the camp. The teacher invited the students to write their responses to the article. Many of the students chose to write, and the teacher put their responses up on the board, too. Soon, even students from other classes came by to read both the article and the responses. In this classroom the teacher offers students choices as they read and write daily in response to topics of interest to them.

Teachers in explorer classrooms such as this one often organize their teaching into units based on broad themes such as survival, justice, freedom, humanity, or courage. This sort of organization allows teachers the flexibility to respond to student interests and create a learner-centered class.

For example, this same class was studying a unit on courage when a local Hmong man committed suicide because he feared he had contracted AIDS. The students began asking questions about the disease, and the teacher saw an opportunity to help her students become more proficient readers and writers and, at the same time, become informed about an important topic. The teacher expanded her courage unit to include a mini unit on AIDS. She and the students explored this topic together. They read newspaper articles as well as more technical reports on the disease. They listened to a guest speaker and watched an educational video on AIDS. They wrote their new understandings and presented them to one another. The teacher was able to act as the leader of an expedition in a community of learners. Rather than trying to be the source of all knowledge, the teacher saw her role as a fellow explorer helping others learn how to learn.

Expedition leaders must be able to respond to the unexpected, as this teacher did, in an organized way. In explorer classrooms, learning is not haphazard. Teachers develop what Goodman, Smith, Meredith, and Goodman (1987) refer to as a double agenda. They look at the school district objectives for their subject area and then find creative ways to accomplish those objectives as they examine areas of interest with the class. In the unit on AIDS, for example, the teacher was

able to meet a number of objectives in science, social studies, reading, and composition.

In a second explorer classroom a biology teacher began his unit on fruits and vegetables by asking groups of students to cut up potatoes, onions, carrots, melons, and apples. As they did this, the students recorded their observations and made hypotheses. Then they presented their ideas to classmates who had worked on different fruits and vegetables in other groups. The students developed the competencies the district required about types of plants, plant growth, and plant parts without being aware they were doing so.

In a third class a world studies teacher began her unit by reading Peter Spier's book, *People* (1980). The book served as a stimulus for study on similarities and differences, world population, individual physical characteristics, religion, recreation, housing, means of making a living, and different world languages. Students then chose areas of special interest to them to read about further. They became experts in those areas and shared their expertise with their classmates.

A middle school teacher allows her students to choose from among several novels. Each week she conducts literature studies with small groups of students reading a particular novel. One of her students, Jaime, arrived from Mexico only five months ago. He is literate in Spanish and is now transferring those skills to English. Maria, a bilingual student, has been helping Jaime read *The Cay* in English. His teacher encourages Jaime to record his responses to the novel in Spanish. During the weekly conferences, Maria helps Jaime participate in the group discussion and translates parts of his response journal for the other group members.

Explorer classrooms expand learner potential by expanding the contexts for learning. Students in these classrooms are not expected to sit in isolation like plants as teachers or texts transmit information to them. Instead, they are involved daily in social interactions during which they actively construct knowledge. The contrast between the success of students like Jose and Mai in explorer classrooms and the failure of students like Juan and Chang in more traditional classrooms most clearly refutes the assumption that learning consists of the transfer of knowledge from teacher or text to students. Rather, learning is an active process of meaning construction that occurs during social interaction.

Assumption 2: Learning Oral Language Precedes Learning to Read and Write

A second assumption held by teachers in many traditional classes is that students need to master oral language before they begin to read and write. However, a look at a classroom where students are encouraged to read and write in their second language from the start suggests that this assumption is also false.

Even though Jaime could not speak English fluently, he was beginning to read and write in English as he participated in the literature study on *The Cay*. Jaime's teacher assumed that reading, writing, speaking, and listening all develop together. She rejected the linear model followed in many classes for second language students where the order of language learning traditionally is listening, speaking, reading, and then writing. By allowing her students to read and write before they develop full control of oral English, Jaime's teacher expands the potential for learning.

Oral language research supports early introduction of literacy. Harste, Burke, and Woodward (1984) discovered that preschool and kindergarten teachers working with monolingual English speakers often ignore meaningful reading and writing activities in language arts because they assume their job is to develop oral language. The same attitude is even more prevalent in classrooms with second language learners where teachers delay the use of writing in the second language despite the fact that written language is crucial for academic success (Hudelson, 1984).

Often, second language students such as Jaime can read and write before they can understand and produce conventional English orally. Clay (1975) has suggested that students may succeed with written language because they can better control the rate of processing. With written language students have time to focus on aspects of form that they select. For these students, learning to read and write may precede the development of oral language.

Often, however, the second language students are pulled out of their regular classes for extra help with an ESL specialist who works on their oral language. During the time they practice pronunciation drills, their classmates are learning important content area concepts and developing literacy skills. This leads to the second language students falling even further behind in their classes.

Although English as a second language classes are moving toward teaching language through content, many ESL teachers still ascribe to the notion of oral language supremacy, a legacy of the structural linguists, whose slogan was "Language is speech, not writing" (Diller, 1979). In two popular approaches to second language teaching, The Natural Approach and Total Physical Response, speaking, reading and writing are postponed until a certain level of listening proficiency is achieved. The general belief among some language educators is that readers must be able to understand spoken language in order to read or write.

However, research is challenging the oral language supremacy assumption. Krashen (1985), whose hypotheses form the basis for the Natural Approach, has more recently reported that "reading exposure" or "reading for genuine interest with a focus on meaning" (p. 89) provides language learners with comprehensible reading input

similar to comprehensible oral input. The reading exposure contributes to second language acquisition just as oral language does. Krashen (1984) also proposes that reading contributes to competence in writing, just as listening helps children in their production of speech.

Research by Hudelson (1984, 1986) supports Krashen's more recent views. Children who speak little or no English can read print in the environment and can write English, using it for various purposes. In fact, Hudelson found that some second language learners can write and read with greater mastery of English than their oral performance might indicate. In the same way, Edelsky's research (1982) in bilingual classrooms indicates that written expression in English may precede formal reading instruction and that bilingual learners use knowledge of their first language and of the world and actively apply that knowledge as they write. John-Steiner (1985) reports that Vygotsky also believed in "...the central role of literacy in the interaction of first and second language development..." for older learners (p. 360). The work of these scholars supports the notion that orality and literacy both contribute to language development.

This research suggests, then, that functional reading and writing as well as speaking and listening activities should be integral parts of all classrooms because all these processes interact with each other. Research by Harste, Burke, and Woodward describes individual reading, writing, speaking, and listening encounters as all feeding into a common "data pool." Learners draw on the data in this pool for each subsequent reading, writing, speaking, or listening encounter. Rather than assuming that speaking, listening, reading, and writing are separate and should be kept separate, Harste, Burke, and Woodward argue that all expressions of language can support and develop growth in literacy. This data pool concept suggests that requiring second language students to master oral skills before they write and read can actually limit their learning potential.

In explorer classrooms where both teachers and students are involved in learning and teaching, second language students can develop all their language skills. Mai and Jose, for example, discussed the video on early colonists before doing research for their maps. Then they used what they had drawn and written as a base for an oral presentation to their classmates. The students in the classroom with the Ban Vinay article began by reading the article. Then they discussed it with their classmates. These discussions led to writing and more discussion. In the same class, some students read an article in the newspaper or saw the news on television about the Hmong who committed suicide because he believed he had AIDS. This reading or listening encounter led to a class discussion. Then students read and wrote as they researched this topic. They listened to each other

and to guest speakers. They watched a film. They wrote reports on various aspects of the disease. In each of these cases students interacted through all four modes. They read, wrote, spoke, and listened as they explored their own topics of interest.

These classes stand in contrast to the class where Juan and Chang filled in worksheets. Although these students were required to read and write, they worked individually to answer someone else's questions. They had no ownership of the learning process, and they were not empowered to use the four language skills functionally in social interaction. Their teacher blamed their lack of success on the underdevelopment of their oral language. However, the classroom structure precluded the development of both language and thinking skills.

Juan and Chang would have had more opportunities in a social studies class such as the one offered in a pilot program for limited English proficient students considered potential dropouts (Freeman, Freeman, & Gonzalez, 1987). Although these 11th graders had all failed at least three classes the previous semester and had all scored low on standardized tests, they succeeded in a class where teachers provided daily opportunities for them to read, write, speak, and listen as they worked in cooperative groups.

For example, in one lesson on the Civil War, the teacher first read from Irene Hunt's *Across Five Aprils*. Students then read the textbook selections on the Civil War and compared what they had learned with the facts presented in the novel. Later, after seeing a movie on the Civil War, the class prepared for the unit test by first writing sample test questions in small groups. The groups then quizzed each other on these questions. The teacher collected the questions and used a number of them on the test the following day. Because they had been actively involved in constructing the test rather than passive recipients of it, the students did extremely well. They also came to realize that they could rely on one another and that they could work with the teacher for mutual success. One student reported that this had been the first test she had ever passed without cheating.

By allowing students to develop all their language skills simultaneously rather than assuming that mastery of oral language must precede the development of written language, teachers increase student potential by expanding the contexts for learning.

Assumption 3: Learning Goes From Part to Whole

In Juan and Chang's classroom the teacher operated on a third assumption that limited their learning potential. He believed that learning goes from part to whole. When Juan and Chang studied a chapter, they progressed section by section answering individual questions on their worksheets. Since the tests this teacher gave also emphasized individual facts, his students constantly focussed on details. Their teacher believed he was making learning easier by dividing

topics into parts and presenting one part at a time. However, this part to whole approach to a subject actually can make learning more difficult because many students lack the broader conceptual framework that the details fit into. This is especially true for students such as Juan and Chang, who do not share the cultural and experiential background of their classmates.

The assumption many educators hold is that real, whole language and complete texts are too difficult for most second language students, and learning is easier if tasks are broken down into smaller parts. This assumption has guided instruction for both first and second language students. In language arts classes for English speakers, children are asked to underline parts of speech, put in capital letters and punctuation, and circle pictures of things that begin with the same sound. Second language students may be asked to fill in correct verb forms, substitute plurals for singulars, and practice minimal-sound pairs.

The assumption in either case is that mastery of these exercises dealing with parts of language in isolation will lead to mastery of real language. In the same way, Juan and Chang's teacher believed that mastery of details of history would result in an understanding of broader historical processes. This kind of part-to-whole assumption about learning holds that if students begin with the details, simplified sentences, isolated grammar points, or dates when the colonists landed, they will easily be able to build up to comprehension of whole texts. Further, if learning goes from part to whole, it is the teacher's (or the textbook writer's) job to select and sequence the parts the students need to learn. Like the first two assumptions, the idea that learning goes from part to whole only serves to limit student potential by limiting their contexts for learning.

The idea that learning goes from part to whole is a common-sense idea. In industry, complex tasks are often broken down into simple operations to improve production. However, the technology of business does not seem to work in learning. Research indicates that language and concepts are developed from whole to part, not part to whole. Vygotsky (1962) believed that word meanings develop in a functional way from whole to part even though in quantity language seems to develop from part to whole as the child moves from one word to several words to full sentence:

In regard to meaning. . . the first word of the child is a whole sentence. Semantically, the child starts from the whole, from a meaningful complex, and only later begins to master the separate semantic units, the meanings of words, and to divide his formerly undifferentiated thought into those units. (p. 126)

The second language learner also uses individual words to convey whole meanings. For example, one of the authors, when learning Spanish, used the single word, *¿bano?* meaning *bathroom?* with ques-

tioning intonation to mean at various times: *Where is the bathroom?*; *Is there a bathroom here?*; and *Is that the bathroom?* As more proficiency with the language was developed, the author was able to express these ideas with more complete sentences in Spanish.

Goodman (1986) explains that we are "first able to use whole utterances" and that "Only later can we see the parts in the whole and begin to experiment with their relationship to each other and to the meaning of the whole" (p.19). Parts are harder to learn than wholes because they are more abstract. Words or historical details embedded in meaningful and familiar contexts are easier to learn than isolated words or details.

Many secondary students have experienced the difficulties imposed by a lack of context when they are asked by their teachers to give a definition for an isolated word from a vocabulary list and then use the word in a sentence. Problems arise when students find a definition such as *sharp* and *acute* and then produce sentences like *The knife is acute*. Students familiar with a word will first use it in a sentence and then derive the definition from the context.

Only in the context of the whole is it possible to explain what most words mean. In the same way, individual facts or dates from a social studies book are harder to learn than facts and dates embedded in historical contexts. As Brozo and Tomlinson (1986) point out, using trade books adds the narrative element, "... the stories that lie within all human interactions" (p. 288). Content-area textbooks are often dry and lifeless and have little meaning to secondary students.

When older students like Juan and Chang first read Collier and Collier's *War Comes to Willy Freeman* and then study the details of the War for Independence, they have a picture of the whole situation, the people involved, and the setting. Once a context is established, the isolated facts, names, and dates can begin to make sense. The same principle holds for all subjects. For example, second language students studying the vocabulary and concepts of large numbers may more easily begin to understand these concepts and learn the vocabulary by reading or having read to them *How Much is a Million?* by David Schwartz, than by doing isolated exercises in translating numbers like *1,000,000* into words.

Learning in explorer classrooms goes from whole to part naturally. The class that studied AIDS began with a basic question: What is the nature of this disease and how is it transmitted? The students researched various aspects of the disease, listened to a speaker, and viewed a video. They discussed AIDS with their classmates and presented their research to one another. They read and wrote responses to articles about AIDS. As their understanding of the topic increased, they moved from a vague, undifferentiated concept to finer discrimination of the parts. The teacher did not attempt to determine the content to be learned and present it sequentially. She did engage

her students in a variety of activities, and her classroom was highly organized, but she followed the lead of students. Her classroom was a community of learners exploring a subject together from whole to part.

In the same way, the biology students studying fruits and vegetables began with very general observations. Bananas had only one outer layer of skin while onions had many layers. Oranges could be divided into equal sections, but turnips were not so conveniently organized. As the students examined various fruits and vegetables they began to be able to categorize them according to different criteria. They became more adept at knowing what they were viewing, either directly or under a microscope. In short, they began to see the world as a biologist sees it and to ask the kinds of questions a biologist might ask. As their investigations continued, they worked in teams to explore particular aspects of the topic that interested them. In this class, as well, the teacher organized activities and involved students in certain experiences. However, he was interested in having students come to understand certain general concepts before they investigated particular aspects of it that were of interest to them. In this way, he was able to allow his students to learn from the whole to the parts.

The middle school students who read Theodore Taylor's *The Cay* were also learning from whole to part. In most classrooms, students are assigned only small sections of a book and then asked to answer specific recall questions on that section either on a worksheet or on a series of quizzes before moving on to the next section. In this class, on the other hand, the students were given time to read large sections of the novel before they discussed details. As they read, they kept journals in which they noted aspects of the story they wished to discuss. Once they had a sense of what the novel was like as a whole, the students held small group conferences with the teacher. In the initial literature conferences students shared particular passages that caught their interest. Then each group made some general conclusions about the kinds of passages they were interested in. During later conferences, students discussed specific aspects of the author's craft, such as the use of light and darkness as symbols. The discussions moved from more general to more specific reactions. Once students had a good idea of what the whole novel was about, they went back into the novel to look at particular features that made the writing effective.

Jose and Mai's history class provides a final example of learning going from whole to part. The video gave the students an overview of the unit they were to study. The follow-up discussion gave students a chance to clarify their general understanding of what had been presented. Subsequent activities allowed students to focus on particular parts of the topic. Mai studied where the colonists came from and where they settled. Jose researched the kinds of food they ate.

The details they gathered made sense in the context of the whole.

Organizing teaching by breaking down subjects into parts and presenting one part at a time may be easier for teachers but more difficult for learners. Teaching part to whole is logical, but it is not psychologically viable (Goodman, 1986). Students often fail to see how the individual pieces go together to form a coherent picture. It is as though they are trying to do a jigsaw puzzle without being able to see the picture on the box. Thus, although teachers sometimes assume that teaching the parts will help their students, that approach limits students' potential.

Summary

Teacher assumptions form part of the school context that helps determine the academic success of language minority students. Juan and Chang's teacher operates on these assumptions: (a) Learning is the transfer of knowledge from teachers or texts to students; (b) learning oral language precedes learning to read and write; and (c) learning proceeds from part to whole. These assumptions determine his methods and materials. He relies primarily on the text and his lectures to transmit knowledge to his students. He believes that his second language students fail because they have not adequately developed their oral language skills. Finally, he presents information part by part and tests his students on their recall of details. He views his students as passive recipients of the knowledge he deposits with them. The assumptions he makes reduce his students' potential for success by restricting the contexts for learning.

Mai and Jose's teacher has a different view of learning. She assumes: (a) Learning is an active process of meaning construction that occurs during social interaction; (b) reading, writing, speaking, and listening develop interdependently; and (c) learning proceeds from whole to part. These assumptions let her create what Lindfors (1982) calls an explorer classroom. In explorer classrooms students and teachers form a community of learners. They read, write, and talk with one another as they examine topics of interest moving from a focus on the whole area to a study of particular parts.

By changing their assumptions, teachers can alter educational input factors. They can empower students to take control of their own learning. For all students, and particularly for second language students, this approach expands the contexts for learning and increases the potential for success. ■

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