

Balancing Language and Content: Teaching English Language Learners in the 21st Century

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It is hard to be an ESL student at an American school. Between ESL students, I could make many friends but when I have any classes like math or science I feel an invisible space between ESL students and regular students. I envy the regular students because I was good at science before, and now the only reason for my "C" on science was pictures in the textbook. (Middle school student)

This student's experience is not unique. The number of English language learners (ELLs), or students for whom English is a new language, has been growing in many international schools. Helping these students to become part of the school community and to balance language learning with content learning is one of the major challenges facing international schools today. English is a tool for learning, and an increasing number of students who cannot use that tool do not have full access to curricular or extracurricular opportunities offered by an international school. As a result, many schools have been rethinking how they serve ELLs.

ELLs face social, cultural and personal challenges, but perhaps their biggest difficulty is learning academic content *in English*. Social English skills may develop within a year, but research has consistently shown that the cognitive academic language of the classroom and textbooks takes five to seven years to develop (Cummins, 1981, 1996; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002).

Additionally, ELLs are aiming at a moving target, since increasingly complex language skills are required for access to academic content that becomes more difficult at each grade level. We cannot expect students to wait the five to seven years needed to develop academic language proficiency and then start learning content—that train has already left the station.

This disparity is seen in the well-documented and significant achievement gap between ELLs and their monolingual English-speaking peers. But there is a silver lining on this cloud. It has forced teachers and administrators to ask: *What can we do about it?* Fortunately, we can do a lot, and many international schools are changing in response to the growing cultural and linguistic diversity in the student population.

ELLs clearly need the support of ESOL teachers in facing the twin challenges of achieving in content areas and developing academic English proficiency. But ESOL teachers cannot do this job alone. Many schools are making a gradual shift in the roles of ESOL teachers, and in the responsibilities of the larger school community – in response to the growing cultural and linguistic diversity in schools. Successful program reform and professional development reflect the following principles:

- Schools understand their student population clearly and recognize that "ELL" includes not only students currently receiving ESOL and bilingual services *but also many students in "the mainstream" who have exited or never received ESOL support.*
- Teachers and administrators view students along a developmental continuum of academic English language proficiency and recognize that *all students will benefit from the intentional integration of language and content instruction.*

- All teachers understand how to work effectively with ELLs in their own classes, including:
 - the essential role culture plays in the classroom
 - strategies to scaffold content instruction to make it more comprehensible
 - basic principles of second language acquisition and how to promote the development of both social and academic English in mainstream classes
 - the critical importance of supporting students' first language development to promote an additive rather than subtractive form of bilingualism.
- Schools have explicit English proficiency standards and assessments, and teachers understand how these tools can support the development of academic English skills *in all classes*.
- Classroom and content teachers understand *how to collaborate with ESOL specialists in planning, instruction and assessment*.

These principles describe a new instructional environment for ELLs in the 21st century and many schools are already moving in this direction. Morris Kimura, a high school ESOL teacher, recently explained to me how the nature of his professional dialogue is changing. He used to feel that he was constantly initiating conversations about ELLs with his colleagues. Now more teachers are seeking him out and asking for advice and support. On top of that, fewer teachers are asking for *him* to help ELLs, but instead they are trying to find out what *they* can do to help an ELL in their classes. This reflects how teacher roles are changing as the entire school community shares responsibility for educating ELLs. Two keys to understanding this evolution are *integration* and *collaboration*.

Integration

Whether it is considered “immersion” or “inclusion,” more and more ELLs are finding themselves in mainstream classes. This integration of ELLs and mainstream students needs to be reflected in a similar integration of language and content in instruction. On one hand, language is a bridge to learning content. All teachers need to understand the impact of language in their classes and how they can support ELLs’ subject mastery by using English in intentional ways. On the other hand, content can provide a means for language acquisition, and teachers can promote the development of academic English proficiency for all students. Approaches such as reading and writing across the curriculum may not be new, but with increased ELL enrollment, all teachers need to help students develop oral language and literacy skills in the content areas. The integration of language and content is often represented by a venn diagram, but this interdependent relationship is more accurately illustrated by a yin-yang.



Changes in curriculum and assessment also reflect the integration of language and content. Recent revisions of K-12 English language proficiency standards (e.g. WIDA, TESOL) have been linked to content standards, helping teachers to understand and assess the specific language skills ELLs need to learn mathematics, science, social studies and language arts. Connecting academic language proficiency with specific content standards is a powerful new development. For example, the following excerpt from the WIDA standards articulates what kind of writing skills a sixth grade student might need to use in math class.

WIDA Classroom Framework, Grades 6-8					
Standard 3: English language learners communicate information, ideas, and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of MATHEMATICS					
PROFICIENCY LEVEL	Level 1 Entering	Level 2 Beginning	Level 3 Developing	Level 4 Expanding	Level 5 Bridging
Writing Sample Topic: Probability	Record and label outcomes of events involving chance, using real objects (e.g., coin flips or rolling cubes)	Give outcomes of events involving probability, using real objects with words and phrases or short sentences	Propose probability based on observed outcomes and describe results in a series of sentences	Detail possible combinations, based on probability and compare against observed outcomes in paragraph form	Explain and give reasons for likely probabilities in multiple paragraphs

(source: WIDA 2007 Standards, www.wida.us)

Descriptors in the above example show content-based language skills at different English proficiency levels. These descriptors, or model performance indicators, provide valuable support for both ESOL teachers and content teachers in designing differentiated lessons and understanding student progress. For example, a sixth grade math teacher would be able to use the above information to develop writing tasks involving probability at the appropriate linguistic level for ELLs in the class. While this example shows only the mathematics standard and the writing domain, the complete framework describes speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in mathematics, science, social studies and language arts. Teachers need to be aware of these new tools and understand how to use them in planning for, teaching and assessing ELLs.

This type of integration of language and content does *not* mean that ESOL teachers are becoming obsolete, or that all teachers need to be English teachers. On the contrary, elementary classroom teachers and secondary content teachers are *still* primarily responsible for teaching the grade-level curriculum, but they need to do it in ways that make that content accessible for ELLs. This is often referred to as “sheltering” instruction, which does not mean diluting the content, but rather differentiating instruction and integrating language into all subjects. Most teachers agree that this approach helps all students, not only ELLs. Content teachers need training in how to use English in intentional ways to provide access to the mainstream curriculum and to help students develop academic English (see sidebar).

Likewise, ESOL teachers are *still* the ones responsible for teaching English. Especially in the case of students with beginning English proficiency, intensive English language development is critical and ESOL teachers need to meet this need. However, ESOL teachers need to consider how they can also connect language development with content learning. For example, thematic units and content-based instruction can “import” grade-level content into pull-out ESOL classes and provide a relevant context for language learning. Increasingly, some ESOL teachers are asked to work with ELLs within other teachers’ classes, to provide push-in support for language development. ESOL teachers need to be able to recognize the linguistic dimensions of a content lesson, to differentiate instruction and scaffold academic language learning. For instance, ESOL teachers need to understand how a fourth-grade social studies assignment can be adapted for different English proficiency levels, and where to find supplementary readings. Staff development for mainstream teachers is not enough; ESOL teachers also need to develop new skills in order to meet the demands of their changing professional role.

Collaboration

ESOL and general education teachers need to be able to work together collaboratively to integrate language and content by planning, teaching and assessing in ways that support ELLs – and this cooperation needs to be intentional to be effective. The key to collaboration is that it is not seen as “pedagogical imperialism” from the perspective of mainstream teachers. If ESOL teachers find links between language and content, and then share them with mainstream teachers, the issue of “curricular ownership” needs to be considered carefully. These links should serve as examples rather than mandates. Otherwise, a science teacher, for example, might feel an ESOL teacher is being prescriptive or presumptive in explaining the language dimension of his or her science class. Unless teachers have already built a professional relationship and developed a shared vision for how ELLs fit into the bigger picture, integration may sound like someone “telling me what I need to teach.” Once this shared foundation is developed, however, teachers can collaborate to support ELLs in a number of ways.

Five ways for mainstream teachers to integrate language and content learning

1. *Use graphic organizers.* Give students a visual (e.g. timeline, diagram) which relates information and helps to organize new concepts. Graphic organizers also provide a “visual grammar” by allowing common language patterns to be connected to key concepts (e.g. smallpox vaccine was developed in 1796, the Red Cross was founded in 1864).
2. *Teach vocabulary.* Provide students with thematic lists of difficult words before a new unit, and return to these words throughout the unit. Pay attention to how common words (i.e. *table*) may be used differently in an academic context. Teach students to use prefixes, suffixes and roots to understand and remember new words since approximately 60% of English words have Latin or Greek origins. Practice with fun activities like bingo, pictionary, or crossword puzzles.
3. *Use dialogue journals.* Have students write back and forth with other students, with their family or with the teacher. They can describe what they have done in class, articulate what they have learned and share any questions that remain.
4. *Teach discipline-specific genres.* Identify and explain different text types (e.g. lab report, newspaper article) by modeling patterns of organization, text structures and transition words. Provide writing frames or sentence starters to scaffold students’ writing in the genre.
5. *Reverse the lesson.* Instead of introducing a new idea through a reading and then following it with application activities, reverse the sequence. Start with a lab, video, demonstration or other hands-on activity, then use the text to reinforce both content and key academic language.

Co-planning: First, ESOL and mainstream teachers need to be able to develop units and lessons that include appropriate language and content objectives, integrating content standards with students' linguistic needs. Again, the new integrated language standards from WIDA and TESOL provide valuable tools for teachers working together to serve ELLs. Common planning time is essential for this type of collaboration, and administrators need to see the value in providing this structure. However, some ESOL teachers are spread across many grade levels or even across different schools. In this case, email or electronic curriculum mapping can be useful tools for connecting teachers.

Co-teaching: Second, in addition to support for co-planning, ESOL teachers also need skills in co-teaching, and the ability to play different instructional roles so they don't always default to the "teaching assistant" model. For example, two teachers may complement each other with mini-lessons, activity centers or parallel teaching. To do this, ESOL teachers need not only an understanding of language teaching but also an awareness of how to collaborate effectively in another teacher's classroom.

Co-assessing: Third, teachers need to collaborate on assessment. Identifying individual students' academic language proficiency in each content area will help teachers to develop appropriate linguistic expectations and accurate content assessments. ESOL teachers need to communicate assessment data on ELLs to colleagues, and find ways to work together on formative assessments. For example, two teachers can evaluate student work collaboratively, providing the student with useful feedback on both language and content learning.

To promote both integration and collaboration, ESOL teachers may be involved in staff development. Many administrators recognize the value of ESOL teachers as on-site resources who understand second language acquisition, cultural dimensions of school and how to support ELLs and their families, so ESOL teachers are sometimes asked to provide professional development for colleagues. It is important to recognize that this approach is not without challenges. Teaching English is one thing, but training colleagues to teach ELLs is another process altogether. Even though ESOL teachers have expertise in language teaching, they may lack knowledge of specific content areas or may not have experience with teacher training. In many cases, these challenges are compounded by ESOL teachers' lack of professional status within the school community or a school culture that does not promote collaboration.

There are some important caveats to keep in mind. If ESOL teachers are asked to provide direct professional development, they need the training and resources to do this effectively. Unfortunately, many "off the shelf" teacher-training programs do not provide adequate training for trainers. Also, when schools purchase staff development materials that do not reflect the cultural context of the school, it takes extra time to develop workshops for colleagues: time which ESOL teachers may not have. There are many ways to facilitate professional development, and ESOL teachers may be more effective starting with a co-planning, coaching or co-teaching role than a traditional in-service training role.

Technology: an analogy

The inclusion of ELLs is often compared to what has happened in special education in the past two decades. There *are* many parallels in the two situations, but a more accurate comparison is

found in K-12 technology instruction. All students need to learn how to use technology tools, both to access information and to communicate effectively in all content areas. How schools have approached technology education mirrors a similar shift that needs to occur for language and content to be integrated. Ten years ago, the computer teacher's job was to develop technology skills in students. Often this was viewed as a "special" class, and students would work on projects, using spreadsheets or desktop publishing, in isolation from their other classes. Gradually computer teachers began to find curricular connections with the other subject areas in order to incorporate projects into computer classes.

In many schools, technology skills are now fully integrated into the content area curriculum, and technology specialists serve as resources for students and teachers. A technology teacher may still teach individual classes for students who are new to technology or need additional background, but the main function of this specialist role is collaboration through team-teaching, consulting and coaching. This analogy of how technology instruction has changed provides a useful model for how the roles of ESOL and content teachers must continue to evolve.

Conclusion

International schools share a valuable resource in the diversity of their student body and have the potential for exemplary educational programs. In the 21st century, proficiency in more than one language will be increasingly necessary to participate in a globalized, information-rich society. Students who are learning English as a new language should be regarded as *becoming bilingual* (or trilingual), rather than as somehow *lacking in English*. When all students are viewed along the same continuum of English language proficiency, teachers are connected and programs become more cohesive. By integrating ELLs into the larger school community, *all* teachers can become more aware of the important role of academic language in content classes. Within this new instructional environment, ESOL teachers can continue to help students develop English language proficiency skills, while also collaborating with colleagues to support planning, instruction and assessment that serve all students – including ELLs.

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