

You Can Use the Language All You Want but You Can Never Leave: The Difficult Task of Reclassification*

Cristina, who was born and raised in California, is now enrolled in middle school. When her parents—both of whom came to California from Mexico—registered her for kindergarten, they checked the boxes for both Spanish and English on a form that asked, “What language do you speak at home?” When this form reached the registration department of the district, Cristina was labeled as an “English Learner” long before she ever even stepped foot in a classroom or had met any of her teachers.

Now, in her 8th grade year, Cristina is still in English Language Development (ELD) classes, at the highest level (level 4). This year she was placed in a “pull out” class based on her score on the state assessment for English Learners. While Cristina’s score was high enough to earn her admittance into the level 4 class, it was not quite sufficient for her to be “reclassified” and have the label of “English Learner” removed.

Because she must take the ELD class, Cristina cannot participate in classes that most of her other 8th grade friends attend during period three. Students choose the classes this period based on personal interests such as leadership, yearbook, or art. Instead, Cristina and seven of her peers must meet every day to practice for the state assessment with the hopes that this year their scores will increase, and they will finally be able to become “Fully English Proficient”.

Cristina says she likes her ELD teacher and the other students in her class, but when I visited, she did not seem very engaged. On this particular day, the students practiced their “listening and speaking” by listening to a text about spiders that was read by a computer in a robotic, monotone voice. The recording explained characteristics such as how spiders make their webs or how strong the silk is that spiders produce.

On this day, the teacher brought students up to a table at the front of the room to work with her in a small group (2 or 3 at a time) and had them listen to the recording several times. Then, she asked them questions about what they heard, such as, “How strong is the spiders’ silk?” or “How big are their webs usually?” Students (including Cristina) were reluctant to answer but when the teacher pressed them individually, they quietly gave correct answers indicating that they had understood everything perfectly. When they finished, the students returned to their desks to work on practice tests while another group sat with the teacher and listened to the same recording. Back at their desks, Cristina and her friends spent more time engaging in

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small talk with one another than completing their assigned task. Their conversations, though, were in fluent English, and they never had to ask what certain words or phrases meant. They seemed to listen to and speak with each other with ease.

Later on, in her mainstream English class, Cristina was invited to engage in a lesson that was written by a team of curriculum designers from QTEL as part of a research study on how educative curricular materials support students just like her—those classified as “Long-Term English Learners.” The lessons in this class were designed based on the notion that interaction about worthwhile ideas and texts is at the heart of learning.

On the day I observed this class, Cristina was paired with a “lower level” student (according to her teacher) and the two engaged in a task called the Mind Mirror which invites students to analyze a character in a story by making inferences about the character based on text evidence, finding and discussing which symbols best represent the character, and explaining the thought processes of the character. Cristina was excited to work on the poster and had many ideas. She quickly took over the task and directed the work. As Cristina worked with her partner, she supported her friend with both ideas and language.

At the end of the task, the pair had created a poster representing Phaeton (the protagonist of the myth they had read) as a stubborn and arrogant young man who learns his lesson the hard way. At one point, Cristina even called me over to show me what the team had done and asked me what I thought of her interpretation of the character. I was impressed with the students’ depth of thinking and asked Cristina about the rationale behind their choices for describing and symbolizing the protagonist. Without hesitation, she was able to explain their analysis and give reasons and text evidence as to why it was valid. A few weeks later, I would even receive a copy of an alternate ending Cristina had written for the myth sent from her teacher. She proudly explained that she posted Cristina’s writing on the wall as an example to other students—many of whom were not labeled as “English Learners” and therefore would never have to prove their command of the English language on a special test.

However, because of her bureaucratic label (“Long-Term English Learner”), the next day Cristina had to return to the ELD class with the same 7 other students to practice “listening and speaking” once again. If Cristina does not do well on the test nor receive a score high enough to reclassify this year, she will need to enroll in another ELD class next year in high school that will continue with similar isolated drills and practice activities. This means her opportunity to take advanced or honor classes or choose classes based on her interest in sports, the arts, or possible future careers will be limited. Furthermore, she may miss the “honors track” her freshman year and never be able to catch up; even worse, she may not get the credits needed to graduate. The repercussions could follow her for the rest of her life.