Perspectives / Broken English and Other Embarrassments

Marge Scherer

Amy Tan still winces when she describes her mother’s English as “broken.” Although her mother’s speech embarrassed her while growing up, even back then she realized it was rich with imagery and understanding, as those who’ve read The Joy Luck Club can appreciate.

In her essay, “Mother Tongue,” Tan tells a story about a time when her mother, angry with a stockbroker who had disrespected her, made Amy, her teenage daughter, get on the phone and pretend to be she. It wasn’t the first or last time her mother had made this request because a lot of people—from doctors to bus drivers—did not take her seriously. This time, however, her mother’s message (shortened here)—“Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money”—became in Tan’s words something like: “I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check. If I don't receive it immediately, I am going to speak to your manager next week.” The fledgling writer’s polished English had a desirable effect, but what really won the day was that her mother made good on the threat. She appeared in the stockbroker’s office the next week to chew out him and his boss in “impeccable broken English.”

Ironically, Tan, at 15, had her own language troubles at school. Her teachers counseled her that English, and especially writing, were not her strong suits and that she should pursue either math or science. She scored below the 70th percentile on language achievement tests, primarily, she believes, because the word analogies on the tests played on her imagination so much that she was baffled about choosing one meaning from the multiple choices.

That those who speak in less than perfect, or even fractured, English are underestimated is only one of the themes in Tan’s story. Another is the continuing challenge of learning multiple languages and navigating multiple cultures. This issue of Educational Leadership echoes those ideas and also stresses the need for deep and rigorous learning for the fastest growing subgroup of students in our schools today: English language learners.

Researchers Ilana M. Umansky, Rachel A. Valentino, and Sean F. Reardon lead off by describing their 12-year longitudinal study of four English language programs in a large urban California school district. Their findings about programs are nuanced: All of the programs worked, but in some of the two-language programs, students took longer to gain proficiency. After they did reach proficiency, however, these students often made larger academic gains in the upper grades than did the other groups. The researchers conclude that schools should invest in high-quality two-language programs, opting for slow and steady growth over quick wins. They also recommend that schools consider community and stakeholder voice. What meets the needs of one district may not be valued by another. A major finding is that ELL programs must always focus not only on helping students attain language benchmarks but also on providing full, meaningful content.

Our authors explore many avenues to providing that instruction. Jane Hill, for example, shows how best to teach students in the early stages of language acquisition without watering down the curriculum. Wayne E. Wright tackles how to increase oral language proficiency, cautioning that exposing students to social English will not take the place of rich discussion. Carol Booth Olson and colleagues describe how to prepare students to meet the writing demands of college and careers. Other authors discuss how to meet the social and affective needs of students—from getting to know students’ families, to encouraging social mingling, to helping students find their own voice (pp. 46, 51, 78, online). And Patricia Gándara and Lucrecia Santibañez examine the teacher quality gap and the characteristics of “the teachers our English learners need.”

Throughout the issue, there is an urgent call to meet the challenge of helping English language learners excel. Statistics show that ELLs are almost twice as likely as their native-English-speaking classmates to drop out of school. As the world changes and many more of us become aware of the necessity and benefit of speaking several languages, wasting the potential of ELLs will be beyond embarrassing.

Endnote

1 Tan, A. “Mother tongue.” Available at http://www.olypen.com/pnkdui/as/mother_text.html