

Meeting the Needs of Newcomer non-Spanish Speaking ELLs: A Case Study of Two Cambodian Students in a Suburban Intermediate School

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Situations similar to the one above regularly occur in schools throughout Texas and the United States (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2003). An increasing number of teachers are finding themselves face-to-face with newly-arrived ELL students in their classrooms, whom they feel ill-prepared to teach (Ariza, 2006; Crawford, 2004). While many schools in Texas offer bilingual education programs which are well suited to newly-arrived Spanish-speaking ELLs (Perez, 2003; Program Evaluation Unit, 2000), few Texas schools offer bilingual programs in any other language. Indeed, while Spanish-speakers make up 94% of the over 520,000 ELL students in Texas, there are over 37,000 ELLs in the state who speak a wide variety of other languages, including Cantonese, Mandarin, Russian, Vietnamese, Urdu, Korean, Arabic, Khmer, Lao, and their numbers are increasing each year.

Non-Spanish-speaking ELLs are often placed in English-only mainstream classrooms, and, unfortunately, many are simply left there to “sink-or-swim” with little to no services or support (Baker, 2001; Baker & Jones, 1998; Wright, 2004). This study, however, documents the efforts of the faculty and staff of Rodgers Intermediate School to meet the language and academic needs of its two newly-arrived Cambodian students. Despite several problems and frustrations, this school’s response nonetheless demonstrates how a school and individual teachers can assist and support newly-arrived ELL students, using available resources. This school’s experience is instructive for other schools and their

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teachers who are facing similar challenges in meeting the needs of newly-arrived ELLs, particularly those for whom no bilingual education programs are available.

In this paper, I provide a brief overview of Rodgers Intermediate School, followed by an introduction to Nitha and Bora, the newly arrived Cambodian students. Next I will describe the school's rationale for placing Nitha and Bora in Mrs. Moore's classroom, and then describe the various strategies and techniques used by her to try to meet their needs. A description of a number of other support services provided outside of Mrs. Moore's classroom, including pull-out ESL instruction, assistance from a paraprofessional, computer lab instruction, and primary language support will follow. The paper concludes with a description of the progress made by Nitha and Bora by the end of the school year. Implications and lessons other schools and teachers may learn from this school's experience will be provided.

Methodology

This qualitative research case study utilized participant observation, interviews with teachers and support personnel, and the collection and analysis of school-based documents (e.g., policy documents, memos, notes, lesson plans, curricular materials, student work, progress reports, assessments, etc.). Soon after the arrival of Nitha and Bora, I began volunteering at the school to provide Khmer primary language support during one-hour tutoring sessions each week, which continued until the end of the school year (see below for details). In addition, I conducted observations in their regular and ESL classrooms and in their tutoring sessions

with the paraprofessional and in the computer lab. Digital audio recordings were made and field notes were taken during my tutoring session and observations described above. Formal interviews were conducted with the classroom teacher, ESL teacher, and the paraprofessional. These interviews were digitally audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Detailed field notes were also kept on informal conversations with these individuals and others, including the school counselor, principal, the computer lab teacher, other teachers and paraprofessionals, and the girls themselves. Fieldnotes, transcripts, and documents were imported into and organized using *QSR Nvivo*, a qualitative data analysis software program. Data analysis was guided by the work of Erickson (1986) and Miles and Huberman (1994). To maintain confidentiality, the names of the students, teachers and staff, and school are pseudonyms.

Rodgers Intermediate School

Rodgers Intermediate School is in a medium-sized school district of 13 schools serving 7,636 students in grades PreK-12. The district is located in a suburb on the outskirts of San Antonio in a rapidly growing area. Rodgers provides instruction to 590 students in grades 5 and 6. Over half of the students are White (58%), while 29% are Hispanic and 10% are African American, and only 2% are Asian/Pacific Islanders. The school is located in a middle-class neighborhood, and only 31% participate in the free/reduced lunch program (well below the state average of 53%). English language learners represent less than 1% of the schools' enrollment. In the 2004-2005 school year, Rodgers was rated as

“academically acceptable” by the Texas Education Agency (District and School information retrieved from www.greatschools.net).

Nitha and Bora

Nitha and Bora are sisters who arrived with their father (and one other sister) in the middle of October 2004. In Cambodia, they lived in a poor village in Takeo Province, far from their provincial capital or any major cities. Their family was sponsored to the United States by relatives who run a small but successful business (donut shop). They live with their relatives in a spacious two-story home—a far cry from the one-room thatched hut with no electricity or running water where they used to live. While no school records were provided at the time of enrollment, it was later determined that both girls had attended school in their village; Nitha had completed 6th grade, and Bora had completed the 4th grade. Despite the poor condition of Cambodian schools (Ministry of Education, 2004; Planning Department, 2006; Um, 1999), particularly in the rural areas, both girls had strong Khmer (Cambodian) literacy skills, and could do basic arithmetic. While both were reportedly excellent students, neither had studied English before coming to the United States, nor could they speak a single word of English upon their arrival. Both Nitha and Bora faced the challenges of living and attending school in a new country with a strange language, customs, and food.

Placement Decision

Traditionally students in 5th grade at Rodgers were placed in “clusters” and rotated between the four 5th grade teachers, each of whom taught a different subject. However, at the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year, rapid growth in the student population necessitated the addition of a new 5th grade classroom, and rather than disrupt the four-teacher cluster rotation system, it was decided that this new classroom would be “self-contained” (i.e., one teacher teaches all subjects). School administrators also decided before the beginning of the school year to put all three of the school’s 5th grade ELL students in the self-contained classroom, under the rationale that the teacher assigned to the class was bilingual in English and Spanish. However, this teacher did not have any bilingual or ESL certification or training, and the three ELLs assigned to her did not speak Spanish (they spoke Thai, Tagalog, and Swedish). The teacher was promoted after the first month of school to an administrative position at another school. As described in the vignette at the beginning of this article, Mrs. Moore was hired after one day of substituting at the school to take over the self-contained 5th grade classroom.

When Nitha and Bora arrived one month later, the administrators struggled with where to place them. They decided to keep the girls together in the same classroom and grade level, despite their age differences, so that they would feel less frightened and could provide support to each other in the classroom. It was further decided to place them in the self-contained classroom, as this would be less confusing (i.e., they would not have to switch

classrooms every hour). In addition it was where the other ELL students were placed, and thus would make it easier for the ESL teacher to pull them out. These decisions were made despite the fact that one of the rotation teachers had received some ESL training the previous summer, and that Mrs. Moore had none. Despite Mrs. Moore's lack of training and experience with ELL students, she worked hard to meet their needs in the classroom, and was a strong advocate for getting them help and support outside of the classroom, as will be discussed in the following sections.

Classroom instruction

Mrs. Moore had 25 students in her classroom when Nitha and Bora arrived. The three ELL students already in her classroom were at the intermediate and advanced levels of English language proficiency, and able to do most of the regular work in the class. Mrs. Moore described the first few days in her classroom with Nitha and Bora as "extremely challenging." The school's ESL teacher, Mrs. Leonard, was out that week attending meetings, and thus was not able to offer support. Mrs. Moore remembers, "The first day, I was in tears by lunch." The girls just sat at the back table and couldn't understand a word of what she was saying, nor could she understand them. Lunchtime, however, proved to be the first major challenge. Mrs. Moore struggled to help the girls pick out food in the cafeteria they could eat, and ended up arguing with the cafeteria manager over mandatory food choices and payment of the meal. The girls' application for free-reduced lunch had not yet been processed, so Mrs. Moore paid for them out of her own pocket. Other simple things proved to be major challenges as well,

such as just trying to help them get their backpacks at the end of day. Mrs. Moore recalled, "The first day was extremely overwhelming."

When Nitha and Bora first arrived, the principal suggested, "They will just want to be immersed in the classroom in English, so, they'll just sit there." But Mrs. Moore determined that simply letting them "just sit there" would not be acceptable:

They seemed almost frustrated because you can imagine, six hours of just sitting and listening and not knowing what anyone is saying, was not working. I didn't know what was going to happen the second day, but then I just decided, "you know what, I am going to start with colors." I had to get them started on something.

She found some very simple worksheets on colors the girls could do fairly independently. She admitted it was basically to keep them busy with something to do, but, as she said, "it was a start." Bora did not complain, but Mrs. Moore remembers that Nitha seemed a little insulted with this "baby work."

When Mrs. Leonard returned the following week, she was only able to work with Nitha and Bora for 30 minutes, three times a week. She knew they needed more assistance, but could not offer them more time because she was also covering two other schools. After a few weeks, Mrs. Moore continued to feel overwhelmed. She recalls:

I felt bad for them. I didn't have a lot of experience, and we don't have any resources in here for that level. And when I asked about resources, "Could I go to the elementary school to the ESL teachers and pull some of their stuff?"

and I was told "No," and that I needed to differentiate fifth-grade curriculum material. I said, "Great! Come show me how."

Despite her requests for assistance, no one came to show her what to do or how to help Nitha and Bora learn the regular 5th grade curriculum. Mrs. Moore realized she was on her own. A major focus of the regular instruction, she noted with regret, was to prepare students for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), and she was required to use a language arts program and a math curricular program that were specifically designed for that purpose. She determined that such instruction and materials were inappropriate and inaccessible for her two newcomers. Instead, she decided to differentiate her instruction by providing separate lessons and activities that were more appropriate to Nitha and Bora's level of English and academic skills.

Mrs. Moore bought several educational games that her other students could play with Nitha and Bora. She searched her garage at home and found many materials from the year she taught Kindergarten, including several books with audiotapes the girls could listen to and follow along with at the listening center. During the first week, she had students take them around the school to meet the administrators, staff, and specialists they would see each week. They took pictures of each person they met, then used the photos to create a book. Mrs. Moore had other students read to them and do simple activities with them in class. She created a classroom atmosphere where the other students were welcoming and anxious to help Nitha and Bora. Mrs. Moore noted that some took to "mothering" them.

In terms of academic instruction, Mrs. Moore prepared lessons and activities each day that were similar to what she was teaching the rest of the students, but at a more appropriate level. She obtained relevant worksheets and materials that were more at a 1st or 2nd grade level. For example, when she was working with her students on Math doing complex (TAKS-like) multi-step word problems, she had Nitha and Bora working on simple computational worksheets, and simple one-step word problems. In a social studies unit in which students were expected to learn the capital and basic facts about each state, Mrs. Moore worked with Nitha and Bora to help them understand what a state is, and to learn the names of each state. In science, while the rest of the students engaged in an in-depth lesson on the rock cycle, she worked with Nitha and Bora to understand what a “cycle” is, and had them do simple art-type projects on the water cycle and the life cycle of a butterfly. For language arts, as the other students worked on TAKS-preparatory reading comprehension exercises, Nitha and Bora worked on basic reading skills, and played sight word games and other activities to learn new vocabulary.

Mrs. Moore created a different set of 10 spelling words primarily consisting of sight words for Nitha and Bora each week. She attempted to explain the meaning of each word through pictures or by having them look up the words in their bilingual Khmer-English dictionary (see below), and would have them draw a picture next to each word to illustrate its meaning. She had an established in-class and homework routine for them to practice writing and spelling their words each week. Nitha and Bora studied hard and both would typically earn 100% on their spelling tests each week.

Still, Mrs. Moore was frustrated. She recognized that the Nitha and Bora needed more support than she was able to give them on her own. She found it increasingly difficult to work with them one-on-one each day. Whenever she attempted to do so, a long line of her other students needing help with their independent seatwork would form behind her. An aide assigned to the classroom part of the day began to work with Nitha and Bora, but she was frequently pulled out by the office to cover for other teachers or staff members. Mrs. Moore was discouraged as many of the lessons and activities she had prepared for the aide to do with Nitha and Bora would fall by the wayside.

After a few months, Mrs. Moore was so discouraged and overwhelmed that she called for a meeting with the administrators and other staff members. Together, they came up with a more comprehensive plan to meet Nitha and Bora's language and academic needs. Some of the components of this plan are outlined below.

Pull-out ESL

The school's ESL teacher, Mrs. Leonard, while relatively new to Rodgers Intermediate School, had over 27 years of ESL teaching experience. Prior to Nitha and Bora's arrival, Mrs. Leonard had only been working with five ELL students in the school, in addition to monitoring a handful of others who had exited from the program. Her time at the school was limited as she was also servicing two other schools in the district. As mentioned above, she initially only had 30 minutes, three times a week to work with Nitha and Bora, which she lamented was not nearly

enough. She had joked at one point with Mrs. Moore, calling herself the “drive-by ESL teacher.” She also did her best to provide materials for Mrs. Moore and offer her suggestions, but her schedule did not allow her to spend much time offering support.

Mrs. Leonard raised the issue with the district, reporting that her students at Rodgers needed more support than she was able to give. Finally, in February 2005, the district hired a full-time ESL teacher for one of the other school sites, thus allowing Mrs. Leonard to spend more time at Rodgers. From that point on, she was able to work with Nitha and Bora daily for one hour and fifteen minutes in the afternoon.

When Mrs. Leonard first came into the school, she found that the district had not adopted any specific ESL curricular programs or purchased many ESL supplemental materials for the 5th grade. Those materials that the school did have were, as she described them, “antiquated.” She used the small budget she had to purchase materials, and bought many more out of her own pocket. She also described her efforts to “beg and borrow” as many materials as she could from textbook company representatives and other teachers. Through these efforts she assembled an eclectic set of resources she could pull from as she tailored her instruction to the needs of each individual student.

The ESL classroom was in a bungalow which was colorfully decorated with a variety of charts and other visuals useful for teaching basic vocabulary, e.g., calendar, days of the week, months of the year, and shapes. Around the classroom on chalkboard ledges were displays of a large number of simple books, all related to a specific theme. This print-rich environment Mrs. Leonard created in her classroom was conducive to the language and

literacy development for ELL students (Hadaway, Vardell, and Young, 2002).

Nitha and Bora worked with Mrs. Leonard in a small group with one other girl from their class, an intermediate level ELL from Thailand. Mrs. Leonard described what it was like when she first started working with Nitha and Bora:

It was kind of slow going in the beginning. But I've known from my experiences in the past that that is to be expected and I needed to respect that. I just wanted to, first of all, make them feel comfortable and feel where they could be in an environment that was non-threatening. We know about that affective filter and how kids will shut down if they're not feeling comfortable about taking opportunities and risks to acquire any language or any learning.

Observations conducted in Mrs. Leonard's ESL classroom verified that she succeeded in creating the type of warm, non-threatening environment, which, as she herself noted, is important to lower the affective filter of students so that comprehensible input can be maximized (Krashen, 1985, 2003). It was apparent that Nitha and Bora were very comfortable in their ESL classroom. While they were typically quiet in their regular classroom, in here they were active, engaged, and unafraid to take risks in using their new language. Their ESL classroom created opportunities for the type of meaningful listening and speaking interactions which are necessary for ELLs to acquire English (Haley & Austin, 2003).

The students engaged in a wide variety of activities in the ESL classroom. Mrs. Leonard established a number of routines surrounding the calendar and the various charts around the room and utilized them to teach basic vocabulary. Each session, students

would pull out a slip of paper from a hat Mrs. Leopold would pass around, which indicated the routine they would be responsible for leading. These routines were fun and more game-like than repetitious drills or worksheet, and thus proved effective in helping the students learn new vocabulary (Nation, 2001).

Mrs. Leonard utilized thematic teaching and engaged students in meaningful hands-on interactive activities surrounding these themes (Freeman & Freeman, 1998). For example, for the theme "The five senses," Mrs. Leonard brought in many items from home for students to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. In one activity, students reached into a mystery box and used their sense of touch to guess what item was in the box. She read aloud simple books related to the five senses. Students made posters for each of the five senses by cutting pictures out of magazines. Students wrote in their journal completing sentences written on the board such as "I can _____ with my eyes" and "I can listen with my _____." During the theme of "plants," in addition to similar activities as those above, Mrs. Leonard engaged the students in hands-on experiments with growing plants from various types of seeds. These thematic lessons and others integrated listening, speaking, reading and writing in effective ways which helped these ELL students develop communicative competence in their new language (Lee & Van Patten, 2003).

As Nitha, Bora, and their classmate engaged in these activities, Mrs. Leonard did not simply let them work independently as she sat at her desk. Rather, she worked with them throughout, talking with them the entire time. She used the activities to model the key vocabulary and language needed to talk about the tasks they were completing, and to engage the students in

meaningful conversations to use their new vocabulary to accomplish the tasks she had given them. These strategies increased the students' opportunities for "incidental learning" of vocabulary, that is, learning vocabulary subconsciously by using language for communicative purposes (Schmitt, 2000). Mrs. Leonard adjusted her speech to a slower but appropriate pace for beginning ELLs, and she carefully controlled the vocabulary and structure of her sentences (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). She utilized repetition, gestures, visuals, and other techniques to make her speech understandable, thus increasing her students' comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985).

She also had the students engaged in a number of literacy activities, especially reading books appropriately matched to their language and reading level (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002). Mrs. Leonard had a number of guided-reading type books designed for emergent readers (Pinnell & Fountas, 1996), which contain simple repetitive sentences with ample visual support in the illustrations or photographs (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). For example, one book entitled *Do You Like My Pet?* (Tripp, 1999) had one simple sentence per page such as "Do you like my dog?" and "Do you like my duck?" with each being accompanied by a photograph of a child holding their respective pet animal. By using these books to teach vocabulary, and through repeated readings, soon Nitha and Bora had a large collection of books that they could read with confidence and pride.

Nitha and Bora clearly benefited from their time with Mrs. Leonard in the ESL pull-out classroom. They were at ease in a supportive environment, and Mrs. Leonard used her expertise to create a variety of meaningful, engaging, and fun activities to

support their English language acquisition (Beykont, 2002; Echevarria, 2002; Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Peregoy & Boyle, 2004). Given the small size of the group, Mrs. Leonard was able to give each student the kind of individual attention and tailored instruction that Mrs. Moore found was difficult to provide in her large regular classroom. As the months progressed, the amount of English the girls learned and used with their teacher, their classmates, and even with each other, increased dramatically.

Paraprofessional assistance

A major part of Mrs. Moore's frustration was not being able to spend enough classroom time with Nitha and Bora. Especially at the beginning, there was little that they could do independently. They needed someone to work with them the whole time to guide them through a worksheet or activity. Following her plea for help in the meeting with the administrators, they arranged for Mrs. Davis, a paraprofessional who had been assigned to the school counselor, to work with Nitha and Bora for an hour or more each morning. Mrs. Davis had been working at the school as a teacher's aide for over ten years, and at one point had also worked briefly as a substitute teacher. However, she did not hold teacher certification, nor had she previously worked with ELL students or received any type of ESL training. Nonetheless, she is a friendly and outgoing person, and was more than happy to work with Nitha and Bora. Reflecting back on what it was like when she first started working with them, Mrs. Davis described it as a real challenge given her lack of experience. She remembers trying to talk with them, but only getting blank stares in return: "They were

looking at me, like, what are you talking about? No clue!" In just a short time, however, Mrs. Davis found working with Nitha and Bora a "real joy." She described how she looked forward to working with them everyday, "It really gives me a good feeling because it feels like I can accomplish something with the girls, and they are so eager to learn." From observations of her sessions, it was readily apparent the Nitha and Bora adored Mrs. Davis as well.

Mrs. Davis' assistance made it possible for Mrs. Moore to plan more in-depth lessons and activities for Nitha and Bora. Mrs. Moore spent time each week planning lessons and gathering materials which were similar to what she was doing with her other students, but at a more appropriate language and academic level. Each day she would give Mrs. Davis the materials and instructions, and Mrs. Davis would do her best to help the girls understand what to do. She also began to supplement the lessons herself, and even started to do extra activities with them, such as teaching Nitha and Bora about Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas and other holidays. But mostly, she just talked with the girls. Unlike Mrs. Leonard, she did not appear to adjust her rate of speech or even attempt to carefully control her vocabulary. She just talked. Nevertheless, despite Nitha and Bora's limited vocabulary, after a couple of months, Mrs. Davis and the girls were genuinely communicating, albeit on a very basic level. They appeared to be able to understand each other and were clearly enjoying their conversations.

Reflecting back on Mrs. Davis' work, Mrs. Moore acknowledged that the academic work often took a back seat, but said she viewed their time with Mrs. Davis as "oral language

heaven.” Indeed it was. Like their time with Mrs. Leonard, Nitha and Bora had another set time during the day with a caring adult who simply took the time to talk with them, and thus created a risk-free environment to practice listening and speaking in their new language, usually (but not always) surrounding an academic task. While she may not have been aware of or known the technical terms, Mrs. Davis was successful in lowering Nitha and Bora’s affective filter, and provided ample comprehensible input, which leads to greater English language acquisition (Krashen, 2003).

Computer lab

Another support for Nitha and Bora came through the school’s computer lab. The lab, run by a paraprofessional, Mrs. Stone, had a number of older PC computers, and utilized a somewhat outdated software program by Compass Learning (see www.compasslearning.com for similar but more current programs). The software program contained self-guided lessons for reading and math, and were designed to start students at their appropriate reading and math levels and then help them progress to higher levels from there. The program kept track of their progress, and students could not move to the next lesson or level until they demonstrated sufficient progress by answering all questions within the current lesson correctly.

While this software program was not designed for ELL students, it nonetheless contained several features that proved to be supportive for Nitha and Bora. The program contained engaging and lively graphics. Students could wear headphone and hear all

instructions and other texts read aloud to them. If they read on their own, they could click on any word they did not know and hear it read aloud. If they continued to answer questions or do activities wrong, the computer would model the correct answer. The types of questions and activities were similar across the lessons; thus, once students completed a few lessons, they felt familiar and comfortable with the program. In addition, Mrs. Davis would frequently come into the lab with the girls to provide them with assistance, and Mrs. Stone also monitored their progress and provided help when needed.

Despite the fact that they were in a 5th grade classroom, all students were able to work simultaneously at their own level. Nitha and Bora started the Reading and Math programs at the Kindergarten level, and by early May they had both completed the K and 1st grade levels and began to work on Grade 2. Thus, over a seven-month period, both Nitha and Bora made over two years' progress in these important content areas.

Primary language support

One other significant support the school provided Nitha and Bora was assistance in their primary language (Jesness, 2004; Wright, in-press). Ovando, Combs and Collier (2006), assert that "the research evidence is very clear that first-language development provides crucial support for second language development," and note the importance of allowing beginning ESL students to use their first language (p. 154). As noted by Wright (in press), there are ways teachers can provide primary language support, even when they do not speak their students' languages.

Some of these strategies were utilized by the teachers and staff at Rodgers.

Mrs. Leopold, Mrs. Moore, and Mrs. Davis all allowed Nitha and Bora to speak to each other in Khmer.⁽¹⁾ Not only did this provide moral support, but it also enabled them to work together to comprehend academic tasks. When one of the girls understood a direction or a task, she would explain it to the other in Khmer. Nitha and Bora were also excited to receive two copies of a Khmer-English Picture Dictionary (Shapiro & Adelson-Goldstein, 1999) that Mrs. Leopold was able to obtain from a textbook representative she knew, who was willing to donate the dictionaries to the school. The girls were able to use the dictionaries in their classroom, and their teachers and others were also able to use them on occasion to point to pictures, words, and their Khmer translations when they had difficulty getting certain ideas across (Summers, 1988). Later, other relevant Khmer language materials were obtained covering social studies and math concepts taught in class. In one observation, Nitha made the connection between a social studies lesson Mrs. Moore was teaching and an entry in the Khmer social studies book she had been given. She quickly pulled out the book and turned to the appropriate section. The Khmer social studies text provided her with important background knowledge which helped her understand better the lesson being taught in class (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Teachers also encouraged Nitha and Bora to write notes in Khmer. Mrs. Moore even had them make a few posters in class, such as the days of the week, in which they were able to write in both English and Khmer. They would also sometimes write Khmer translations next to their spelling words.

However, Mrs. Moore, especially at the beginning, felt completely overwhelmed and frustrated as she and others had great difficulty even communicating with the girls. A colleague across the hall sympathetic to her plight suggested that they find a community volunteer who could speak Khmer. She suggested that with the large military presence in San Antonio, there had to be someone who could speak the language. She called one of the Air Force bases which had a school mentoring program. Unable to find someone who could speak Khmer, e-mails were sent out to different agencies and organizations in the community. One of the e-mails eventually made it to the University of Texas, San Antonio, where I had joined the faculty just two months prior.

When I received an e-mail about the school's need, I was both surprised and excited. San Antonio had a very small Cambodian population and I had assumed my Khmer language skills would be of little use here. The Air Force mentoring program put me in contact with the school's counselor, and a few weeks later I began volunteering at the school for an hour or more a week to provide Khmer primary language support. Mrs. Moore told me later that she was so pleased to learn that someone was coming to assist with native language support.

One of my first tasks was to get answers to a long list of questions Mrs. Moore and others had regarding the students' background, particularly in terms of their prior schooling and to what level they could read and write and do math in their own language. I talked to Nitha and Bora about their schooling in Cambodia and they described to me what they had learned in school prior to moving to the United States. Both proudly noted that they were top students in their class. After conducting a few

informal assessments, I determined that they had strong Khmer literacy skills, and that their math and computational skills were excellent by Cambodian grade-level standards, but far from what is expected of students in the same grade level in Texas. There were also a number of basic safety issues such as "Don't run out into the street." and "Use the cross walk." that the school was anxious for me to help them understand.

Once these issues were resolved, Mrs. Moore began planning lessons and selecting appropriate materials for me to work on with Nitha and Bora each week. She decided to have our Khmer primary language tutoring sessions focus primarily on math. As dictated by the federal No Child Left Behind policy, Nitha and Bora were exempt as newcomer ELLs from taking the Language Arts segment of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), but were nonetheless required to take the Math TAKS test in the Spring (Wiley & Wright, 2004; Wright, 2005). While Mrs. Moore had little expectation that Nitha and Bora would be able to pass the TAKS test after only a few months of schooling in the United States, she felt math would be an important area on which to focus. Mrs. Moore explained during the interview that she would save the "hard" stuff for me, meaning those mathematical concepts and procedures that she and Mrs. Davis were having difficulty explaining to Nitha and Bora in English. Mrs. Leonard also made a few requests on occasion of content she wanted to make sure the girls understood. On occasion there would also be work from social studies and science, and sometimes my services were needed by the teachers, counselor or nurse to help resolve small crises and misunderstandings, but the majority of the Khmer primary language support time focused on math instruction.

I found, as had the others above, that Nitha and Bora were intelligent, determined, hard working, and a joy to work with. Our initial sessions began with two- and three-digit addition and subtraction (with regrouping). As the school year progressed, we worked on fractions, decimals, money, probability, and solving one-step and later two-step word problems. I was impressed at how quickly they grasped new concepts once they were explained to them in their native language.

At the end of year, both Mrs. Moore and Mrs. Leonard commented on how effective they felt the primary language support had been. Mrs. Moore described it as “extremely helpful,” and commented:

First of all, it was helpful for me to see them light up when they know you are coming. They love it. And you can imagine, I mean, the one day a week they get to hear their language and they get to understand what's going on that whole afternoon period. ... And I can clearly see in the [math] story problems ... they're circling those key words, doing the best that they can.

Mrs. Leonard described the primary language support as “a tremendous help to Nitha and Bora,” and commented:

I can't say enough about all that you've done for the girls, ... taking time to visit with them, clarifying things, giving them some additional instruction. You have made the process so much better, not only for the kids, but [also] for us as their teachers.

Nitha, however, made the most telling comment. During one tutoring session we were working on fractions, which Mrs. Moore reported Nitha and Bora had been struggling with all week. After a very brief explanation, Nitha and Bora both let out an excited “Oh!” indicating they finally understood the concept. They both began to rapidly complete their fractions worksheets. About halfway through, Nitha said to me, “When you explain it in Khmer, it’s so easy.”

Nitha and Bora’s progress

Nitha and Bora began the school year over two months after the beginning of the school year, and entered the 5th grade not knowing a single word in English. They did not pass the Math TAKS test, nor did they become proficient in English after seven months of instruction. However, the progress they made both in learning English and academic content was impressive. At an end-of-the-year party in Mrs. Leonard’s ESL classroom, Nitha and Bora, along with the other ELL students, played host to their teachers, administrators and other school guests. They each had a basket full of books they eagerly and proudly read one-on-one with their guests. In their classroom and other areas of the school, they were able to hold basic conversations with their teachers and new friends. Bora even got in trouble on occasion for passing notes—written in English—to her friends in class. Both consistently earned high marks on their weekly spelling tests and other quizzes.

Mrs. Moore also noted significant improvement in Nitha and Bora’s math knowledge and skills. During the first month, she started them with math instruction at the kindergarten level. Seven

months later, she described Nitha as at-grade level in terms of computation, and at the 3rd to 4th grade level in terms of solving problems requiring greater use of language. Bora, who is younger, also made significant progress. Mrs. Moore reported that Bora was reading at about the 1st grade level, while Nitha was at about the 2nd grade level. Mrs. Moore described Nitha as "quite the reader," and found that she could decode at a much higher level than she could comprehend. But by the end of the year, Nitha was stating to read *Cam Jansen* chapter books (Adler & Natti, 2002), a popular series among students of her age.

Conclusion and implications

When two non-English-speaking Cambodian students enrolled at Rodgers Intermediate School, it would have been very easy for their teacher to simply let them sit in the back of a mainstream classroom to "sink-or-swim" (Baker & Jones, 1998). Unfortunately, this happens often at schools throughout the state and country, especially for many non-Spanish-speaking newly-arrived ELL students for whom bilingual programs may not be available. Corson (2001) makes a strong case for bilingual education, arguing that students should have the right to learn standard English *and* be educated in the "language that is learned at home." However, he acknowledges that it may not be practicable for schools to offer a bilingual program, particularly in schools like Rodgers where there are several different languages and only one or two speakers of each language. In these cases, Corson argues there are two principles that should be met: (a) students should have the right to "attend a school that shows full

respect for the language variety that is learned at home or valued most by them," and (b) students should have the right "to learn, to the highest level of proficiency possible, the standard language variety of wider communication used by the society as a whole" (p. 32).

The situation at Rogers Intermediate School was not perfect. Mistakes were made, and, in retrospect, there are things that the school administrators and teachers said they would likely do differently in terms of meeting Nitha and Bora's needs if they had the chance to start the school year over. Nonetheless, the efforts of the school appear to be consistent with Corson's principles outlined above. The teachers and staff showed respect for Nitha and Bora's native Khmer language, viewing it as a resource for learning rather than as a problem to be overcome (Ruiz, 1984). The teachers and staff were also determined to provide as much support as possible, using the resources they had within the school and community to help Nitha and Bora learn English and academic content to the highest levels possible.

The experience of Rogers Intermediate School has a number of implications for other teachers and their schools faced with similar challenges in meeting the language and educational needs of newly-arrived ELL students. The following implications represent lessons learned from this case study, and include recommendations for schools and teachers of newly-arrived ELL students, particularly when bilingual programs are not available or feasible:

- Differentiated classroom instruction – Newly-arrived ELLs with little to no English proficiency should

not be expected to be able to fully participate in the classroom's regular, often assessment-driven instruction (Wright & Choi, 2005). ELLs require language and content-area instruction which is appropriate to their current proficiency in English and academic ability, and which is specially designed to help them attain higher levels of English proficiency and academic knowledge. In the academic literature, this is referred to as specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) or "sheltered" instruction (Echevarria, 1998; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Peregoy & Boyle, 2004; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). Such instruction does not mean that teachers lower their expectations for newly-arrived ELLs. Successful teachers of ELL students do have high expectations, but these expectations are reasonable, and teachers provide the means for their students to obtain them. Teachers need to plan separate but relevant lessons, classroom activities, and homework. They also need to structure their classroom time so that they can work individually with their ELL students on a daily basis.

- **ESL instruction** – In the best case scenario, the classroom teacher is certified to provide ESL instruction within her own classroom (Peregoy & Boyle, 2004). However, this is frequently not the case. Pull-out ESL is often viewed in a negative light as students may miss out on important content-area instruction in their classroom, and it is difficult for pull-out ESL teachers to coordinate their teaching relevant to instruction taking place in the regular classrooms (Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006).

Nonetheless, as shown in this study, pull-out ESL is a better option than leaving students in a mainstream classroom all day where they receive little personalized attention or instruction appropriate to their level. An experienced ESL teacher can provide much needed individualized language instruction, especially for newly-arrived ELLs, which accelerates their acquisition of English.

- **Paraprofessionals** – Paraprofessionals can provide much needed assistance for ELL students. They can assist teachers in delivering differentiated instruction. When they work with ELLs one-on-one or in small groups, they can create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable using their new language for communicative and academic purposes. Teachers should not expect their paraprofessionals to plan instruction for ELLs. Rather, teachers need to carefully plan lessons and select activities and materials for the paraprofessionals to use which supports and supplements regular classroom content-area instruction.

- **Technology** – When properly used, computers can provide an additional means of differentiating instruction, providing students access to material appropriate to their level, and providing ELL students with visual and audio support (Butler-Pascoe & Wiburg, 2003; Haley & Austin, 2003). Teachers should work with their school technology specialist to select software for use on classroom computers and/or in the computer lab which supplements classroom instruction in the language and content areas, which allows

students to work at their own pace at a level appropriate to their language and academic proficiency level, and which provides ample scaffolding support enabling ELL students to successfully interact with and learn from the program.

- **Primary language support** – Students' native languages are not problems to be overcome, but a resource for learning language and academic content (Ruiz, 1984). Teachers should allow ELL students to use their native language in the classroom, as this helps to create a warm and welcoming environment conducive to learning a new language (Jesness, 2004; Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006; Wright, in press). When teachers allow and help students to use bilingual dictionaries, and allow students to talk to each other in their language, they enable their ELL students to complete work and learn new concepts and language they may not be able to otherwise (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Summers, 1988). When schools lack personnel who can speak students' native languages, teachers can turn to the community for help from volunteers who can come in to provide much needed primary language support.

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¹ "Khmer" and "Cambodian" are frequently used interchangeably to refer to both the people and their language. In this paper, I use Khmer (pronounced by native speakers as Khmai) to refer to the language, and Cambodian to refer to the people.