

# Refugee Children with Low Literacy Skills or Interrupted Education: Identifying Challenges and Strategies

Dr. Dina Birman



Photo: Rich Wildau  
Nairobi, Kenya

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Cover photo is from Nairobi, Kenya at the Kakuma Refugee Camp and was taken by Rich Wildau.

For further information about the Spring Institute's English Language Training Technical Assistance (ELT/TA) Grant please contact Burna L. Dunn, ELT/TA Project Director, 1610 Emerson Street, Denver, CO 80218. Phone (303) 863-0188. Fax (303) 863-0178, Email <elt@springinstitute.org>



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## Forward

A woman at a workshop I attended several years ago circulated a quotation on how to define success that listed items that were somewhat mundane and subtle in nature. Items noted in the quote were things that we might overlook when thinking about success because they weren't noteworthy except within a very limited circle of acquaintances. It reminded me of the semester at college when I worked with a special education student, and her victory after fifteen weeks was to be able to blow out a candle. Most of us, most of the time, want to see larger measures of progress. We might even have the thought this work was a waste of our time if we could point only to a student blowing out a candle after fifteen weeks of intensive one on one tutoring.

Some of the newer refugee populations have been particularly challenging because we haven't labeled those small gains as success, and, we fear, at some level, the reason those gains are so miniscule is we haven't done something we could or should have done. So we search for how to teach low level literacy students with no previous formal education, and we hope that someone else will have an answer or **the** answer.

This booklet will provide our ideas to this point about what you might want to consider when teaching students with low literacy levels or whose schooling has been interrupted. We will make some suggestions and talk about some classroom strategies, but, there are so many variables in your situations – newcomer programs, no newcomer programs, pullouts, no pullouts, translation, no translation, parent involvement, no parent involvement, and on and on, that you will have to adapt what is here to your local situation. It re-affirms that many of your instincts are very good and much of what you do is very appropriate, but that perhaps our framework for what we expect of our students, how quickly we expect it, and what we look for as measures of progress may need to be re-examined.

Carl Jung once said no problem ever gets solved; what happens is we begin to look at the problem in a different light and it changes and we change. We hope to be able to bring additional perspectives to the problems teachers face as they work with these challenging populations.

The Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning has been designated by the Federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to provide technical assistance for English Language Training programs serving refugees.

Burna L. Dunn, ELT/TA Project Director (Editor)

## **Part One: School Scenarios**

A new wave of refugees is entering the country, many of them coming from refugee camps in Africa. They have lived most of their lives in refugee camps and some of the children were born there. Because these children have either never been in school, or have only attended make-shift schools in refugee camps, entering the U.S. schools is challenging for them. In turn, the schools face challenges in how to help them become integrated into the school, given their lack of knowledge of school culture and the accountability for progress in programs like No Child Left Behind. Here are some examples of situations that teachers have encountered with these children:

A refugee child is placed in a mainstream classroom where he cannot follow along with the rest of the class. The teacher is unable to devote one-on-one attention to him and tries to give him some materials to work on. However, the child does not seem to know what to do with the work given to him. Sometimes he wanders out of the classroom, and the teacher doesn't know where he is.

A group of refugee children attend pull-out ESL class together. Whenever the teacher distributes anything to the children, such as pencils, workbooks, or special treats on holidays, the children seem very nervous, and are constantly checking to make sure they got the same item and amount as the others. Whenever they work on classroom tasks they constantly check each others' papers and provide answers for one another. When a teacher calls on one of them, the others yell out answers. When a teacher asks each of them to work independently they still check each other's work and copy from each other. They continually call out the teacher's name to help them with each task and check their answers. This makes it very difficult for the teacher to maintain order in the classroom, and to make sure all the children stay on task.

Several refugee children have acted wildly in the school. They didn't seem to respond to requests; they have sometimes kicked other children, or have gotten up on top of desks and jumped down. Another day one child threw a chair at another child. One day a child actually hit a teacher in the face. These types of behavior have raised safety concerns for the school, and they are uncertain about what to do.

A fight breaks out between a refugee child and another student on St. Patrick's Day. Upon further examination, it turns out that a U.S. born child pinched the refugee child because he wasn't wearing green. The refugee child assumed that the other one was picking a fight and hit him.

A refugee girl who had been born in a refugee camp does not seem to be making much progress in school. After many months in a pull-out ESL classroom, as well as in a mainstream classroom for the rest of the day, she remains very quiet. Although she has memorized and can recite the alphabet and single digit numbers, she has not learned to recognize them by sight. She is able to color in a work book, but needs constant one-on-one attention to show her how to complete the work.

## **Part Two: Teacher Challenges**

As seen in the above examples, teachers struggle with several kinds of challenges in working with these children:

- How to help them learn English and at the same time help them develop literacy and content skills so that they catch up academically to their U.S. born peers
- How to communicate to them behavioral expectations of a U.S. school, given that they may have never been in a school and don't know what's expected of them
- What to do when they misbehave, break school rules, endanger themselves or other children

## **Part Three: What Can Teachers Do To Help These Children?**

### ***Understand where these children are coming from***

These refugee children come from complicated war-torn situations, sometimes living in refugee camps for many years without having a sense of when and where they may be able to have a life with more permanence and predictability. These children and their families can help educate teachers and the other students about where they came from and why. A number of materials have been created to help tell the stories of their plight, and teachers can use them in the classroom to help educate the other children, as well as give opportunities for the newly arrived children to tell their stories to the extent that they can and are comfortable doing so. Pictures, picture books and films can be particularly useful.

Living in refugee camps and through war-torn situations has taught these children a number of survival skills. Some of them have excellent conversational English that they may have used to help their families to communicate while in the camp. Many of them have learned to make sure that they are getting their fair share when any kind of resources get distributed where it could have literally been a matter of life and death. This may be what teachers see in the classroom when they hand out pencils or cupcakes: the children seem very concerned about making sure that they get theirs. They are ready to defend themselves when attacked physically. They may not be used to being separated from their families and siblings, and have learned to look out for one another. They may have learned to creatively play and interact with one another even in the absence of toys or recreational facilities, creatively constructing games and activities out of objects and places available to them. All of these behaviors were probably very adaptive for them in refugee camps. However, they may not always serve them well as they enter American schools. In addition, they don't know what's expected of them in these schools. As a result, these children are trying to learn what's expected of them at school, and help adapt their ways of behaving to this new environment.

### ***Understand what culture shock is***

People who encounter a different culture sometimes experience culture shock [See Appendix A – The Stages of Cultural Adaptation]. In many classrooms with students from refugee backgrounds, both teachers and students experience

culture shock to a greater extent than with many other refugee children because the differences between where the children came from and where they are now are so vast. Imagine children who have great survival skills, but don't know how to use a Western style bathroom, have never used a crayon, and have never sat in a chair for an extended period of time. They are not used to being alone, or performing tasks alone. How can a teacher involve such children in classroom activities?

### ***Understand the importance of the ESL classroom***

While the children are trying to understand their new environment and adapt to it, many things are confusing to them. The ESL classroom, however, is often a “safe space”, where they are together with other children from their country. ESL classrooms are usually smaller than regular classrooms and allow the children to get more attention and develop a special relationship with the teacher. The ESL teacher may focus on teaching them “survival skills” in their new environment, and often becomes an advocate for these children in the school. As a result, the ESL classroom is a very important and special place.

### ***Understand how to integrate students into the larger school community***

Mainstream classrooms are also very important for refugee children to participate in because they are places where they can learn to interact with other children and start to become integrated into school activities. However, being in mainstream classrooms can also be a lot more stressful for them. Refugee children are often withdrawn and quiet in their mainstream classrooms, or do things that get them into trouble with the teacher and other students. It is particularly difficult for mainstream teachers, who have a whole classroom of mainstream students to teach, to attend to the special needs of the refugee child.

### ***Understand how to work with and support all teachers who work with the refugee student***

Communication between the mainstream and ESL teacher can be extremely valuable. These teachers often see very different behaviors in the same child. They may be able to offer each other ideas, and coordinate learning activities that can transfer from ESL to the mainstream classroom or the other way around.



## Part Four: Behavioral Expectations

Teachers can help address many of the challenges in working with these children by setting clear and consistent expectations for behavior. Because many of these children have never been in school, they need to learn “school readiness”, in the same way that it is taught in the United States in pre-schools. For example, like pre-school aged children, refugee children with no prior education need to learn:

- **What’s expected of them in the school setting** without the presence and supervision of a parent. They are used to having their parent teach them what’s appropriate, or not, at home, but now they are expected to respond to a different authority figure – the teacher.
- **How to handle school materials**, such as pencils, notebooks, and books, including simple rules such as “one does not write in books, but it’s ok to write and color in workbooks”.
- **What behaviors are allowed and disallowed, where, and when.** For example, is it okay to run in the hallway, between desks in the classroom, or in the school gym, or go to the playground to play on the swing set? Are there specific times when it’s okay to do these things? How do children know that it’s time for recess?
- **That it’s okay to be separated from their parents.** Children first entering pre-school often have great problems separating from their parents. They may cry for extended periods of time, and parents find it very difficult to leave them. Refugee children have traveled as part of a large group, and often live together in cramped apartments with many people. As a result, they are rarely alone. When they enter school, they are immediately separated not only from their parents, but also from their siblings, who are placed into different age-appropriate classrooms.

Many of the goals of pre-schools are to teach children about school norms, materials, and appropriate behaviors to help orient them to being in school. However, many refugee children have never received such an orientation. For them, entering the school building involves trying to figure out all of these things mentioned above. Because these children are only beginning to learn English and may have very low literacy skills, the same kinds of teaching techniques used by kindergarten teachers may be helpful. At the same time because these children are older, these skills, rules and expectations may need to be taught to them in slightly different ways from the ways in which they are taught to pre-schoolers. Also refugee children may be able to learn more quickly than pre-school age children.

### ***Activities to teach behavioral expectations:***

- **Use visual aids and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) materials** (See Appendix B), post rules, post pictures of activities that are expected of children.
  
- **Use physical activities** when possible, that are designed to demonstrate concepts and expectations; for example, demonstrate a behavior, having a child repeat the behavior, then have another child repeat the behavior. Then have a student act as the teacher.
  
- **Start small, and build skills incrementally.** Because the culture shock is so great and the differences in behavioral expectations across cultures and types of schools are so large, the learning will take time. It is important that teachers pick the few most important skills that they want to teach and add new skills incrementally.
  
- **Small group cooperative activities.** Refugee children are frequently unable to participate in cooperative activities in their mainstream classrooms because they cannot keep up with the language and course material. In ESL classrooms it can also be difficult to work cooperatively because children are often at very different levels of English, and seem to require individualized instruction. At the same time, cooperative activities can be great opportunities to teach them how they are expected to work with other children, how to share materials. Such activities can also be used to teach children that at some times it is appropriate for them to work together, while at other times (such as during testing) it is not.
  
- **Mentoring or pairing children for activities.** Giving a refugee child a “buddy” can be one way to make sure that he or she is following along with the class, and can help provide some support for the child. Refugee children can be paired with each other in a mainstream classroom; with a mainstream child during particular activities, such as field trips; or with another refugee child with better English skills who can help teach the child about the school. Having a partner can be very supportive for the child, and can help the teacher.

### ***Behavior Management tools:***

Behavior management is a set of teaching tools that can be used to teach behaviors to children. Because refugee children need to learn about even the

most basic behaviors in school, use of behavior management and non-verbal techniques can be particularly effective. Here are some specific tools that teachers can use:

- **Rewards.** Children will learn to repeat behaviors that they are rewarded for. With many refugee children even the most simple rewards can be effective, such as praising them for what they've done. Other ways of providing rewards are to let children collect points for a larger reward at the end of the week, such as a small gift. For many refugee children small items, such as a pencil, or a piece of candy, can be powerful rewards. It is also possible to set up group rewards. For example, if the class is quiet or stays on task, at the end of the week they may earn the right to do an activity that they like, such as play an educational game during class.
- **Focus on the positive.** Children will learn quicker if teachers “catch them doing something right” and reward them for it.
- **Modeling.** Children learn by watching other children get reinforced for a behavior. So praising or giving a reward to a child publicly can be an effective way to teach the others.
- **Cueing.** Cueing is something the teacher does to help the children know that it is time to transition to a new activity. For example, if children have a difficult time settling down at their desks at the beginning of class, the teacher can develop a cue, such as playing a few bars of a particular music piece or dimming the lights. This “cue” will become easily recognized by the children quickly, and when they see or hear it they will know what the teacher wants them to do.
- **Build routines.** Children love routines, and cues are one way to build routines into their classroom experiences. Routines are helpful to refugee children psychologically: they introduce structure into their school experience and help make it more predictable. It can be very comforting to have particular activities that they start to look forward to. Routines and cueing can also reduce the need for teachers to constantly monitor the children, and can help build independence.
- **Punishment.** Punishing children (or doing something that they don't like in response to their misbehavior) can be very effective. At the same time it can create many problems, particularly if a teacher administers only punishments without rewards. First, if the punishment is particularly aversive, and if the child is humiliated by it, she or he may start to dislike

the teacher, and this can make it more difficult to teach. Second, punishment often works only in the presence of the teacher, and does not help the child to behave appropriately elsewhere. Third, punishment may need to be perpetually increased to keep working, and this may create greater problems for the teacher's relationship with the child.

For these reasons, here are some guidelines for using punishment:

- the child should know before hand what the punishment will be and under what circumstances
- punishment should be administered dispassionately in a “matter of fact” way, with an explanation: “I am doing \_\_\_because you did \_\_\_\_.”. With younger children time-out is a good approach to punishment.
- every effort should be made to be consistent when administering punishment.

## ***Traumatic Backgrounds***

Many refugee children have lived through extremely traumatic events. Many have lived through bombings, have run away from soldiers, have fled their homes suddenly under great threat, or have witnessed murder and other terrible acts done to others. Western staff and camp workers generally leave refugee camps at night, and the camps can be very unsafe with night time raids. There is also sometimes insufficient food in the camps. Finally the many moves that the children have lived through, including the move to the United States, can be both exciting and traumatic. Families are separated during this transition, and their resettlement in unsafe urban U.S. neighborhoods can be greatly disappointing and stressful. For the children, some of the things that go on around them may trigger traumatic memories, or they may react in ways that they have learned to react in order to protect themselves. For example, fire alarms may be very disconcerting. Pictures of some objects can be very upsetting. For example, some children can get very upset when seeing skeletons and other Halloween pictures and costumes. People in uniforms, even school security guards, may be frightening to them.

### **Anticipate and help orient children to events that may be upsetting to them.**

For low-level English language learners, teachers may need to anticipate such potentially upsetting events and orient the children to what's coming. Having a Halloween party, and doing classroom activities about it can help anticipate the children's concerns, and reassure them that it is a holiday. Teaching them about fire alarms and what they mean may also be reassuring.

### **Reassure children when they bring up traumatic content.**

Sometimes children's stories of trauma may come out in the classroom. Children may draw disturbing pictures, bring in photographs, or, for those whose English language skills are more advanced, they may bring up stories in the classroom. The most important thing to do when this happens is for the teacher to make the child feel comfortable about telling the story that he or she wants to tell, and express empathy for the child. Because other children may hear the same story, it can be useful to make sure that they are being respectful, and also expressing their empathy to the child. If this happens often, perhaps some "rules," or even classroom traditions can be developed for times when a student shares something important. The teacher may ask each child, going around the room, to say something kind to the person who has revealed something painful. It may be important to explain that there are also places and times that students can approach the teacher in private. A suggestion can be that some things are best shared in private with the teacher.

### **Should teachers probe about traumatic content?**

While it can be helpful for children to tell their stories, it is not useful to probe about traumatic events. At the same time, children do like to be asked about themselves, about their culture, and about where they came from. It is important not to fall into the other extreme and never ask a child anything about his or her background and past. It is most helpful for teachers to let children know that you're interested in the cultures and countries they have come from, and invite them to share what they would like you and their classmates to know.

### **Active Listening and offering support.**

Active listening involves periodically restating to the speaker what the listener has heard. For example, after listening to a story, the listener may say "Let me see if I understand." or "You mean that.", and repeat what has been said but using slightly different words. This restatement helps the speaker feel listened to and understood, and allows both parties to clarify any misunderstandings. Further, restating can be used as an excellent English language teaching tool in the ESL classroom. Children can practice "active listening" with each other and with the teacher. By taking the time to try to understand, the listener is essentially "sharing the burden" of the problem by actively engaging with the speaker rather than finding a solution. When a child sees that an adult can hear the story, be saddened by it, but not fall apart, it can be very reassuring, and can help the child feel as if she or he can do the same. In this way active listening can help refugee children feel understood and supported.

## **In Conclusion**

We are always starting over.

(Editor)

Yesterday I had the opportunity to observe in an ESL class, and I noticed that I had a new set of eyeglasses. Material that had looked just fine to me earlier, looked too complex with too many unnecessary lines now. Time spent on a worksheet seemed to create confusion unnecessarily, and it highlighted the gap between students who could write easily and the majority who really struggled. How far below the smiles and passivity were the frustration and the anger? We hope that you have a new set of questions to ask after reading this publication, and we wish you patience as you tackle the challenges ahead. Parker Palmer, the noted educator, tells a story about an exceptional teacher he had named Mr. Porter. Dr. Palmer ended the story by saying, “But Mr. Porter’s self-definition as a teacher was not confined to his job description. He never stopped asking the most important question a teacher can ask: Who is this child, and how can I nurture his or her gifts?” Who do you have in your class and what gifts do they bring that are yet to be discovered?

## **Appendix A: The Stages of Cultural Adaptation**

Reprinted from Cultural Adjustment, Mental Health, and ESL: The Refugee Experience, the Role of the Teacher, and ESL activities, Adkins, Birman, and Sample, Spring Institute 1999

### The Stages of Cultural Adaptation

In thinking of refugee resettlement as a process, it is useful to think of the different stages within this process that refugees go through. In general this experience has four stages: Honeymoon, Culture Shock, Initial Adjustment, and Integration. The initial stage of resettlement can involve idealization, or a “Honeymoon” period, when the refugee family may be quite excited and hopeful about what to expect, happy to be out of immediate danger, and optimistic about the future. Such elation and optimism may in fact be very adaptive for refugees. This period of idealization may be psychologically useful and necessary in order to give the family the resources to withstand the stresses of the initial period.

The down side of the idealization period, is that refugees may be underestimating the extent of the difficulties they are likely to be facing in resettlement and have quite unrealistic expectations about their future. In terms of acculturation, this initial period can be characterized by very positive feelings toward the American culture, and an optimistic expectation that the newcomers will integrate successfully into the various aspects of American life. Thus, the positive aspect of this stage is its optimism, which while unrealistic, may in fact be extremely useful in helping the refugees cope with the initial stresses of resettlement. On the negative side, however, such idealization inevitably sets the refugee up for disappointment and disillusionment, which can occur during the second stage.

As the realities of the difficulties of acculturation and resettlement sink in, idealization gives way to the second stage, sometimes referred to as “Culture Shock.” The onset of this stage may indeed involve a particular event, or series of events or stressors, which demonstrate to the individual that adjustment will be difficult. It may involve disappointment over obtaining employment, an episode of teasing at school for a child, or other such events. This period is marked by demoralization, and perhaps regret. Emotionally, this period may be marked by anger and frustration, or depression and withdrawal. In terms of acculturation, this may be a period when a refugee retreats into the comforts of her or his own culture and ethnic community, and may feel that integration into the American society socially and culturally may be impossible. With time, and perhaps help and support of others, the culture shock may begin to wear off, and a more realistic period of adjustment may begin.

The third stage, Initial Adjustment, is a process where the refugee may take more measured, realistic, and perhaps less ambitious steps toward adjusting to

life in the new culture. The refugee may take a job which is clearly below his initial expectations, but yet allows the family to do better economically; the learning of English may be more intensive now, as a refugee appreciates how difficult a process this is.

The final stage, generally called Integration, refers to a period of time when the refugee finally feels part of the larger society, able to meet the various demands of life, and finally finds a style of acculturation, which is functional and comfortable. In terms of the prior discussion of mental health, this is the stage where the refugee is able to attain good functioning across the varied life spheres. These include having success in the occupational realm, forming and maintaining good relationships with others, whether with Americans or within the ethnic enclave of the refugee community, and having positive relationships with one's family, including the ability to parent children in the context of the new and foreign culture. Finally, as with the definition of mental health, integration refers to a good psychological adjustment as well as a sense of comfort and satisfaction with oneself and one's life.

How long does this process take? There is no clear answer to that question, but we have some hints at what the important milestones are in the process of adaptation and acculturation. Several events built into the resettlement system may function as stressors that may help propel the movement of refugees from one stage to the next. Thus the moment that the initial period of financial assistance ends, at either 4 or 8 months, depending on the resettlement program, refugees are expected to become self-sufficient and employed. This is bound to be a stressful moment. It can be stressful if a refugee does not get a job. It can also be stressful if the refugee does take a job, because if the job is at a level much lower than the job he or she previously held in the country of origin, taking the job may make him/her feel that he/she will never again attain his/her former status. Such an event can induce a culture shock crisis, and dissipate the feelings of idealization and optimism, which the refugee may have initially experienced. Another difficult period is generally one year after arrival, because anniversaries are a time when people reflect on where they have been and where they are going. Thus the onset of culture shock can occur at any time, but most likely within the first year of resettlement.

Although it is very useful to understand the general stages of cultural adaptation, it's very important to note that the experience of many refugees may not fit the pattern described by these stages. Refugees arriving from war torn areas soon after a traumatic event may not experience idealization upon arrival, and may take a very different path toward integration. However, it is difficult to argue with the idea that integration, or some kind of accommodation to the new country and culture is a desirable goal and outcome of the resettlement process.

There is no predictable pattern as to how long it takes for refugees to feel that they have become integrated into the culture. One important milestone occurs after 5 years of residence in the U.S. At this point refugees become eligible to



apply for citizenship. This can be an opportunity for taking stock of the experience in this country during the past five years. Four to five years is also how long it takes children to master the English language. In fact, many refugee children begin to speak English better than their native language after having been in the country approximately five years.

After five years of residence in the U.S. it is appropriate to expect that some kind of integration into the American society has taken place. This may be the formal integration of becoming a citizen. However, our previous discussion of biculturalism is an important reminder that there are many different adaptive ways to be integrated into the American life. Adult refugees who become productive participants in their ethnic refugee community have also adapted to life in the United States. Becoming part of the mainstream and becoming part of a particular community are both approaches to integration, and both have advantages and disadvantages.

## **Appendix B: Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP)**

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

Jana Echevarria, California State University, Long Beach, Deborah J. Short,  
Center for Applied Linguistics

Excerpts

- The combination of these three knowledge bases – knowledge of English, knowledge of the content topic, and knowledge of how the tasks are to be accomplished – constitutes the major components of academic literacy/ (Short, 1998) SIOP report Page 5
- Another consideration for school success is the explicit socialization of students to the often implicit cultural expectations of the classrooms such as turn-taking, participation rules, and established routines. As Erickson and Shultz (1991) have discussed, student comfort with the social participation structure of an academic task, for instance, can vary according to culturally learned assumptions about appropriateness in communication and in social relationships, individual personality, and power relations in the classroom social system and in society at large. Therefore, many English language learners could benefit from being socialized into culturally appropriate classroom behaviors and interactional styles. As Bartolome (1994) states, teachers need to engage in culturally responsive teaching, so their instruction is sensitive to and builds upon culturally different ways of learning, behaving, and using language. (Pages 5- 6)
- One way to do (scaffolding) is by adjusting their speak (e.g., paraphrase, give examples, provide analogies, elaborate student response) to facilitate student comprehension and participation in discussions where otherwise the discourse might be beyond their language proficiency level (Bruner, 1978). Another way is by adjusting instructional tasks so they are incrementally challenging (e.g., pre-teach vocabulary before a reading assignment, have students write an outline before drafting an essay) and students learn the skills necessary to complete tasks on their own (Applebee & Langer, 1983). Through these strategies, teachers can socialize students to the academic language setting. Without such teacher assistance, however English Language learners may fail to succeed in content area courses. (Page 6)
- Accomplished SI teachers modulate the level of English used with and among students and make the content comprehensible through techniques such as the use of visual aides, modeling, demonstrations, graphic organizers, vocabulary previews, prediction, adapted text, cooperative learning, peer tutoring , multicultural content and native language support. They strive to create a non-threatening environment where students feel comfortable taking risks with language. They also make

specific connections between the content being taught and students' experiences and prior knowledge and focus on expanding the students' vocabulary base. In effective SI lessons, there is a high level of student engagement and interaction with the teacher, with each other, and with text that lead to elaborated discourse and higher-order thinking. Students are explicitly taught functional language skills as well, such as how to negotiate meaning, ask for clarification, confirm information, argue, persuade, and disagree. Through instructional conversations and meaningful activities, students practice and apply their new language and content knowledge. (Pages 8 - 9)

The full paper is available at <http://www.siopinstitute.net/pdf/sioppaper.pdf>

## Appendix C: Classroom Activities

### Active Listening

#### Goals:

- To follow instructions
- To ask questions and to use feedback skills in asking for clarification
- To complete a task with a partner

#### Mental Health-Related Goals:

- To gain confidence in one's ability to understand and to confirm understanding of oral communication
- To gain control over the communication process

#### Level:

- Beginning to advanced

#### Classroom Configuration:

- Whole class for demonstration
- Small groups and pairs

#### Procedure:

1. Demonstrate active listening by using two different grids, one with half of the spaces filled in, the other with the remaining spaces filled in. Place a barrier (such as a folder standing up) between two people so that they cannot see each other's work. Grids for lower level English speakers can include shapes, letters or numbers, while grids for higher level students can include words. Have them complete the grids by asking questions and using active listening or feedback (repeating what was understood) to check their comprehension, and by filling in the blank squares.

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2. Have students do the activity in pairs, preferably with someone who does not

speak the same language.

3. Debrief the activity. What strategies did people use to communicate? How is the skill of active listening useful on the job, in following directions, on the phone, in all relationships?

# Islamabad

## Goals:

- To practice active listening
- To describe a place or event that is significant to the speaker

## Mental Health-Related Goals:

- To feel that others are really listening and care about the speaker's experience
- To contribute to the mental health of all students, but especially those who have experienced traumatic loss and displacement

## Level

- Beginning to advanced

## Classroom Configuration

- Whole class for demonstration
- Small groups or pairs

## Procedure:

1. Demonstrate the activity for the whole class. Describe a place or event that is important to you. Using rods to illustrate, tell about a place, and step-by-step, create that place or story by building it with the rods (or other manipulatives).
2. Ask the students to recall your description and repeat your story or description while looking at the model. Each student can add a different detail until the whole model is described. If a detail is not mentioned, you can add it, or another person in the class can contribute the detail.
3. Disassemble the model and ask two or three students to rebuild the model together while saying the sentences that describe the place or event. Often people indicate a true understanding of the emotion that is attached to the story by adding words that describe feelings. Vocabulary is expanded as people replace your words with synonyms or by paraphrasing.
4. Have students work in pairs, each of them describing a significant place. When each person has completed his/her story, have the other person reflect back (active listen), repeating the description as it was understood. Learners often discover that their classmates truly understand some of what they felt but did not actually say.

# Language Experience / Group Writing

## Goals:

- To write a poem or story in English
- To work together with other learners

## Mental Health-Related Goals:

- To express feelings in English

## Level:

- Beginning to advanced, literate

## Classroom Configuration:

- Whole class, small groups

## Procedure:

1. Have students work in groups by common culture.
2. Ask the learners to choose something they remember or love about their country or a topic that they all know something about. Pictures, music, folk tales, story cloths, craft items, jewelry, clothing all can provide the stimulus for group writing.
3. Give time for people to talk together suggesting words in English as well as the native language to describe the item or to tell a story. Encourage learners to work together to expand the vocabulary to include words for their feelings. Have one of the group members write the words.
4. Have the learners tell you a story or describe an experience in two to four sentences or phrases using the vocabulary they have generated. Have them take turns saying the sentences or thoughts while you write what they say.
5. Read the passage to the group.
6. Have the students read the passage aloud as a group, and then as individuals.
7. Make any changes that the students suggest.
8. This activity can be used with illiterate or beginning students if the teacher does all the writing as the students dictate. If some of the students in a multilevel class can handle the activity alone and some cannot, group the more advanced students together to create their own story or poem. The teacher can become a member of, and scribe, for the less academically experienced.

## About the Author

Dina Birman has been an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago since 2003. She teaches in the Community and Prevention Research Division and conducts research on refugees, focusing on general adaptation and acculturation, school adjustment, and mental health interventions for refugee children and families. Dr. Birman received her Ph.D. in Clinical/Community Psychology from the University of Maryland (1991) and completed a clinical internship at Harvard Medical School. Her expertise is in the area of acculturation, adaptation, and mental health of refugees and immigrants. From 1991-1997 she worked in the Refugee Mental Health Program at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIH) and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), where she provided consultation and technical assistance on mental health issues to the Office for Refugee Resettlement (DHHS), and to the state and local programs that they fund.

Dr. Birman has conducted studies to understand the long term acculturation and adaptation of adolescent, adult, and elderly refugees from the former Soviet Union, Somalia, and Vietnam. She is currently collaborating with the Heartland Alliance for Human Rights and Human Needs in Chicago, evaluating their innovative program that provides mental health services to refugee youth and families. This collaboration is being supported by the National Child Traumatic Stress initiative, with funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. She is also a recipient of the NIMH KO1 Mentored Career Award (2004-2009) to develop and study school-based interventions for multicultural refugee students. She is currently conducting an ethnographic study of Somali Bantu, Vietnamese, and Bosnian refugee students in a Chicago elementary school that will inform such an intervention. She is the author of numerous papers in professional journals and books on these topics, and has developed technical assistance documents for teachers working with refugee students, published by the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning in Denver. In addition, she continues to give talks, conduct workshops, and provide consultation to resettlement service providers, mental health professionals, and teachers who work with refugees.

Ethnography of Refugee Children in a Chicago School - Dr. Birman is currently conducting an ethnographic study of Somali Bantu, Vietnamese, and Bosnian refugee students in a Chicago elementary school. The purpose of the study is to understand what happens when refugee children enter a school, what challenges the children, their parents, and the teachers face, and how they cope with them. During the past year 20 graduate and undergraduate students spent time in the classrooms assisting ESL and mainstream teachers, accompanying students on field trips, and helping out elsewhere in the school. At the same time, they recorded their observations in ethnographic field notes. In addition, interviews with refugee families, and school teachers, administrators, and other staff were conducted. These data are currently being analyzed for themes.