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The CATESOL Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0922r9r5>

Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 8(1)

ISSN

1535-0517

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Publication Date

1995

DOI

10.5070/B5.36547

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Listening to Marisol: Groupwork in a Sheltered High School Classroom

- *There's something magical about real conversation, students learning from each other. The ethnic mix brings an instant spark. There's learning going on every instant. Every interaction becomes a learning experience. To get a project completed, they must negotiate with each other. And because they are all newcomers to the U.S. ..., and from different countries, English is their only common medium.*

Teacher journal entry, October 1991

For 12 years I taught at Newcomer High School in San Francisco, a unique school dedicated to teaching recently-arrived immigrant and refugee youth from around the world. There are no native English speaking students in the school. The majority of students have had seven years or less of education in their country and represent a wide range of ethnic diversity. As of 1994, the largest ethnic groups were Central American, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, and Filipino.

Newcomer serves as a port of entry for these students to both the school system and the United States. Students generally spend one year at the school before they go on to regular high schools. Although they will probably receive English as a second language (ESL) instruction in the regular high schools, teachers do as much as they can in this introductory first year to prepare the students to enter the American school system and American culture.

The students study ESL half the day and then receive bilingual instruction in math and social studies. Currently, bilingual instruction is offered in Tagalog, Chinese, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Students who speak other languages, such as Arabic, Korean, or Lao, or whose schedules do not allow

them to study in a bilingual class, study social studies and math in sheltered classes. The content is taught in English using ESL techniques and strategies which emphasize visuals, gestures, and slower speech, or the things that Stephen Krashen calls *comprehensible input*.

For several years I taught a sheltered social studies class called "San Francisco Perspectives." In the class, students are introduced to American culture and geography using San Francisco and the Bay Area as the context. The students' educational backgrounds are as varied as their linguistic backgrounds. Some students know virtually no English, while others have studied English for three or four years in their native countries.

In this class, students worked on three or four major group projects over the semester. These projects included investigative reports on different schools and communities in San Francisco and California. Students worked in groups of three or four and put together multimedia projects involving research, art, interviews, and photographs on the assigned topics. Each student was responsible for a specific task. Through these groups, I tried hard to create a "community of learners" in the classroom, an environment in which the teacher and the students are learning from each other.

In 1991, I was invited to participate in the Urban Sites Writing Network, a spin-off of the National Writing Project. Funded by the Dewitt Wallace Foundation, 50 experienced teachers in major urban areas across the country participated in two summer institutes, where we began collectively to ponder and discuss the problems facing urban education today. For two years we were provided with stipends and some release time to take a close look at our classrooms and write about them. From 1991 to 1993, nine other Bay Area classroom teachers and I, meeting monthly, wrote and talked feverishly about our classrooms as we began our first foray into the field of teacher research. This article is an example of how one classroom teacher conducted an investigation to answer his own questions about his classroom and students.

As I began to look at possible areas of inquiry, it seemed that the group projects were successful. I was getting beautiful 20- to 30-page reports, full of good writing, artwork, and photographs. I thought the projects were successful, but what did the students think? What were they really learning? What was going on in their groups as they put their projects together?

These initial questions served as a springboard for my research. I decided to focus on the student work in the different groups to see what I could find. I was interested in what kind of groups worked best, homogeneous, mixed language, or random. I decided to collect data from the group projects to see what I could find. These included writing samples, student reflection logs, classroom observations, and individual and group

interviews. As I began to collect these data, I quickly realized that it would be impossible to look at all the students' work closely.

At my school site, I was involved in another project, the HERALD Project, which focused on interdisciplinary teaching and teacher reflection. An English teacher, a science teacher, and I decided to look at our students from a cross-disciplinary perspective. Because of scheduling problems there were very few students that we all had in common. But there was one Mexican girl, Marisol, who was in all our classes. We all decided to use her as our target student. Rather than make more work for myself, I decided to use Marisol for both projects and try to trace her language growth over the course of a semester.

The vehicle for tracing the growth would be the group projects. As evidence, I wanted to chart her growth as a writer and learner in three different groups: a homogeneous primary language group, a heterogeneous mixed-language group, and finally a self-selected group. Through Marisol's eyes, I would be able to take a closer look at the group projects to see whether the processes were as valuable as the product.

But there was another goal which emerged over the course of my inquiry and that was my own learning. I wanted to see what this close, microscopic look at one student would do for me, the teacher. What could I learn that would help my teaching?

Marisol

Marisol appeared in class in September with an infectious smile and a lack of shyness that differentiated her from most of the recently-arrived Newcomer students. What I remember most was her laugh. She would throw back her head and out would come something between a giggle and a chuckle. When I asked questions in class that first week, she was one of the few who would dare to answer. Her confidence stood out. She was not afraid to make a mistake in English. If she was wrong, she would try again. And to both my dismay and delight, she would often argue with me if I told her she was wrong.

This contrasted with most of the other ESL students in the class. It would sometimes take them weeks or even months before they would get the confidence to begin speaking English in class. Most of their utterances would be limited to one-word answers or short phrases. But not Marisol. She was ready to speak.

She told me she had studied some English in Mexico. Her mother was a lawyer in Mexico and had sent her to live with Marisol's older sister, who was living in San Francisco. In a survey she had taken in another class, Marisol had written that she read a lot in Mexico, both at home and in

school. Marisol had some distinct advantages over most of the other students. She was quite literate in Spanish, and it appeared that she came from a home environment that valued education and literacy. In contrast, most students at our school come from families that are semi- or nonliterate in their own languages, and very few of them live in home environments in which English is spoken. During the first week of school, I asked the students to write about school in their countries. Marisol wrote the following:

In Mexico the school is good because all the people have the chance for study in public school or private, the schools are big, have for about 30 classroom. All the schools have students bads, and good, with the bads students, the teachers goes with they a the office. When study more time. ... The clothes are uniforms, for the girls ... third grade is high red, with a withe skirts, and shoes black ...

Compared to other students in my class, this was good writing. Most students wrote only very basic information about their school, such as "My school is big. I like school." From the very beginning, Marisol was not afraid to express herself. She began by writing about schools and choice, and good and bad students. Errors like *students bads* and *shoes black* are common for Spanish-speaking students as they derive from the Spanish placement of nouns before adjectives.

Reflecting on this first writing a year later, Marisol told me that she felt most of her mistakes were from Spanish. She said, "I was thinking in Spanish, and then writing the content in English." She pointed out that *have the choice for study* was directly translated from the Spanish *para estudiar*. Thinking in their first language and then attempting to directly translate into English is a common strategy for beginning ESL students.

What was most important to me was that there was a voice there. While there were many errors, I could hear a voice struggling to tell me what she thought about schools. Unlike many students who simply gave basic information and rattled off the lists of subjects studied, Marisol wanted the reader to know that Mexican students had a choice in their education. Her emphasis was on communication, not grammar. This emphasis on communication over the course of the semester proved to be Marisol's strongest asset as an ESL learner.

Homogeneous Group

In November, Marisol worked on her first full-fledged group project involving three other students. Her group prepared a report on North Beach, a neighborhood in San Francisco we had visited on a field trip. In this project, I grouped the students by native language so that Marisol was

grouped with three other Spanish-speaking students. Because it was early in the year, I wanted them to feel comfortable using their primary language. My belief was that for most students this comfort level was essential in getting students to feel okay about themselves in order to begin adapting fully to their new language and culture.

In this project Marisol and her three classmates worked together to produce a report about the neighborhood that included photographs, research, maps, and interviews. Marisol's responsibility for the project was to write about the photographs the group had taken on the field trip. Under one of the photographs she had written the following:

This picture is from North Beach. Some people say that his is the most exciting neighborhood of San Francisco. It's a district with a colorful past one which encompasses the Barbary Coast tradition. Successive waves of immigrants have left their mark on North Beach. Currently, the are is predominantly Italian ... It's safe and geat neighborhood for walking with lots of Italian cafes where cap-pucina, enticing lunches and scrumptious pastries may be found. ... Italian bakeries are bulging with homemade bread and sinfully rich pastries such.

I suspected that some of these terms had been copied from a brochure she picked up during the field trip. Words like *predominant* and *successive waves* just don't fit with the voice of a beginning level ESL student. I gave her a "B" on the project but wrote in my evaluation of her report that some parts of the writing sounded like they had been copied, and I was looking more for her own words.

After the project was completed, students were asked to complete a reflection log, responding to such questions as, "What did you learn from this project? What was the most difficult thing about the project?" and "What did you learn from your partners?" I thought it was important that they begin to think about how they were learning. I hoped they would begin to recognize the power of learning with and from another student. Marisol's reflection log contained this response to the question, "Is your writing better now than the last project?":

I don't know. I think so, but the teacher told me, that I wrote from the book!

I could feel the steam rising from her pen. Marisol was indignant. The explanation mark after the word *book* showed how hurt she was. In fact, she wouldn't speak to me for several days. But I was pleased to see her confidence in revealing her anger to me. Most ESL students would never dare to

show their anger to the teacher. They either are too concerned that it would affect their grade or they hold the teacher in such high esteem that they wouldn't dare speak out in opposition.

But Marisol wasn't afraid, and she could even display that anger in writing. Again I saw voice and power in her writing. I could hear Marisol's inner conversation: "I think I am writing better. But apparently the teacher doesn't agree. He thinks I am copying." Her sharp retort also showed me signs of progress in her writing. Her spelling was improved. Aside from a mistake in the past tense, *teld* for *told*, the writing was much better than in her last project. She was moving away from simple sentences such as *There are good students and bad students*, and now using clauses such as *that I wrote from the book*.

To Marisol, simply lifting a couple of sentences out of a pamphlet was not copying. And besides, there were other parts of the report in which she had contributed much of her own writing. In another portion she had tried to integrate some of the writing in the book or pamphlet into her own ideas. On a previous page she had written the following:

This neighborhood is the most important of bussines. The most of people come to Downtown of shopping, Downtow has many stores like, Macy's, Northroom, Limited, in fact many kinds of stores.

The writing in this paragraph contrasted sharply with phrases like the *successive waves of immigrants*. Although it was clear she had lifted some pages out of the book in the first assignment, perhaps I had erred in not mentioning the good parts of her writing that had been authentic and clear. In Marisol's mind I was saying she had copied all of her report, which she certainly hadn't.

Marisol later told me that this project had been very frustrating for her. Her partners were supposed to have collected information to give to her so she could write it up in the final report. But she said, "They didn't help me. Alejandro didn't do his job getting information about the pictures. ... I was angry." As to my charge of copying, she responded, "I didn't know how to put it in my words. I understood it. I only copied two sentences." As we spoke more, I began to understand that it had been a matter of pride. She felt hurt, especially because she felt that the others had not done their jobs. She felt she was being unfairly penalized by only getting a "B."

I learned more of Marisol's thoughts about grouping from her reflection log. In her evaluation, she seemed unhappy with her group. Her answer to the question, "What did you learn from your partners?" was blunt:

Nothing. Some of my group help me with the information of some neighbor-hoods.

When asked if she liked working with partners, she wrote,

Yes, when they are organizate and if they want to work.

Despite being an all Spanish-speaking group, the educational backgrounds of the members were quite different. Jimmy, a Spanish-speaking Chinese student from Puerto Rico, attended class sporadically. Marta, although she was Mexican like Marisol, spoke very little English and had less schooling in Mexico.

Here I got a clear indication of Marisol's thinking about groups. It didn't matter what language they spoke. What was important to Marisol was how well they worked. In other words, I believe Marisol was saying, "Yes, I like groupwork if the other members do their share." The problem in this project had been that Marisol felt that the other group members had not done what they were assigned to do.

When I originally assigned the reflection logs after each assignment, I really wasn't sure of their value. Here already in the second assignment I was learning some valuable lessons from Marisol's reflections. Just because everyone spoke the same language did not automatically make it easier for the group. Factors like educational background, years of English studied, and personality were just as important as native language.

Heterogeneous Group

In the next project a few weeks later, Marisol was grouped with a Korean, a Russian, and an El Salvadorean student. Their task was to go out and investigate another neighborhood in San Francisco, the Seacliff district. Marisol and her partners decided who would be responsible for the various assignments. These included taking photographs, researching the neighborhood history, making a map, and conducting an interview with a neighborhood resident. After two weeks of hard work, the group turned in a very thorough 20-30 page report complete with all the above components. The project received an "A" grade.

As part of the project, each student was asked to state their individual contributions. Marisol's major responsibility was to conduct the interview. Alejandro took the photographs, Igor wrote the history of the neighborhood, and Min Yong did the map. Marisol wrote the following:

Well, in this project about the neighborhoods. I did the interview. I copied the answer on the paper, then I had to do the transcription. clear of questions and answers. I helped to Igor do do the story about Seacliff, he wrote the story about Seacliff, he wrote the story and I just wrote in paragraphs, to correct some words and put more information in it. I helped to Min Yong to do the map putting

some names of the places and colored. I wrote the information from an encyclopaedia about Seacliff.

It appeared she had done a lot of work and learned a lot. But I still had many questions. What processes did Marisol use to do this writing? Did working in the group help her writing at all? How did Marisol feel about working with a mixed-language group as opposed to her previous Spanish-speaking group? And I wondered, "Did they really get any work done during their group time together, or were they just fooling around?" I decided to take a close look at this group to see if any of my questions could be answered.

During the project, I had recorded one of their group meetings a few days before the project was due. I had urged each group to use their time together to make sure all the components were included in their report: research, maps, photographs, and interviews. I also wanted them to proof-read their writing and check for paragraphs. I tried to convey the idea that each new paragraph should contain a new topic. These students would be leaving for a regular high school in two or three months. In order to pass their proficiency exams and to succeed in their classes, they had to know how to write a paragraph.

What follows is a partial transcript from a group meeting two days before the project deadline. I asked a classroom volunteer to tape the group. The group began by introducing themselves.

Igor: My name is Igor. I'm the writer in this group. In this project I write story about Seacliff. We went to Seacliff in Saturday, March 16. In this project I write story, plan of group, and I went to library and took information about Seacliff.

Min Yong: My name is Min Yong. I made the map so I ... I ... the map.

Marisol: *(her speed and delivery is about five times faster than the rest of her group)* O.K. My name is Marisol. I did the interview. I ... uh ... got some person of the Sea Cliff, and I asked the 10 questions.

Alejandro: Mi nombre es Alejandro Teran.

Marisol: En Ingles! *(Marisol translates)* ... He's Alejandro. He take a picture of the Seacliff, the people, the museum, interesting places of Seacliff. He take a picture, Golden Gate Bridge. His last name? Teran. Teran.

(Right away Marisol took over. I wasn't sure if it was because her English was better than the others or if it was because of her outgoing personality. Both Alejandro and Min Yong had recently transferred into the class and were still rather shy and reluctant to speak. Min Yong, at this point, moved over to an adjacent desk to work on a map of the neighborhood. Alejandro began putting the photographs in order on the floor.)

Marisol: The people who I interviewed say that some of the people live since 1924. So, the old people live 70 years. *(Marisol then proceeds to read Igor's writing out loud)* "On November 1991, we had a field trip to Seacliff. This is nice beautiful neighborhood in San Francisco. Its boundaries are the 24th Avenue." You have to put this in paragraph.

Igor: What?

Marisol: You have to put this, write in paragraph, you know? *(Marisol repeats her instruction again, pausing after the words this and write so Igor will understand)* Like this. *(She shows him a paragraph on a paper.)*

Igor: You want to do it? O.K. Take homework. All the time you give me the papers for homework. *(Igor is angry.)* Paragraph. I know, I know. But it's difficult!

Marisol: Why is difficult? Only the difference you have to put in other ... you know? *(She gestures at the paragraph.)*

Igor: I know.

Marisol: Because the teacher is gonna say, you want to get this in paragraph.

Igor: O.K. I do it in home. It's my homework. *(They continue to argue over who will do the revisions.)*

Marisol: Gimme this. I wanna read. *(She takes back his report and continues reading.)* "Many rich people live in Seacliff ..."

Igor: Not true? The lady told us. Ask Mr. Berkman. Very nice house, you know? O.K. *(He is trying to convince her that there are many rich people in Seacliff.)*

Marisol: *(continues to read)* "Many people lives ..." Why "s"?

Igor: "Lives."

Marisol: "Lives." Many people. Why you put "s"?

Igor: Ah ... Yes. I ... *(Igor sees his error.)*
(Marisol is tired of arguing. She beckons teacher over.)

Marisol: O.K. OK. Teacher. This is okay? We have to put in paragraph?

Teacher: Always need paragraph.

Marisol: Igor! *(She looks at Igor and laughs.)*

Igor: Thank you, Marisol.

Marisol: You're welcome.
(The teacher then reads their story.)

Teacher: Good. Try to get some paragraphs.

Marisol: Thank you. Do you know how to write *exactly*?

Igor: What?

Marisol: Do you know how to spell *exactly*?

Igor: Seacliff?

Marisol: *Exactly.* *(She says the word again for the third time.)*
 Like this. *(She writes down the word exactly and shows Igor.)* You understand this?

Igor: Ah! Yes.

Marisol: Is right?

Igor: Yes.

Marisol: Because, some of, the my, no, no, no, because one of the, my questions I put *exactly*, and I not sure is the spelling.

Igor: You can look on the ... dictionary. But no, I think it's good.

Marisol: O.K. Thank you. *(Marisol begins speaking Spanish to Igor.)* Hola. ¿Qué tal? ¿Cómo te ha ido? Qué bueno. ¿Qué estás haciendo en tu proyecto? Entonces me alegro. ¿Cuándo van a ir mañana? ¿A dónde?

Igor: Marisol. Many Spanish and you take "F."

Marisol: Why?

Igor: Because Mr. Berkman say.

Marisol: Why?

Igor: Because it's English lesson.

(Marisol continues to speak in Spanish. Igor counters by speaking in Russian. Soon their group is a hubbub of Spanish, Russian and Korean, and the meeting ends with Marisol and Min Yong singing gleefully "Bésame Mucho" in Spanish.)

This transcript revealed a wealth of information. First, I was delighted to see Marisol and the group on-task. Most of the time had indeed been spent going over the report, specifically discussing paragraphs and the "s" in third person singular.

During a normal class period, I usually walk around the room and meet with different groups. I sometimes get the feeling that groups are off-task and fooling around much of the time. Zeroing in on this group gave me another perspective. The transcript showed they were on-task, working with each other in the time allotted. Although they tailed off into their native languages at the end, this was understandable. After 20 minutes or so of an intense academic discussion in English, the group needed a break.

From the transcript we see that Min Yong and Alejandro, whose English levels were the lowest, said practically nothing. They went off to do other tasks. Both Min Yong and Alejandro had only been in the class a few weeks and did not speak much in class. They might be characterized as being in Krashen's preproduction stage. They are beginning speakers, not quite ready to produce speech. They can comprehend a little, and may be able to respond in short phrases, but they are not ready to partake in conversations in English.

But Marisol was the leader here, and her confidence and strong communicative skills were evident right away. She read over Igor's material, and immediately noticed the lack of paragraphs:

You have to put this ... write in paragraph, you know?

She is telling Igor to change his writing and put it into a paragraph. She slows down her speech and emphasizes the words *put this* and *write*. She realizes that Igor might not understand *put this*, so she rephrases it and says *write* to make sure he understands. And then she checks once more to see if Igor understands by asking, "You know?"

Marisol wants to be understood, and she employs an array of strategies to that end. She repeats things many times so that Igor will understand. She uses nonverbal clues, waving her hands emphatically to make a point, and she points to important parts of the paper she wants Igor to look at. She is constantly listening and checking to see if her listener understands. Marisol is totally focused on communicating with Igor here. Form is secondary. Marisol is offering what Krashen calls comprehensible input, the extralinguistic clues one must use to make oneself comprehensible to someone who does not speak English as a first language. In fact, she demonstrated the very strategies I employ daily in my ESL classes.

Marisol showed here that she was not only a communicator but a negotiator. She did not stand still, unbending. She acknowledged Igor's stand and tried to work around his resistance. She sensed his anger about changing his writing when he responded, "You want to do it? O.K Take it!" So she adopted a more conciliatory tone, showing him that writing in paragraphs was not a big deal. It just involved changing things around a little bit. Ultimately, she saved her big trump card, the teacher, for the end. When she saw me within proximity, she called me over, and I unwittingly became an accomplice to her cause by responding, "Always need paragraph."

Marisol was a teacher here, but she also learned from Igor. When she was not sure about the spelling of *exactly*, she turned to Igor for help. This was a nice reversal in light of the fact that, just a minute before, she had been the teacher and Igor the student.

There was a rich dialogue about language here. Marisol and Igor were discussing the use of third person singular and what constitutes a paragraph. Marisol reminded Igor that *many people* did not require an "s", that is, *many people live in the Seacliff*.¹

From this transcript, we can see that Marisol and Igor were succeeding fairly well in discussing academic issues. Indeed, they were so involved in their conversation that they were not focusing on speaking correctly. Although the focus of their discussion was on correct grammar and writing, they were having a rich conversation about academic issues, getting lots of CALP experience. They had an opportunity to use cognitively demanding language in a realistic situation.

Towards the end of this project, I wanted to get Marisol's assessment of how she was doing. I called her over to my desk to ask her some questions.

Teacher: Did you like this project?

Marisol: Yeah.

Teacher: Why?

Marisol: I ... I ... I can to meet the other neighborhoods of San Francisco and I like to meet ... umm ... what kind of neighborhoods in San Francisco.

Teacher: How about your group? What do you think about your group?

Marisol: My group is good because ... uhh ... all the people work.

Teacher: Hmm. This group, well, Alejandro's Spanish, but you have Russian, and Korean. Is it a problem because they didn't speak English?

Marisol: No. Not is problem because we ... we can to speak with ... with the hands! (*She laughs.*) That's it. No is problem.

Teacher: Now last project you were with all Spanish [speaking] group, right? Which project was easier for you?

Marisol: This project.

Teacher: Really? Why? What about working with them? Was it harder or easier than the last project?

Marisol: No, easy. Both easy. (*She says assuredly.*)

Teacher: So it didn't make a difference for you that one group was all Spanish, and one group mixed? (*Marisol nods in agreement.*) Did you learn anything from your partners?

Marisol: Yeah. How they work, how they thinking about, ummm, their form to work.

I was surprised to hear that it was not a problem for Marisol to work in a mixed-language group. I had assumed that Marisol would prefer to work with students who spoke Spanish because they could speak freely and there would not be any linguistic problems. But Marisol reiterated to me that she didn't care whether or not her group was Spanish-speaking. What was important to her was that they were willing to work hard.

Student Choice

It was getting towards the end of the semester and there was time for one final project. Since we had been studying California history, I asked students to do a group project on some aspect of this topic. This time the students were free to work with whomever they wanted. In the first group project I had placed Marisol in a Spanish-speaking language group, and in the last project she had worked in a heterogeneous group with a Russian and a Korean. I wanted to see what kind of group Marisol would join if given a choice. I anticipated that she would group herself with other Spanish speakers. But Marisol and many other students in the class formed their groups based on factors other than just language. Marisol formed a group with Claudia from El Salvador, Brenda from Hong Kong, and Liana from Armenia. They were all friends, but more importantly for Marisol, they were good and dependable students. Marisol's group decided to do a report on Spanish California. Language was not a barrier for them. They did a terrific job, handing in a 46-page report full of illustrations, maps, research, and learning logs. Each student made valuable contributions to the report. Marisol's responsibilities were to write about the work and problems the Spanish faced in California. In her report, she wrote the following:

... they learned to work from differents way; to work rainsing animals, as cattle and horses, working the earth, agriculture, they sowing wheat. Their methods of sowing and reaping however, were extremely primitive. ... Some times they got knifes of metal, cloth, and pretty things for a change of the work that they made.

At first glance, this writing might not be impressive, but I was struck by the authenticity of her writing. It contrasted sharply with the copied writing from the first project. From my perspective as an ESL teacher, when beginning ESL students are doing research, the more mistakes the better. This shows me that they are finding information, comprehending what it means, and trying to write it in their own words. It shows me that they have spent time and thought on the writing. Most ESL students have a hard time with this. Often I receive beautifully copied yet tedious reports on the assigned topics. In this same report, Elana, one of Marisol's group members, wrote the following about the religion of the Spanish:

Whatever the Spaniards may have done, good or bad, reflects in the final analysis the fact that from the beginning of their history, they had to face and deal with the most disastrous and unfortunate conditions of the growing of the Mohammedan occupation. Spanish religion ... is a form of belief that is characteristic of Spain, intelligible only within the peculiar casticity of her history.

As I stated previously, it is easy to see when ESL students are copying. After only a few months in the country, it is impossible for them to write error free. Elana, in fact, was a very bright student. She may very well have understood what she wrote here. But the point is, all she did was locate the information in a book and copy it. She might have made some decisions as to which portions of the information to include, but there was not much else.

In contrast, Marisol's writing had many errors. There were spelling mistakes (*rainsing*, i.e., *raising*?) and syntax problems (*they sowing wheat, for a change of the work*). But what gratified me was that she was working with the language, not just reading a book and lifting passages from it. She had found information and was trying to write about what the Spanish cowboys did for their livelihood. It wasn't fantastic writing but it was authentic. Marisol, too, was pleased with her final project. In her reflection log she wrote the following about her group:

They are very good as partners. They were working hard. We shared ideas each other. How they work and what kind of ideas they have. ... We did the best, that we could do. We getting informations from differents book from the library. We really like this group. We shared opionions about how to do our work. I think we had a good organitation.

Marisol was still struggling in her writing. The spelling in *organitation* and the "s" in *differents* indicate that Marisol is probably still translating from Spanish. But her message is clear:

We did the best, that we could do. We shared opinions about how to do our work.

These are the issues that are important to Marisol.

Several months later, I asked her to tell me what kind of processes her final group used in working together. She responded:

We getting informations from differents book from the library. We all went to the library, and we each got a book. We each read it. I was understanding all the context first. Then I write by myself.

The processes depicted here are quite different from her description of the early projects when she was translating from Spanish. Now Marisol was reading the information first, trying to understand it in English, and then trying to write it in her words. I thought back to Marisol's first reflection when she had been asked if she enjoyed working in groups.

Yes, because you can to compart opinion and to the work better.

Two and a half months later she wrote,

We did the best, that we could do. ... We shared opinions about how to do our work. I think we had a good organization.

It was the same sentiment, only this time she had said it much more clearly. I noted with pride the growth in her writing. I asked her which project she had enjoyed the most. She responded:

The mixed group was better. That way we have to speak English. Mixed group. They speak English. ... It's nice cuz we were laughing and everything, you know, enjoying the work. With Claudia, Brenda (the self-chosen group), everybody agree. We divided the work to every people. Every people was doing the work. In other group, Igor, I make Igor's work, and then I help Min Yong doing the map.

Brenda from Hong Kong and Liana from Armenia were dependable. They were good students and friends and that was more important to Marisol than working with someone who spoke Spanish.

I thought back to her reflection from the first project on North Beach when she had worked with an all Spanish-speaking group. She said she had learned nothing. Although her writing still needed improvement, I saw progress in her writing and thinking. She was working with a heterogeneous group, overcoming language and social barriers and, more importantly, valuing the group process. A year later I asked Marisol to reflect one final time on what she had learned in the class. She talked about the second project when she had worked in a mixed-language group:

I like sharing opinions. He's (Igor) giving me opinions and ideas. Maybe his opinion is better than mine. It's good to get ideas.

When asked if she liked working with partners, she replied,

Yes. Because four heads think better than one.

Marisol was clearly able to see the power of working and learning from other students. Perhaps she was echoing what the Russian psychologist Vygotsky called the *zone of proximal development*, the importance of students learning with and from each other.

Findings

By listening to Marisol and my other students, I have developed insights into four important aspects of instruction in my classroom: language and group work, copying, grouping, and students as communicators.

Language and Groupwork

From studying the transcript of Marisol's mixed group and looking at her reflections, I have learned that groupwork is beneficial and has value. It provides opportunities for students to have authentic conversations and practice their new language.

Marisol's mixed-language group required lots of cognitive academic language proficiency. There was much discussion of academic issues, an area in which many ESL students are weak. In studying the transcript of a group meeting, I saw a complex discussion going on between Marisol and Igor on the use of paragraphs and the third person singular. Marisol and Igor were learning from each other. Though the two other students in the group, Alejandro and Min Yong, were not able to take part in the discussion because of their lower English skills, Marisol and Igor were able to talk about important issues. Although it may not have been pleasurable or fun, her discussions and negotiations with Igor were valuable opportunities for both of them to use English in difficult but meaningful ways. I suspect ESL students do not have many opportunities to have such content-based discussions in English.

Copying

Copying is not a simple issue. While it inevitably comes up every semester, before this investigation I had not really had an opportunity to reflect on what is involved in copying. What may look like direct copying to the teacher may involve several processes by the student. Marisol taught me to look beyond what is written on paper. Early in the semester I had accused her of copying some sentences from a pamphlet. Marisol was indignant at the accusation. While she admitted that she had lifted some of the writing, she was miffed that I had not validated the other parts of her writing which she had worked hard on. By talking to her I was able to get a deeper understanding of the group process and why she resorted to copying. By only mentioning the copying and not validating the other parts of her writing, I had erred.

I have now developed strong beliefs about copying. I believe that, especially for ESL students, the number of errors can sometimes indicate growth in writing. When they are doing research, copying is a problem for most ESL students. I go to great lengths to try to explain to them that I want their own words, even if there are mistakes. One former student went home to her parents once and complained, "I don't understand. My teacher wants me to make mistakes."

Yes, I do. If I see mistakes, I see that the student is working with the language, trying to adapt it to his or her own words. Liana's report on

California was smooth and effortless. However, even though she may have understood what she wrote, she simply copied it from the book. Marisol's writing in that same report was not as smooth. There were many errors, but the errors showed me that she was reading the information in the book, comprehending it, and then trying to write it in her own words. This process of taking the information in, thinking about it, and then trying to write it in one's own words is intrinsically valuable.

Grouping

I looked at Marisol in three kinds of groups over the semester: an all-Spanish-speaking group, a mixed-language group, and a group self-chosen by Marisol. She surprised me when she said it didn't make any difference to her whether her group was heterogeneously mixed or grouped by language. I thought she would appreciate the luxury of communicating in Spanish with her fellow group members. But Marisol taught me that there were other factors to consider. First and foremost, Marisol was interested in partners who would do the work. What mattered to her was how much effort each group member applied.

Towards the end of the semester when Marisol was given the choice to work with whomever she wanted, she chose to work with an Armenian, a Chinese, and an El Salvadorian girl. The fact that they were good friends was very important, but equally important was, as Marisol stated, that they were all good workers. It was important to Marisol not only to have fun but also to work hard. When I asked her if she had had any problems communicating with the other members of her group, she whimsically replied, "No. Not is problem because we ... we can to speak with ... with the hands!"

I must be very careful in extrapolating my findings about Marisol to all ESL students. I must emphasize that Marisol came into my class with a lot of advantages over other students. She came from a literate home environment. She had strong literacy skills in her own language. There was a native English speaker living in her household. She had confidence. She had distinct advantages over many of the other students.

While for Marisol a bilingual group was not so important, I do not wish to suggest that bilingual groups are not effective. I am a strong believer in bilingual education. I believe that students who do not have the same academic background as Marisol need primary language assistance. Marisol's academic background prepared her to lean less and less on her primary language. Her level of English proficiency was intermediate. Studies have shown that, at this level, students can receive more and more instruction in their second language.

Students as Communicators

Marisol's strongest suit was that she was a communicator. She had very little of what Krashen calls a *raised affective filter*, the shyness or inhibition that stops many people from attempting to speak in a second language. When she spoke or wrote, she concentrated on getting her point across. She did not worry about form. In the conversation with Igor, we see her using an array of strategies to get her point across, gesturing, repeating, and intonating so that Igor will understand how to use paragraphs.

Many ESL students do not have such confidence. They fear that they will make a mistake or be laughed at. They worry so much about being grammatically correct or how they sound that they forget about communicating. They play it safe. Marisol, however, felt no compunction at venturing into the deep water of expressing her feelings, even her anger at the teacher when I questioned the authenticity of her writing.

When she was asked a question, she would almost always attempt to give an answer. If not understood, she would work at responding in a different way. Her English was not perfect, but she didn't care. She wanted to get her point across. Most beginning ESL students do not share this level of confidence. They might attempt to give a one-word answer or a short phrase, but if they make a mistake or they are not understood, they are often stymied and do not go any further. Perhaps if we can get other students to lower their affective filters and display some of the confidence that Marisol displayed, their progress in acquiring English will be enhanced.

Conclusion

Marisol has since departed to another high school, and now I find myself asking what a colleague once asked about teacher research: "So what?"

First, I learned a lot about my classroom. I got an opportunity to get a birds-eye view of the group projects I have been orchestrating over the last 10 years. It was an opportunity to look closely at groups and observe what was going on. As teachers, we are constantly making assumptions and judgments on what we see everyday. Through this inquiry, I was able to analyze some of my assumptions.

From this research I have also learned the value of multiple perspectives on the classroom. The teacher's view of the classroom, while valuable, is just one piece of the puzzle. By including the students, visitors and even other teachers' perspectives, a much richer view of the classroom emerges.

A teacher's day is so filled with responsibilities above and beyond teaching that there is little time for reflection. Between teaching, parent conferences, writing interim reports, and running to the xerox machine, we

rarely have time to think during the day. But by setting aside time each day to sit and reflect, I received a much deeper picture of the classroom than I get from the spontaneous snapshots I take in my mind every day. I would urge other teachers to begin keeping journals or begin writing about their classrooms. Perhaps there are other teachers at school or in the area who are interested in forming a teacher research group. The camaraderie and support I experienced in my group was very stimulating.

Listening to Marisol gave me an opportunity to look closely at a student with more than the cursory glances provided by writing samples and tests. Through her writing, her talking, her actions, and her reflections, Marisol helped me to see that there was real work and productive exchange going on in the groups. Nevertheless, watching and listening to Marisol always seemed to reflect back to me, the teacher. By looking at Marisol, I was able to look in the mirror, not my mirror but a student's mirror, and see how her perceptions echoed or differed from mine.

Perhaps in some ways what I learned about Marisol was not so important. What remains for me is the process, the experience of looking at my class from different perspectives and, more importantly, the benefits of listening to my students. ■

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Endnotes

- 1 These issues constitute what Cummins has called Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Cummins made distinctions between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and CALP. BICS describes the ability of a second language speaker to communicate in social interactions that are not cognitively demanding while CALP refers to the second language speaker's ability to use the second language in an academic setting with reduced contextual clues and visuals. Cummins maintains that the acquiring of CALP is a good predictor of success in a second language.