WHO ARE THE LANGUAGE MINORITIES?

Language minorities are people whose native language is not English and whose backgrounds are other than U.S. culture. Approximately 660 language minority students are receiving English as a second language (ESL) services in the Portland Public Schools. In Portland they come from over 42 separate language groups. In addition, there are many, many language minority students who are now in regular mainstream classes.

But who ARE the language minority learners in our public schools? It is simple to categorize, even stereotype, these students into one common group with similar needs. But, in fact, this population is very diverse with unique, separate, cultural backgrounds. Additionally, language minorities can be categorized by why they came to the U.S. This can help teachers to understand motivations which students bring to the classroom environment.

CATEGORIES

According to various studies, there are four basic groups of language minorities:

1. Refugees. Refugees, the largest group represented in Portland schools, are newcomers who have been forced to leave their country of origin for political reasons. Because of the threat of death, bodily harm, economic ruin, or social isolation, refugees have been granted official political asylum and are eligible to initiate the citizenship process after residing five years in the United States.

Generally speaking, the single most distinctive feature of the refugee population is reluctance to leave their country of origin. Many left family members, friends, jobs, and economic and social status to come to the United States to face an uncertain future. Many refugees may have experienced physical or psychological trauma in the process of moving. One
result may be a resistance to acculturate to U.S. culture. In fact, many adult refugees never entirely do so, retaining most of the characteristics of their home culture and language. They may continue to yearn for a return to their country of origin while their children acculturate more rapidly into U.S. culture.

2. Immigrants. Immigrants are willing newcomers to U.S. culture. In general, immigrants have qualified for eventual citizenship and are eager to embrace U.S. culture. As a result, they may acculturate more quickly, willingly shedding many of the values and assumptions as well as cultural practices they held in their country of origin. The process of acculturation can lead to assimilation in a relatively brief period of time for both adults and their children.

3. Ethnics. The term “ethnics” refers to refugees or immigrants who have continually maintained their distinctive language and culture yet who may participate in some or all the political and popular aspects of U.S. culture. Characteristic of this group is perhaps geographical mobility. Many have lived for periods of time in both their country of origin and U.S. culture. Another characteristic can be an inherent resistance to assimilating or acculturating to the values and assumptions typical of U.S. culture.

Implicit in the attitudes of individuals termed ethnic may be an involuntary, resistant attitude towards mainstream culture, since that is the gateway towards possible assimilation. These adults have consistently embraced their country of origin, even if they may never have lived in or visited it. They seek to preserve the characteristics of that culture.

4. Sojourners. People who live in another culture for any length of time yet know they will return to the country of origin can be classified as sojourners. Sojourners continue to embrace their home culture while willingly and voluntarily experiencing the host culture. Exchange students, Peace Corps Volunteers, and international travelers are examples of sojourners.

Sojourners are typically eager to learn as much as possible about any aspect of culture. As a result, they voluntarily immerse themselves in U.S. culture, knowing that they are free to accept or reject anything they encounter that appears to be negative.

The next Bulletin will examine the educational implications of these categories for language minority students. The social and cultural attitudes of the learners have both a positive and negative impact on learning in the classroom.

Sources:
