Between Worlds
Between Worlds
Access to Second Language Acquisition

Third Edition

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We dedicate this book to our daughters, Mary and Ann, our sons-in-law, Francisco and Christopher, and to our grandchildren, Maya, Christiana, and Romero, who continue to provide us with very personal lessons about acquiring a second language and learning to live between worlds.
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Cavelier Elementary School is located in the downtown part of a border city in Texas. Its name belies its present student population of 530 Hispanic children, almost all of Mexican origin. Cavelier was the name of an early French settler who came to this part of south Texas in the late 1600s. His family members became important contributors to the community. In 1889 the first Grammar School in the city was built at the site. In 1947, fifty-eight years later and after several renovations, it was named after a descendant of the Cavelier family, a well-loved schoolteacher who later became principal. Cavelier Elementary School maintains much of its colonial Spanish-style structure, and welcomes newcomers from across the border.

There is a park across from the school that, at one time, was the town plaza. Now, this pleasant, grassy park has a fountain in the middle and paths around it. Families and neighbors from this part of town come often to walk around the park, much like people walk around the plazas in small villages in Mexico. Before and after school one can see mothers, grandmothers, aunts, older sisters, and even some fathers and older brothers dropping off or picking up their children. Almost all come and go on foot, as few have cars. This is a neighborhood school, with only one bus bringing in children from farther away.

After school, parent volunteers sell palomitas (popcorn), raspas (snow cones of different flavors), leche (sweet milk), and fruit with chamoy (spicy red sauce made from pickled fruit) or limón (lemon), to make money for the school. Spanish is heard everywhere. This school becomes a place where parents and relatives greet one another and share news and gossip.

The surrounding neighborhoods have small homes, and almost all the families living in the neighborhood struggle economically. Some sections have become dangerous, and gang members plague those who try to get ahead legally. Often children suffer
because a parent is in jail or one parent has abandoned them. Relatives often take over the responsibility of raising nephews, nieces, and grandchildren. Adults struggle to feed and clothe their families, but know that education is the only way their children can hope to succeed.

The school and the park are a haven for the people living in this part of the city. The teachers are all extremely dedicated. They are all bilingual, many were once immigrants themselves, and all feel the responsibility of not only helping all the 530 children who attend the school to succeed academically but also of providing them a safe place to learn. The student body is 100 percent free breakfast and lunch, and over 80 percent of the children are second language learners of English. Still, the teachers must prepare them to pass high-stakes tests in English. For newcomers this is especially difficult, because there is only one year allowed before they must take the tests.

The challenges at Cavelier School are great, but they are not unique. While this school is on the border where one expects high numbers of immigrant children, there are similar schools with student bodies filled with immigrant children across our nation. Teachers, resource specialists, paraprofessionals, administrators, teacher educators, parents, and the general public need to understand who these students are and what the best ways are to help them succeed in this society. This book is an attempt to meet this need.

Why a Third Edition?

As the numbers of English language learners grow, the concerns about how to help them succeed in school increases. California has the largest number of students designated as needing English instruction, with about 1.5 million. One in four ELLs in the United States attends school in California. When the California State Superintendent of Public Instruction states that the achievement gap for linguistic minority students is “the most persistent and pressing nationwide challenge facing public schools” (Aguila 2010, 1), it is clear that everyone should pay attention to the schooling of English language learners (ELLs).

We have updated this text because we want to provide teachers with the latest thinking about language acquisition and to bring in recent important research studies. Educators should be able to apply current learning theory as well as articulate research and theory on language acquisition, bilingualism, literacy, and academic language. Of course, for teachers to help their students, they must know their students and understand the contexts of their lives. Our opening description of a border school is one attempt to do this. Our students come from rich and diverse backgrounds, and it is only when we teachers comprehend and appreciate our students that we can reach them.

Introduction
Our schools reflect an increasingly linguistic and ethnic diversity, and this brings with it a challenge for teachers, because many more students at all grade levels have limited English proficiency. In 1994 when we wrote the first edition of this book, there were about three million second language learners in our schools. The number had grown to almost five and a half million in 2009. During this period, the second language population grew by 58 percent, while the total K–12 school population grew by only 4 percent. While states including California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas have always had large populations of English language learners (ELLs), other states have seen an influx of second language students. States where second language learners make up at least 10 percent of the overall student population include Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Alaska, Oregon, and Colorado, along with California and Texas (Batalova and McHugh 2010b). However, it is important to understand that it is not only the states in the West that are seeing high numbers of English language learners. States with more than 200 percent growth in the last ten years include, in ranked order of growth: South Carolina, Indiana, Nevada, Arkansas, North Carolina, Delaware, Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee (Batalova and McHugh 2010a).

As we have worked with educators in different states, we have seen many more teachers preparing themselves to work more effectively with ESL students. We have given workshops for teachers in small communities as well as in major cities in most of the states across the country on the topic of effective approaches to teaching their multilingual/multicultural students.

While teachers are becoming better informed, misconceptions among the general public about new immigrants and their needs have also grown. Immigrants have been blamed for economic and social ills, and there have been strong movements to limit immigration to the United States. In California, Arizona, and Massachusetts movements against bilingual education have led to outlawing the use of students’ first languages for instruction. Throughout the country anti-immigrant movements have been a concern for all those teaching second language students. We believe that it is perhaps more important now than ever before for educators to be aware of the many issues affecting the academic performance of immigrant students in our schools so that they can be advocates for all their students.

Certainly, no magic formula will ensure the academic success of any group of learners, and while this book offers examples of practices that have proved effective with a variety of students, we are aware that each learning situation is different. What works in one classroom may not apply down the hall, much less in another part of the country. We hope, however, that by identifying and discussing the linguistic, social, and psychological factors that impact students who are learning academic content in their second or third or fourth languages, we can help professionals examine their programs and their classroom practices to ensure that they are providing what is best for all their students.
The approach we develop here recognizes that any student’s second language development and academic-content learning are the result of many interacting forces. No one factor determines success or failure for a particular student or group of students. Yet, in the past, some educators relied on single-cause explanations to account for students’ progress. For example, some have focused on English proficiency. However, learning English is not the only key to academic achievement. English proficiency, by itself, does not determine success or failure. Cummins (1989) expresses this clearly:

Understanding why and how minority students are failing academically requires that educators dig a little deeper than superficial linguistic mismatches between home and school or insufficient exposure to English. Underachievement is not caused by lack of fluency in English. (33–34)

Even when lack of English is not seen as the cause of failure, the students themselves or their backgrounds are sometimes blamed. Such single-cause explanations are often based on social or cultural stereotypes. For example, some teachers might say that Hispanic students lack motivation, so they do not do well in school, but that Asians get good grades because they are influenced by high parental expectations. Recent research has disproven these stereotypical beliefs as well as others. In this book, we hope to help readers understand the issues related to the schooling of linguistic minority students at a deeper level so that we can all become advocates for our students and help them succeed in our schools and the greater society.

Our Title

The title for this book, Between Worlds, reflects our conviction that providing the best education for second language students requires that we understand that our students must negotiate between the world of their families and their native countries and their new world. In a sense, school is a place that is between two worlds for all students. Students entering school are leaving the smaller world of their home and entering the larger world of the school. For English language learners, these two worlds are often very different. In school, language minority students are often taught by teachers whose experiences have been limited to the mainstream culture and whose attitudes and values have been shaped by mainstream views. Teachers benefit from examining their attitudes and values and also by considering the values and attitudes that their second language learners bring to school. By doing this they can help all their students fully experience the best of both worlds.

Some students are unable to move successfully between worlds because they never fully enter the mainstream school community. They are marginalized by the instruc-
tion they receive and the attitudes they encounter. Eventually, many of them drop out or are pushed out of school. Unfortunately, these students also often lack a sense of belonging in their home community. They may be in a state of cultural ambivalence, not completely accepted either at school or at home. When this happens, increasing numbers of students turn to alternate communities, such as gangs. Rather than experiencing the best of both worlds, they cannot participate fully in either one.

Other students succeed in school, but in the process they become alienated from their home community. These are students who enter school as monolingual Spanish, Arabic, or Korean speakers and leave school as monolingual English speakers. They are unable to communicate fully with family and friends in the home community. These students may reject their heritage language and culture in order to become part of the mainstream. Rather than experiencing the best of both worlds, they simply trade one world for another.

We have chosen *Access to Second Language Acquisition* as the subtitle for this book because we believe that a number of linguistic, psychological, and social factors interact to permit or deny students access to the acquisition of a new language. However, the subtitle also has another purpose. We hope that this book gives those involved with English language learners access to recent research, language learning theories, and effective classroom practice. We hope to bring the research and theories alive for the readers of this book by providing numerous examples of classroom practice. Educators who understand research, theory, and the implications for teaching can provide English learners with access to their new language.

**Who Is This Book For?**

The idea for writing the first edition of this book came to us as we taught a course called *Language Acquisition and Cross-Cultural Communication*. The teachers in our graduate program needed a text that described different theories of language acquisition and also provided examples for putting theory into practice. In addition, as we worked with teachers in schools, we were reminded daily that teaching multilingual/multicultural learners involves much more than an understanding of theory, methods, and materials. We realized that this text needed to address linguistic, social, political, and cultural factors that influence students’ learning. Our goals for this third edition are not different. We bring to readers what we now understand even more deeply as the result of our own work, the work of teachers around us, and the work of recent researchers and theorists.

Many of the examples in this text appeared in the first and second editions. Teachers found them useful and often told us how much they related to them. Some of the
stories are new ones, vignettes we wanted to share because they helped us to better understand teaching and learning and the ever-changing immigrant populations who come to our schools. We have spent eight years now along the Texas/Mexico border working with large numbers of Latino teachers and administrators. They have taught us much and have provided us with new insights.

All of the examples come from our own experiences and from the experiences of teachers we have worked with. It is our hope that teacher educators continue to find this book useful in courses dealing with learning theory, first and second language acquisition, and linguistic, social, political, and cultural factors that influence learning. These courses might be part of a preservice program for prospective teachers, part of a program for teachers wishing to continue their professional development, or part of a graduate program of study.

However, we do not intend that the audience for this book be restricted to people taking formal coursework or to designated ESL or bilingual teachers. We hope that mainstream teachers will also find this book useful. In fact, we wrote this book with several possible audiences in mind, including teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, and others who work with second language students and who wish to continue their own professional development through independent reading. As student populations change and increasing numbers of English learners enter our schools, it is important for all the professionals working with these students to be knowledgeable about current theories of language acquisition and to be aware of the linguistic, social, and cultural factors that influence students’ academic performance. We have presented explanations of theory and examples of successful classroom practice that should clarify many of these issues. We encourage educators who are not taking formal courses to meet with colleagues in pairs or small groups to reflect on the ideas presented here.

We have also written this book for school administrators. Administrators provide leadership in curriculum, and they support the efforts of classroom teachers. School demographics have changed radically. In many schools, language minority students have become the numerical majority. For administrators to carry out their role, they need to be aware of the linguistic, psychological, and social factors that influence the academic performance of second language students as well as their curriculum needs.

Finally, we have written this book for parents and for community members interested in school improvement. Parents and other community members play a key role in the academic success of language minority students. We discuss in some detail ways in which the social context of schooling influences the educational context. We also describe successful programs that involve parents and other community members. Second language students can succeed when home and school work together to provide them access to the best possible education. We hope that parents and other members of the general public will find the examples and explanations here helpful as they increase their own involvement in programs to improve schooling.
At the end of each chapter we have included a section called Applications. These are not intended as end-of-chapter tests or exercises that must be completed for a grade. Instead, they are invitations to explore in more detail the concepts raised in the chapter. We hope that they will help readers apply the ideas to their own experiences. We believe that people learn by doing, and the applications ask readers to do something with what they have read or to read related material. We have asked our own students to try these activities, and they have reported that the applications enabled them to relate the concepts being studied more directly to their own teaching. Since we also believe that learning takes place in social interaction, we have often suggested that the activities be completed in pairs or small groups. With our students, this sharing has led not only to the expansion of ideas but also to the building of a supportive community.

Terms to Describe Students

We wish to comment on the terminology we use to refer to the students we write about in this book. It is always difficult to choose a descriptive term for any group because the words used may, in fact, label or limit the people in that group (Wink 1993). For example, the frequently used label for non-English speakers, LEP, focuses attention on what students cannot do. All of us have limited (or no) proficiency in a number of languages.

In the past, we have referred to students in our schools who do not speak English as their first language as second language learners, or bilingual learners. We use these terms to make the point that these students already have another language, and English is an additional language. However, we are aware that many English language learners are, in fact, adding a third, fourth, and even fifth language to their repertoire. Therefore, the terms bilingual learners and second language learners might also be seen as limiting.

Another term often used is language minority students. As the numbers of these students grow in different areas, this term is a misnomer. For example, in South Texas where we live, many of our schools are 98–99 percent Hispanic, and often more than 50 percent of the students come to school speaking a language other than English. These students are in the majority although their languages do not carry the social power of English.

The term most often used is English language learners (ELLs) or simply English learners (ELs). Even native speakers of English are English language learners in a sense, but students for whom English is not the native language face the task of learning English. This term focuses on what these students are trying to do, what they have in common, so it is the term that we will use at times.
A more recent term that has been suggested is *emergent bilinguals*. García (García 2009, 2010; García, Kleifgen, and Flachi 2008) has proposed that this term validates the language students bring to school as well as the fact that, as they learn English or another second language, they are becoming bilingual. They are not simply learning English, as the term *English language learner* implies; they are emergent bilinguals. We will move back and forth among the different terms as we write this book, being always aware that it is important to be cautious about the use of any label.

**The Chapters in This Book**

The nine chapters in this book focus on the students who are in our classrooms and the factors that affect their school success, the teachers who teach those students, and the research and theories that provide the basis for effective practice for teachers of ELLs.

Chapter 1 poses the question, “Who are our English language learners?” and explores factors that influence their academic performance. In this chapter, we present a series of case studies of English learners to show the complex factors that influence their academic development. We look at English language learners with a variety of language and cultural backgrounds who are living in different contexts, and we analyze each. Chapter 2 asks, “What factors affect the school success of English language learners?” Here we describe different types of English learners, including those with adequate schooling, limited formal schooling, long-term English learners, and potential long-term English learners. We review Ogbu’s distinction between immigrant and involuntary minorities and the characteristics of each of these groups. We end the chapter by reviewing perspectives on failure for ELLs and laying out a model that helps us identify factors that lead to student success or failure.

Chapter 3 raises the question, “What influences how teachers teach?” In this chapter we consider the many different influences on teachers working with language minority students. We then trace the experiences of one teacher over many years of teaching and analyze what influenced her teaching. In Chapter 4 we turn to learning theory and the role of the teacher because, ultimately, teachers teach based on how they believe students learn. We discuss social learning theories and connect them to teaching emergent bilinguals. We then connect learning theory to language learning and describe the different functions of language that students must acquire. Different language learning strategies are described. Throughout the chapter we provide examples of students learning a second language.

Chapter 5 answers questions related to first and second language acquisition: “How do people acquire a first language?” “Can people acquire a second language in the same way they acquire a first language?” “Are the processes involved in acquiring
ing a language the same as in learning other things, such as how to solve a math problem?” and “What are the principal theories of second language acquisition?” We review theories and give examples of how the theories apply to real students and real schools. We also discuss a key question in language teaching, “What is the role of the teaching of grammar?”

In this book we dedicate Chapter 6 to a topic we did not fully cover in our first two editions: bilingualism. In our global society, it is critical that we promote bilingualism for all. We know that rather than eliminating our students’ first languages, we should develop them. Language use in the twenty-first century includes moving back and forth between and among languages, and educators need to understand the value and power of using different languages at different times and in different contexts. In this chapter we review the principal theories of bilingualism and the different models of bilingual education.

In Chapter 7 we further discuss students’ first languages and whether we should view their language as a problem, a right, or a resource. We explore orientations toward teaching ELLs as being either assimilationist or intercultural. As we develop these topics, we talk about the role of the parents of second language learners and how to encourage parents to participate in schooling. We provide examples of transformative pedagogy, and discuss how educators can take an advocacy role in assessment.

Chapter 8 develops another new topic for this third edition, one that has received a great deal of attention because of its importance for the school success of ELLs: literacy. In this chapter we describe the concerns we have that many second language students have become “word callers” but cannot comprehend the textbooks they need to read. We suggest the gradual release of responsibility model for the teaching of reading and provide readers with ways to choose and use culturally relevant books that support literacy development for bilingual students. In particular, we discuss culturally relevant bilingual books and review three false assumptions about teaching bilinguals that have made some teachers hesitant to use bilingual books.

In the last chapter of the book, Chapter 9, we address two topics that have been widely written about and discussed in the past few years: academic language and assessment. Academic language is the particular kind of language that our students need for academic success. Many ELLs develop conversational language fairly easily, but without academic language, they cannot hope to read, discuss, and write about the subjects they study in school. In this chapter we contrast conversational language with academic language and explain the importance of developing academic language for emergent bilinguals. We discuss academic language at the word, sentence, paragraph, and text levels.

The last section of the final chapter includes the important topic of assessment. We explain how teachers need to develop both content and language objectives in the different content areas, and we describe different approaches to the assessment of ELLs.
We also review the research on standardized tests and second language learners and discuss modifications designed to help these students succeed. We end the chapter with an explanation of the standards and performance indicators that the international organization TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) has developed to help educators assess students’ academic language proficiency.

We hope that the information in this book will be useful to teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, administrators, parents, and others involved in the education of language minority students. We are aware that there are no easy solutions to closing the achievement gap for our emergent bilingual students, but we are convinced that all students benefit when educators working with them are aware of current research, theory, and effective classroom practice.

We began this introduction with a description of a school with many emergent bilinguals, dedicated teachers, and families who look to the school for children’s success, for hope of a better future. This school is not that different from many schools across the country. By studying language acquisition and bilingual theories, the sociocultural influences on bilingual learners, and the effective practices of teachers working with diverse populations, educators can better provide the best instruction for all those students who are living and learning between worlds.
Who Are Our English Language Learners?

I was amazed. I had no idea!”—these were the words John kept repeating as he told fellow teachers in his second language acquisition (SLA) class about an experience he had while trying to choose one of his students for a case study, a major class assignment. John teaches choral music, and he began by polling his small class of eleven students:

First I asked, “Do any of you speak English as a second language?” All raised their hands. To be sure they understood, I asked, “Does anyone speak Spanish?” Again, all raised their hands. I was amazed. I had no idea.

John is a new teacher, trying to prepare himself to work effectively with his students. He recently earned his teaching credential, and now he is returning to graduate school to take the courses for his English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement. He knew that the student population had changed in recent years, but he “had no idea” that so many of his students speak English as a second language. John’s teacher-education classes gave him a good foundation for his teaching assignment, but he now knows that he needs additional information about second language learning if he is to reach all his students.

In his graduate class, John is beginning to learn that the academic success of English learners depends on many factors and that he needs to understand learning theory and second language acquisition theory. Students learning in a new language and in a new culture have unique needs. In a school like John’s, the students and the teachers are worlds apart—almost literally. It is critical that educators understand that
many elements interact to influence the school performance of students who are acquiring English as another language.

We begin this book with case studies of several English language learners. Teachers who wish to understand the complex interaction of factors that affect the performance of their students can benefit from reading these stories and from conducting case studies of their own. These studies help show the different factors that influence the academic performance of second language students. Case studies provide a good starting point for understanding the research, theory, and practice described in this book, and this knowledge can help educators respond in an informed way as they work with their English language learners.

Each case study is based on a real student in a real school setting. Since we have lived in several multilingual communities, some of the case studies reflect our personal experiences with English language learners. Others are based on our observations of schools and our conversations with teachers, students, and parents as we work with teachers across the country. The remaining case studies were conducted by teachers studying second language acquisition in the graduate education programs at universities where we have taught.

To help our graduate students discover the strengths of their second language students, we have them read about and discuss second language acquisition (SLA) theory and the importance of students’ first languages and cultures. They also study the ways the community context affects schools. Then the teachers choose one second language learner to work with closely. We wrote of John’s experience in making his choice in the beginning of this chapter. The teachers read, write, and talk with their student. They share with each other what they are learning from their experiences as they write up their case studies. Through their research on one student and their interactions with their peers, many of these teachers begin to change the way they view the language minority students in their classes and the way they teach.

The teachers in our classes agree that it is one thing to read about English language learners and discuss SLA theories in the setting of a university classroom; it is another to work with the students directly and apply what they have read. However, when our teachers take the time to study one student carefully, they gain a new perspective on all their English learners. Desiree, an elementary teacher in one of our classes, wrote:

I am now a strong advocate for case studies. It is too bad that a case study is not mandatory for all teachers. A case study forces you to really get to know the children. I know that what I have learned will help to make me a much better teacher.
Another teacher, Katie, whose case study we describe below, explained even more specifically how her experience would influence her in the future:

- I will expend more effort in getting to know my students personally.
- I will provide individual time for each student as often as possible.
- I will never again assume that “what I hear” is “what they know.”
- I will arrange my classroom/curriculum around whole, real, purposeful, meaning-filled experiences.
- I will find, value, and exploit each student’s contributions and talents.

While we realize that no two students are alike and that no two students have the same needs, there are commonalities among learners that help us approach our teaching in a more informed way. We include here the case studies of eleven students at different grade levels and with different educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. After each, we list several of the factors that may have influenced that student’s success or failure. It is important to be aware of the different forces involved and consider them as we work to provide our students who are between worlds access to second language acquisition and content-area knowledge. Our students need both for academic success.

We ask readers to compare the students in the case studies below to English learners with whom they have worked and to think about the differences and similarities in the factors that may have influenced them.

**Eugenia**

Five-year-old Eugenia attends a bilingual kindergarten in a small rural community in the Central Valley of California. She was born in the United States in the apartment of a family friend, because her mother, an undocumented immigrant, was afraid to go to a hospital. Shortly after Eugenia’s birth, her parents became legal residents under the amnesty laws for migrant laborers who had worked in the United States over a period of years. For several years her parents were seasonal field laborers, moving often and leaving the children with relatives in Mexico at times, but after both parents got jobs in a canning factory, the family settled down.
Though neither of Eugenia’s parents speaks English, and neither has had much formal education, both parents believe that her education is very important. They see school as the hope for their children’s future. At first they were concerned about the fact that Eugenia’s teacher used Spanish for some instruction. One of their high school sons had had negative experiences with bilingual education and had recently dropped out of school. However, Cándida, Eugenia’s energetic Puerto Rican teacher, was able to explain to the parents why she teaches in Spanish and how building a strong first language base would help Eugenia in English in the future. Cándida convinced Eugenia’s parents to sign the waiver form to allow her to receive primary-language instruction. Because Cándida speaks Spanish and has shown an interest in them and their child, Eugenia’s parents now come to the school frequently to ask for advice or offer to help.

Eugenia has thrived in Cándida’s classroom. Cándida provides many opportunities for her kindergarten students to begin to read and write. For example, the classroom playhouse doubles as a “restaurant,” and includes paper, pencils, and lots of cans and boxes so that the children can “take orders” and “prepare meals.” The class spends time every day reading predictable books, singing, and reciting poetry in both Spanish and English. Because the class creates language experience charts and class books and does lots of brainstorming, Eugenia is comfortable with writing and experiments with writing in both Spanish and English for different purposes.

Eugenia has had a very positive year in kindergarten. Cándida believes that Eugenia will succeed in school. “She is lucky enough to have a supportive and caring home environment,” Cándida explains, “which will help her weather academic difficulties or disappointments and tolerate and defeat racism and expectations of failure. She has strong self-esteem.”

Perhaps Cándida is optimistic because she is seeing these Hispanic children at the very start of their school experience, and she has such a strong belief in them. In her own words, Cándida describes why she feels she can work well with her students:

I believe that being a Latina from the South Bronx helps me understand my kids not only linguistically, but also philosophically. I know the challenges that face these children, but I also know that if someone cares, their chances for success are great.

**Analysis**

At this point Eugenia is doing well. Cándida is giving her a positive start, and she has supportive parents who are eager for her to succeed and are willing to help her in any way they can. Her teacher, a Hispanic herself, is sensitive to the needs of both Eugenia and her parents. In addition, her teacher is giving Eugenia the kind of curriculum
she needs, including first language support, a print-rich classroom environment, opportunities for social interaction, and experiences with meaningful literacy activities.

However, other influences may affect Eugenia in the future. Eugenia’s parents have low levels of education and do not speak English. They will not be able to help her with her academic studies as she moves into the upper grades. Though they are now in the United States legally, the uncertainty and transience of the past and their socio-economic status may keep them from being as confident as they need to be in dealing with schools. An older brother has already encountered problems and dropped out of school while the parents watched helplessly.

As Cándida herself points out, many Hispanic children face challenges of racism. Eugenia’s teacher is optimistic, but her background as a New York City Puerto Rican is different from that of her students, whose families come from rural Mexico. We have hope for Eugenia, but we must look at both the positive and negative influences that might affect her in the coming years.

Mony

Unlike Eugenia, who lived most of her early years in the United States before attending school, Mony arrived here from a refugee camp in Thailand just as she was entering kindergarten. The school she attended was a large, inner-city elementary school of over one thousand students from many different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Since most of the students were Spanish speakers from Mexico or Hmong speakers from Laos, Mony had only a few other Khmer speakers from Cambodia she could communicate with. Her parents, also overwhelmed by their new surroundings, were of little help, as they spoke no English and were concerned about finding work and maintaining a household for Mony and her siblings in a new country.

Mony’s kindergarten teacher recommended that she be placed the next year in Katie’s prefirst class, a transition year for students who were not ready for first grade. Katie’s classroom had twenty-eight students, and many were English language learners from Mexico, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Korea. Katie was intrigued by Mony, who “seemed ‘deeper,’ more serious than students who, though ‘silent’ in English, converse freely with their L1 [first language] peers.” Mony followed directions and participated silently in most activities. Her artwork was so impressive that Katie, a veteran teacher of ten years, commented that Mony was “the most advanced six-year-old artist I’d ever seen.” Mony avoided eye contact with most people and preferred the company of the one other Cambodian child in the room. In fact, if her peers paid too much attention to her, Mony would stick her tongue out at them, trying to make sure Katie didn’t see her do it.
Though Katie could coax Mony to come close to her for cuddling during quiet times and comforted her when she had crying periods, she could not convince Mony to converse with peers in Khmer or discuss her fears and concerns in her first language. Just as Katie felt she might be beginning to connect with her, Mony was transferred to another school. Katie wrote a note to administrators at the transfer school. “I worried that [Mony’s] darting tongue and serious look might get her into unfair trouble, that her lack of oral language would be confused with lack of intelligence, and I wanted someone to know of her treasured artistic ability,” she explains. She received one brief follow-up call.

Since Katie teaches at a year-round school and went on vacation shortly after Mony left, she chose to do her case study on Mony in her new school setting. She decided to visit Mony in her new classroom, talk and read with her, and continue an interactive journal she had begun with Mony when she was in Katie’s class. Katie visited Mony ten times and kept anecdotal records of their time reading, writing, and talking. In this smaller classroom environment, Mony seemed almost like a different student. Katie’s reflections reveal how much her visits taught her.

I was amazed at Mony’s proficiency in English and shocked at what I’d wrongly perceived it to be when she was in my class. It sounds so simple, but if we as teachers put more effort into who we’re teaching, more of the what would take care of itself. When we concentrate on programs, or strict timelines, we lose sight of the important human element.

Looking closely at one student helped Katie see that human element anew.

Analysis

Mony is a refugee child who arrived in the United States with no preparation for the dramatic changes she encountered. Busy teachers who have many other things to be concerned about often do not realize just how traumatic the changes are for refugee children who leave behind war-torn countries or homelands ravaged by natural disasters.

Mony found little support at the large school she attended. Her response was to watch silently and try to absorb what was going on around her. As we will see later, many English learners have a silent period as they acquire the language, and Mony was no exception. Her silence and seeming defiance were wrongly perceived by her kindergarten teacher as lack of ability, and even Katie, who recognized her skill in art, underestimated her proficiency in English. She was surprised at Mony’s rapid progress when she visited her new school.
Many immigrant children get lost in our school system. Yet, if we can find ways to get to know them as individuals, show an interest in them, and meet their specific needs, we give them greater chances for future school success. Although Katie did not see the effects she was having on Mony while Mony was in her class, Katie’s teaching and her attention to Mony paid off in the new school. Katie was fortunate to see the change. Often, teachers are not aware of the effects they have on students because those effects do not appear until after they leave the classroom and move on to another class.

Salvador

Salvador entered Ann’s multiage second- and third-grade bilingual classroom as a third grader. His previous teachers had warned Ann how difficult he was and had pretty much written him off as unreachable. He had been in a bilingual kindergarten and first grade and then had been transitioned to an English-only second grade because he was not learning to read and write in Spanish, and his teacher thought he might do better in English. When he failed in English, he was put into Ann’s Spanish/English bilingual class, which was designed for struggling students.

Salvador was disruptive in Ann’s class and refused to try to read or write in Spanish or English. He would often cry and throw tantrums and start arguments with classmates both in class and on the playground. Ann spoke with Salvador’s mother, who was also at a loss about what to do with him. His behavior at home was similar to his behavior at school. His mother’s response was to give him what he wanted, to placate him. She had a high school education in Mexico, was attending English classes, and hoped to get a job soon. She could help Salvador at home, but he would not often let her. Ann learned that his father was frequently absent from the home, since he worked in other parts of the state or returned to Mexico. She also came to discover that Salvador’s worst outbursts occurred when his father returned home, even though Salvador was always very excited about his father’s homecomings.

Ann’s classroom offered many opportunities for students to do shared and pair reading in Spanish and English. She organized her curriculum around inquiry units and encouraged her students to write in journals, create books, and summarize content readings by making charts and graphs. She suspected that much of Salvador’s behavior stemmed from his lack of confidence in his own reading and writing.

She gave Salvador responsibilities, such as having him take roll or track for the class when they read a poem or big book. Ann celebrated any and all of Salvador’s positive responses, but was frustrated by his frequent disruptive behavior. By the end of the
year, Salvador had improved somewhat in his ability to take part in the classroom routines, but Ann and his mother decided that he was not ready to go to fourth grade, where the academic content was demanding and the curriculum was entirely in English. Salvador was still struggling to read and write in Spanish.

The next year, Salvador’s teacher was Francisco, who also found Salvador to be difficult. Francisco helped Salvador to see that anger was a response that was hurtful not only to his classmates but to Salvador himself. His teacher’s gentle insistence on positive behavior and cooperation was calming for Salvador. Francisco also played soccer with the students during recess, and Salvador loved soccer.

Since Francisco had a similar routine to the one Ann had used, Salvador was more ready to read and write and participate in group projects. By midyear, Francisco began to see real progress. Salvador actually wrote a book on his own, following the pattern of a class book about farm animals and the sounds they make. This seemed to be a breakthrough for Salvador. He wrote and read more confidently in Spanish and began to read and write in English.

Salvador’s year with Francisco was important. He continued to get literacy support in his first language, with routines similar to the year before. In addition, Francisco was a Latino male who insisted on good behavior and maintained high expectations. By the end of the year, Salvador was beginning to show significant academic gains.

Both Ann and Francisco have watched Salvador’s progress in fourth and fifth grade. While he is not the strongest student, he is progressing well and his former behavior problems have all but disappeared. When Francisco visited the school two years after he was in his class, Salvador greeted him and told him how well he was behaving and how much better he was doing in school.

**Analysis**

Salvador is an example of a student who had many complicated forces influencing him. Though his mother wanted to help, she seemed at a loss, and her husband was seldom home. The school had no specific proof, but there was a suspicion of violence in the home when the father was in residence. This seemed to affect Salvador’s behavior.

Salvador was first placed in a bilingual class. Teachers soon labeled him as a troublemaker and did not appear to know much about him. He was later placed in an all-English classroom when he was not yet literate in his first language. Before coming to Ann’s class, his teachers didn’t perceive him as a capable student and largely ignored him.

Ann gave him responsibilities and held high expectations for him. Her classroom provided a consistent routine of reading and writing in Spanish and English, and
Salvador was expected to participate in all activities with the class. Although he still misbehaved frequently, Ann laid a foundation for his eventual success. Francisco built on that foundation, and Salvador is doing much better now.

Even though Salvador has made great progress, his home situation is unstable. He will soon enter his teen years, always a difficult time. He will also have to make the transition to middle school. These outside forces will make success more difficult, but he has developed better self-discipline and his academic skills are steadily improving, so if he continues to get good teachers, he has some chance for success.

Sharma

Rhoda, a fifth-grade teacher in an elementary school in a rural farming community, describes her first impression of her Punjabi student, Sharma, and Sharma’s mother.

She walked into my classroom and smiled at me with warm, giving brown eyes. Her dark brown hair was neatly braided, and she politely introduced me to her mother and her baby sister. The woman’s traditional Indian silk was embroidered in rich primary colors setting off her beautiful olive skin. In accented English she asked for a few moments of my time. She asked that I arrange for the school’s Punjabi aide to spend time with her daughter so that she would not fall behind the rest of the class. I was intrigued by this caring mother and wanted to know more about her soft-spoken daughter.

As Rhoda gathered information for her case study, she learned a great deal about her. Sharma and her family had moved back and forth between India and the United States several times since her birth in California. The family’s middle-class life in India was comfortable, but Sharma’s parents were concerned that the primitive rural school near their home would not provide their daughter with the future they wanted for her. They tried twice to succeed economically in the United States and once even left their children with relatives in India while they looked for work in the States. Finally, both parents found jobs in the community where Rhoda taught. The father worked for local farmers and the mother was employed at a packing plant.

Sharma’s parents speak English, but they use Punjabi with Sharma and her two younger sisters, who were also born in California. Sharma and her sisters dress in Western clothing for school and make an effort to fit into the activities in which the other students participate. The parents have allowed their children to give up some of their traditions, because they think that adopting Western ways is necessary for school success. They believe in hard work and have high academic expectations for their children. On weekends the girls go to a Sikh temple in a nearby city to develop their first
language abilities and to learn about their religion. They also participate in Punjabi holidays and traditions.

Sharma has attended the same rural school from kindergarten through fifth grade. Though the school has a bilingual program for Spanish speakers, only limited primary-language support is available for Punjabi students. Sharma is an active member of her fifth-grade classroom community. She especially seeks out friends among the native English speakers in her class. Her social English is animated and full of the same idioms used by her peers. She tends to avoid contact with other newer and less proficient Punjabi students, although she is willing to be helpful with information about India or to support the newcomers when asked.

Sharma is categorized as proficient in English by the test the school administers to its second language students. However, Rhoda has noticed that the language of some content-area texts is a challenge for Sharma, and Sharma, on her own, looks for resource books, pictures, and charts to help make sense of some of the more academic content.

Rhoda hopes that Sharma will continue to study her native language so that she will develop that resource as she progresses in English. Rhoda summarizes her concerns about Sharma’s future as follows:

Although Sharma has had some advantages other language minority students have not had, she still has a problem with not being able to work to her potential because of lagging academic language development. As she continues to be exposed to comprehensible input, and continues to develop academic language, concepts will become less cognitively demanding. Because Sharma does not have a strong background in reading and writing Punjabi, it would appear that her primary language needs continued support. Teachers should continue to appreciate new Punjabi students for who they are and model this acceptance to their classroom communities. They should allow them to speak out of their personal experience so that students like Sharma can understand that “traditional” Punjabis have as much value as their Americanized counterparts.

Analysis

Many factors have influenced and will continue to influence Sharma’s progress in school. Her parents are both educated and speak English well when compared with other immigrants. On the other hand, their socioeconomic status is not high. The family has experienced financial stress in the past and for this reason has had to move often. They presently live in a small farming community where there are many Spanish-speaking immigrants but only a few Punjabis. Teachers at the school have little understanding of the Punjabi way of life and customs.
The family maintains their home language and culture; yet her parents want Sharma and her siblings to succeed academically in a society that is very different from their own. Their expectations for their children are very high, almost demanding. Sharma must do well in a competitive school system but also maintain, to some extent, traditional Punjabi customs. This creates a struggle for Sharma, who even avoids social contact with Punjabi students who have recently arrived.

Sharma seems to be thriving despite these difficulties. Though no teachers speak her first language, a Punjabi-speaking aide works with those students who need first language support. Sharma’s parents are quick to seek assistance from the school when they think their daughter needs it. Sharma herself interacts freely with her Anglo peers and seems well adjusted socially. Presently, she is able to function well in both the Punjabi social context and the school context. It remains to be seen if she will continue to be able to do this successfully.

**Farrah**

Farrah came from Iraq to Dallas, Texas, at age nine with her parents and her younger brother, Abraham. Both of Farrah’s parents speak English quite well, but like many Iraqi refugees, they have had trouble finding work. A recent economic downturn has made jobs scarce. Farrah’s mother, Lelya, was a doctor in Iraq but works as a part-time case-worker here. Her father, Hussein, was educated as an engineer. When the war started, he took a job as a translator for English-speaking military personnel because the salary was so high. However, when it became too dangerous to stay in Iraq because of constant death threats, the family came to the United States with special immigrant visas under the Defense Authorization Act.

Hussein now is an interpreter in a meat-packing plant near the housing complex where they live on the edge of the city. The family is having trouble making ends meet, and their jobs certainly do not match their skills. They talk often of moving to Chicago because it has the largest Iraqi population in the country, and they have friends there.

Because she attended a good school in an upper-class neighborhood in Iraq, Farrah was close to grade level in academic content areas when she arrived despite some interruption of schooling from the war. She had studied some English at school in Iraq, and her parents paid for some private lessons as well, but Farrah still struggles understanding the English of her teacher, her peers in class, and her textbooks.

Her fourth-grade teacher is nice, but not certain how to help her. She has several students in her class who do not speak English as their first language, and she is not
Farrah is an interesting student because she comes to school in this country with both advantages and disadvantages. Farrah arrived in fourth grade at grade level academically. She attended a quality private school in Iraq and understands what school is about and what is expected. However, she also is old enough to realize that she has a huge academic challenge because she does not speak English, and she knows she is not understanding critical instruction that students who speak English do. She knows she needs to study hard in order to compete with her classmates.

However, Farrah’s challenges go beyond academic ones. Socially, she understands the racism that exists around her and only seems to feel really comfortable with girls who share her cultural and linguistic background, while her younger brother interacts...
happily with his peers, oblivious to what Farrah is old enough to understand. She also realizes that her family is struggling financially and seems to take that burden too upon her shoulders. Farrah’s parents are so concerned with their own struggles that they don’t realize the problems she faces. With another possible family move on the horizon, Farrah’s academic future is difficult to predict.

**Osman**

Like Farrah, Osman is a Muslim refugee who has experienced the violence of war in his home country and racism in the United States, but his situation is very different than hers. When he entered middle school at age twelve, it was the first formal schooling experience Osman had ever had. He and his mother left Somalia with his uncle and aunt and four cousins when he was five. His father was killed during one of the many clan conflicts within the country.

Osman and his family lived in a refugee camp in Kenya where schooling was extremely limited. At times, children attended classes during the morning, sitting on the ground and repeating lessons after the teacher. However, most of the time in the camps was spent trying to obtain the basic necessities to stay alive. Osman and his cousins stood in line for food and water for many hours.

Osman is one of over a million Somalis who have been displaced since the late 1980s. In 2004 officials estimated that between one and three million Somalis were living abroad. Many had emigrated to Europe, Canada, and the United States. In December of 2009, the estimated number of Somalis in the United States was almost 84,000 (Corcoran 2009). Osman’s family immigrated to the Minneapolis–St. Paul area, home to the largest number of Somali refugees in the United States.

For Osman and many of the other refugee children, life in the big city is overwhelming. Moving from a refugee camp where thousands of people slept on the ground with no modern conveniences to a large U.S. city with tall buildings, public transportation, and modern technology has been a shock. For the first time in his life, Osman held a pen and kept his own books in a locker.

The challenges for Osman are daunting. He has to learn English and learn the subject area content at the same time. Although he brought many experiences with him, those are not the experiences that help him understand the school system and the expectations the system has of him. His family cannot help him too much because they also have so many adjustments to make coming to a new country, looking for jobs, and finding a new home. In addition, they had very limited formal education in Somalia and are trying to learn enough English to survive in the United States.
In addition to struggles in school, Osman finds that the climate and the customs are very different in the new place. The cold is hard for Osman and his family to get used to, and they have to learn how to adapt to dressing, eating, and cooking differently. The religious holidays and customs in his new country are very different from the Muslim traditions Osman was raised with. Stories of communities across the country who do not welcome Somalis and mistrust Muslims concern the Somalis in Minneapolis–St. Paul despite the fact that there is an effort in local schools and the community to understand their refugee populations.

Although Osman worked hard and learned quite a bit of English in his first year in school, he realizes that he is significantly behind his native-English-speaking peers. Because he did not attend school during his time in the refugee camp, he is behind in all subject areas. Now, in this new country, he often doesn’t understand what is being taught. Even though his teachers mean well, they do know how to help these older students who arrive with little to no formal schooling experiences.

**Analysis**

Osman’s academic challenges seem overwhelming. He had no previous schooling and cannot read or write in his first language. He is living in a new country, trying to learn a new language, and also trying to learn school subjects at the middle school level. His parents cannot help him with his academics. He is starting school at age twelve. He does not have very much time to develop the academic content and academic English he will need to graduate from high school in five years. His teachers will need to give him specific kinds of support so that he can learn English and the content he needs, but even with the best instruction, the chances of his succeeding academically are slim.

Other challenges are also daunting. Osman lived in a warm, dry climate; now he is living in a state known for its 10,000 lakes, forests, and snowy winters. While Minneapolis–St. Paul has refugees from many parts of the world, it is a traditional midwestern U.S. city. Osman has always lived in a Muslim world, and now he needs to adjust to different holidays and customs. He is determined to do well in school, but there are many factors that will make academic success difficult for him.

**Tou**

Kathy, a junior high school English teacher, chose Tou, a Hmong student, for a case study because he is typical of other junior high school students she has. The population at Kathy’s school is approximately 75 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Asian, 8 percent
Who Are Our English Language Learners?

Tou, like many of Kathy’s students, speaks English well, but he tested substantially below the fiftieth percentile on reading and struggles academically. Kathy described why she chose Tou for her case study:

Tou is not generally well liked. His small stature and immaturity certainly contribute to this unpopularity. I have witnessed several instances of racial slurs aimed at Tou and the isolation that has ensued. The normal adolescent self-doubt and low self-esteem combined with the hostility he encounters daily seem a certain formula for failure.

Tou, now fourteen, is the youngest of seven children in a refugee Hmong family. He was born in a refugee camp in Thailand but spent only a few months there. After his birth, his family moved to the midsized city in California where he now lives with his father and two of his older brothers, who are married with children. His mother is living with a daughter and her family in another city several hours away. Separation of parents is difficult for any child, but because the Hmong place great value on family unity, Tou is deeply affected as his family stands out as an exception.

The family came to the United States with the hope of finding a better life. Economic and emotional problems, however, have kept them from achieving their goals. Tou’s father, who was a farmer in Laos, does not speak English, is not literate in Hmong, and does not have any job skills appropriate to his inner-city neighborhood.

Tou has attended seventh and eighth grades in Kathy’s inner-city school. Most of the students at the school are from low-income families living in run-down apartment complexes. Many of the parents are unemployed laborers or refugees on welfare.

Tou is generally an extremely reluctant participant in most class activities. Kathy describes his frequent pattern of absences:

He often would come to school toward the middle of the week and then start his weekend early—kind of a two-day school week, five-day weekend model! When he was there, his antisocial behavior was more obvious, and students began to ask me not to seat them close to Tou.

This behavior eventually led to an emotional conference in which Tou’s father, with the help of a Hmong-speaking aide, told of his hopes and dreams, of what America meant to him, and of his aspirations for his children. He told how one older brother had dropped out of high school because of involvement in gang activity and how worried he was that Tou was following the same failed path.

After that conference, Kathy saw that there was a change in Tou’s behavior, though not a transformation. “Truthfully, it was old-fashioned parental hovering, teacher monitoring, and weekly progress reports sent home requiring Dad’s signature that kept..."
Tou in school the last two months of school." His teachers and father did manage to get him through seventh grade, and he was promoted to eighth, an event Kathy explained as "not lifelong success, exactly, but an achievement nonetheless." However, in eighth grade it became obvious that Tou had become part of a gang. He attended school, but was in trouble outside of school. He was eventually transferred to a continuation school.

Kathy summarized her concerns for Tou and students like him at the end of her case study:

> This experience made me sadly aware that my students are all individuals with diverse and complicated needs and that I can never hope to solve them all. Just my one-on-one interviews with Tou and my special efforts to talk at least briefly with him every day pointed up that all my students need that attention. I feel stretched to the limit.

### Analysis

As Kathy points out, Tou’s situation is a complex one. Many negative factors are at work, and they appear to be outweighing the efforts his father and his teachers have made to help him. Tou is the youngest in a large family that is caught in a struggle to survive in a new and challenging culture, a culture that has little in common with their own. The home situation for Tou is stressful. His parents are separated, a situation that is unusual in traditional Hmong culture (Bliatout et al. 1988) and is a source of embarrassment. He lives with his father, who does not speak English and cannot find work. Tou has little support at home and few personal examples of school success. Older siblings either did not get schooling or had trouble in school themselves. One brother has a history of gang membership.

In his large inner-city junior high school, Tou is like many students with social and economic problems who become involved in gangs. He is not well liked even among Hmong students. In the classroom, he is a loner and does not work well with others. He frequently cuts classes.

The teachers in Tou’s school have made an effort to meet their students’ needs by forming teams so that they can share students and get to know the students better. However, for Tou, these efforts appear to have come too late. Tou has now entered a continuation school that provides a last chance. One fears that this change will not be enough for him. In fact, Kathy told us that the caring teacher there works very hard with students, but spends more time at his students’ funerals than any other type of event. Students have often lost hope and many commit suicide or are killed during family violence or in gang warfare. The outlook for Tou is discouraging.
José Luis, Guillermo, and Patricia

We first met these three teenagers in 1984, less than a week after they arrived in Tucson, Arizona, from El Salvador. A few days before they flew to Tucson, they had watched as their father, an important military official, was assassinated in front of their home in San Salvador. The three had narrowly escaped being arrested and perhaps even murdered themselves. In fact, sixteen-year-old Guillermo had two bullet wounds in his leg when he arrived in the United States.

Their stepmother in El Salvador distanced herself from the three teens for her own safety and that of a two-year-old daughter, who was their stepsister. José Luis, Guillermo, and Patricia, alone in a country that had suddenly become hostile, sought asylum with their aunt, a fellow doctoral student and friend of ours at the university. Through that connection, we often had the opportunity to spend time with these remarkable teens over the next six years. We have maintained contact up to the present over twenty-five years later.

Although they had studied English at private bilingual schools in San Salvador, their comprehension of English and their ability to communicate in English was extremely limited when they first arrived. Their aunt, a dedicated academic, was anxious to get them into school and working toward school success. All three were enrolled in a local high school almost immediately and admonished by their aunt that they must do well in all their subjects. She warned them that there was no time to be wasted, and that she would not tolerate irresponsibility.

The aunt, who had an older, ailing husband, found them an apartment near her and supported the three financially the best she could. They also received some sporadic financial help from aging grandparents in El Salvador. The teenagers were soon almost entirely on their own, trying to cope with a new culture and language. Each handled the situation in a different way.

The oldest at seventeen, José Luis felt responsible for the other two. He also felt somehow at fault for not having saved his father, and wrestled with that guilt. He studied day and night, smiling little, and taking almost no time for relaxation. English was a struggle for him, and he spent hours with a dictionary, translating his textbooks and studying for tests. He ignored jokes his classmates made about the fact that he studied all the time. Classes in algebra, calculus, and physics were less linguistically demanding, so he soon concentrated on them as a possible specialization. He graduated from high school with a President’s Award for excellent academic scholarship just two years after arriving.

Guillermo responded in a totally different way to his new surroundings. He was the most outgoing of the three. He worked hard to make friends and joined high school clubs almost immediately. He talked to anyone who made an effort to understand him,
even when they made fun of his accent, and he soon became involved in school government. His grades were not high, but he studied enough to earn a B-minus average and qualify to attend the university.

Patricia depended more on our family for emotional and personal support at first. At thirteen, she was the youngest of the three and the only female. Her aunt wanted her to be responsible for the cooking and cleaning of the apartment the three siblings shared, but those responsibilities and the adjustment to the new language and culture were often too much for her. Her brothers seemed to understand. They helped with household chores. She studied and made friends, but in some ways was the most affected by the move and the loss of her father. English probably came faster to Patricia than to her brothers. She spent more time with our family, and our two daughters helped introduce her to customs and fads in the United States.

The three teens and their aunt became involved in our church shortly after their escape from El Salvador. The church family was especially important when they applied for asylum in the United States. At that time, refugees from El Salvador had to prove their lives were endangered to be granted asylum. Even though they had newspaper articles about the assassination of their father, it was difficult to establish that the three children were in danger. When the hearing for their asylum was held, church members took time off from work to attend. That show of support impressed the judge and probably was instrumental in his filing a positive report with the federal government.

All three eventually attended The University of Arizona and graduated. José Luis completed a master’s degree in engineering and is presently working for the City of Los Angeles. Guillermo studied engineering and international economics as an undergraduate and completed a master’s degree in architecture at the University of Southern California. Patricia finished a degree in chemistry and is now living in the San Francisco area where she works in a supervisory position for a large pharmaceutical firm.

They are now all financially secure professionals. The three enjoy traveling in the United States and Europe and have returned to El Salvador several times to visit family and friends. They consider the United States home and probably will not return to El Salvador to live, despite intentions to do so when they first arrived.

**Analysis**

Certainly the three teenagers faced overwhelming obstacles when they came to the United States. Their only relative here was an aunt who had never had children and who had her own personal responsibilities, including the care of a sick husband, graduate studies, and teaching. The three young people had to learn to live on their own almost from the beginning. Money was tight and had to be budgeted, something they had never had to do before.
The trauma of their father's assassination was difficult to cope with, and the three rehashed the scene many times and speculated about what might have been. They were immediately enrolled in a public school where they had to deal with the academic work in English, and establish their own identities apart from the other Hispanics at the school. They were not Mexicans, and their background was very different from almost all the other students.

That background was probably what helped them the most. They were from a prominent family in El Salvador. Their relatives, including their aunt, knew high government officials, including former presidents. They had pride in their past and a strong sense of their worth. They had attended good private schools in San Salvador and had traveled to the United States and Europe. Although they did not speak and understand English well, they had studied English grammar and had a strong background in Spanish language and literature as well as in academic-content areas such as math and science.

Once José Luis, Guillermo, and Patricia arrived in Tucson, they found different kinds of support. Their aunt provided them the money for the basics of living, and they received some funds from family in El Salvador. Eventually, with the encouragement of their aunt and others, they earned academic scholarships. They also had emotional and social support from people in the community.

Our family often did things with them on weekends, delighting in introducing them to American culture and advising them about schooling and finances. The church provided another important support. They had weekly and sometimes biweekly contact with Americans with whom they had the chance to use English for real purposes. Their past experiences in El Salvador, their aunt’s academic expectations, their social interactions with an American family, and the support of a church community placed José Luis, Guillermo, and Patricia in contexts that influenced them positively.

Conclusion

English language learners are a very diverse group of students, as the case studies we report on here show. Despite their differences, they all face the same academic challenge. As Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) point out, ELLs face double the work of native English speakers. They must learn English, and they must learn academic content through English. In addition, they often live in neighborhoods where the schools are underfunded and are staffed by inexperienced teachers.

Second language students face challenges outside of school as well as in school. New immigrants must adapt to a new culture and a new language. Many immigrant
families are poor. Some immigrants face hostility because of their race or religion. Even for ELLs born in the United States, the culture of the school is usually very different from the culture of the home.

Despite these challenges, some ELLs succeed in schools. They succeed because they have caring and knowledgeable teachers like the graduate students whose case studies we have reported here. They succeed because of their strong motivation and persistence. And they succeed because their parents support them, even when their parents are not highly educated and don’t understand the U.S. school system. However, many other ELLs fail their classes and drop out of school. In the following chapters, we examine the factors that affect the success and failure of ELLs, and we provide information and ideas teachers can use to better serve the increasing number of second language students in our schools.

**Key Points**

- English language learners are a very diverse group of students.

- Factors both outside and inside school affect their academic performance.

- Case studies can help teachers understand English language learners.

- Teachers should understand second language acquisition theory and the social and cultural factors that affect their ELLs.
APPLICATIONS

1. Of the students discussed in the case studies, choose one that reminds you of a second language learner you know. Compare and contrast the factors that affect the schooling of both. Discuss your comparison in pairs or in a small group.

2. In small groups choose a case study described here, or the story of a second language learner you know. On a SMART Board, butcher paper, or an overhead, list the factors that seem to predict school success and those that seem to limit success in each case. Share your results with the large group, and make a composite list of positive and negative factors.

3. Choose a second language learner who seems to be especially successful in school or one that seems to be struggling. Interview that student and/or family members to try to determine what factors might be influencing school performance. Before the interview, compile a list of possible questions with others and discuss culturally appropriate ways of approaching the interview.
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