Language and Representation

Creating a Supportive Environment for Hedson

Ms. Lloyd, a fourth-grade teacher, is determined to include Hedson, an English Language Learner with significant academic and social challenges, in all aspects of the classroom. In this case, she shares how she creates a supportive environment for Hedson that enables him to share his ideas with the class.

Hedson is one of my students. I have made great efforts this year to include him in all aspects of our math class. He has an extensive and detailed Individualized Education Plan that notes significant attention issues, language challenges, and delays. He is a second language learner, but he also seems to have word retrieval, usage, and expressive language problems in both languages. He reads considerably below grade level.

Hedson loves math. He says it is his favorite subject and is more diligent about bringing in his math homework than any other homework. Because reading is difficult for him, I have noticed that when completing worksheets, he will skip over text and seek meaning from the numbers themselves. Hedson is also preoccupied with the difficult situation in his country of origin; with prompting from me, he has talked and written about it. Despite all this, Hedson tries each and every day to participate in math class.

I have made several accommodations to help Hedson be successful in math class. I have found that he works best with just one partner and have been pairing him with another English Language Learner. The two boys seem to have similar ways of describing numbers and quantities and have been working well together. Because reading is a challenge for Hedson, I have created worksheets with less text. I make boxed-in spaces with simple labels to make it easier for him to follow the directions. This helps to eliminate any confusing or distracting information. I always seat Hedson near the board and near me. Finally, I provide Hedson with a lot of eye contact during class discussions. He understands my looks as either "Focus," "Are you with me?" or "Does this make sense to you?" I will put my hand on his to show my support. I have found that he often puts his hand on top of mine and keeps it there, possibly as an anchor to help him stay focused. I have found that these accommodations have helped Hedson to participate accurately and seriously in math class.

My students have been working on using the number line to practice addition and subtraction. I decided to begin math class by reviewing the homework from the previous night. I asked Hedson to start our homework discussion. The problem was 1,000 − 489.

Teacher: Hedson, what is the problem we are solving now?

Hedson pauses for about 30 seconds. He looks down at his paper, pencil in hand. The class is quiet. They know him and act on our classroom culture's expectation that every student gets the time she or he needs.

Teacher: We are on the first one. Tell me the numbers to write on the board. [A student's hand goes up.] Hands down, please. It's Hedson's turn. He knows.

Hedson looks up at me. I nod back at him, beckoning his speech with my eyes, chalk in hand, ready to write. My body is calm. I will wait with him. And so will the class.

Hedson: I think it's — um, um. I think it's, I think you say it like this: one, one [nods, pushing his chin way down], one thousand is the first number.

Teacher: Like this? [I write 1,000 on the board and then look calmly in his eyes.]

Hedson: Yes, like that.

Teacher: Okay. What's next?

Hedson: You take the other number. [He looks up at me.]

Teacher: What is the number? I don't have the sheet. You do. Read it to us.

Hedson: Four, four [stops]. It's four, four hundred eight, then an 8, then a 9.

Teacher: Tell me the number all together.

I nod and wait, maintaining eye contact with him. My body language is patient and calm. Other students have settled down and wait with me.

Hedson: I think, I think it's four hundred [nods a few times], four hundred and eighty-nine. [Nods again more forcefully.]

Teacher: You're sure. [I nod now and smile slightly.]

Hedson: [smiling back] Yes, I'm sure.

Teacher: Now, tell me what to do, what to write.

Hedson: You make, like one of those. [Draws a horizontal line in the air.] Like this.

Teacher: Tell me what you want me to write.

Hedson: A line. Like this. [Draws a line in the air again.]

I nod and wait. He continues . . .

Hedson: Then, on one side, write one thousand. [Points with his finger from his chair.]

Teacher: On the left here or on the right? [I point to each side as I say the word.]

Hedson: On the left? One thousand. Yes.

Ms. Lloyd: [I write the number followed by the minus sign that Hedson indicated: 1,000] Now what do I do?

Hedson: On the other side [points] you write the smaller number. Four hundred . . . four hundred eighty-nine. [Squints, points.]

Teacher: Here? [I point with my finger to the right side.]

Hedson: Yes. There. [Nods.]

1,000 − 489

I wasn't sure if Hedson had solved the problem correctly, but I decided to give him a chance and see if he could make sense of the numbers.

Teacher: About what would the answer be?

Hedson: [Hesitating, repeating the numbers slowly] 1,000 − 489. [He looks again at me for assurance.]

Teacher: What number is 489 close to?

Hedson: 500.

I nod at him and smile.

Teacher: How does that help you?

Hedson: 500 is easy.

Teacher: So what would 1,000 − 500 be?

Hedson: [with a smile] 500.

I smile back and continue.

Teacher: So about what would 1,000 − 489 be?

Hedson: A little more than 500.

Teacher: [to the class] Does everyone agree with Hedson? [Murmurs of yes and a series of nods go through the class.]

I knew I'd taken a great deal of time to help Hedson through his presentation. By doing this, I reinforced our class's value that every student can and will participate in sharing. Everyone gets a chance to contribute his or her ideas to the class, and the class gets a chance to listen and learn from one

another's thinking. By questioning Hedson, I was also making sure that my other students who are struggling understood his strategy.

As I stayed with Hedson during his presentation, I was also watching the other students for any signs of disrespect. I didn't see any. Because I have paired Hedson with a variety of students throughout the year, the class has experience working with him and is aware of his style and strengths. They also know about my fierce and articulated advocacy of all students. Though Hedson can become frustrated and lose confidence at times when he has difficulty listening or expressing himself, he also likes to discuss math and is quite accurate in his calculations. Hedson forces those students who would otherwise breeze through an activity with little reflection to reflect on their own words and written feedback. He makes them slow down and listen to him.

Hedson reminds me of how important it is to keep gesturing as I speak and to clearly write out the steps to the strategies we are discussing as well as talking about them. That way, students with directionality confusions, with visual and auditory processing challenges, and general distractions can and will get use out of each and every math class. Every class is a language class as well as a math class.

Sharing ideas in a class discussion can be a stressful venture for any student. It can be particularly challenging for the English Language Learner, particularly one with language issues that are manifested in the first language as well and go beyond those encountered by other English Language Learners. With this in mind, Ms. Lloyd has taken many steps to make the classroom a supportive environment for Hedson. She is careful to use hand gestures and a variety of verbal instructions to improve communication. Throughout Hedson's presentation, she encourages him by using verbal and nonverbal cues. Finally, she has created a community of learners that appears to understand one another's other's strengths and weaknesses and is able to support one another's learning.

Questions for Discussion

1. **Ms. Lloyd uses many verbal and nonverbal cues throughout the exchange with Hedson to both encourage and support Hedson's sharing with the class. What does she do to make him feel comfortable in the classroom while at the same time supporting his mathematical growth?**

2. **What does Ms. Lloyd learn from working with Hedson? How does the class benefit from listening to Hedson?**

3. **What are ways you make your mathematics classroom a supportive environment for English Language Learners? How do you structure sharing time to make it comfortable for all learners?**