

Teaching Roberto¹

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Abstract

This paper is a case study in the form of a teacher's personal diary of experiences during a semester teaching a class of academically at-risk high school students. It focuses on the interactions among the teacher, the class, and Roberto, a student with negligible English skills. Because of his lack of proficiency in English, discovered later, Roberto began the semester withdrawn and unengaged. As the weeks passed, Roberto started to emerge and finally became an engaged member of the class. The experiences relate to linguistic, social, pedagogical, and personal phenomena inside the classroom. These factors provided an environment conducive to Roberto's emergence from isolation.

Tuesday, September 4, 2001

Roberto (all student names are pseudonyms) is a student in my second-period Enrichment Academy class. The Enrichment Academy is a new program started just this year by the Springdale School District [in Arkansas]. Its objective is to salvage students who are in serious jeopardy of not graduating from high school. Junior high school principals and counselors nominated the students who make up the clientele. To qualify, these students must have received a grade of F in each of their science, math, and English classes during the second semester of their ninth-grade year. Their presence on the rolls of the Enrichment Academy is evidence that at least someone had hope and faith that they were worth the effort of a rescue.

That Roberto is in the Enrichment Academy suggests a failure in English as a Second Language (ESL) assessment.² The Enrichment Academy is explicitly a non-ESL class.

Roberto refused to accept ESL services last year in the ninth grade, his diagnosis was inadequate, or there were insufficient services to meet his needs. If he refused services in the form of ESL classes, the classes he did

attend underserved him. A grade of F does not satisfactorily describe the experience of a Level 1 ESL student in a mainstream English class (or, for that matter, a mainstream math or science class).

These students are intelligent. They are obviously quite bright—in almost every case. There are several reasons why they managed to meet the criteria for inclusion in the Enrichment Academy. The most common reason, it seems, is that they did not have a strong habit of attendance. The experience so far this year indicates that the habit of truancy is still alive and well among most of these children.

Another reason many of the kids got into the spot in which they now find themselves is their home lives. It might be beyond my perspective to say that many of their parents do not care because I do not know them. Anecdotal evidence indicates that this is true in at least some of the cases. That their attendance is so spotty is another piece of evidence of lack of parental involvement. The parents must know that their children skip a lot of school, but they do not do anything effective about it in some cases. When attendance attains a certain level of official concern, the schools and the courts combine to take legal action against the parents.

There are three teachers in the Enrichment Academy. Ms. Williams teaches math, Ms. Thomas teaches English (not their real names), and I teach applied biology. Applied biology is the lowest of the three tiers of biology offered by the science department. The students pass among the three teachers as a group. After the first three periods, the students go on to their other classes, and we three teachers have a common planning period in which we discuss the students and plan our curricula in a cooperative manner.

Thursday, September 6, 2001

One of the basic rules of the Enrichment Academy is that no student needing special ESL service will be on the rolls. There are 39 students in my three Enrichment Academy classes. Of these, there are nine students with Latino surnames and three Marshallese students. (Springdale is home to the largest community of Marshallese people outside of the Marshall Islands. The Republic of the Marshall Islands is in the south Pacific and includes the notable atolls of Bikini and Kwajalein.) Of these 12 students, 11 have good English-language skills. The one exception is Roberto. I do not know why Roberto, with his poor English-language skills, is on our rolls.

I have noticed that Roberto does not take part in class discussions. He chooses to sit in places most removed from the activity of the class. During lectures, he spends a lot of time doodling. This doodling is common among several of my male Latino students. It appears that this is not necessarily a sign of inattention for the others. I wonder about Roberto.

ELL students with marginal skills in English often go through a period of silence in which they withdraw from interaction with students who do not speak their primary language. This often suggests to the teacher that the student has even lower English-language skills than he or she actually possesses.

Roberto, however, also declines to interact with Spanish-speaking students. There are many non-linguistic reasons for a student to decline to engage in class with the teacher or other students. At this point, the etiology of Roberto's behavior is certainly unclear. Roberto is a complex human and not just an ESL problem to solve.

Friday, September 7, 2001

Roberto seems to be a very private person. He also seems to be very shy. When I speak to him, he does not respond. Of course, this suggests a language problem, but there are several reasons that I hesitate to rush to this conclusion. Some Latino students do not like to interact any more than is necessary with Anglos. This is especially true for interaction with teachers. Some resist what they see as assimilation and an implicit betrayal of their heritage. They do not want to play "White."

One problem that stands in the way of ESL education is that a student may resist education in the language of the majority culture as a betrayal of his or her own culture.

Another thing I notice is that Roberto does not have much to do with the other Latino students in this class. There are four other Latino students in this class, Ana, Jose, Justin, and Jackie. Two of these students are very friendly, outgoing, and approachable, and they all are proud of being "Brown." They celebrate their culture through their taste in music, occasional dancing in class, and by statements they make in words and on their clothing. Roberto sits in a corner and has little to do with them. He acknowledges their presence no more than he acknowledges the presence of Anglos.

That Roberto is apparently no more eager to engage fellow Latino students casts doubts upon my hypotheses as to why he declines to engage.

Is Roberto shy, angry, afraid, private, proud, or isolated by language? Now, with my current understanding, I do not have a clue. Something tells me to proceed slowly and with caution. One thing that these kids have seen less of than their richer and more gifted brethren is respect. I am talking about White and "Brown" kids. Occasionally, they refer to themselves as "dummies" or "losers." I disagree with both assessments.

In addition, for ELLs, respect and acceptance by agents of the dominant culture are not the most common experiences. Education requires trust, and trust requires respect and acceptance.

These kids are not dummies. I have taught Advanced Placement biology previously, and these students do not seem all that less intelligent than the Advanced Placement students seem. They are bright, open, curious, and wonderful. This is only the beginning of my second month with these kids, and they have already found a way into my heart.

Perhaps I should mention here that this is not uniformly true for all of my students. Several of them are hostile to the institution of school, and they hate teachers as agents of their oppression. I must sympathize if not agree with their opinion. School *is* a lot like a prison. They have no choice about whether they attend. If they do not show up, they risk legal action, for which they or their parents may receive punishment. They have to obey bells and march from one cell to another, sit in certain places, and not talk. They even have to ask a “guard” for permission to take care of their metabolic needs.

These kids have received even less respect than the so-called “normal” population. Authority figures write them and their prospects off. Many of the authority figures see them as losers and not worth saving. As such, some teachers see them as a waste of time and a distraction from the *real* mission of the schools, which must be, I guess, serving the needs of the upper-middle-class White culture by molding their kids into high-earning potential industrial units.

I wonder how much worse it is for Latino students. Many of these students have been out of school for several years. They come to the United States and find themselves compelled to attend school and forced to retreat into a state of dependence that they left behind several years before.

Different customs of education result in this odd situation. In the United States, particularly in Arkansas, the law requires that children attend school until the age of 18. In many of their home countries, the duration of mandatory education is much briefer.

These perceptions cannot help but seep into their consciousness. These kids, Brown and White, are bright and perceptive.

To sum it all up, I believe that it is important to preserve and protect their dignity. I cannot convincingly demonstrate my concern and regard for them unless I demonstrate respect. This is why I choose to go slow in trying to diagnose Roberto. I will approach slowly, thoughtfully, and respectfully.

Tuesday, September 11, 2001

Late in my second-hour class, the principal broke in on the intercom. He said something to the effect of, “. . . because of the tragedy on the east coast. . .” Tragedy? I asked my students if they had a clue about what he was referring to as a tragedy. Few of them seemed any more aware than I was. One said that someone had blown up the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and the World Trade Center in New York. That seemed impossible.

I fired up the classroom computer and logged onto the Internet. There it was. The first pictures of a plane slamming into the World Trade Center and pictures of one of the towers collapsing were on Yahoo. I found a story and read it to the kids. My words choked out the description of the dramatic events. I had to pause from time to time to preserve my own composure. The students were aghast and reacted each in their own way, some sad, some scared, some indifferent, and some angry.

I was busy keeping my kids calm and keeping them from hurting each other's feelings. However, I did manage to notice Roberto while I was reading the news story to the class. His face gave clear evidence of rapt attention and concern. This was my first substantial evidence that Roberto was not without at least some English-language proficiency. This could be something on which to build.

Thursday, September 13, 2001

When I ask something of Roberto, he does not acknowledge my presence. He does not respond in words or by body language. He never meets my eyes. It is as if I do not even exist to him. Even so, it does not have the feel of hostility. Rather, it feels like resistance or even self-protection.

I dropped by Hector's (a pseudonym) office. I asked Hector about Roberto. He knew of whom I was speaking. He said that Roberto's English-language skills were somewhere around Level 1, which is to say virtually nil. Hector said he would look into what the story was.

The Springdale School District hired Hector as a cultural coordinator. He serves as an advocate for the various cultures at the school. His office is just down the hall from my classroom. Students of various ethnicities are usually in and around his office, and he helps teachers work out problems with minority students. The minority students gravitate to Hector and seem to trust him very well.

Monday, September 17, 2001

I seldom give homework. We do most of the work in class, which gives me one more chance to go over material. I assign some work and give the students time to complete it during class. This allows me to float around from one group to another and provide help as needed. It gives me a chance to personalize instruction.

I began to use this method last year while I was a preservice teaching intern at Springdale High School. Two of the sections I taught in my high school rotation were ESL applied biology classes. My expertise, experience, and ability in ESL education were, at that time, essentially nonexistent. I relied too heavily on worksheets, but this did have one good side effect. I let the students work together, and this served several purposes. For one, it allowed

the students to obey their cultural inclination to cooperate and help each other. It also allowed them to pool their language abilities. I got to know my students better and could do more to ameliorate the hurdles presented by problematic English-language skills.

Dealing with students personally and individually is a prerequisite for acknowledging their dignity, which is necessary for demonstrating respect.

About one third of students in this class do not speak English as a first language. There is a critical mass kind of thing involved here. ELL students do not clump in the Enrichment Academy classes nearly as much as they might in a mainstream class. There is some pairing up, but not nearly so much as in other venues. Perhaps when a group is not so much in the minority, there is less psychological need to seek comfort by clinging to each other.

Roberto does hand in some of the assignments. Earlier, he handed in writing assignments in broken, sometimes nearly undecipherable English. He has an average somewhere around 50%, currently. Now, he seems to be handing in assignments increasingly in Spanish. This is a puzzle. I would love to be able to get inside his head for a look around.

Wednesday, September 19, 2001

Hector got back with me. Roberto's language skills *did* test very low. I asked Hector if he knew why Roberto was not in ESL classes.

We have, for the first time this year, a program that gives new ESL students who have minimal English-language skills what they need to operate in U.S. society and to succeed in Springdale High School. This new program is a very large step in the right direction, in my opinion.

Last year, students with little to no abilities in English were placed in classes, some mainstream and others ESL, and left to sink or swim. My opinion, based on what I personally observed, was that the ESL program, as it was then conducted, was not working very well. It seemed to serve more to isolate students and to delay the development of English-language skills. There was more sinking than swimming.

One girl from Laos showed up about 2 weeks into the first term last year. She knew no English—not even “yes”-and-“no”-level English. I could detect no visible support. The school stuck her in ESL classes, and she struggled. Six weeks later, her English was not much better. She was getting along pretty well in Spanish, though! We teach, but what our students learn is not always what we intend.

Roberto's lack of English-language skills isolates him in the Enrichment Academy. ESL classes, with all their shortcomings, would seem to better meet his apparent needs and were quite available. Why is Roberto in my class and not in the class for Level 1 ESL students?

Friday, September 21, 2001

Ms. Williams reports that Roberto is very competitive in her math class and that Roberto does not seem to have insurmountable language-skill barriers. Ms. Thomas reports something similar about Roberto in her class. He is still around a 50% student in my class.

It is not so surprising that Roberto is good at math. Math is, after all, the universal language. It must be refreshing to be in a class where language barriers are less formidable than they are in biology or English.

Monday, September 24, 2001

Hector tells me that Roberto chooses not to be in the ESL program. For whatever reason, he does not want these services.

Neither of us knows for sure whether Roberto has the right to refuse assignment as an ESL student, but we each suspect that he does have the right. Hector will check. Our discussion of what this means in terms of educational responsibilities is inconclusive. If Roberto has the right and exercises it to decline ESL services, does this relieve the school of liability? We suspect that the school still has the obligation to provide services in a form that the client, Roberto, can use.

Moral and professional responsibilities are clearer and easier to determine. Roberto has a right to an education. I am his teacher, and I have both a moral and professional responsibility to provide it. Regardless of the definition of Enrichment Academy, it will now have an ESL component.

In practice, this will make little difference. I teach my at-risk students in much the same way as I would ESL students anyway. I provide a lot of visual support for each concept. There are many hands-on laboratories. We do a lot of work in groups in class. Some of the work groups are formal and assigned by me as I see fit for the particular educational objectives I have. Other work groups are informal and self-selected by the students. We do use a textbook. As far as I know, we do not have a Spanish-language version, and there are no Spanish-language audiotapes available. When we use the book, I read it aloud as the class follows along silently, or I ask students to read if they are willing.

When I assign groups, I make sure that the group in which Roberto is included at least one other bilingual student. I always include another student who is not Latino. My purpose is to give Roberto the maximum opportunity to develop English-language skills while not isolating him linguistically.

A small group is a valuable tool for working with ELL students. The intimacy of the group provides some security, and a little heterogeneity lessens isolation.

Monday, October 1, 2001

One thing I know is that having Gus (another Latino) in a group with Roberto has little to no value. I think the personal chemistry between Gus and Roberto is problematic.

Tuesday, October 2, 2001

Today, I put Roberto into a group with Ana. Roberto seems to have a crush on her. Ana has a pleasant personality and is attractive.

Roberto interacts more with the group when Ana is in it. He talks with Ana and does the work. I noticed another thing. Roberto does not act as if I do not exist when I speak to him. He just does not respond.

These things may sound modest, but they are major breakthroughs in actual practice. I have found a way (I hope) to engage Roberto (even indirectly), and he has dropped at least one layer of resistance to me in not ignoring my existence.

Thursday, October 4, 2001

I was wrong! It was not Ana that was the key to Roberto's interaction with a work group. He talked to Ana, but it was not because of an interest in Ana. It was Rhonda!

Rhonda is an Anglo and does not speak any Spanish. She often sits with Ana and Jackie, another Latina. Rhonda is a middling student. Her grades hover around a C, which is good for this bunch, who have received mostly Fs on their report cards previously. Rhonda has a sweet disposition. I can see why Roberto is interested in her.

Kids do not leave their social lives behind when they come to class. Often their social lives begin as they enter the schoolhouse door. It is unrealistic to think that one could (or should) ignore the social lives of their students. Their social lives are a major part of who they are. With my at-risk kids, it is certainly more important to them than science, English, or math.

I am trying to help them become educated and capable individuals. I will use any ethical means at my disposal to accomplish this end. Why would I ignore the biggest and probably the most powerful aspect of their lives?

Tuesday, October 9, 2001

Who said it? It turns out what seemed like an offhand quip may carry a profound truth. The observation was that nothing teaches a Latino boy how to speak English more quickly than a pretty girl who speaks no Spanish does.

Now, I am not as gullible as that—I know that there has been considerable latent English-language ability in Roberto's repertoire all along. Rhonda has been the key to developing (or, rather, perhaps, revealing) Roberto's English-language ability.

Thursday, October 18, 2001

That is not all!

There are other changes in Roberto's manner. For one—and this is, at least to me, a very big one—Roberto acknowledges me and even speaks back to me when I address him. If he had any hostility toward teachers, toward Anglos, or toward me personally, it is no longer in evidence.

His English-language abilities are still nothing to brag about, but, as far as I know, he now uses all that he has. He usually sits with a group of four that includes Ana, Jackie, and Rhonda. They do not present a classroom management problem. Although they do talk among themselves some, the culture of my classroom permits some talking. I tolerate this because some talking with peers seems to be necessary for ESL students. They do not know every word I use and, certainly, they do not know every idiom and turn of phrase.

Thursday, October 18, 2001

Today was a major amount of fun. Tomorrow is a chapter test. The day before each test, I devote to a review. In the past, I have had the class play “baseball” or “basketball” and employed just plain bribery (I would ask questions and if they answered, I threw a piece of candy at them). This time, I used PowerPoint to make a copy of the *Jeopardy* game board. The classic TV game show is the model for this game.

I have added the concepts of lifelines, stolen from the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* (a) If they do not want to lose the points, they can pass. (b) They can take 30 seconds with the textbook. (c) They can ask a friend. Of course, their friend is the teacher.

This means that the class needs the services of a scorekeeper. I asked Roberto to be “Vanna White” and keep score. He fell into the job and had the best time. He was animated, outgoing, entertaining, and accurate. It was a lot of fun to see Roberto so into the class life.

I think that most of my former worries are smaller about Roberto. I believe that while there is always room for improvement—and I will continuously look for ways to improve—what I am doing has helped open the class to Roberto.

Thursday, November 1, 2001

Today, I asked each student, in turn, to read a section of the chapter aloud as others followed along in the textbook. Some were hesitant to read in front of others. I press a little and move on. When one student, an Anglo, refused to read, Roberto volunteered! He was slow and stumbled a lot, but his innate dignity carried him through the rough spots.

Endnotes

¹ *Editor's note.* Papers appearing in this section often draw explicit connections to a body of literature and/or to research on the topic at hand. Others do not. In this example, a careful, thoughtful, and patient teacher persists in reaching a difficult student without ever knowing or specifying what theories are being explored. The careful reader will no doubt find them and be able to point them out. This piece has been edited for punctuation, grammar, and style.

² Italicized text represents the author's commentary, added later, on diary entries.