

Stuck in Goldenrod, Aiming for Aqua: ELL Memories, Part 1

By Ann H. Leon | Categories: English Language Learners

In recent months, I have come into contact with teachers who are experiencing a boom of English language learners (ELLs) in their classrooms. Having these conversations takes me back 46 years to 1967 when I was the English learner. In the first of a series of blog posts, I grapple with these questions:

- How did I develop my skills for reading, writing, listening, and speaking?
- And, more importantly, how did I feel during those years of learning in a foreign language as a nine-year-old?

Reflecting on My Learning Experience

I clearly remember my fourth-grade year being significant, and I was excited to be with kids my age! In a later post, I will share about spending the previous January through June in a first-grade class as a nine-year-old. I learned conversational English rather quickly through the summer and was ready for the fourth grade. Being the only limited-English speaker, I was a novelty in class, so I gained many new friends.

In the classroom, I was a good, obedient student, which pleased the teacher. But the teacher didn't know how to reach me with daily instruction except to send me to a reading specialist. The individual help in reading gave me skills and confidence to do some major catching up.

The Limits of Learning in Isolation

Unfortunately we worked daily in isolation. I did not learn from classmates who thought deeply or differently from me. I didn't have the opportunity to practice speaking in class for fear of giving the wrong answer. Giving the right response was so important to me that I couldn't risk the embarrassment of being wrong. I did a lot of listening, but spoke infrequently!

I knew that I was not among the best readers, but I didn't know what I needed to improve. Our reading program was color-coded with a clear goal of "aqua!" My competitive nature moved me out from the lowest reading level to "just-below-middle," where I settled for the majority of the year. But because I was accustomed to comparing myself with those around me, I was frustrated that I couldn't get out of "goldenrod" while watching other students read longer texts with smaller font in the "aqua" level. Being an English learner, I was not answering questions consistently enough to pass.

Classroom Communities in the Context of the Common Core

Fast-forward 46 years with the introduction of Common Core State Standards, which clearly state the need for collaborative work to develop high levels of thinking and deep learning. All learners, especially ELLs, can be supported to achieve those goals if teachers integrate the reading and writing standards with listening and speaking in daily practice as an authentic learning experience. Setting up a classroom community that respects and protects each member to take learning seriously is paramount to guiding learners to become confident and competent communicators in all four areas of language and literacy development.

