

ESL Learners

Many beginning teachers will have taken courses in their teacher training addressing the teaching of students for whom English is a second language. It is likely that you will have students who are considered to be ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. A significant number of students in NSW schools have one or both parents who were born outside Australia and speak a language other than English, and the family has chosen to maintain the mother tongue at home. Some students were born outside Australia, speak a language other than English and may or may not have undertaken formal studies in English OR their mother tongue.

The diversity among students who are learning English as a second language would astound most beginning teachers, but suffice it to say, it is important not to make assumptions about students based only on their time of arrival in Australia or their schooling. You can find out a great deal from the information collected at enrolment, but you will continue to be surprised at their experiences and perhaps some of the things you might have taken for granted. You might be taken aback by requests from anxious parents who may not be familiar with schooling contexts in NSW.

Most students will want to learn what their peers are learning, but are sometimes acutely and frustratingly aware of their fledgling skills in speaking and writing in English. They find it exhausting to listen to English all day (often with very limited comprehension) and can become anxious and irritable when they are unable to share what they already know and understand about a particular topic. They want friends as much as their English-speaking peers do, but may feel left out or unsure of how to participate in social interactions. They will have varying expectations of the role of a teacher and may be unsure of how to take on the role of a student in their new context.

There are no easy, foolproof formulas to follow, nor is there one complete reference guide. The students will learn at different paces – your supportive attitude will help make learning a positive experience. If you expect them to listen to you, listen to them too. If there are implicit and unstated rules (often because a group of students have attended the same school for a few years and know what the rules are), make sure the ESL students are let in on what everyone else seems to know.

A number of useful resources are listed on the AIS Professional Development website at <http://www.studentnet.edu.au/aispd/>. (From the *Resources* menu select the *Cross KLA* option, then *ESL*.) Some offer practical strategies that promote language learning in the classroom. Try one or two strategies when you feel comfortable. Talk to your colleagues and ask for strategies they have used that have successfully promoted language learning and engaged all learners.

The following text is an article which appeared in the AIS Newsletter.

ESL teaching and the 2004 context

The Independent School sector in NSW is characterised by the uniqueness of the schools and the diversity of the populations that make up the schools. Schools reflect a range of ethnic, cultural and religious groups, all using varying strategies to ensure students are both autonomous learners and key members of a cohesive school community. A significant number of students in NSW schools are learning English as a second or additional language. The figures change from year to year, and are sensitive to immigration policies of course, but we can safely say that at least one-fifth of students in Australian schools have a language other than English as their first language (also referred to as their *mother tongue* or their *L1*).

Learning English as a second language

Learning English as a second or additional language is different from the type of instruction undertaken by students who come to Australia to learn English and then return to their country of origin. The latter is called learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because learners will return to a country where English is not the dominant language. ESL education requires students to learn the language they will need for academic and community purposes as they interact with members of the school and broader community - and that means learning the language that is valued in schooling. The students need to learn the language that will give them the best chances of success and achieving their goals as a member of society. They need to understand English that is spoken and written for a range of purposes, and be able to write whole texts (not just grammatically correct, disjointed sentences).

A potted history of ESL teaching

Years ago, in some classrooms, a child's English language proficiency almost solely determined what curriculum they would follow. I recall an older German boy, newly arrived who was also much bigger than us, joining the Year 1 classroom where I was a student. Horst was probably a very successful student in his year 5 class (or whatever the equivalent was at that time) in Munich, but he was relegated to a small desk with a bunch of inquisitive 6 year olds. Horst broke the desk, laughed about it (I would have cried), and was eventually moved somewhere else. We never knew where he went. The system did not have the resources to accommodate Horst, or anyone else who did not have English as a first language.

There were no ESL teachers in the 60s. ESL teachers were first appointed in Australia in the late 70s. Classes often concentrated on simple language structures and features, with the trajectory of lessons tending to move from the simple language patterns to more complex structures. Some pedagogy was based on the drill and practice, pen and paper exercises that tend to be associated with traditional teaching methods. This may be similar to the way some of us had learned French as a foreign language. We conjugated verbs, said, read and wrote sentence-based grammar and wrote long vocabulary lists. In

the wider social context, and in subject areas, we really had no clear idea of where the language we were learning fit and how we could use these patterns.

In the early 80s, things had changed in that students were at least placed in the class with their same-age peers, but the curriculum was often made up of baby-ish books, colouring-in tasks, and the omnipresent naming of body parts. In Australia, the pedagogy that is often referred to as “progressive” was infiltrating schools, with an implicitness that tended to disadvantage ESL learners. Students who shared the same background and background assumptions as their teachers tended to have a pretty good idea of what the demands of schooling were, but ESL students were struggling. Many students in the older primary years were given project work, but really did not know what the point was. Some were plucked from the regular classroom and given instruction in what was called survival language – what students needed to know in order to make their way around the school and sometimes the local community. They learned specific structures to ask for help, clarify information, give instructions and so on. Links to the mainstream curriculum were often coincidental rather than planned. Often ESL programs looked quite divorced from the classroom teacher’s program.

And now...

So what is different in 2004? We know that students learn the language of the playground a lot more quickly than they learn the academic language of schooling. We know that students in the younger years tend to sound as if they are progressing well, but often lack a depth to their language. Students who sound fluent often are restricted by their knowledge of vocabulary, and need experience and exposure to many opportunities to expand their vocabulary. Students who come to Australia in their later years of schooling may have bigger gaps in their oral language proficiency than in their reading and writing, and need opportunities to talk through their understandings. They need purposeful opportunities to speak, and not just in formal, prepared sessions.

The demands of schooling have changed over the years, as have definitions of what it means to be literate. ESL education has to mirror what is going on in the broader educational context, to a large degree, or the students get left behind. Knowing what is appropriate to say, write, read and view is important, as is grammatical correctness. Any preoccupation with survival language can no longer be at the expense of more academic pursuits, or the gap between the ESL learner’s school learning and that of their English speaking peers becomes wider. In NSW it is recognised that language and literacy programs need to address the language learning needs of the students, acknowledge what the students bring to schooling (their social practices in and out of school) AND the demands of the mainstream curriculum.

The “Mainstream”?

The term *mainstream curriculum* generally means the curriculum that is followed by students who are in a particular stage or grade of schooling, and who have moved at a regular pace through schooling. Mainstream curriculum is usually defined by syllabus

documents in subjects and key learning areas, and in NSW, is defined by stages of schooling. With the exception of Early Stage 1 (Kindergarten), each stage represents two years of schooling.

So ... what is different about ESL?

If the curriculum content is the same – that is the knowledge, skills and understanding – is relatively stable for English-speaking students and their peers from language backgrounds other than English, then what is different? ESL students benefit from:

- More opportunities to practise the target language
- The smaller steps of learning to be made explicit (this includes all aspects of reading, writing in a new language and sometimes a new script, speaking including word choices and pronunciation, pitch and pacing)
- Any taken-for-granted underpinnings are articulated and not automatically assumed to be a shared starting point
- New knowledge to be linked to their background knowledge and experiences
- Safe opportunities for them to make links with prior learning
- Acknowledgement that their ideas matter
- Support nearby for them to check back, review, and refer to previous learning
- Tasks that provide ways of them showing what they know without relying on a purely language-based demonstration of understanding

The ESL students I have taught have always added refreshing dimensions to my classes. They have highlighted my professional need to keep learning about language, to question my own assumptions and they have, without exception, taught their English speaking peers so much.

Written by Sue Bremner. Sue has worked for many years in ESL education and TESOL training.