



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from The Multilingual and Multicultural Center

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Sociocultural Issues in Language Minority Education

THE ROLE OF EXPLICIT TEACHING WITH SUDANESE LEARNERS

The ongoing civil strife in Sudan has resulted in great personal suffering and in an extraordinary pattern of individual and family migration across central and eastern Africa. The worldwide publicity about the saga of the 'Lost Boys' and the recent turmoil in Darfur, for example, have led to a diaspora of the many and varied cultures inhabiting the geographical confines of non-Arabic Sudan. As a result, many Sudanese refugee children are now in our schools. This *Bulletin* examines the complex community of Sudanese learners and suggests some teaching strategies.

A PROFILE OF THE COMMUNITY

Although 70% of the Sudanese population are Muslims living mainly in the north, refugee families in the U.S. come from the southern and western areas and are overwhelmingly Christian. Of the 100 or so languages represented in the tribes of southern Sudan, Acholi, Bari, Dinka, Nuer and Zande are the principal linguistic/cultural groups represented in U.S. public schools. Here are some of their characteristics:

1. The overwhelming rural, agrarian nature of this adult Sudanese population imposes many challenges to acculturation in the U.S.

The language of instruction in Sudanese schools is Arabic; home languages such as Acholi, Bari, Dinka, Nuer, and Zande are only transmitted orally. Within the minimal schooling of typical Sudanese, their literacy level is quite basic. Lacking experience with the western complexities of modern communication, technology, and business, many Sudanese generally also lack comparable work, lifestyle, or family living experiences characteristic of U.S. daily living.

2. Most children have little or no schooling and much of it is disrupted. It is estimated that as many as three quarters of the Sudanese refugee population have minimal schooling at best. Ironically, children with the most continuous prior schooling are those who received it through extended stay in refugee camps. Unsettling political and social conditions in villages have led to disruptions to normal daily life, and this has negatively affected schooling.

3. Although education is generally valued, there is little understanding of how schooling should be supported for the children to become economically and socially successful. Unless children are counseled in a consistent manner by teachers or other significant American advisors,

they will be at risk of dropping out or not achieving enough education to be successful.

4. *The communal nature of Sudanese cultural groups makes it difficult for learners to adapt to the independent, individual decision-making, assertive style required for successful academic and business interactions.* Sudanese children are taught that a quiet, respectful demeanor, with eyes averted from the speaker as a sign of respect, is highly valued. Unless Sudanese children adapt to the more direct, proactive, interactive, and reflective forms of communication valued in U.S. classrooms, they will continue to struggle in their schooling.

ASSISTING WITH EXPLICIT TEACHING PRACTICES

In general, learners such as the Sudanese, otherwise known as SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education) come from a dramatically different cultural environment and have relatively minimal schooling experiences. It is incumbent upon teachers to be more culturally aware of and committed to delivering explicit instruction. This includes, but is not confined to, knowing the details of their background experiences as revealed in student file information and discussions with parents and the learners themselves; setting "thinking small" goals in terms of increments of desired learning and schooling behavior; and building adaptation to the American school environment as part of instruction.

The following are some more specific suggestions:

1. *Structure is extremely important; make the implicit explicit, i.e., model classroom behavior and instructional strategies in spoken, written, or visual formats.* On the blackboard, write out the content and language objective for the day's lesson(s); post classroom routines on the wall for reference; engage in 'think-alouds',

vocalizing behaviors and strategies otherwise assumed and unspoken. Asking learners to visualize, then orally describe, behaviors is useful, punctuated by asking 'why' a particular behavior needs to be done. The four-phase approach of explaining, modeling, guided practice, and independent practice may need to be done repeatedly. The adage "teach, don't prompt" is important: rather than referring to previously taught information, it may be necessary to reteach that information several times rather than referring to the information in a prompt-like fashion.

2. *Connect with parents to help forge a bond regarding the learner's schooling and to create greater understanding about how to navigate the complex landscape of academic learning.* Perhaps the most useful action that can be taken in this regard is a home visit. The parent-school connection is almost universally unknown in other cultures; as a result, initial contacts with families *in their home environment* can be of enormous benefit in revealing culturally-based behavior and communication styles. Accompanied by an interpreter and prepared with relevant questions, teachers can observe culturally-different behavior in context and develop a sense of partnership, explaining basic schooling practices in a non-threatening, anxiety-reducing environment. It will result, as well, in laying the foundation for future parental involvement in the schooling of their children.

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