

Educators' Notebook
Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators

**Teaching English as a Second Language and English
Language Development in Mainstream Classes**

Sandra G.Kouritzin and Patrick G. Mathews

The responsibility for assisting ESL and ELS students with their linguistic, academic and social development is one that has been largely left to subject area teachers in mainstream schools. This Notebook identifies and summarizes five clusters of strategies drawn from current research that supports these responsibilities

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Teaching English as a Second Language and English Language Development in Mainstream Classes

Introduction

It is the first day of school. As we look around our classrooms and survey the number of ESL or ELD students, we see young faces alive with possibility. That is why we teach. But, just who are these students who languages other than English when they arrive in our classrooms? Do we even know?

Our students may have been educated in their first language schools, or they may not have ever held a book or sat behind a desk. They may be privileged international students, legal immigrants or refugees, or they may still be in limbo, awaiting immigration hearings. They may speak a language of international currency, or they may not. They may have arrived with their extended families intact, or they may have lost loved ones temporarily or permanently during the migration process. They may have grown up amid the rice fields in Vietnam, elbow-to-elbow with the blend of cultures in the metropolis of Hong Kong, or in an ancestral home in a village in Slovakia. They may belong to one of Canada's First Nations in northern areas or urban settings, who feel displaced in their own homeland. They may be conflicted about the role of English in their lives, associating it with "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson, 1992) in forms such as residential schools or cultural erasure (Kouritzin, 1999). They may have learning disabilities which we don't recognize because they don't speak English.

Researchers such as Ashworth (1985; 1988) point out that, for reasons of politics, practicality, or economics, the responsibility for these students has largely been left to subject-area teachers in mainstream classrooms. The main challenge facing the teachers who are charged with this task is how to assist ESL and ELD students in their academic and social pursuits? We have identified five major strategies drawn from current research to guide teachers.

1. Build on schools' and communities' strengths

- Learn about your students, where they are from and what they have done.
- Find out what materials there are in the school, in the community, in libraries, in students' homes. When new students arrive be ready to include them.
- Look for community workers and volunteers who know the first languages of your students. Research the heritage cultures of the students in your classroom (e.g., Kouritzin, 1999, Igoa, 1995; Sterling, 1992; Manitoba Employment Services and Economic Security, 1987) and find ways to make references to those cultures in your classroom (e.g., Scarcella, 1990).
- Locate the student's country on a map, and know about land claims. The first step in knowing your students is to know where they come from geographically and politically.

- Make sure that you evaluate students' learning, and not just their language ability (e.g., Law and Eckes, 1995)
Bring everything into your classroom to make it a more inviting place.

2. Build on your strengths

- Recognize what you have to offer. You know the subject content and you can prioritize the educational objectives. You know how to teach your subject area(s). You know the English language, and you are already a language teacher.
- When you have identified your educational objectives, make them explicit, and reinforce them by repeating them in many contexts.
- Use brainstorming activities to preview reading passages, and systematize them by, for example, making sure that all items on a web display the same grammatical form.
- Teach not only listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but also teach viewing and representing to all students, especially ESL and ELD students.
- Get active. Join the local national, and international organizations devoted to teaching English as a second language (e.g. TESL Manitoba, TEAM, TESL Canada, TESOL). Make connections.
- Be sure to make your explanations explicit. Provide examples. Have several students explain in their own words what you want done. Have instructions prepared in writing which you can put on walls or on an OHP.
- Do not assume that students, including "mainstream students" have the required knowledge of the specific genres (e.g., a joke, a story, the scientific method) or language registers (e.g. classroom vs. playground language) needed to successfully participate in knowledge-building in the different subject areas.
- Recognize the role that English has played nationally and internationally as a colonizing force, and remember that your students may well feel conflicted about learning it.

3. Build on your students' strengths

- Find out what the students know and can do, and focus on that. A needs analysis which focuses on what the students can't do and don't know is less appropriate.
- Use the international language of visual representations (e.g., webs, diagrams, charts) to help students understand and organize their knowledge.
- Don't insist that all students work with the same texts. If you are teaching a unit on trees, allow some students to work with encyclopedias, others with a textbook, others to look for information on the WWW. In this way, give all students ownership of some knowledge that they can share.
- Recognize that sometimes non-standard accents and non-standard dialects of English are markers of identity which students don't want to relinquish. Decide on whether accuracy, fluency, or comprehensibility is the most appropriate goal for your students at this stage of their development.
- Begin with the assumption that your students know the answers to your questions; their struggle is to find the English to express themselves. Encourage students by scaffolding language (e.g., begin by giving them frame structures, sentences, and paragraphs; try to guess and supply words that they are missing).

- Never forget to involve the students' first languages and first cultures in the classroom. Make sure that students understand that their own languages and cultures are important.
- Develop patterns in the classroom. If you brainstorm ideas first, and then vocabulary, and read a story silently and then aloud, do it this way consistently so that students are dealing with one unfamiliar thing at a time.
- Observe affinity groups, and use them in the formation of groups for collaborative work. Encourage the development of friendships that cross cultural boundaries.

4. Extend your strengths

- It is not being a good teacher that counts, but trying to be a better one.
- Study grammar in order to make what you know intuitively explicit. Learn to explain how English grammar works so students will learn English faster and better (e.g., see Azar, 1999). Learn how to teach grammar in context, starting with examples in real oral or written discourse (e.g., Celce-Mucia & Hilles, 1988). Learn about pronunciation and vocabulary structures (e.g., Kenworthy, 1987; Nation, 1990). Invest in a good picture dictionary for use in the classroom (e.g., Parnwell, 1996; note that the Oxford Picture Dictionary series has multilingual dictionaries as well).
- Study the resource books and curriculum documents which explain how to integrate the teaching of language and content (e.g., Kidd & Marquardson, 1994a; 1994b; Mohan, 1986; Richard-Amato & Snow, 1992).
- Read about the language learning process for language minority children (e.g., Spangenberg-Urschal & Pritchard, 1994).

5. Trust these strengths

- Believe in the human ability to learn and to communicate. Don't be afraid that ESL or ELD students won't understand. Talk to them. They may not be able to answer, but continue. You will make yourself understood in ways similar to how we communicate with very young children as they learn to speak. Speak in short, here-and-now sentences. Speak clearly, emphasizing the important work or words, saying them louder, softer, or with pauses before and after. Use objects and gestures, and demonstrate what you're saying. Involve other students in talking, translating, and explaining.

This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture the subtleties and qualifications reflected in the larger works, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.

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*Sandra Kouritzin and Patrick Mathews teach at the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba

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