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700 words

Meet my students.

Katia,* 16, finished 10th grade in Brazil. Highly literate, she'll be able to pass the MCAS in a few years, though she'll say "Give for me the book" all her life.

Juan, 17, struggles to complete high school assignments using the 5th grade education he received in his country. "One day in the supermak[et] two men clothing the black me at least," he starts his story about robbers.

Then there's Chun, 15, who can complete grammar exercises fairly accurately, but is near-impossible to understand when he speaks.

If Ballot Question 2 passes, these students will have one year with me to learn enough English to be able to do the same work as American students.

Yesterday we read a novelette in my English as a Second Language 1 (ESL-1) class. "Matty is a black and brown dog. He lives with the Robinson family. He loves playing with Judy Robinson. Judy throws balls for him." Except for "throw," my students know most of the words in this present-tense story.

Next year, if Question 2 passes, they'll be reading: "At that same moment, Dr. Masakazu Fujii was settling down cross-legged to read the Osaka Asahi on the porch of his private hospital, over-hanging one of the seven deltaic rivers which divide Hiroshima." I count seven words or terms they won't understand in just this sentence.

After my class, Katia heads to Biology, which she takes in Portuguese. A future physical therapist, Katia's glad she won't fall behind in her science classes; she wants to take physics before graduating. Juan goes to his Spanish math class. He's in bilingual Math Skills 1 because he still forgets to carry when adding and when he sees $758 / 26$, can never figure out how to estimate how many times 26 goes into 75. If Question 2 passes, next year, he'll be put in (American) Math Skills II, using a textbook that tells him to "use an equation to model the relationship in each table."

Then there's Chun, who's failing ESL History. "I no understanding teacher, book," he says. "I know," I comfort him, all too familiar with the difficulties he is facing in a class with more knowledgeable ESL-2 and ESL-3 students. "Your class is very, very hard because you are in ESL-1. Next year, you are in ESL-2 and next year you understand the book." Oops, I forgot. Next year he'll be taking World History, in a mainstream class with all American students and a teacher who has never been trained in working with limited English proficient students. What do you think the chances are he'll pass the class?

At the end of the year, Katia and Juan are quite verbal, but their academic skills are far below their oral skills. Next year, will their American teachers teach them passive voice ("was eaten") or the perfect tense ("have gone"), which I didn't cover at all in ESL-1, but which their American classmates already know? If they don't learn correct grammar in English (or ESL) class, then aren't we condemning them to inferior English all their lives?

Meet one more student in my school: Carla Lopez. In order to get in touch with her cultural roots, Carla's taking Spanish-1 this year. Not only do colleges require a foreign language, but if you're bilingual you bring both languages to any career you embark upon. Our society knows how important it is to be bilingual.

Unless of course your first language isn't English. In which case, you're not allowed to read or write in your mother tongue. While Carla takes Spanish II, Juan will be prohibited from taking any classes in Spanish, even Spanish Language and Culture, where the teacher patiently reminds the students to capitalize at the beginning of a sentence and use periods.

"I am first day in America. I see have some people in the my country is different," Chun writes on his Final Exam essay. This is a boy who has made wonderful progress this year. But does he sound ready to go to American classes next year?

Vote NO on Question 2 in November. Give my students the time they need to learn English. One year isn't enough.

*students are composites; writing samples are actual

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