ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATION OF FOREIGN BORN LANGUAGE MINORITY LEARNERS

Differentiating between language minority learners who were born outside versus inside the United States can provide valuable insights about the attitudes and motivations of this culturally and linguistically diverse population. There are important distinctions between these two groups which can assist teachers in understanding why and how these learners respond to instruction. This Bulletin examines the instructional services and general characteristics of language minority learners who are foreign born and offers some suggestions to teachers for classroom instruction.

INSTRUCTIONAL SERVICES FOR FOREIGN BORN STUDENTS

If their numbers are large enough and if there is funding available in U.S. schools, foreign born language minority learners receive academic support in their first language through: a) bilingual programs; b) bilingual facilitators working in English as a second language (ESL) or mainstream classrooms; and/or c) ESL or mainstream teachers who enable students to utilize their first language as a means of accessing concept knowledge and transferring it to English. What is critical for these learners is the degree of first language support they have as they learn English and academic subjects in English.

The ESL services and cultural support which foreign born students receive serve as a bridge to placement in mainstream classes. The degree of support depends upon the size of the ESL population in a particular school district; the nature and extent of ESL or bilingual support services available; and the quality of such services (self-contained classes provide more support than a pull-out program).

CHARACTERISTICS OF FOREIGN BORN STUDENTS

1. Foreign born students generally have a strong first language model at home. This is important, because modeling in the first language helps to reinforce language concepts and structures as a bridge to learning ESL. Without adequate first language input, students may be at risk in not transferring appropriate aspects of language, learned in childhood, to English. This conceptual base is necessary for accessing content learning in English as these students progress in school.

2. Many foreign born students, especially if they have had previous schooling in their country of origin, have some or extensive literacy in their first language. The degree of a student's literacy development in the first language (e.g., ability to decode, predict, infer meaning, etc.) transfers
directly to English. In other words, if students have learned how to read in one language, they do not have to learn how to read all over again in another language; rather, they need to learn English and to apply their knowledge of reading to English.

3. Foreign born students feel positively identified with their first language and culture. The pride in their home background provides them with a positive self-esteem and a willingness to approach various situations with confidence.

4. In general, foreign born students are motivated to learn English well. The desire to acculturate translates into a desire to succeed in school, and this motivation can be a powerful incentive for students to learn.

5. Foreign born students generally have an idealized view of the United States as a land of opportunity. Media images of U.S. culture prior to arrival and the materialism they see around them after arrival creates a desire to seek opportunities for "success".

6. Unless they have had a unique opportunity to study U.S. history and culture before arriving, most foreign born students are not aware of its history, customs and traditions. As a result, they will need instruction, reinforcement and/or clarification of customs, practices and holiday celebrations as they continue in school.

7. In general, foreign born students experience their own differences as positive. Despite initial entry, culture shock, and adaptation to schooling, these students accept the values and assumptions of U.S. culture. They appreciate the similarities and differences which exist between their own and U.S. culture.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING FOREIGN BORN STUDENTS

In general, the motivation of foreign born students will be high; as a result, many will progress when transferred to mainstream classes because of their desire to succeed, if teachers are aware of some important aspects of second language learning. First, there is a basic difference between conversational language and academic language. Conversational language takes an average of 1-2 years to develop; academic language takes 4-7 years if the student has prior schooling in the first language and 7-10 years if the student has no prior schooling. Content instruction needs to be presented in context-embedded, cognitively appropriate, constructive ways to enable these students to access learning and to develop critical thinking in English. In addition, it is important to understand that successfully acquiring academic language takes time, despite previously acquired oral fluency.

Teachers can assist foreign born students by:
1. Allowing first language use in problem-solving tasks and activities whenever necessary. This will enable concept development to transfer from the first language to English and will not interfere with the overwhelming use of English in mainstream classes.
2. Capitalizing on the high motivation of foreign born students by incorporating their unique cultural knowledge and first language experience whenever possible. This sends the valuable message of acceptance and self-esteem, while bolstering the students' confidence in learning.
3. Being sensitive to the fact that foreign born students may not have a firm understanding of or familiarity with historical or cultural traditions, literature, or with the culturally-embedded knowledge that is implied in idiomatic use of language, school practices, or community-related activities. It may be necessary to explain these culturally-related artifacts whenever appropriate.
4. Being sensitive to the social interactions of foreign born students in the classroom. They may need some assistance in integrating with other mainstream students for activities and projects.

Sources
Pytowska, E. April 1995 NNETESOL keynote address: "Language Minority Students: Diverse Backgrounds"