From the Classroom to the Community: A Fifteen-Year Experiment in Refugee Education

Donald A. Ranard & Margo Pfleger (Eds.) (1995)
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Are you an adult ESL literacy teacher? Are you interested in the educational background of your refugee students prior to arrival in the U.S.? From the Classroom to the Community: A Fifteen-Year Experiment in Refugee Education traces the beginnings of refugee education in Southeast Asia. It is a collection of essays that chronicles the refugee program coordinated by the U.S. Department of State in Southeast Asia between 1980 and 1995. During this period over half a million refugees participated in the program.

In the first chapter, Ann Morgan (U.S. Department of State) gives compelling testimony for the importance of running these types of educational programs outside the United States. First and foremost is the cost factor. It would cost approximately five times as much to run the same program inside the United States (p. 5). In addition, her argument continues, by providing English and cultural instruction prior to immigration, it was hoped that assimilation would occur at an earlier point.

Much attention is paid in the book to varying opinions concerning whether the U.S. should even be running refugee education programs outside the United States. Morgan, mostly in response to those whose grandparents came to the U.S. and learned English inside of a week, asserts that this is no longer 1920 and those fictional grandparents were, for the most part, not refugees. Another difference, she claims, is that, for those earlier immigrants, the learning curve was not so tremendous. Employment opportunities in the "New World" were not vastly different from those in the old country. In contrast, it is common for a Southeast Asian refugee to come to the U.S. with little or no education in any language, and for some, without even the ability to hold a pencil. It was not so easy for the rice farmers or tricycle drivers from Cambodia and Laos to transfer their skills into productive employment in the America of today (p. 7). It is for these people, says Morgan, that we must provide additional training prior to coming to the United States, including English language instruction.

Ranard and Pfleger provide an in-depth perspective on the day-to-day machinations of the program. The students were initially tested and placed into five different levels, with Level A being for those students not literate in any language. Those few students who placed above Level E were given jobs as instructional aides or in [-1-] other education-related assignments. Class size was limited to 20, with the lowest level having fewer than that number. The cultural orientation courses were larger and were grouped according to the students' native language. After two years, the program began providing vocational ESL courses in addition to the current instruction. These classes were taught in English and students were grouped according to the level of their English proficiency.

Initially, most of the students were male heads of households. It was felt that the family member with the greatest need to learn English should be the one provided with the opportunity. Culturally speaking, it was highly likely that the male would be the employed member of the family upon arrival in the U.S. Soon the program was opened up to other family members. It became clear to a number of people that the family's success or failure in the U.S. was directly related to the mental well-being of the women. It was the women who maintained the home, raised the children, and were most responsible for integration into American culture, but who lacked even the most basic skills, including English, with which to succeed. A great sense of isolation for these women was an all-too-common occurrence. Although providing English instruction did not solve all these women's problems with living in the U.S., it did provide them with a greater opportunity, through newly-acquired skills, to succeed.

Teacher education played an important role in this refugee education model. It was a requirement that all instructors receive 10 hours of teacher training each week. Teachers in the program were primarily Indonesian, Thai, and Filipino. Although the teachers were exceptional speakers of English and college graduates, they had little experience with more learner-centered approaches. Since the program was competency-based (as opposed to grammar-based), it soon became apparent that some form of teacher training must occur. The program initiated a team approach to staff development. In sessions coordinated by language and cross-cultural specialists, teachers met every week to plan lessons and to share various techniques and methods. Eventually the teacher education component became so structured that, at one site, courses in second language acquisition and cross-cultural education were offered, and it even became possible to earn a graduate degree in the field (in part due to ties with local colleges).

The above is only a small sampling of what is contained in this work. There is also an intriguing chapter on the first language classes which were conducted. Although more controversial than even the ESL classes, they provided students with the opportunity to become literate in their home language and learn skills which could be transferred to their second language. This method is now certainly supported by the research of a number of scholars. [-2-]

Ranard and Pfleger, as editors, have done a superior job in completely covering the history of an important event and place in the ESL field. Certainly they have gone for quality over quantity, which makes the reading so much more pleasurable. This book would be a
With the closing of the refugee camps in 1995, this book provides an important look back at an innovative program. Why is it important to study a program that no longer exists? One reason is that it was so revolutionary. No where else in the world has English been taught to so many people in such a unique setting. Let us not forget that, the world being what it is, the techniques learned there will probably be needed again in other refugee camps and other situations around the world.

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