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English as a Second Language: Strategies and Comparisons

by Bekah Myroup

(English 1100)

Abstract

This paper examines the English as a Second Language (ESL) program, stating that the main components which make it different from other language programs are pull-out classes with specialized instruction and the opportunity for students to befriend both native and non-native English speakers. Using current books geared towards ESL teachers, a variety of strategies are discussed that aid educators in meeting the different learning types of their English Language Learners (ELLs). Among these strategies are sheltered learning and second-language use. After exploring ESL, it is compared to other language options available for students, such as rapid mainstreaming and immigrant charter schools. The pros and cons of the three programs are considered, incorporating case studies to see how students are affected, so teachers can make educated decisions about what program is best.

English as a Second Language: Strategies and Comparisons

According to the U.S. Department of Education, roughly 10% of students in public schools today are English Language Learners (ELLs), with over 100,000 of these Limited English Proficient students being from Illinois (as cited in Sadker and Zittleman, 2010, p. 70). Minority students will account for half of the school population in less than 15 years (p. 58). These surprising statistics show the great need for the English language programs which are in place in schools today. Mainstreaming, dual-language instruction, and immigrant charter schools are just a few of the options for ELLs. But perhaps the most well-known program is English as a Second Language, or ESL. It is important for teachers, especially today, to understand the differences between the many language programs available so they can better help their ELLs. ESL differs from other language programs because it offers specialized English instruction in self-contained classes; yet, it also allows ELLs to experience life in an English speaking school.

English as a Second Language is defined as “[a]n immersion approach to bilingual education that removes students from the regular classroom to provide instruction in English” (Sadker and Zittleman, 2010, p. G-4). In these pullout classes, students are taught basic English reading and writing, skills interdependent on other subjects, such as history and science. The students' time, therefore, is divided between grade level classes and ESL classes. This allows students to still meet and become friends with native English speakers, yet eases them into learning the language.

Many strategies exist for ESL instruction. One such strategy is sheltered instruction (or Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English, SDAIE), which “highlights *grade appropriate, cognitively demanding core curriculum* for English learners who have achieved an intermediate or advanced level of English language proficiency” (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005, p. 78). Material should not be watered down for ELLs; rather, the amount of work should be reduced. This enables students to learn what their peers are learning, yet not be overwhelmed. Teachers can help students with English language development, and still use multiple teaching methods like group work and scaffolding. In a beginning ESL setting, this could look like the following process:

- Reading a easily-understood book to students, having pictures of objects mentioned in the book cut out and labeled

- Rereading the story and using objects in the room as reference or acting out the story
- Looking at the structure of sentences in the book
- Having students writing a different version of the story in small groups following the pattern of the book
- Having students write individual stories (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005)

In this way, students become familiar enough with a concept so they do not feel overwhelmed applying it in their homework.

Another strategy for ESL teachers is to teach towards “learner autonomy,” a term used by Lynne Diaz-Rico (2004) to describe when an ELL is intrinsically motivated to learn and complete work on his or her own (p. 101). To achieve this, a teacher must convey strategies for learning, help students identify how they learn best, and encourage students to set learning goals for themselves. According to Diaz-Rico,

Autonomy enables students to feel pride in their own achievements. If learning is too externally controlled, a student can feel other emotions (gratitude for the teacher's help, or relief not to have failed) but many not feel a personal sense of success. In SLA [second-language acquisition], the need for autonomy is especially important, yet especially difficult to attain. . . . One can *teach* the learner a second language – but only the learner can *learn* it. (p. 103-104)

A third example is second-language use strategies. Teaching this kind of strategy is especially important for beginning ELLs, because “second-language use strategy is employed for transmitting an idea when the learner cannot produce precise linguistic forms” (Diaz-Rico, 2004, p. 107). Students are challenged to improvise or be creative when they are unsure of words or phrases. Some language use strategies are repetition, memorization, speaking in unison, elaboration, monitoring self for mistakes, and role play. Using these actions, students are able to effectively practice English and move quickly to fluency.

But speaking a language is only part of the battle. Many ELLs struggle with reading in school because textbooks are written in academic language, rather than conversational language. Donna Ogle and Amy Correa-Kovtun (2010) state that an effective strategy for helping ELLs better understand informational texts is “Partner Reading and Content, Too – or PRC2” (p. 535). This idea can be implemented in an ESL classroom by matching up two students of approximately the same reading level. The partners are then given a book, and each silently read an assigned page. Each partner devises a question based on the page he or she just read. They then read the pages out loud and discuss the questions they came up with. Any new vocabulary words are written down in a notebook. The PRC2 method helps students to understand the content of the text, as well as gauge what they have comprehended from the reading. Speaking and reading a new language are inseparable tasks that require a lot of effort from both the teacher and student in ESL.

Now that the basics of ESL have been covered, it is important to compare it to other language programs available. Of course, no program is a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers today to know the options that exist for their ELLs, as well as be familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of each program.

With the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), more emphasis has been put on bringing ELLs up to grade level and English proficiency quickly. This situation is creating a rise in mainstreaming: placing ELLs into grade-level classes, whether after one or two years of ESL or immediately. This immediate placement, called “rapid mainstreaming” by Elizabeth Varela (2010), is often a sink-or-swim scenario. Consider the example of Olivia, published in Varela's article “Mainstreaming ELLs into Grade-level Classes:”

Olivia Contreras remembers being afraid.

As an 8th-grade student at Jackson Middle School in Nashville, TN, Olivia had arrived in the United States from her native Nicaragua the previous year. All of her academic experiences in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade had been in an English language learner (ELL) program. There, the teacher taught at a level slightly above that which was easily comprehensible to students, using demonstrations, pictures, diagrams, graphic organizers, and hands-on materials to help students understand.

But Olivia learned English so quickly that she was placed in mainstream content classes the following year. . . .

“Science was the most difficult for me,” recalls Olivia. “I usually understood the information from labs, but I had difficulty reading the book and I couldn't explain what I did understand because I didn't know how to say it or write it in English. I was afraid that the teacher would think I just didn't get the concepts.” (p. 39)

Situations such as Olivia's are not uncommon for students who are rapidly mainstreamed. Though it has its downsides, rapid mainstreaming does have benefits, such as learning from native English-speaking peers and a stronger sense of belonging, two goals that ESL can sometimes hinder. On the other hand, rapid mainstreaming often lacks the ability to offer specialized instruction for ELLs that ESL gives. As Varela (2010) states, “...rapid mainstreaming seems to ignore what research tells us: It takes five to seven or more years for students to pick up the academic language needed to survive in grade-level classes” (p. 40). In this comparison, it appears that research favors ESL over rapid mainstreaming as an effective program for teaching English.

A second alternative to ESL is immigrant charter schools. These schools are a fairly new trend in the United States, and, according to Camille Jackson's (2010) article, “Immigrant Charter Schools: A Better Choice?,” “increasingly focus on serving specific immigrant populations” and celebrating the students' cultural heritage (p. 24). Some charter schools offer dual-language instruction, such as Hebrew and English at the Hebrew Language Academy Charter School in New York. Others offer food complying with religious restrictions, bring in special performers to honor and remember a specific culture, or make counseling available for refugee children. In contrast, ESL often does not include such cultural learning (though it would be relatively easy to incorporate). However, ESL gives students the opportunity to attend a diverse school, with both other ELLs and English-speaking peers. Immigrant charter schools risk creating segregation, which could help their students in some ways, but undoubtedly harm them in other ways. Many concepts that make charter schools great (e.g.: learning about each student's heritage, new language immersion, and engaging the family in learning) can be incorporated into any school, says Jackson (2010).

The United States is becoming more and more diverse, and with it, the public schools. Many English language programs exist to help immigrant children transition to a new land and language, with the most well-known being English as a Second Language. Because ESL offers specialized English instruction in pull-out classes, it differs from other language programs such as rapid mainstreaming and immigrant charter schools. ESL seems to be right in the middle of the spectrum: focused English education in a diverse school. Teaching English Language Learners can be quite a challenge for teachers sometimes, but many strategies exist – such as sheltered instruction, learner autonomy, second- language use, Partner Reading and Content, Too – to guide them in developing a program that fits their ELLs. However, educators must keep in mind that the teaching is not all one-sided. Teachers and students alike benefit from hearing about the different cultures, values, and traditions of students for whom English is not their native language. Learning to appreciate differences will help schools to become stronger and students gain a wider perspective of life.

**You and I Are the Same**

by Kien Po

You and I are the Same  
but we don't let our hearts see.  
Black, White, and Asian  
Africa, China, United States and all other  
countries around the world  
Peel off their skin  
Like you peel an orange  
See their flesh  
like you see in my heart  
Peel off their meat  
And peel my wickedness with it too  
Until there's nothing left  
but bones.  
Then you will see that you and I  
are the same.

(as cited in Boyle and Peregoy, 2005, p. 1)

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