Diversity: Language, Race, Culture Among English Language Learners
Questions to Enid Lee—Mining the Gold

Teachers' Questions: "How can I find time in the day to do all this cultural stuff?" "What are some of the things that you have seen in classrooms that you caution teachers from doing too much?

California Standard for the Teaching Profession (SCTP) Standard Two:
Creating and maintaining effective environments for student learning

One of the many processes in which we engage in as teachers is the co-creation of our classroom environment. Along with our students we try to create and maintain effective environments to support student learning. Through these environments we also have the opportunity to affirm the cultures of the English Language Learners in our room. No classroom environment is culturally neutral. They either reinforce or reject the values, experiences, knowledge and histories of students, their families and communities.

When I visit classrooms I make a mental note of what I call "the evidence of the inhabitants " as reflected in pictures, notices, and examples of student work among other features of the visual life of the room. But this is not the aspect of the learning environment that I am suggesting we should enhance this time around. This is an invitation to focus on the "sound" of our classroom environment. It involves reflecting on the way in which we encourage the use of oral languages in our classroom and their potential for students

sharing their culture and for the development of reading and writing

I am often struck by the frequency of this sound in classroom life "sh" "sh". It is the sound of teachers asking students to be quiet. It is also sometimes the sound of a missed opportunity for student learning. I recognize that there are times for quiet moments in classrooms, but the tendency to deny student talk as a means of controlling the environment also requires some examination.

In a study of a statewide school restructuring initiative in California, researcher Meg Gebhard makes the following observation:

"In many schools in this study, teachers and administrators tended to discourage students from using talk, both in English and their home language to figure out challenging print –based assignments. We observed this practice even when the schools had supposedly implemented such reforms as co-operative learning and "brain –compatible instruction "(Gebhard p.36)

She describes an instance in which students had found "strategic ways of completing the social science assignment" but "were prevented from sharing this knowledge with each other because the school had adopted a model of instruction that advocated silent independent learning in the name of creating a "peaceful learning environment ". (Gebhard p.36)

We know from both research and

practice that oral languages play a role in helping students make sense of the reading and writing assignments they face everyday. In addition, students' oral languages are carriers of culture bearing stories and solutions drawn from the experiences of their families, communities and ethnic groups. The sounds of students' voices-learning, laughing and living in the languages they bring from home and community and the ones they are acquiring at school can make for an empowering and energizing classroom environment.

As we "plan and implement classroom procedures and routines that support student learning" (CSTP) let's remember to make room for student talk as a way of sharing their culture and deepening their understanding of the work at hand. The encouragement to talk in an English Language Learning classroom can contribute to an environment of risk- taking in learning and respect for the cultural contexts of our students. It's a way of bringing some of "that cultural stuff" into the room with the students playing an important role. Checking the "sound system" for student talk in your classroom environment need not be time consuming. It can be a quick daily activity that can move us closer to a more equitable antiracist environment, exactly the kind we need for enhancing learning.

Reference

Meg Gebhard, Volume 60. No 4. December 2002/January 2003, P. 36. *Educational Leadership*.