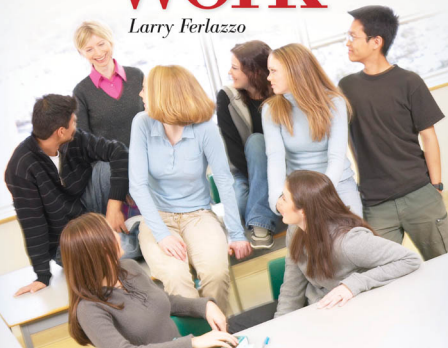


ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Teaching
Strategies
Wthat
Work

Larry Ferlazzo



English Language Learners

Teaching Strategies that Work

Larry Ferlazzo



LINWORTH

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About the Author

LARRY FERLAZZO has taught English and social studies—primarily to English language learners—at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento for six years. Prior to becoming a teacher, he spent 20 years working as a community organizer assisting low- and moderate-income families improve their communities. He has won numerous awards, including the Leadership for a Changing World award from the Ford Foundation, the International Reading Association Presidential Award for Reading and Technology, and the Sacramento State College of Education’s Education Partnership Award. He writes a blog for teachers about working with English language learners (<http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/>) and has a Web site for students (<http://larryferlazzo.com/>). He is also the author (with Lorie Hammond) of the book *Building Parent Engagement in Schools*.

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Introduction

I was waiting in line for one of the school's copy machines to become available. Another teacher approached me.

"You just got the class of the Hmong students who came from Thailand and have never been in school before, right?" he asked. I confirmed what he said.

"Boy, I can't imagine what that must be like," he continued. "They can't speak a word of English. I bet they can't read their own language, and you probably have to teach them just how to hold a pencil. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes."

"I love the class," I replied. "The students are eager to learn, they've got incredible life experiences, and I'm getting intellectually challenged, big time, on how to connect the two." I went on to share some examples of what we had been doing, including creating models of traditional Hmong and American homes to compare which ones were designed better to keep cooler or warmer; drawing and describing traditional Hmong "story cloths," which told Hmong history; and looking at the differences and similarities between how Native Americans were treated in this country and what the Hmong experience was.

"Wow," the teacher said as he left the copy room. "I wonder how I could get to teach that class next year?"

This book shares practical experiences in looking at teaching English language learners and others through a lens of *assets* and not *deficits*. This perspective draws on my 20 years of being a community organizer prior to becoming a public school teacher, as well as an extensive review of supporting research.

Community organizing is about developing leaders and helping them improve their lives. Organizing is about helping people, many of whom are initially reluctant to participate, learn a *new language* of how to engage in the world and with each other. It is about helping them to use their own traditions and stories to re-imagine themselves and their dreams. It is about helping them tap into their own intrinsic motivation and embark on a journey of action, discovery, and learning. It is about helping them develop the confidence to take risks, make mistakes and learn from them, try new things, and develop a discipline of self-reflection. Importantly, it is about doing these things through enforcing what Saul Alinsky, the father of modern-day community organizing, called the "Iron Rule": *Never do for others what they can do for themselves. Never.* It is about their energy driving this journey. And it is about *the organizer learning* as much as it is about *the organizer teaching*.

These same principles can be effective guides for educators in schools.

Guiding Teaching and Learning Principles

Help students learn a *new language* of how to engage in the world and with each other.

Help students use their own traditions and stories to re-imagine themselves and their dreams.
Help students tap into their own intrinsic motivation and embark on a journey of action, discovery, and learning.
Help students develop the confidence to take risks, make mistakes and learn from them, try new things, and develop a discipline of self-reflection.
Never do for students what they can do for themselves.

This book is focused on converting these principles to concrete actions in schools, which can, as the research in the following chapters shows, mobilize and motivate English language learners in ways we—and they—might never have considered possible. Applying these principles in the classroom can help nonnative English speakers develop faster and deeper command of the English language, higher-level thinking skills, resiliency (the ability to move forward despite hardships and obstacles), and self-confidence—all of which can result in greater levels of academic achievement. Another outcome can be educators becoming more intellectually stimulated and professionally energized. Someone once said that schools are where younger people go to see older people work. That is definitely not the case in classrooms where these principles play a consistent role. The purpose of this book is not to pile on more work for teachers to do. Instead, it will provide suggestions on how to use these principles to help teachers do what they want to do anyway—just in a way that is driven by *student* energy instead of teacher energy.

Using these principles in communities results in dramatic concrete improvements, and the same can happen in schools. But for organizers, the best results are seeing how dramatically people can change *themselves* based on what they learn through community organizing—how to give and receive constructive critique, how to lead and guide diverse groups, how to confidently confront challenges, and how to take the initiative to create change. They can develop a burning desire to learn and can often surprise themselves with their capacity to excel with difficult tasks.

Seeing these kinds of results caused me to wonder how much better people's lives could be if they developed effective leadership skills at a younger age. I wanted to help people learn to think critically and act confidently as they were growing up, rather than waiting until they were adults. This desire, and my belief that many of the organizing strategies that worked successfully with adults could benefit teenagers and younger children, prompted my decision to become a teacher.

Although I had seen these organizing principles work effectively with people from all ethnicities and economic backgrounds (just as I have found the application of these principles to the classroom successful with English language learners and native English speakers alike), I was particularly interested in using them with English language learners. One reason was personal. I grew up in an immigrant household in New York City and believe that experiences I had growing up helped develop my desire to use community organizing, both in and out of school, with newcomers to the United States.

One incident in particular stands out. My Uncle Horace was always spoken of in my family as having been a brilliant child, though a bit rambunctious in school. My grandmother was a new

immigrant from Italy who had been deserted by her husband and had three children to support. She didn't really understand what school staff wanted her to do when they met with her about Horace's behavior in the late 1930s. As my father told the story, they brought some papers for her to sign, and told her they wanted to help and send him to a hospital for a short time. Though she didn't necessarily understand, she knew this was America, and figured that these well-meaning school officials only wanted the best for her oldest son.

Horace, like a number of other children who were considered behavior problems at that time, received an experimental lobotomy shortly thereafter, and had to spend the remaining 50 years of his life in a state hospital. It seemed to me that you could see the pain in my grandmother's eyes whenever she spoke of Horace and whenever my father brought him to visit us. I remember the childlike man who was always looking at his watch to ensure he was returned to the hospital on time. I always felt that my grandmother never forgave herself for allowing him to be taken away.

I learned several lessons from this story. People who felt powerless could be intimidated and bullied by those representing institutions of power. Instead, low-income people needed to feel capable and competent in dealing with so-called experts. And newcomers to the United States were even more vulnerable to manipulation because of their unfamiliarity with the English language and American political and legal system.

Years later, my father became a teacher. And though he left it as a full-time job because he felt he couldn't support a growing family on a teacher's salary, it was his first love, and he continued to teach at night. In fact, he taught ESL classes. I remember him coming home late full of energy. He told me once, "Larry, I don't want to teach my students to survive in the United States. I want them to learn to *thrive!*"

After I made a decision to become a classroom teacher, and to focus on working with newcomers, I began to observe classes that had large numbers of English language learners to see what I might be getting myself into. I also began talking with immigrant leaders of our community organization to learn about their classroom experiences, those of their friends, and those of their children. Through these observations and conversations, I developed an even greater determination to see how I could incorporate the principles outlined in this chapter into my teaching.

I saw and learned how older English language learners were often treated in schools. Many teachers taught middle and high school students as if they were little children, using simplistic activities that denigrated the sophisticated reasoning skills and life experiences that young adolescents and teenagers brought to the classroom. Then and now, many educators looked through the lens of a deficit model that focused only on students' limited English skills and not on the wealth of their prior knowledge. Consequently, many students lost interest in school and never discovered how to push past the early frustrations of learning another language so they could continue their education.

In contrast, the following methods can help students become cocreators of their education, without being constrained by their limited English skills. I will explain each in greater detail throughout the book, including their basis in research and many practical examples of how to apply them with students.