



Let's talk about feelings in the newcomer ESOL classroom!

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Context

I teach English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) at a public high school in Maryland to newcomer English Learners (ELs)—students who just arrived to the country. As part of my yearly self-professional development, I implement different projects in my classroom and gather data to learn from them. This process of systematic inquiry to gather information about how my students learn and how I teach is commonly known as action research (Mills, 2007), but may also be considered reflective teaching practices (Matthew & Jessel, 1998). These projects often address topics not incorporated into the curriculum that are helpful for ESOL students, such as cultural perspectives, intercultural communication, and native customs and traditions. In addition, these projects are always connected to at least one of the four language domains (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

This year—2018—my students and I worked together to implement a reading and speaking classroom project. The two most popular topics chosen by my ELs were moral values and behavior; in particular they were interested in reading more about American moral values. From a personal and professional perspective, I have been looking forward to addressing the topics of moral values, behavior, and feelings in the newcomer ESOL classroom. In our textbooks and curricula, these topics are not addressed in depth because the focus of newcomer ESOL classes is to expedite the learners' cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS). In other words, the focus of ESOL programs is to accelerate contextualized language learning to help students succeed in mainstream classes (Pentón Herrera, 2015).

After reviewing a few books about feelings, moral values, and behavior, we decided to read *How to behave and why* by Munro Leaf (1946). This book was primarily chosen because it addressed the topic of moral values, feelings, and behavior, it was a best seller, and it also has many drawings that help in the process of supporting comprehension and deciphering information as students read. In addition, Leaf's (1946) book makes a point of being inclusive. As explained by Nel (2007), the book embodies "the idea that all people should be treated fairly, irrespective of race, religion, country of origin, or the ways they work and play" (p. 481), which aligns perfectly with the beliefs of



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our ESOL program. The reading project about moral values and behavior took place during the last 30 minutes of class for seven instructional days. During those seven days, my five ESOL newcomer students and I would sit in a circle to talk about what we read. I took notes as my students shared their comments, ideas, and impressions about the pages they had read. This type of Socratic dialogue proved to be highly engaging and provided a safe space where my students discussed their views on feelings, moral values, and behavior from their own cultural perspective and compared it to those present in the book (American feelings, moral values, and behavior).

Participants

There were a total of five Hispanic adolescent newcomer ELs in this project: two males and three females. Three participants were originally from Honduras, and two from the Dominican Republic. All participants spoke Spanish as a first language and were learning English as a second language. Participants were all teenagers, 15 to 19 years of age.

I participated in this project as the classroom teacher to posit higher-level thinking questions, as a moderator to keep our discussions balanced and give opportunities to everyone to express their thoughts, and as a teacher-researcher to collect data and take notes from the events that unfolded during our conversations.

Description

This particular event took place during the project's fourth day; we were reading about being fair and what it entailed. According to the book, being fair is similar to being friendly because when you are friendly you show people you care about them and make them happy. As we were reading the information on this particular day, all students were disengaged and did not seem to be able to connect to the reading. At first, I thought it was the vocabulary used and for that reason I made sure to ask them if they were understanding. "*Sí Mr., entendemos*" (Yes Mr., we understand), a student replied. "*Entendemos la información que estamos leyendo Mr., pero no entendemos el mensaje porque no tiene sentido*" (We understand the information that we are reading Mr., but we cannot understand the message [of the reading] because it does not make any sense).

I asked my students to elaborate on their comments about how the message of the reading did not make sense. They explained that, to them, being fair has nothing to do with making other people happy or being friendly towards others. In their view, being fair meant not judging others before knowing them and/or the reasons for their actions and to give everyone the same opportunities. They asked if the definition explained in the book (of being friendly and making others feel happy) was the definition of being fair in the United States. I explained to them that this definition was written this way partially because the book was meant to be read by younger children. I also



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explained that, perhaps, the author's intention was to explain that when people are treated fairly they feel happy because they do not feel mistreated or judged.

After some back and forth, it was revealed that my students were focusing on this particular value—being fair—because they were connecting it to their personal experiences as immigrant ESOL students who recently arrived in the United States. They felt that, sometimes, people treated them unfairly and judged their circumstances and their developing English language skills without truly knowing who they are as individuals. Also, they mentioned that they felt they are not given the same opportunities in other classes because they are ELs and they felt this was unfair. I agreed with their statements and gave them some words of encouragement, sharing a personal story of when I was 17 years of age and was experiencing the same things they are experiencing presently. I assured them that things do get better and that they will learn English and will succeed in school and beyond.

Dialogic features

Different from other conversations, the interaction we had during our fourth day of class was meaningful to my students because it was about a topic affecting them in their current lives. It is important to mention that students were active throughout all of our conversations every day. However, what was different in this case from other encounters was that ELs took ownership of the dialogue and sought my input and support. They wanted to make sure that I, as their teacher and role model, was supporting their personal statements because they were feeling vulnerable by sharing their reality as ELs. In this particular conversation, it was revealed that fairness is very important to them. All students became very passionate about elaborating on the topic of fairness because they became personally involved in ensuring fairness was understood from their personal circumstances and reality. In a way, they wanted to ensure I understood what they were going through to better understand who they are and what they believe in.

Lessons learned

The information shared in this case study makes reference to the importance moral values have in creating a space for communication and relationship. Although we had seven conversations throughout this study, the exchange we had about fairness was particularly meaningful to the participants because it was part of their immediate reality. As a result, they sought my approval of their comments as an opportunity to build a relationship with me at a deeper level—more human. At the same time, when I shared my personal story and explained to them that I went through the same challenges they are going through now and gave them words of encouragement, they smiled and became hopeful of a better future.



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Although the purpose of this case study was to analyze different moral values, the biggest lesson learned—from an intercultural perspective—is that participants needed affectionate and supportive communication when we talked about a topic that was personally relevant for them. When we talked about other moral values and behaviors, ELs did not become as personally involved because they were not as important to their immediate reality. As seen in this case study, participants could not separate classroom interaction from their reality. Hence, this study sheds light on how learners from this age group might react and engage with content that is personally meaningful to them in the classroom and how they react and communicate their feelings. It also points to a specific topic, fairness, that could spark equally rewarding discussions if brought up by others, in other classrooms.

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