

Directions:

1. Annotate the text to show evidence of a close reading and understanding of the text.
2. Write a one-page response on a separate sheet of paper.

AoW: L.A. Unified's English learner action upsets parents, teachers

As the district moves to enforce a policy of grouping pupils of similar English fluency ability together, those opposed protest.

Source: Teresa Watanabe/Latimes.com/October 19, 2013

Luis Gaytan, the 5-year-old son of Mexican immigrants who speak Spanish at home, was so terrified by kindergarten that he would barely talk — prompting classmates to tease that he didn't have a tongue.

In the last two months, at Granada Elementary Community Charter, Luis has gained a growing command of the language in a class of students with a mixed range of English ability. His father, Jorge, is convinced that his son is learning English more quickly because he hears it every day from more-advanced classmates.

But Luis — and thousands of other Los Angeles Unified students — is being moved into new classes with those at a similar language level under an order that has sparked a storm of protest. In recent weeks, a group of southeast L.A. principals have mounted a rare challenge to district policy, teachers have flooded their union office with complaints, and parents have launched protest rallies and petition drives urging L.A. Unified to postpone the class reorganizations until next year.

"Kids with little or no English are going to be segregated and told they're not good enough for the mainstream," said Cindy Aranda-Lechuga, a Granada mother of a kindergartner who gathered 162 parent signatures seeking a postponement and spoke against the policy at an L.A. Board of Education meeting last week. "Kids learn from their peers, and they're not going to be able to do that anymore."

Marking the latest chapter in California's fierce language wars, the furor over class placements for those learning English raises the controversial question of which is more effective: separating students by fluency level or including them in diverse classes. Critics are also upset that the change is coming two months into the school year, after students have bonded with classmates and teachers have developed classroom lessons and routines. Opponents blame the district and local schools for the disruption.

Although the district adopted segregated classes as official policy for all schools in 2000, it has not been widely practiced or enforced, according to officials from both L.A. Unified and the teachers union.

But that changed this year. L.A. Unified settled a complaint by the federal Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, which contended that the district had failed to provide adequate services to students learning English.

Katherine Hayes, the district's chief research scientist, told teachers last week that district data show that students placed in classes with peers of similar language level progress more rapidly toward fluency than those in mixed-level classes. But she added that the question had not been widely studied and more research was needed.

Norm Gold, an independent educational consultant who has worked in the field of English language development for more than 35 years, said that although studies are mixed, they tend to skew toward separating students based on their English ability.

"My experience tells me, in addition to research, that there is an absolute necessity for doing this kind of grouping," he said — adding, however, that students should be moved in a timely manner to new classes as their fluency improves.

Two experts in bilingual education with the teachers union, United Teachers Los Angeles, said they support the district policy because limiting English levels in a class allows teachers to better focus instruction. And although students may learn "social English" from more fluent classmates, they

are better able to learn the "academic English" appropriate for their level in more segregated classes, according to Cheryl Ortega, UTLA's director of bilingual education.

In a Sept. 9 letter to local Supt. Robert Bravo, however, 17 principals from South L.A. schools expressed disagreement with the policy. They argued that fluent English speakers serve as classroom role models for less proficient peers and that segregating students creates a "chasm" among them as well as "communities that are intolerant of those who are different."

In his written response, Bravo rejected the request to delay the moves and told principals they "may be subject to discipline" if they failed to reorganize their classes as directed.

One principal, who asked for anonymity for fear of retaliation, said administrators believed they were following the spirit of the plan by trying to limit levels but also taking into account other factors, such as gender, gifted abilities and behavioral issues, to form well-balanced classes.

But the district plan requires English levels to be the top factor in forming classes. At one campus, three students with serious behavioral problems ended up in the same classroom; at another, some gifted children are set to be transferred out of the gifted teacher's classroom because she has been assigned to teach students with low levels of English.

Some of the elementary schools ordered to reshuffle classes, including Granada, Victoria and Tweedy, had recently been commended by the district for boosting the test scores of their limited-English students. Although it is possible to request a waiver from the plan, none have yet been granted.

Bravo and district official Hilda Maldonado said school staff had months of notice to make the changes. District officials conducted training on the new policy for all staff members last November, issued a detailed memo on forming classes in May and sent reminders during the summer that the district and federal government would be monitoring campuses in the fall, said Maldonado, director of the multilingual and multicultural education department.

But Judith Perez, whose Associated Administrators of Los Angeles represents principals, blamed L.A. Unified for the upheaval on school campuses, saying the district should have done more to prevent it.

"You can't just send people an email and expect them to fully grasp the ramifications of this change," Perez said. "We feel the fault lies with the district in providing inadequate communication with schools. People are very upset, frustrated and discouraged."

Maldonado said it was not clear how many of the district's 500 or so elementary schools are reorganizing their classes — some, such as Hoover Street Elementary, have organized them by English fluency for years. She added that the policy encourages mixing students with other levels for such non-core classes as P.E., art and music.

In the San Fernando Valley, parents at Granada and Bassett Street Elementary joined forces last week to hold a protest rally and are considering boycotting school one day this week when they said class changes are set to take effect.

Nieves Garcia, a Bassett parent, said she is particularly upset that Principal Linda Barr had not broadly informed parents of the impending change, which she learned about from a teacher. Barr did not respond to requests for comment.

"They're completely taking the parents out of the equation," Garcia said. "There's a bunch of finger-pointing, but no one is taking responsibility. Either way, our kids have to suffer."

Possible Response Topics and Questions:

- Consider your personal experience in the school system regarding English Language Learners. What have you noticed about how students are grouped up and placed in classes? How have any of these decisions affected your academic ability?
- Evaluate the LA Unified District's decision to "segregate".
- Pick a topic from this article and reflect on it.