

# Meeting the Needs of ESL/ELD Learners in the Classroom

■ by Colleen Early

*The lesson plan in this issue is not our usual specific lesson on a specific subject. Instead, Colleen Early provides strategies for teaching ESL/ELD students.*

Teaching ESL/ELD students effectively can be a challenge for the classroom teacher. The good news is that as educators we know it is important to have high expectations but reasonable targets for all. If we can think about what ESL/ELD students need to succeed, they can and will.

English as a Second Language students may be new to the country or Canadian-born but with a first language other than English. More and more ESL students are proficient in several languages. All have limited facility in English.

English Literacy Development (ELD) students have limited or no English or use an English dialect. They have limited literacy skills due to interrupted and/or limited educational opportunities.

*The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8, English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development, A Resource Guide, 2001* identifies a continuum of expectations for ESL/ELD learners. Available to every classroom teacher, this guide provides concrete supports for the adaptation of Ontario curriculum expectations. It is also the basis for collaboration between ESL/ELD and classroom teachers.

Colleen Early is an ESL/ELD resource teacher in Simcoe County DSB and member of the ESL Resource Group of Ontario (ERGO).

The *Resource Guide* is organized under the headings of Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing and Orientation for primary, junior and intermediate grades. There are sample adaptations and modifications for selected teaching units for each grade level.

**Modifications** or adjustments are made when a student is unable to meet the grade expectations and/or performance criteria. Descriptors in the appropriate ESL or ELD stages are used to determine the modifications.

**Accommodations** are strategies and provisions (such as appropriate resources) provided by the teacher to help students meet the expectations.

You may accommodate as much as your ESL/ELD students need to assist in academic achievement.

## **Stages of Second-Language Acquisition**

The *Resource Guide* (page 9) outlines the stages in the acculturation process.

The rate at which individuals experience this process may vary even among members of the same family.

The four stages are:

1. Survival/beginning English
2. English in familiar and supported contexts
3. English with some independence and inaccuracies
4. Independent and accurate English

Students will proceed through the stages at individual rates depending on many factors such as age, language knowledge in first language, ability, and other factors such as personal trauma (*Resource Guide*, p. 8).

In the early stages of acculturation and language acquisition, there are periods of rapid growth and “silent periods”, or plateaus. During these times the student is absorbing large amounts of linguistic and cultural information but is not yet ready to produce oral language, especially in front of the class.

## Resources

Coelho, Elizabeth

### **Adding English**

Toronto: Pippin Publishing, 2003

Gibbons, Pauline

### **Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning: Teaching Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom**

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.

[www.heinemann.com](http://www.heinemann.com)

Ontario Ministry of Education

### **The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1–8, English As a Second Language and English Literacy Development – A Resource Guide, 2001**

Available as a PDF from the Ontario Ministry of Education website, [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/elemcurric.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/elemcurric.html)

### **Schechter, Sandra and Jim Cummins Multilingual Education in Practice: Using Diversity As a Resource**

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003.

### **[www.ergo-on.ca](http://www.ergo-on.ca)**

*ESL consultants and teachers meet at ERGO to discuss ESL across Ontario and lobby government about ESL concerns.*

### **[www.teslontario.org](http://www.teslontario.org)**

*The website of Teachers of English as a Second Language of Ontario has links to a number of sites that offer resources.*

### **[www.iteachilearn.com/cummins](http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins)**

*Jim Cummins' website features key links to current research papers and ESL/ELD supports.*

Most ESL/ELD students are able to use English to communicate in social situations and day-to-day classroom interactions within one or two years. However, students may require from five to seven years to develop the ability to understand the academic language used in textbooks and to use English to express the increasingly complex and abstract concepts encountered in the higher grades. (*Resource Guide*, p. 11)

The latest literature states that it takes anywhere from two years to nine years to acquire both the oral and written skills of a native English speaker. This year the Ministry of Education changed its funding formula to allow for four years of financial support rather than three, acknowledging that it does take longer to acquire English than previously recognized. However, it is individual boards that decide for how long students will receive ESL support.

Many teachers say, "They speak English, they are not ESL." Weeks later the teacher comes back saying the writing level is quite a bit behind the speaking level. Keep in mind that writing is the most difficult skill to master and students will still need ESL/ELD support in this area.

Students sometimes require ESL/ELD support and special education support. The latest statistics show that 12 percent of the general population has exceptionalities (including giftedness) and the proportion of ESL/ELD representation in special education classes should be approximately the same.

Standardized tests often don't produce valid/reliable information due to cultural and/or linguistic bias and are inappropriate for ESL/ELD learners. It is therefore

important to look at alternative ways to gather data. The ESL Resource Group of Ontario (ERGO) has been working on this issue for the past two years.

### **Strategies for teaching the ESL/ELD student**

Have confidence that you know more than you think about teaching your ESL/ELD student. Speak with your eyes and your heart. People do not remember what you said. They remember how you made them feel.

#### **1. Use of first language**

Students should be encouraged to continue speaking their native language at home. Otherwise, in years to come they may lose it altogether and not be able to communicate with some family members such as their grandparents.

Some benefits of using first language are:

- being able to transfer skills from one language to another
- developing mental flexibility
- developing problem-solving skills
- experiencing a sense of cultural stability and continuity
- understanding cultural and family values
- developing awareness of global issues
- expanding career opportunities.

Encourage the use of the first language at school when students first arrive. Another student in the class who speaks the same language can be a translator for instructions.

Within the first few days the student may write in their journal in their first language. Even if you cannot read the



language, you as the teacher will be able to determine certain literacy skills.

If possible, post charts, work, and lists in the first language. This validates the language and culture and helps students to feel accepted.

Encourage parents to use their first language at home, as using only English may limit family interactions. Families can also support learning at home. For example, they may teach their child to tell time in their first language. Children will then understand the concept of time and will only need the English vocabulary to communicate their understanding.

## 2. Visuals/gestures/concrete materials

**Visuals:** Fill your classroom with visuals. Label things around the room or use simple diagrams to help get a meaning across.

**Gestures.** We all use gestures all the time; for example “big-small,” “come here,” “no-yes.” Many cultures use their hands to speak. Body language says a great deal. Your smile is the first expression the student sees at the beginning of each day.

**Concrete materials.** Teach vocabulary using concrete objects, flashcards, pictures and other things readily available in a primary classroom. A partner can help.

Tools such as strategies, word-walls, alphabet displays, big books, pictures and a variety of other teaching methods create a supportive environment for the ESL/ELD learner.

## 3. Buddy system/peer tutors

Students who are just beginning to learn English do benefit from the support of

a bilingual same-language partner if possible.

Buddies (for younger children) or tutors support new English-language learners.

A peer-tutor from the same class or an older student from another class works well in older grades to help with content, reading, writing or math skills.

The teacher chooses a buddy/tutor the first day to sit beside the newcomer to help not only in class but also at lunch and recess. The buddy changes regularly so that everyone gets a chance to meet the new student and be of assistance. Buddies/tutors benefit from developing their own social and leadership skills and enhancing their own understanding of concepts after explaining them to someone else.

## General Hints for Teaching ESL/ELD Students

- ▶ Simple, straightforward words and sentences are easier to understand. Avoid passive verbs. Avoid slang and unusual idioms. Figurative language like “run that by me again” may be confusing.
- ▶ Speak naturally, remembering that learners have to learn to recognize English as it is actually spoken.
- ▶ Give clear instructions. Number and label steps, reinforce oral instructions with written outlines.
- ▶ Use non-verbal clues, gestures, facial expressions, and mime (be aware that some gestures may have negative meanings in some cultures).
- ▶ Highlight and introduce key vocabulary. Preteach and provide vocabulary ahead of time so students can look up new words.
- ▶ Check often for comprehension. At frequent intervals say, “Tell me what you have to do next” instead of “Do you understand?”
- ▶ Allow sufficient response time. Students need time to think in their first language and compose a response in English.
- ▶ Do not correct grammar when students first begin to speak English. Instead model it back in the correct form. Allowing students the freedom to speak and make mistakes will give them the self-confidence to take risks and try again.
- ▶ Work collaboratively with all teachers of ESL/ELD students. Share information, tips and ways of helping students become familiar with vocabulary and concepts of subjects
- ▶ Verb tenses are a common area of concern with ESL/ELD students. This will require a few formal lessons, and these will probably benefit your whole class.
- ▶ Checking the ESL or ESD box on the provincial report card indicates that accommodations and/or modifications of curriculum expectations are in place for that student (*Resource Guide*, p. 22).
- ▶ Try to get to know your students and their stories. It will open your eyes and your heart and is a good opportunity to teach acceptance in your classroom.

The author would like to acknowledge the members of the ESL Resource Group of Ontario (ERGO) and the ESL/ELD resource teachers in Simcoe County who contributed ideas for this article.

For journal writing, the journal could be dictated or copied. At first have the student write it entirely or partially in the first language. The student then reads it to the buddy, the teacher and the school secretary. The buddy could read to the student and the student could read to the buddy. There are many possibilities

#### 4. Use games, puzzles, chants and songs

Many commercial games such as *Guess Who* and *Concentration* need little language.

Puzzles are great because they require no language and the child just needs to match the picture on the box. The student may already be familiar with puzzles. The smaller the child, the bigger the pieces should be.

Chants and Songs: the ESL/ELD student should be sitting right in front of the teacher during this group activity. It is a great opportunity for the child to hear his/her own voice in unison without taking a risk of being embarrassed. All cultures appreciate music and rhythm.

Use audio tapes, drama, and visual arts.

#### 5. Resources

Schools, classrooms and libraries have a variety of picture dictionaries. Some of these are available in dual language format using English and another language. Dual language picture books can also be ordered from some book companies that carry multicultural literature.

Letting the child borrow the book to take home is a great way to show the family that you respect their language. Having parents read it to the child encourages them to be in contact with the school in a non-threatening way.

Think about computer programs you are already using in your classroom and school. ESL/ELD students can be put on a computer with or without a buddy depending on their computer ability.

ESL websites have teacher material.

### Working with buddies

Here is a sample list of ideas that buddies can work on. You or the students could make more, using themes and topics from the regular program. Ideas can be put on file cards and kept in a box.

- ▶ Label the school; e.g., office, desk, wall, washroom.
- ▶ *Introduction* game. The ESL student introduces himself/herself to various people in the school.
- ▶ Car survey: check parking lot, colour, make
- ▶ Make a map of the school
- ▶ Interviews: principal, secretary, custodian (make questions, then record the answers)
- ▶ Playing cards: teach counting and asking; Fish, 21, Crazy Eights
- ▶ Miming action words: partners must guess action words
- ▶ Preposition tour of the school: Who is *in* there? What is *on* the shelf?
- ▶ *I Spy* game
- ▶ Scavenger hunt
- ▶ Make a magazine collage (favourite things)
- ▶ Family survey (how many people in your family?, etc.)
- ▶ Newspaper: tell a story from a picture, weather, etc.
- ▶ Birthday: how do you celebrate?
- ▶ Languages-spoken survey
- ▶ Trace a body on mural paper; measure, label parts
- ▶ Teach a song, clapping, skipping
- ▶ Measure up: measure and record things around the school
- ▶ *Play Battleship*: a word and number for each coordinate
- ▶ Cookie sheet with objects on it: after looking at the articles, take the tray away and guess what things are missing
- ▶ Make a pictiary
- ▶ Tape a story
- ▶ Draw pictures and label them with appropriate vocabulary for their language stage
- ▶ Read a story into a tape with a friend
- ▶ Sequence games; use cut-up comic strips
- ▶ Activity: make a paper doll and dress it in the dress of your native country and label the items