



# Engaging English Language Learners with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education

## SUMMARY

Carol Antolini, who teaches Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE), participated in a research project on a new instructional model for this population. Here, the researchers who developed the model and mentored Carol describe the model, the implementation process and the results, while Carol reflects on her experience.

This article addresses recommendations 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 of the “Reading Next” and recommendations 6, 7, 8, and 9 of the “Writing Next” reports of the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. (See pages 95-96 and 98)

*Her head on the desk, no thought of joining in the lesson, would Maria ever engage? ... Carol found the key and Maria found her school success — a new instructional model shows the way.*

## A Profile of SLIFE

In the past decade, the United States has witnessed high growth in immigrants around the country. While high rates of immigrants tend to be traditionally concentrated in urban areas and in states such as New York, Florida, Texas, and California, in recent years many other states have become home to new immigrants. As the immigrant population has grown, schools in these states are educating more English Language Learners

(ELLs) — students whose first language is not English. South Carolina, for instance, experienced an increase of more than 700 percent in K-12 school children whose first language was not English (NCELA, 2005). Some of the older ELLs have missed schooling in their home country, whether due to the unavailability of schooling or for other reasons such as war, civil unrest or migration. Other ELLs have not attained grade-level knowledge and native language literacy skills, whether because of the inadequacy of resources, quality of instruction, the lack of education beyond the primary years, or other factors (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009).

*Helaine Marshall is an associate professor and director of language education programs in the Teacher Education Department at the Westchester Graduate Campus of Long Island University.*

*Andrea DeCapua is an assistant professor of multilingual multicultural education in the Graduate School at The College of New Rochelle.*

*Carol Antolini is currently teaching a self-contained English as a second language fifth grade at Lime Kiln School in Spring Valley.*

**Helaine W. Marshall, Ph.D., Long Island University**  
**Andrea DeCapua, Ed.D., College of New Rochelle**  
**Carol Antolini, East Ramapo Teachers Association**

New York state refers to this subpopulation of ELLs as SIFE — Students with Interrupted Formal Education. According to DeCapua, et al., this term ignores the fact that many ELLs actually have not had interrupted education but rather, limited education, and are called SLIFE — Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education. They are living in urban, suburban and even rural school districts around the country; many are Latinos from such countries as Mexico and the Dominican Republic; others are from Southeast Asia, Somalia and other areas of Africa. All of them face a triple challenge in our schools: developing English language proficiency, mastering grade-level subject matter, and developing and/or improving literacy skills (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2007). Although they can be found at all grade levels, they create educational challenges when they enter high school with little time to face their triple challenge. However, we found that limited exposure to formal education, particularly to Western-style education, the prevalent model shaping our schools, may prevent them from benefiting from the instruction provided. As teachers actively engaged in this model, we

share a set of assumptions about education — assumptions that are not shared by all of our learners (DeCapua & Marshall, 2009; Rothstein-Fisch, Trumball, Isaac, Daley, & Pérez, 2003).

Carol's SLIFE class includes students ages 15 to 21 who had completed between third grade and eighth grade in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Although the students came from different countries and spoke different languages, they shared certain characteristics that Carol needed to consider in designing her instruction. If we revisit our list of assumptions, we find that, for the most part, SLIFE do not see school as a preparation for life; many of them, like the students in Carol's class, already have adult responsibilities and jobs. They look for school to have some immediate benefit in their lives rather than preparing them for the future. Another important characteristic is that they are members of collectivistic cultures, in which group loyalties and responsibilities are central to people's lives (Triandis, 1995). Mainstream U.S. culture, in contrast, places a high

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### **Teachers and learners assume that:**

1. The goals of K-12 instruction are:
  - to prepare the learner for life after schooling
  - to produce an independent learner
2. The learner has an urge to compete and excel as an individual.
3. The learner brings along age-appropriate preparation for literacy development and academic tasks.

*(Marshall, 1998)*

Given the difference between the assumptions of teachers and students, it is apparent the wants and needs of SLIFE are not provided in our educational system, and what we do provide is not relevant to them.

importance on each person's wants, needs, and accomplishments. This individualism is reflected in the assumption that learners bring an urge to compete and excel as individuals. SLIFE generally do not share the goal of becoming an independent learner but are instead focused on maintaining interconnectedness with the teacher and with each other, and on helping others. They do not bring with them the urge to succeed as individuals but rather to succeed as a group working together (Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

Additionally, the students are at least two years behind their grade in literacy and academics, and frequently more, especially at the high school level, which makes reading and understanding the concepts and information of the required secondary school curriculum very difficult. Finally, they are largely unfamiliar with the types of tasks required in school, such as comparing and contrasting, identifying true and false statements, classifying, defining, and so on (Freeman & Freeman, 2002).

Given the difference between our assumptions and those of the SLIFE, we see that what they want and need is not provided to them by our educational system, and what we do provide is entirely new (Au & Kawakami, 1994). If we are to succeed with SLIFE, we must shift our paradigm and find ways to engage them. A key

point in this shift is to understand and accept that they come to high school with many life experiences, what Moll & Greenberg (1990) call "funds of knowledge," and have spent years developing such knowledge. Once we recognize and welcome their knowledge, we can explore the conditions, processes and activities that will help them reach their potential.

## **The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm — MALP**

In response to these needs, the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) (Marshall, 1998; DeCapua & Marshall, 2009) was developed. This model combines four elements of the students' way of viewing learning while introducing them to what is new. We summarize our model as follows:

**1. Accept Conditions SLIFE Need —** If the culturally based conditions of SLIFE for learning are met, they are more likely to become engaged in the classroom (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2004). The two major conditions needed are: (1) feelings of interconnectedness; and (2) lessons with immediate relevance. In MALP, teachers focus on creating curriculum that includes items closely linked to the students' world, and that draws upon their funds of knowledge. Instruction should be infused with interpersonal elements, such as activities designed to build relationships and projects encouraging collaboration.

## 2. Combine Familiar and New Processes

— Teachers need to prepare and execute learning experiences that combine elements familiar to the student with new ones. Familiar processes are: (1) learning through oral transmission rather than through the written word; and (2) collaborating with others rather than solely focusing on individual achievement. In MALP, the teacher includes group work but also requires each student to be accountable for some aspect of the activity, and uses both oral and written modes together throughout her teaching.

**3. Focus on Academic Tasks that are New** — it is important that teachers create higher-order thinking activities that teach these skills without introducing new language or content. A more effective way to move toward finding meaning and success in academic tasks is to make the task itself the only unfamiliar component of the activity. Too often, new subject matter, challenging language, and cognitively demanding academic tasks are introduced simultaneously (DeCapua & Marshall, 2009).

It is the combination of all three components that creates a MALP classroom. Taken together, the elements provide the students a firm, supportive learning environment as well as a way to transition to our educational system.

## Implementing MALP

We implemented our model in a high school SLIFE program. Carol, who taught both ESL and social studies, enthusiastically agreed to work with us. Carol impressed us as open and responsive, and interested in taking on a new challenge as part of her strong dedication to these, her most at-risk students.

After training in MALP, she began to change her teaching approach. We periodically observed Carol's classes and provided feedback about the implementation of this new model, using our MALP Checklist, a sample of which is included in Appendix A. In addition, Carol would e-mail us with reactions from students and updates on their activities in and out of class. She would run ideas by us before teaching a lesson to be sure she was using the model effectively. As might be expected, there were bumps along the way, as Carol dealt with student absences, students enrolling months into the school year or students leaving school for a job. Because of these issues, the data we collected were largely anecdotal; our notes on the students' in-class performance and our interactions with Carol became the most important aspects of our research, rather than any formal assessments or other quantitative measures.

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### **Follow the three guidelines of MALP:**

1. Accept Conditions SLIFE Need
  - feelings of interconnectedness
  - lessons with immediate relevance.
2. Combine Familiar and New Processes
  - learning through oral transmission rather than through the written word
  - collaborating with others rather than solely focusing on individual achievement.
3. Focus on Academic Tasks that are New
  - create higher-order thinking activities without introducing new language or content.

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### Benefits and challenges of the higher ed/school partnership

A partnership between researchers from institutions of higher education and classroom teachers on the front lines of delivering high school instruction can yield powerful results. Through our collaboration on this project, the teacher benefited from extensive and targeted professional development that she can now share with other teachers. She saw concrete change in her students' performance and motivation that she could directly correlate with the changes she was making in her teaching. For the researchers, this partnership enabled them to guide the implementation of their instructional model and provide time-sensitive feedback along the way. This formative assessment helped to improve the model and inform subsequent lessons.

At the same time, the best intentions of all were thwarted by circumstances. Scheduling time for consultations and reflections posed logistical challenges as the teacher and the researchers all had full teaching loads. Some data collection depended upon the teacher's ability to recall lessons in detail for those not directly observed by the researchers. Finally, the partnership remained limited to one teacher in the program, so that she became an island of new implementation without the support of other teachers and the ability to exchange ideas with them. Addressing these challenges in future research would result in a more extensive study with full implementation of the instructional model.

During the five-month period of this study, a strong mentoring relationship developed between Carol and the researchers. After this most encouraging exploratory work, our next step will be to implement the model in math and science classes in the SLIFE program. We are seeking to work with districts that have a program for SLIFE and are interested in implementing MALP.

Initially, Carol felt her students could do very little in a high school setting;

she was discouraged and disheartened, and not sure how to reach them.

Because Carol was expected to teach the regular social studies curriculum, one unit she needed to focus on was the Civil War. For this unit, she was interested in having students relate to this time period in U.S. history, but she realized it was a leap for them.

Her challenge was to develop her unit based on the MALP instructional model and to address relevant New York State Learning Standards for Social Studies, specifically, Standard 1: History of the United States and New York. Following this standard, Carol developed lessons that addressed connections and interactions of people and events, Standard 1.2, and historical analysis, Standard 1.4. For Standard 1.2, Carol incorporated the following performance indicator: Investigate key turning points in New York state and United States history and explain why these events or developments are significant. For Carol's SLIFE class, the Civil War was the relevant turning point.

*Using the MALP guidelines, Carol planned her instruction so that students could demonstrate learning in accordance with this indicator:*

- *making connections between the social studies content and their own lives — increasing immediate relevance;*

- *processing input from teacher, Web sites and Venn diagrams on social studies content, connecting oral language and literacy;*
- *sharing input on social studies content with fellow students — combining group and individual contributions.*

For Standard 1.4, Carol turned to the following indicator: Describe historic events through the eyes and experiences of those who were there. The students studied the perspectives of Abraham Lincoln, northerners and southerners, blacks and whites, and the Union and Confederate soldiers. In each case, Carol designed activities that had the students put themselves in the place of the people of that time.

Again, using the MALP guidelines, Carol designed learning activities to develop and build new academic tasks so that students could demonstrate learning through this indicator:

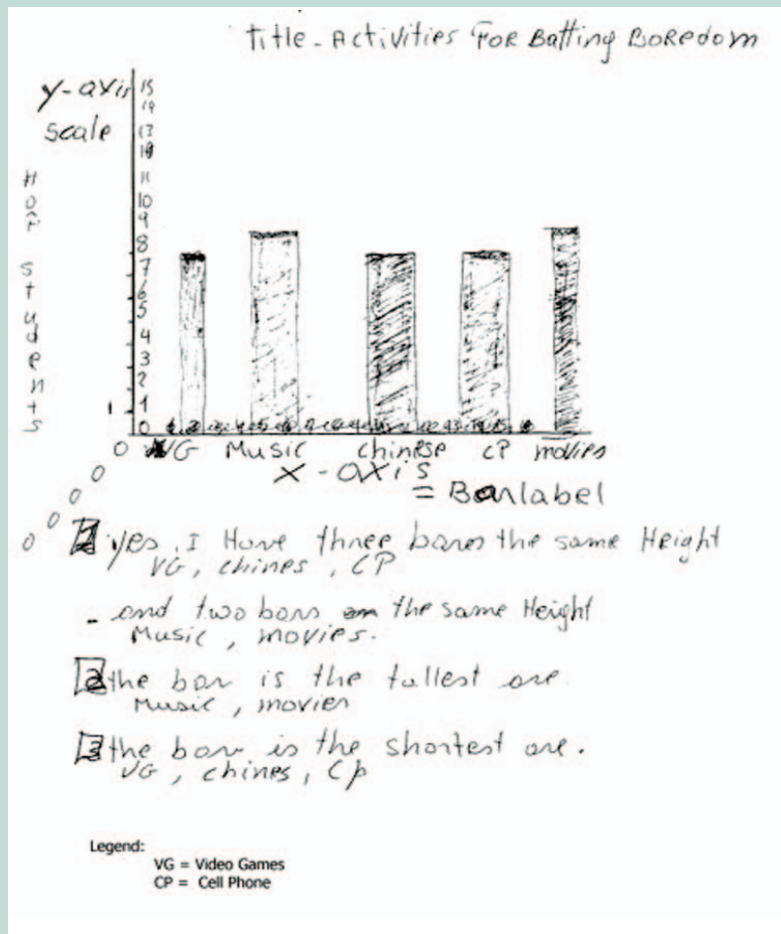
- *the use of secondary sources, such as Internet sites;*
- *comparing and contrasting data with graphic organizers.*

She hoped they would be able to describe the everyday life of a Civil War soldier, then compare and contrast it with their own lives today. She began by introducing basic information:

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**Figure 1:**

**Sample Student Bar Graph**



Thursday I started with the Civil War. I introduced the topic using the time frame of 1860 and 2008. I used a PowerPoint presentation. Then on Friday we did a T-chart for 1860 and 2008. Along with that, I printed out pictures where the students were able to tell me something for each picture.

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**Figure 2:**

**Carol with Class Venn Diagram**



*They did really well. For the two years we compared presidents, flags, number of countries, what the countries looked like for each year, voting rights, freedom of blacks/slaves, North/South, Civil War/Iraq War, a black person living in New York vs. a black person living in Florida.”*

To develop their literacy skills, Carol had the students tell her their sentences, which she wrote on chart paper and had students read them back to her. They then used these sentences as a basis for creating their filmstrip stories.

*“It [the chart paper] is now hanging in the classroom. As we were doing this, it came to me to do filming of the idea. They will have pictures to cut out representing 1860 vs. 2008, paste them, and then write a sentence for each picture.”*

Carol continued the unit by having the students think about their own free time. She started with a Venn diagram and the students, working in groups, listed some of the things they did to overcome boredom on one side of the diagram. Carol then collected their worksheets to find out the five most common activities they had come up with. Based on this, she developed a questionnaire for them to ask each other about favorite pastimes. After they had gathered their data by keeping tally of who liked doing what, Carol worked with them to make graphs based on the information they had collected. Under the graph, the students wrote sentences about the data (See Figure 1). This literacy practice was meaningful for them because it directly related to information they had collected orally and then presented in graph form.

Following the bar graph activity in Figure 1, Carol returned to the Venn diagram and, using the Internet, helped the students to identify ways Civil War soldiers dealt with boredom. To the students’ surprise, with slight

differences accounted for by the 150 years between themselves and the soldiers, there were many similarities. Next, as a group, they completed the diagram, which in turn led to lessons on comparison and contrast.

Carol followed the ABCs of MALP:

- She planned for interconnectedness and immediate relevance in her lessons;
- She made sure to move smoothly from the oral to the written, using the students' own language as the starting point;
- She included both group and individual elements in the data collection; and
- She directly taught the new academic tasks but scaffolded them with familiar language and content.

An important tool Carol used to ensure that she had included all these elements was the MALP Checklist (see Appendix A), which she used to design and evaluate her lesson plans. The checklist consists of six essential questions, each relating to one of the criteria for a successful MALP lesson. She asked herself each question and wrote the responses based on the lesson or lessons that she was planning for a given unit.

### **Preliminary Results**

Even from this small sample of students and from the limited time period of the study, we saw change. Students

became more comfortable and familiar with Western-style academic tasks. They were able to create and analyze graphs, charts and other organizers, and use critical thinking skills such as comparison/contrast. Most importantly, Carol noted their increased facility with print as they began to use print as a resource and started to use academic-style discourse. By the end of the study, these students were engaging in research and in creating PowerPoint presentations of their findings. The students also gained in self-confidence from working on these projects individually and in groups and strengthened their interpersonal skills in a school setting as they helped each other with their work.

*“I know, I know!” Maria eagerly raises her hand in response to Carol’s question. Unlike the early days of the school year, she no longer retreats into her own world with her head on the desk. She has increasingly become engaged in learning, volunteering answers and sharing her work with her peers.*

Carol gained a great deal of insight and satisfaction from implementing the model. She gained an understanding of cultural dissonance and how it affects learning by SLIFE. She came to believe they could indeed, with the right approach, master academic content. Carol also

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The students also gained in self-confidence from working on these projects individually and in groups and strengthened their interpersonal skills in a school setting as they helped each other with their work.



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### Appendix A: Sample of Carol's completed MALP checklist for Civil War lessons

#### MALP Checklist of Six Key Questions for Teachers

##### 1. How am I helping students develop and maintain interconnectedness?

- Students talk about their lives outside of school (ESL 4.4)
- Students and teacher learn more about each others' interests (ESL 4.4)
- Teacher and students share what they do when they are bored (ESL 4.4)

##### 2. How am I making this lesson immediately relevant to my students?

- Finding out what soldiers did and seeing if any students do the same (SS 1.2; ESL 1.4)
- Adding more ideas to own list based on soldiers' information (SS 1.2; ESL 1.3)

##### 3. How am I scaffolding the written word through oral interaction?

- Students read from own chart as teacher writes on class chart (ESL 1.7)
- Teacher's oral explanation of pictures of soldiers in free time (SS 1.2; ESL 1.2)
- Students contribute orally what they found on website (SS 1.2; ESL 1.7)
- Students read from the Venn diagram responding to questions about themselves and soldiers (SS 1.2; ESL 1.5)

##### 4. How am I incorporating both group responsibility and individual accountability?

- Class collectively creates chart of activities with each student making contributions (ESL 1.13)
- Pairs work together to identify what soldiers did to combat boredom (SS 1.2; ESL 1.13)
- Each member of pair adds information to personal Venn diagram (ESL 1.13)

##### 5. What new academic tasks am I introducing?

- Gathering data from secondary sources (SS 1.4; ESL 1.2)
- Comparing and contrasting data (SS 1.4; ESL 1.4)
- Analyzing data from graphs (ESL 3.1)

##### 6. What am I doing to make the new tasks accessible to my students?

- Language on Web site accessible through photos and captions (ESL 1.16)
- Language scaffolded by use of L1 among students (ESL 1.14)
- Content scaffolded by relevant personal information (ESL 1.16)
- Content scaffolded by graphic organizers (ESL 1.16)

**Note: Relevant NYS Social Studies and ESL standards in parentheses**

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learned to create projects to engage the SLIFE class, build literacy, enhance critical thinking, and tap into knowledge that she hadn't accessed before or assumed that they didn't have.

Although this intervention targeted SLIFE, Carol has begun using the approach in all of her classes. We believe that many other students are somewhere along the continuum between SLIFE and highly academically oriented ELLs and that they, too, can benefit from this instructional model.

Content teachers necessarily focus their instruction on the standards and core curriculum for their subject area and grade level. However, if teachers only focus on content, they may not succeed in reaching SLIFE. MALP provides an instructional framework for teachers to plan and implement activities, ensuring that all students can access the content they present. Without attention to relevance and interconnectedness, teachers risk losing their students before they even begin to teach. And ignoring the challenges of the written word, individual accountability and academic tasks may result in students who cannot reach their potential in performance on subject-area assessments. Although MALP is essential for Students With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education, it can be beneficial for all students and thereby useful for all content teachers.

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