Older Struggling English Learners

Last spring Juan, Pepe, and María decided to go to the United States to be with their families. They wanted to have a better life and to get a better education. The three kids said good bye to their grandmothers. María cried because she was sad. The boys gathered clothes, slingshot, a knife, a rope, blankets, a flashlight, a map and compass. María was cooking and buying food for the three of them. They were excited about the trip.

This piece of writing is part of a several-pages-long language-experience story written collaboratively by fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students in Sandra Mercuri’s newcomer class. Sandra begins each year with a unit on immigration because she wants her students to connect their lives to the school curriculum as they develop academic English. She also wants them to develop a broader worldview and new concepts, so the students learn about the many different reasons immigrants come to this country, where they come from, and the ways they arrive. Sandra’s approach is particularly critical because all her students are newly arrived English learners and most have had little formal schooling in their native languages.
Although these students lack the academic experiences of other students their age, they do not lack life experiences, so Sandra is sure to draw on their background knowledge. The story that the students wrote together reflects the real-life experiences of some of them. The following response was written by one of Sandra’s students, Jesus, after he heard Sandra read *How Many Days to America*? (Bunting 1988), the story of an immigrant family that comes to America to escape a military dictatorship. Sandra uses this story during the immigration unit.

Yo llege por le serro caminando con mi aguelito y con mi tio. Cuando curzamos el serro estava lloviendo. Y tanbie vinimo por la via del tren y tanbie cruzamos una carretera y nos escondimos mentre vinia la ben entonces llego la ben y entonces nos subimos a la ven escostados para que no nos agarrara la migra del camino y me trajiero para la casa. (Translation) I came through the hills walking with my grandpa and my uncle. When we crossed the hill it was raining. And we also came along the railroad track, and we also crossed a highway and we hid when the van was coming then the van arrived and then we lay down on the van’s floor so the highway patrol wouldn’t get us and they brought me to my house. (Mercuri 2000, 114)

Though Jesus’ writing lacks conventional spelling and punctuation, he is able to describe his experience in clear writing. Others of Sandra’s students are less proficient in their native language, and a few come to her class not knowing how to write at all. When non–English speaking students arrive in our schools without having had adequate schooling experiences in their native languages, they present special challenges to teachers.

Older students with limited formal schooling (LFS) like Jesus struggle to close the academic achievement gap. A second group of struggling older students we refer to as long-term English learners (LTEls). These are students who have been in this country for several years, but who have not developed high levels of literacy in either their first language or in English. Marisol is typical of this second group.

Marisol was born in a village in Michoacan, Mexico. She has six brothers and four sisters. Marisol attended kindergarten in Mexico, but she did not go to school the following year. When she and her family moved to a small, rural town in the United States, she was put into second grade. Her father, a farmworker, and her mother, a homemaker, put a high value on
Marisol’s schooling. Despite their support, school in her new country has not been easy. Marisol remembers her first days of school in the United States. She wrote about that experience in her high school English class:

When I started Washington school I was so nearveos becaue I didn’t know anybody and I didn’t understand anything in English.

For the next five years, Marisol received one hour of pullout ESL daily, but she didn’t receive any first-language support.

Marisol is now in high school. Oscar, Marisol’s ninth-grade English and reading teacher, was surprised that she had been in the United States so long. Her oral and written English proficiency is similar to that of more recent immigrants. He noticed that she especially lacks the academic language needed for schooling. But her progress in his class has been impressive, as Oscar’s comments about her recent work show: “Marisol’s work is greatly improved. I see confidence in her writing. She understands some of the ambiguities of the language, especially with poetry.”

Just before the end of the year, Marisol told Oscar this:

My mom saw me reading at home, and she asked me, “Is that homework?” and I said, “No, I’m just reading because I want to.” I couldn’t believe it myself. I usually would watch TV or listen to the radio, but now I actually get into the books.

Oscar and Sandra have achieved success with at least some of their older English learners by using research-based approaches that have been shown to produce positive results. Our goal in this book is to describe the similarities and differences among the types of older English learners in U.S. schools, to review the research on effective programs for these students, and to provide many examples of successful classroom practice from teachers like Oscar and Sandra. It is our hope that this information will better prepare both new and veteran teachers to work more effectively with their older struggling English learners.

Types of English Learners
The range of backgrounds of English learners in upper-elementary, middle, and secondary schools is phenomenal and seldom recognized. Programs designed to help these students are often based on the assumption that all
the students are alike. A look at three groups of older English learners presents a picture of their differences and similarities (Olsen and Jaramillo 1999). Figure 1–1 summarizes the characteristics of these three types of English learners.

The first group includes students who have come to this country within the last five years and who have strong educational backgrounds and literacy in their first language, and sometimes in other languages as well. They have developed academic language and skills in their first language that will transfer to their content-area studies in English. However, although many have studied English in their native countries, most lack conversational flu-

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<td>Newly Arrived with Adequate Schooling</td>
<td>• Recent arrival (less than five years in U.S.)</td>
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<td>• Adequate schooling in native country</td>
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<td>• Soon catches up academically</td>
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<td>• May still score low on standardized tests given in English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newly Arrived with Limited Formal Schooling</td>
<td>• Recent arrival (less than five years in U.S.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Interrupted or limited schooling in native country</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Limited native-language literacy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Below grade level in math</td>
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<td>• Poor academic achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long-Term English Learner</td>
<td>• Seven or more years in U.S.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Below grade level in reading and writing</td>
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<td>• False perception of academic achievement</td>
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<td>• Adequate grades but low test scores</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• ESL or bilingual instruction, but no consistent program</td>
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**FIGURE 1–1.** Types of Older English Learners (adapted from Olsen and Jaramillo 1999)
ency in English. These students often do well in course work, though they struggle for several years to compete with native English speakers on standardized tests. These new arrivals fit into traditionally organized ESL (English as a second language) or ELD (English language development) programs and often are integrated into the mainstream after one or two years.

A second group of older students who are recent arrivals in this country come to school with interrupted or limited-formal-schooling backgrounds as well as limited English proficiency. They come from isolated, rural communities with few school facilities, if any; from refugee camps that often lack schools; from countries where war is commonplace; and from home life situations that have moved them frequently from place to place (Hamayan 1994).

Because of their limited-school experiences, these students struggle with reading and writing in their first language, or do not read or write their native language at all. In addition, they lack basic concepts in different subject areas. They are often at least two years below grade level in math. These students are faced with the complex task of developing conversational English, becoming literate in English, and gaining the academic knowledge and skills they need to compete academically with native English speakers. They do not have the academic background to draw upon in their native languages, so these students often struggle with course work and do not score well on standardized tests. They also lack an understanding of how schools are organized and how students are expected to act in schools. They are not familiar with school culture.

The English learners in the third group have been in U.S. schools for seven or more years. Indeed, many are high school students who attended kindergarten here. Usually, they have been in and out of various ESL or bilingual programs without ever having benefited from any kind of consistent support program. They also have often missed school for extended periods at different times. These LTELs are below grade level in reading and writing, and usually in math as well. They often get passing grades—Cs and even sometimes Bs—when they do the required work. Because teachers may be passing them simply because they turn in the work, their grades give many of these students a false perception of their academic achievement. When these students try to pass high school exit exams or when they take standardized tests, their scores are low. Most have conversational fluency in English but lack the academic English language proficiency they need to compete with native English speakers.
The first group of students, the newly arrived English learners with adequate first-language schooling, need support. They need effective bilingual or ESL programs that will allow them to continue to develop subject-matter knowledge and skills as they acquire English. They need knowledgeable teachers who can make English instruction comprehensible. They also need support as they go through culture shock and the adjustments involved in living in a new country and speaking a new language.

Although these traditional ESL students need specialized instruction, the other two groups face greater challenges in trying to succeed academically in a new country and a new language. For that reason, in this book we focus on students in the last two groups. We analyze their needs, outline the kind of curriculum that works best for them, and provide examples from classrooms of teachers like Sandra and Oscar who have worked successfully with them. Increasingly, the English learners in our schools come from these two groups.

Immigrant and Involuntary Minority Students

One important difference between limited-formal-schooling students and long-term English learners is sociocultural in nature because it has to do with the relationships that develop between social groups. Even though many students in both these groups come from families that live under difficult socioeconomic conditions, there are some significant differences between them. This difference is captured by the distinction Ogbu (1991) makes between immigrant minorities and involuntary minorities.

Like LFS students, immigrant minorities are recent arrivals. They are not generally influenced by the attitudes and values of the mainstream society because they measure their success by the standards of their homeland. New students from the Sudan, for example, might be from families that live in poverty by U.S. standards, but whose living conditions are much better than what they were in Africa.

Immigrant minorities are motivated by the belief that they can go back to their homeland and use the skills and academic degrees they earn in the United States. In addition, they can alternate their behavior between home and school. For example, Sikh students from India often take on some aspects of Western dress in school and speak English there. In school, they can dress and act in ways that would not be appropriate at home. At home, they have to dress, speak, and act according to their cultural norms. However,
alternating behavior between home and school is not something that immigrant minorities find difficult. They assume that they must do this to succeed in the school world and still maintain their cultural traditions and values.

Ogbu also points out that the cultural differences between immigrant minorities and those in the cultural mainstream are primary differences that existed before the cultures came into contact. These differences are specific and easy to identify. They include such things as language, food, customs, and clothing. Immigrant minority members recognize these differences and work to overcome them if they believe that will lead to school success. Immigrant minorities succeed in schools at a higher rate than involuntary minorities do, and they operate on what Ogbu calls a folk theory for success—a belief that education leads to success—and so put a high value on education.

In contrast, involuntary minorities, like many LTELs, have lived in this country for years—often for generations. As a result, they are highly influenced by majority-group attitudes and values and measure success by mainstream standards. They cannot export skills or academic degrees to a distant homeland, and they can’t alternate dress or behavior between school and home.

According to Ogbu, involuntary minorities are characterized by secondary cultural differences. These are differences that developed after the cultures came into contact, and they are more a matter of style than content. They might include ways of walking, talking, or dressing that are designed to signal identity in a particular group. Since the differences are intended to indicate distinctions between the minority group and members of mainstream culture, involuntary minorities do not alternate their behavior: They act the same way at school and outside school.

In many cases, involuntary minority members develop a folk theory for success that puts a low value on education. Successful members of involuntary minority groups generally move away from the area where they grew up, so they don’t serve as positive role models for other group members. Involuntary minorities, then, do not see that education improves life’s conditions, and they see few (if any) examples of success related to education. Not surprisingly, involuntary minorities have higher rates of school failure than immigrant minorities do.

Ogbu’s theory helps to account for differences in the school performance of English learners. However, Valdés (1996) points out that it is difficult to
categorize some groups as either immigrant or involuntary minorities. For example, among students of Mexican origin, there are both immigrant and involuntary minorities. Valdés argues that Mexican immigrants can be considered involuntary minorities when they

1. become conscious that they are no longer like Mexican nationals who have remained in Mexico,
2. feel little identification with these Mexican nationals,
3. self-identify as “Americans,”
4. become aware that as persons of Mexican origin they have a low status among the majority society, and
5. realize the permanent limitations they will encounter as members of this group. (26)

When people view themselves as Americans who are placed in low-status positions in society because of their backgrounds, they begin to develop the secondary cultural differences that Ogbu lists. These differences may be formed in opposition to mainstream institutions. When the mainstream institution in question is school, that opposition contributes to a pattern of school failure.

Like Valdés, Cummins (2000) has argued that an important determinant of school success or failure is the relative social status of various groups and their perception of their position in the social hierarchy. He has proposed a framework that focuses on the relationships of power among social groups. He suggests that schools use a transformative, intercultural orientation that would allow them to create collaborative relations of power between groups. In schools that adopt this orientation, power is not solely in the hands of school authorities. Rather, the school and community groups collaborate in decision making and share power. This orientation results in adding students’ languages and cultures to the school curriculum, encouraging parents of all groups to become involved in the school, using transformative models of teaching, and adopting types of assessment that show what students can do. We have elaborated on Cummins’ model and provided examples of teachers who take an intercultural orientation in Between Worlds (Freeman and Freeman 2001).

Although some groups, such as students of Mexican origin, are difficult to classify, Ogbu’s distinction between immigrant and involuntary minorities helps explain the social factors that contribute to the school performance
of English learners. Researchers have pointed out that the distinction does not account for the performance of some groups, the differences within groups, or some other variables, such as socioeconomic differences. However, most researchers agree that Ogbu’s insights are valuable.

Ogbu’s theory is based on sociocultural factors. Purcell-Gates (1995), like other researchers, explains the importance of taking a sociocultural perspective. She studied an urban Appalachian family in which the parents were not literate. Purcell-Gates notes that the failure of minority groups, including the poor whites she studied, is often attributed to cognitive factors or to the assumption that the cultural group is deficient in some way. She argues that such explanations come from a mainstream perspective on reality that holds that all groups should value the same things that the mainstream group values. Purcell-Gates says that we can only understand the poor academic achievement of certain groups by understanding how they view the world and the place of school within their world. This approach, like Ogbu’s, is a sociocultural one. Purcell-Gates writes:

It is this sociocultural theoretical lens, I believe, that offers us the best chance of understanding the low literacy attainment by poor and minority peoples. How can we understand why so many children do not learn what the mainstream schools think they are teaching unless we can get “inside” the learners and see the world through their eyes? If we do not try to do this, if we continue to use the mainstream experience of reality as the perspective, we fool ourselves into believing that we are looking through a window when instead we are looking into a mirror. Our explanations threaten to reflect only ourselves and our world, serving no real explanatory purpose. (6)

Ogbu’s sociocultural theory includes the perceptions of the members of the two groups toward the mainstream. Both groups experience discriminatory treatment, but they react to that experience differently. Immigrant minorities expect poor treatment, largely ignore or discount it, and find ways to succeed despite obstacles.

In contrast, involuntary minorities are very aware of prejudicial treatment. Members resent discriminatory treatment and develop ways to oppose it. Involuntary minorities generally put a low value on education, but immigrants see school as the key to success. By considering the perceptions of the two groups—the way they view reality—instead of assuming that they see things the same way the mainstream does, one can better account for their school performance.
In many ways, the distinction Ogbu makes between immigrant and involuntary minorities parallels our classification of English learners into two groups: those who are recent arrivals with limited formal schooling and those who are long-term English learners. Many of the LFS students have all the characteristics of immigrant minorities. Most LTELs would fall into Ogbu's involuntary minority group. This difference is important for teachers to take into account. For example, effective teachers of LTELs devote considerable time helping their students learn to value school and to begin to see themselves as successful learners.

Mary, a high school teacher, read Ogbu's theory and then reflected on her own students in two different schools. The students she identified as immigrants were recent arrivals who came to the high school with limited formal schooling. In contrast, those she identified as involuntary minorities were her long-term English learners:

Through my teaching experiences, I have seen that Ogbu's theory is a reality. A clear example is seen in the ELD [English Language Development] classes of both high schools I have worked in. It was and has been my observation that students in ELD level one fit the characteristics of immigrant minorities.

When asked, these students will explain that they have come to the United States because they know there are better opportunities here. Although they have problems adjusting to the culture and language, they work hard and do fairly well in school. For the most part, these students move quickly through the ELD program and into mainstream classes. These students realize that their situation is not easy and is often unfair, yet they feel that they have it better here in the U.S. than they would in their home country.

Some of the involuntary students I have worked with were my ELD level four students in the first school where I taught. Many of the students had been in the United States many years, some were even born here. They viewed the dominant society as having all of the power and saw that minorities face discrimination and unjust treatment as well as having little if any opportunity of academic success. They had no role models and saw very few minorities succeed. Most of the minorities from the community that did succeed left the community. Therefore, these students were not able to see their academic success put into practice.

These students were not sure that education leads to success. They had distrust for school, which is a white-controlled institution. For the most part, these students had long ago given up the idea that they could be successful in school and in their lives.
One factor that Ogbu’s classification fails to take into account is the prior schooling of students within the immigrant group. New immigrants with adequate formal schooling succeed at higher rates in schools in the United States than new immigrants with limited or interrupted schooling. The latter group faces a much greater challenge. Nevertheless, Ogbu’s distinction between immigrant and involuntary minorities helps provide a clearer picture of the struggling older English learners in our schools. As recent demographic studies show, the number of English learners has increased dramatically in recent years.

**English Language Learners in Schools**

According to the National Clearinghouse of Bilingual Education, 4.1 million students in the United States are classified as limited English proficient. Among these students, there is great diversity in languages and countries of national origin. Though the vast majority, 72.9 percent, speak Spanish, the diversity even among Spanish speakers is great. The 2000 census reports that 66.1 percent of the 35.3 million Hispanics living in the United States are from Mexico. Others come from Central and South America, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other Spanish-speaking countries, and they have different cultural backgrounds and speak different varieties of Spanish (Barone 2001).

While the terms *Hispanic, Latino,* and *Latina* are generally used to describe these students, this blanket designation may prevent teachers from recognizing the diversity within their classrooms. For example, all of Sandra’s students come from Mexico, but many do not speak Spanish as their first language. Instead, they speak Trique or Mixteco, indigenous Mexican Indian languages. Even when all the students in a particular classroom have Spanish as a first language, significant differences exist. In fact, as Jiménez (2001) points out, many educators lump all Latinos together even though these students are very aware that their roots are in different countries and different traditions. In addition, those born in the United States know that they differ not only from mainstream students of European American origin, but also from new immigrants. Our son-in-law, Francisco, arrived here from El Salvador at age fourteen. He still remembers how his culture shock was heightened by the fact that everyone he came in contact with—his teachers, his peers, and even his coaches—assumed he was from Mexico.

According to Canedy (2001), Hispanic students make up the largest majority of English learners. In California, for example, almost 80 percent of the
students identified as English learners are Spanish speaking. Many do well academically, but the dropout rate is higher among California’s Hispanic students than in any other group. Thirty-one percent of the Hispanic boys drop out, compared to 12.1 percent of African American boys and 7.7 percent of Anglo boys. Twenty-six percent of the Hispanic girls drop out, compared with 13 percent of African American girls and 6.9 percent of Anglo girls.

Canedy also points out that while many of the reasons these students drop out are related to social and economic conditions, their previous educational experiences are also a factor:

Many Hispanic immigrants are either economic refugees from Mexico or war refugees from Central America. Thus, they come to this country very often with little schooling. (A3)

Certainly, not all immigrant students are Spanish speaking. After Spanish, the top language groups in U.S. schools are Vietnamese, Hmong, Cantonese, and Cambodian. Like Hispanics, Asian students differ considerably from one another. They speak different languages and come from different cultural traditions. In addition, there are differences in the academic achievement of Asian students. Chang (2001) found that while some Asian students do very well academically, others do not.

Asian American students are often perceived as college-bound and model minority students; however, Asian Pacific American student populations differ significantly in socioeconomic status, education aspirations, English language proficiency, optimal learning opportunities, or family/community support. (17)

The research that Chang conducted shows that many Asians, even those who began school as kindergartners in the U.S., reach sixth grade with low academic skills and a reading ability three or four grade levels below that of their peers.

In a 2000 report that reviewed research on English learners in U.S. schools, G. García and colleagues identify some key concerns. They report that these students are less likely than mainstream students to have had the kind of early pre-reading supports that teachers expect, such as being read aloud to, using educational games and toys, inventing stories, and reciting rhymes. Certainly, refugee children have probably had little opportunity
for such experiences. In addition, the researchers found that English learners as a group often live in households and neighborhoods with high and sustained poverty, so their lives are extremely complex and school is not always the first priority. Meeting basic needs becomes a key concern.

Among English language learners living in challenging settings, some seem to be more successful than others. Those who do well despite their circumstances have been termed “resilient.” Researchers are identifying individual and school processes that lead to and foster success for nonresilient English learners (Wang, Haertel, and Walberg 1994; Winfield 1991; Padrón, Waxman, Brown, and Powers 2000). Padrón and colleagues, for example, found that resilient English learners use their native language at home and with friends more frequently than nonresilient students do. They also found that 44 percent of the nonresilient students had repeated at least one grade, while only 11 percent of the resilient students were held back a year, leading one to question whether retention is effective for students acquiring English.

The impact of older English learners on U.S. schools continues to grow. Fleischman and Hopstock (1993) estimate that 20 percent of those identified as English learners in high schools and 12 percent of those in middle school have missed two or more years of schooling. With over a million more English learners in schools now than in 1993, teachers must be prepared to work with the large number of English learners who have had limited or interrupted schooling, are long-term English learners, or are nonresilient students. The literature suggests that these students are poorly understood and are not adequately served by schools (G. García 2000). But despite these sobering reports, some teachers are working very effectively with all types of English learners.

**Assessing and Placing Students**

As the number of English learners increases, it becomes more important to develop adequate methods for assessing and placing them. When David taught in a small high school in the early 1970s, some new students who did not speak very much English arrived. Since David had lived in Latin America, he was tapped to assess these Spanish speakers. The assessment was quite informal. Since there were no bilingual or ESL classes at the school, the students were placed in the lower-track (nonacademic) classes.

Times have changed. States have requirements for assessing students, and in most districts a specialist oversees testing and placement. The school
or district may even have an intake center and a newcomer school to accommodate new arrivals with limited English proficiency. Schools administer surveys to determine what languages are spoken in students’ homes, and for students who speak a language other than English, schools follow up with one or more tests.

Even though things are better now than when David first tried to determine the needs and abilities of the students who came to his school, many schools rely exclusively on oral language tests of English proficiency. Carrasquillo and Rodríguez (1996) explain why this is a problem:

An examination of mainstream instructional demands yields a listing of content area topics, thinking skills, and linguistic domains necessary for learning, not necessarily assessed through the above instruments [home language survey and oral language proficiency tests]. (31)

Oral language tests fail to measure students’ ability to read and write. The state of California realized this limitation with tests they were using and developed the CELDT (California English Language Development Test) to assess reading, speaking, and writing skills and to provide information to determine levels of English proficiency. However, teachers and resource personnel have reported that the exam is proving to be a challenge to administer and to interpret and still does not provide information about students’ background knowledge in academic content areas.

Carrasquillo and Rodríguez suggest the use of multidimensional assessment procedures including the following:

(a) information from teachers or teachers’ referrals,
(b) information from parents,
(c) evaluation of records,
(d) appraisal of the student’s academic level, and
(e) appraisal of the student’s language skills. (32)

The authors point out that schools need to use a variety of instruments to assess students’ language proficiency and content knowledge. Clearly, such assessment is a schoolwide or districtwide task. It involves collecting information from teachers and parents, as well as administering various types of tests. Carrasquillo and Rodríguez offer several helpful suggestions and forms that teachers can use for assessing students.
For some students, it is quite difficult to locate records of previous schooling. Since many new arrivals are experiencing culture shock, tests given soon after they arrive may not produce accurate results. Once students are assessed and placed, it is important for teachers to observe them carefully to confirm that their placement is appropriate. A very useful handbook that can serve as a resource for teachers is *Performance and Portfolio Assessment for Language Minority Students*, by Pierce and O’Malley (1992). This book contains a number of rubrics and other instruments for collecting and evaluating data about the language proficiency of English learners.

Mace-Matluck and colleagues (1998) point out that “Early identification of immigrant adolescents with limited prior schooling is necessary so that students’ needs may be served as effectively as possible” (108). They hold that schools must evaluate prior schooling and native-language proficiency as well as English proficiency. They also suggest that schools find out about the schooling of parents and siblings to determine the kinds of support students can receive at home.

For many schools, assessing students’ native-language proficiency is especially difficult. In our local district in Fresno, California, for example, home language surveys have identified more than one hundred different languages, and school personnel are not available to evaluate some of those languages. Schools can involve parents and other community members in the evaluation process. As Mace-Matluck and colleagues state, “Assessment of native language literacy is a crucial factor in the intake process, because prior schooling in the home country does not guarantee students’ proficiency in academic language” (109). Although it may be a challenge for schools to find ways to evaluate students’ literacy skills in their native languages, that information is crucial because first-language literacy and content knowledge are strong predictors of academic success in English.

Assessing English learners is a complex task, and all too often when new students arrive, teachers are not provided with all the information they need to plan effective instruction. Assessment should be a schoolwide or districtwide concern. Accurate assessment and placement is important if students are to receive appropriate educational services. When David carried out a very informal evaluation of the new arrivals at his school, the school had only a handful of limited-English-proficient students and no real place to put them. Now, all across the country, schools are faced with assessing and placing increasing numbers of English learners in educational settings.
that will support their academic success. Once placed, English learners need specialized instruction that will help them succeed academically.

**Four Keys for School Success for Older English Learners**

We have developed four key ideas to help teachers implement effective practices for working with older English learners (Figure 1–2).

The first key is to engage students in a challenging curriculum. Even though many students with limited formal schooling and many long-term English learners have not developed the academic concepts and language proficiency of other students their age, they are capable. What they need are activities that will stretch them. Effective teachers organize their curriculum around themes based on big questions designed to push students’ thinking. Without a challenging curriculum, older English learners will not develop the academic English they need to close the achievement gap.

The second key is to build on what students bring to the learning situation. There may be a gap between what the schools expect and what students bring, but that does not mean that these students do not bring anything. They each have a language, a culture, and background experiences. Effective teachers draw on these resources and build new concepts on this strong experiential base.

The third key is to scaffold instruction. It is not helpful to offer challenging curriculum without also providing the support that students need to

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<tr>
<td>1. Engage students in challenging, theme-based curriculum to develop academic concepts.</td>
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<td>2. Draw on students' background—their experiences, cultures, and languages.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Organize collaborative activities and scaffold instruction to build students' academic English proficiency.</td>
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<td>4. Create confident students who value school and value themselves as learners.</td>
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**FIGURE 1–2. Four Keys for School Success for Older English Learners**
engage with lessons. One way teachers do this is by organizing collaborative activities and providing other means to scaffold instruction.

The fourth key is to create confident learners. Older, struggling English learners often lack confidence. They may not see themselves as capable. They may not understand how schools work, or they may have concluded that schooling does not offer them any benefits. Effective teachers help all their students value school and value themselves as learners.

Three Effective Teachers

Sandra

Sandra Mercuri is a bilingual Spanish/English teacher and a recent immigrant from Argentina. She feels that being an immigrant helps her understand her students, even though her experience has been very different from theirs. Sandra’s students are fourth, fifth, and sixth graders living in a rural farming community in California. Almost all are newcomers to this country and speak either Spanish or one of two native dialects of southern Mexico, Mixteco and Trique. They arrive here with little or no previous schooling, and often come to Sandra’s classroom unfamiliar with school routines and expectations. Only a few are literate in their first language, and most lack confidence in themselves as learners.

Since many of the children are from migrant families, their schooling, once they start studying in the United States, often continues to be interrupted. Work takes families north for several months each year and family obligations take them back to Mexico for Christmas. The composition of Sandra’s class is constantly changing. Only a few students stay with her for an entire semester, let alone the whole year. Other teachers often ask Sandra to take students into her classroom because they don’t know what to do with or for them. Sandra’s challenge is to provide these students with the literacy skills and concept development they have missed and help them develop enough academic English to survive in junior high and high school. She understands that to do this, she must help them build self-confidence and pride in themselves, their culture, and their language.

Sandra has prepared herself well to work with these students. In her native Argentina, she studied language acquisition and has the equivalent of a master’s degree in Spanish linguistics. Upon arriving in the United States, she got her teaching credential at a small university that is known for its innovative teacher-education program, then continued into a graduate
program where she earned a bilingual/cross-cultural specialist credential, as well as an M.A. in bilingual/cross-cultural education. Sandra specialized in students with limited formal schooling, choosing that topic for her thesis. Since completing the M.A., Sandra has conducted research with Yvonne on effective practices for limited-formal-schooling students. She has also collaborated with Yvonne on several professional presentations and articles. Sandra now works as an adjunct professor at the university from which she graduated. Recently, she was chosen as one of three finalists for Teacher of the Year among all the districts in her county.

**Oscar**

Oscar Hernández was born and raised in the central valley of California. His parents were farmworkers, and he worked in the fields himself. Oscar remembers his experiences in high school, when he and other Hispanic students often felt mistreated and left out.

As he was growing up, Oscar found support from his Hispanic church and connected with his Mexican roots through involvement in Mexican folkloric dance and music. Supported by his church, he went to a small Christian college. There he made friends with other students and members of the faculty. He earned his B.A. and then got his teaching credential. Oscar has now taught for seven years. He has worked at various grade levels in several school districts. Recently, he took a teaching position near his hometown, where he works with mostly Hispanic freshmen who have been identified as struggling readers.

Through the college he attended, Oscar became involved with experienced mentors who have helped him develop creative and innovative literacy practices for his secondary students. He has worked with a secondary teacher, Pam Smith, on a literacy teacher-training team in one district and formed a continuing professional relationship with this knowledgeable mentor. He also received training in The Learning Edge, a program developed by Bobbi Jentes Mason in which high school and entering college students receive an intensive two-week literacy experience. Most of the students who participate in The Learning Edge have had interrupted formal schooling or are long-term English learners.

Oscar’s experiences on the literacy-training team and in The Learning Edge, as well as his current studies in an M.A. reading program, have prepared him not only to meet the needs of his high school students, but also
to present his classroom and curriculum to other secondary teachers at inservices and conferences.

**Grace**

Grace Klassen is an experienced junior high school teacher with a real heart for teaching and meeting her diverse students’ needs. About half of her students are Anglo and the other half are Latino. Grace teaches eighth graders and puts a great deal of time and effort into getting to know her students and caring for them. Although Grace doesn’t speak Spanish, she understands her students’ academic and cultural needs. She took courses in second-language acquisition to prepare herself to work more effectively with her English learners, and is completing an M.A. in reading. In her thesis, Grace describes an extensive unit on diversity that she has developed with her students.

The community Grace teaches in has a population of about eight thousand. While much of the town’s income is based on agriculture, recently the town has become popular with tourists. The quaint downtown was remodeled and several antique shops have become popular. There is a large mural depicting the diverse people who make up the community, including Native Americans, Mexican immigrants, and Anglos.

While the downtown has been refurbished and appears to welcome diversity, there are definitely sections of town that are economically depressed where a large number of the Mexican-origin citizens live. One large section is known for gang activity and poverty. Many of Grace’s students live in this part of town. The people of this area have little voice in the community or in the schools.

Grace sees her teaching as a vocation and puts time and dedication into planning for her students. Over the last five years, she has been instrumental in encouraging eighth-grade teachers at her school to plan together in order to give students a more integrated curriculum experience. She works especially closely with a social studies teacher to connect American history to literature and writing around the topic of American folkways.

Grace is extremely respectful of her students and their lives. Daily, she greets them at the door, shakes their hands, and welcomes them. Her students often share personal news, concerns, and successes with Grace during this time. Together with the time she spends reading and researching, this sharing gives Grace the information she needs to draw on the background
experiences her students bring to the classroom. Grace works to connect her teaching to her students’ reality, finding readings and developing units that will be relevant and meaningful to them. The title of her master’s thesis shows this clearly: “Making Real the Promise of Democracy: Valuing All Voices Through Stories of Diversity.”

Sandra, Oscar, and Grace are only three teachers among many we have worked with over the years. Their classrooms and their classroom practices are described in detail in the following chapters because their students are limited-formal-schooling or long-term English learners, and their teaching exemplifies the research-based principles of effective teaching for English language learners that we advocate.

We hope that readers of this book will be able to visualize the classrooms and activities we describe and see how the activities might be applied to the classrooms and students they know. Our goal is for this book to help those charged with educating English learners to put research-based theory into practice.

### Professional Extensions

1. Investigate the English-learner population in your school and district. How many students have been identified as being English learners? What are the primary languages represented among them? How has the population of English learners changed over the past five years? The past ten years?
2. How does the population of English learners in your district compare with the population in the rest of your state? In the United States?
3. How have your state, district, and school responded to the needs of English learners? What kinds of programs are available? How are teachers prepared?
4. Do your school and district make a distinction among the different kinds of older English learners described in this chapter? If so, how do they do so? If not, do you see a need for such a distinction? Why? Why not?
5. Review the discussion of immigrant minority and involuntary minority students. Identify a student you believe might fit one of the two groups, then interview the student. Does this student fit into one of the categories? How or how not?
6. Cummins says that schools should use a transformative, intercultural orientation to address the needs of English learners. Purcell-Gates says that schools should look at students through a sociocultural theoretical lens. Does your school have a transformative, intercultural orientation? What programs are in place for English learners? What changes, if any, would you suggest to improve educational opportunities for English learners at your school?

7. How are English learners assessed and placed in your school and district? What labels are they given? How do the labels affect attitudes about the students?

8. Review the four keys for school success for older English learners. To what degree does your teaching or the teaching in a classroom you have observed follow these keys? How could that teaching be changed to more closely reflect the keys?
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