

A Story I Like to Tell...

Don Bouchard: Um the story that I commonly tell about Mohammed, so my apologies if you've heard this story before, but I think there's a bit of relevance to the nature of our work in these three days.

His name was Mohammed; he was a student that I had in my classroom when I was teaching in Portland High School in 1996-97; um, he was also considered to be one of the lowest proficient students in my class. So I was doing a review of food groups, and I decided to ask Mohammed a some very simple questions, so I turned to him and I asked him a very simple yes-no question. I said, "Mohammed, is chicken delicious?" All he had to do was to answer yes or no.

He looked at me and he said, "Number one best meat is habari (spelling?); number two best meat is gazelle; number three best meat is Doob (spelling?); number four best meat is rabbit. Chicken," he said with an imperious smile, "is number one hundred!"

[laughter]

Whoa, I said. Wow! Ok, I had his attention, so I decided to ask him a few more questions. I said, "Mohammed, is it true that Doobs," now Doobs are lizard-like animals that, you know, race around in desert temperatures that we would literally melt at. I said, "Is it true that um, you, uh, cook Doobs by boiling them in water?"

"No way to cook Doob!" Mohammed said. "We catch Doob, take stick, put stick through tail, out mouth, put on fire. That is how we cook Doob."

I said, "is it true that you catch them by driving up to their holes in the desert, taking a hose, putting it on the exhaust pipe and down in to the hole, asphyxiating them?"

"No way to catch Doob!" he said. And then he stood up, and he went in to this Tai Chi like posture, and then he said, "There is Doob." And creeping closer to the imaginary lizard, all of a sudden he leaped and he said, "Hands catch lizard like this. If Doob bites you, it never lets go. Never!"

There was a little bit of laughter in the class and one of my other students said to Mohammed, he said, "Mohammed, is it true that desert people," 'cause Mohammed was from Eastern Africa, "is it true that, um, they eat poisonous snakes?"

All of a sudden, Mohammed became very serious. He said, "I tell you what we do with poisonous snakes. We catch them; we kill them; we make paste; put paste on mother's breast. Babies eat, are never, ever bothered by snake bite again, never!"

[Bouchard rings a bell]

The bell rang. The students left. I never saw Mohammed again. Never. He dropped out. To this day, I wonder what happened to him, but one thing I do know is that I and my colleagues in school failed him. Now remember, this was in mid to late 90s. Fast forward another 6 or 7 years, and Maine becomes a member of the WIDA Consortium, and I go to my first professional development training that was done by the Center for Applied Linguistics--because we were a really small staff in those years—and all of a sudden I had the epiphany. I had all kinds of insights as to, oh, *this* is how you teach to English language learners in a standards-based environment. Reflecting on this, here's what I think I failed to do: I failed to identify the language needs of Mohammed--yes I was able to generally know what he knew and what he didn't know; I failed to provide multiple avenues for instruction for him—it was very limited; and then I failed to

differentiate according to his proficiency level because I didn't know the defining features of his proficiency levels enough to know what to teach. And so it was a failure on three different accounts. But we didn't have the tools then. Now, we have the tools to be able to do it, and I think this is the reason why the Consortium has expanded the way it has is because it is an instrument; it is a framework around which we can really do some strategic, differentiated, efficient, effective delivery of instruction to our English language learners. So, from that time, I was sold, and I've been with WIDA ever since.