ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATION OF U.S.-BORN LANGUAGE MINORITY LEARNERS

Differentiating between language minority learners who were born inside versus outside the United States provides 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 educators in understanding why and how these learners respond to instruction and exhibit certain behaviors. This Bulletin examines the school services and general characteristics of language minority learners who are U.S. born and offers two general suggestions to teachers for classroom instruction.

SCHOOL SERVICES FOR U.S.-BORN LANGUAGE MINORITY LEARNERS

As refugee and immigrant families acculturate to U.S. society, and/or as their children get married and have children, the number of school-age minority learners who are U.S.-born will increase. These learners are characterized by predominant use of their primary language (other than English) in the home, as well as an emerging mix of English. As a result of extensive time spent in U.S. culture and the exposure to English, the children entering school may or may not be eligible for English as a Second Language (ESL) services before being mainstreamed. In other words, they may have enough exposure to U.S. culture outside the home, as well as through mass media to be orally proficient to enter mainstream classes. Even after U.S.-born language minority children have been exposed to enough English to enable them to exit ESL program services, these learners are at risk because of the mixed language input (primary language plus English) they continue to receive. U.S.-born learners commonly experience insufficient and inconsistent English language reinforcement for normal mainstream English language instruction. In addition, there are issues related to acculturation and assimilation which impact schooling for these learners. Both language and cultural characteristics are discussed below.

CHARACTERISTICS OF U.S.-BORN LANGUAGE MINORITY LEARNERS

1. U.S.-born students may have a weak first language model at home. Because they have lived away from their country of origin for a long time, many parents and other caretakers of U.S.-born students begin to lose their primary language fluency or intersperse their primary language with English. Without continued, supportive modeling in the primary language, children do not develop strong language concepts to form the basis of conceptual develop-
ment in that language or in English. As a result, these students are at great risk of slowing their normal academic progress in the later grades.

2. U.S.-born students, depending on the consistency of their primary and second language development, encounter conceptual development and word processing difficulties in their acquisition of English literacy. There is no transfer of previously acquired literacy in the primary language into English, since these students have usually not acquired literacy in the primary language. In addition, inconsistent modeling in one or both languages creates problems in comprehending text. Cohesive aspects of text such as references, conjunctions, substitutions, ellipses, and multiple meanings of words are general sources of difficulty in reading comprehension and writing.

3. U.S.-born students feel a great deal of ambiguity towards their first language and culture. There often is no positive identification to help instill a sense of identity, pride, and self-esteem. This leads to marginalization, especially if no positive identification has developed towards U.S. culture as well.

4. U.S.-born students are often not motivated to learn English well. The sense of ambiguity and marginalization translates directly into an apathetic attitude towards schooling in general, and literacy development in particular.

5. U.S.-born students generally have a more realistic view of the United States. These students do not have idealistic expectations about their ability to achieve; to the contrary, many U.S.-born students have difficulty identifying with and aspiring to the academic and vocational opportunities available to them.

6. U.S.-born students generally are more aware of U.S. history, customs, and traditions. By virtue of living in U.S. culture and experiencing schooling from early grades, U.S. born students have a greater sense of awareness, if not identification, with aspects of U.S. history, customs, and traditions.

7. U.S.-born students often perceive their own cultural differences as negative. The values and assumptions of U.S. culture appear to be unattainable or undesirable because of the indifference or hostility these students experience in school or in the culture in general.

TEACHING U.S.-BORN LANGUAGE MINORITY LEARNERS

U.S.-born language minority learners provide many challenges to teachers because of their unique dual language and culture experience. What is important to note is that these students are at risk of academic difficulty, even failure, because their language knowledge and use is often not as comprehensive as students whose native language is English. Schools need to accommodate the academic and social needs of this student population through sensitive instruction and, in many cases, tutorial services to assist students in their conceptual development often based on a weak first and/or second language experience.

Teachers can assist U.S.-born language minority students by being aware of two important considerations:

1. Do not assume that, because of their oral language skills, these students are comparable with native speakers in skill achievement regarding their reading and writing development. U.S.-born language minority learners need sequenced, comprehensible, contextualized instruction with a great deal more language reinforcement than mainstreamed English-speaking students.

2. Be aware that the ambiguous, marginalized attitude of many U.S.-born language minority students necessitates special efforts to develop personal relationships in order to understand their unique background, assist them in overcoming self-esteem issues, and make them aware of academic, social, and vocational opportunities available to them. U.S.-born language minority learners must have their identity affirmed through focused, language-sensitive teaching and active participation in the social life of the school.

Sources:
Pytowska, E. April 1995 NNETESOL keynote address.