

NOTE: This article was originally published in NALDIC Quarterly Autumn 2009

Academic success for non-native English speakers in English-medium international schools: The role of the Secondary ESL department

Paul Shoebottom, Frankfurt International School.

Abstract: This paper outlines the various responsibilities of the ESL department in an English-medium international school. These responsibilities include not only day-to-day ESL instruction, but also close collaboration with administrators, mainstream teachers and parents, so that each party is fully aware of its own special role in ensuring the academic success of students with English as an additional language.

A typical English-medium international school contains a significant proportion of students who are learning English as an additional language. Indeed, it is common for the majority of students at an international school to have a mother tongue other than English¹. These non-native students have a daunting task. They must learn new content and skills in a language over which they are still gaining mastery. Almost all of their classes will be in English, and they will take the same internal and external exams in English as their native-speaking peers.

An international school that enrolls English language learners (ELLs), usually for high tuition fees, has the clear responsibility to do all it can to maximize the chances of these students achieving academic success and thereby gain access to the further education of their choice.

There are some international schools, as Carder (2007) notes, where there is no special provision for students with limited English. They are placed in the full mainstream on the assumption that they will soon pick up English and be able to participate in lessons. This may be true for some students, particularly in respect of their basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS – see Cummins, 1984). Most international schools, however, acknowledge that the development of the students' cognitive academic language ability (CALP – Cummins, 1984) is the key to academic success, and that this needs much more focused effort and attention. It will not develop quickly or effectively enough in what Carder (2007) calls the "sink or swim" of the full mainstream.

¹ The EL Gazette (2005) states: "The majority of students in international schools are non-native speakers of English. In the 2004 European Council of International Schools (ECIS) annual statistical survey, 297 schools with a total enrolment of 161,86376 students indicated that over half the student population (59%) spoke English as an additional language (EAL). Of these, 198 schools (67%) had 50% or more such students while only 21 schools had fewer than 10% EAL speakers. In 18 schools none of the students spoke English as first language" (quoted in Carder, 2007).

A large number of international schools, therefore, employ ESL specialists with the responsibility of supporting students of limited English proficiency. The academic success of such students can best be ensured if the ESL teachers have a clear concept of their crucial role, not only in working directly with English language learners, but also in assisting mainstream teachers and school administrators in fulfilling their duty to create a school with optimal learning conditions. The ESL department also has a special role in educating parents of non-native English students in what they can do to optimize their children's chances of success.

While the responsibilities of the ESL department go beyond the provision of direct support to ESL students², this remains its primary duty. The nature and content of such support should be guided by current research³, and take into account the special circumstances of the school, its curriculum and its student body. As Genesee (1999) states: "No single approach or programme model works best in every situation. Many different approaches can be successful when implemented well. Local conditions, choices, and innovation are critical ingredients of success." Collier, whose extensive research with Thomas (2002) provides clear evidence of the superiority of the two-way bilingual model⁴ for situations where there are large numbers of non-native-English students with the same mother tongue, states that "ESL instruction may be the best way to support non-native English students in international schools" (in Murphy, 2003).

A number of international schools, indeed, have decided that a temporary, partial withdrawal of ESL students from the mainstream to receive direct language instruction and mainstream subject support is the best way of meeting these students' immediate and longer-term needs. Since the overriding objective is that ESL students achieve academic success, it follows that the focus in ESL lessons must be on doing work that helps students learn academic language and academic language skills. A traditional EFL syllabus that has as its primary goal the development of communicative competence will be inappropriate (Krashen, 2003). Many ESL departments have implemented a content-based syllabus that combines the acquisition of useful factual knowledge with the development of academic language and skills such as note-taking based on authentic text, expository writing or making oral presentations. Some ESL instructional time will need to be devoted to preparing ESL students for forthcoming assignments in their mainstream classes or helping them revise work before it is handed in. (See the Appendix A for a brief description of the content-based ESL instructional programme at Frankfurt International School.)

A well-constructed, pedagogically-sound ESL programme can positively influence the rate at which the ESL student closes the gap on his or her native-speaking peers. However, the role of the ESL department in an international school goes further than simply designing and implementing ESL instruction. The time that students spend in ESL

² An ESL student is a student whose English is sufficiently limited for him or her to be considered in need of ESL instruction. Thus, not all non-native speakers are ESL students.

³ Hinkel (2003) notes, for example, "The teaching of perfect progressive verb forms and their uses may not be worth the time in L2 academic writing instruction".

⁴ A typical two-way bilingual class in an American public school consists of approximately equal numbers of English and Spanish students. They have some of their lessons in English and the other lessons in Spanish.

lessons is generally much less than the time they spend in their mainstream classes. If the students are quickly to become peer-competitive, able to fully participate in classroom activities and gain good grades in homework assignments and tests, it is essential that this time is spent as productively as possible. The second responsibility of the ESL department, therefore, is to ensure that mainstream teachers have the knowledge and skills to get the best out the non-native English speakers in their classes.

Optimal mainstream subject instruction occurs when the teacher is able to modulate classroom language and adapt classroom work so that the ESL student is able to participate in the tasks and achieve the learning objectives of the lesson. The ability to do this presupposes familiarity with the facilitators of second language acquisition, particularly in respect of making language comprehensible. It is the responsibility of the ESL specialists, as linguistic experts, to assist their mainstream colleagues in the acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills in this area.

One way of imparting theoretical and practical information to mainstream teachers on how to make their instruction "ESL-friendly" is via a reputable commercial in-service programme such as *ESL in the Mainstream* (DECS, 2008)⁵ or *Enriching Content Classes for Secondary ESOL Students* (Jameson, 1998). The courses are designed to be delivered by ESL teachers in the school and take up 50-60 hours of a mainstream teacher's time. Both focus very heavily on how to make language and tasks comprehensible to ESL students following the theories of Krashen (1982) and Vygotsky (1978) - see Appendix B. The clear message is that teachers in a school with a significant proportion of non-native speakers need to consider themselves not only as teachers of mathematics, science or art, but also as teachers of language.

An alternative to off-the-shelf courses such as *ESL in the Mainstream* is for the ESL department to create its own in-service programme, as has been done at Frankfurt International School (Shoebottom, 2007a). This has the advantage of being directly applicable to the particular situation of the school and its student body. Cummins (in the foreword to Carder 2007) emphasises that the development of effective classroom practices in respect of non-native speakers “ .. will evolve in schools where there is ongoing dialogue and sharing of perspectives among teachers and administrators, all of whom are seen as having something to contribute to the improvement of practice.”

The ESL department's in-service programme with advice on the modulation of classroom language and tasks is not the only service that it can offer to mainstream teachers. It can also prepare ESL-friendly materials for use in the mainstream class and assist with the preparation of assessment materials. Furthermore, in some international schools ESL teachers have scheduled time in which they can visit mainstream classrooms and team-teach or provide direct help to students in individual or group tasks. Teacher cooperation of this nature is often a very productive way of imparting/acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to get the best out of the non-native speakers in mainstream classes.

⁵ Carder (2007) has a comprehensive summary of the aims and content of the *ESL in the mainstream* course.

Students with limited English proficiency need not only informed, committed teachers. It is very important also that their parents know how they can best help them at home. ESL students at international schools often spend a very large amount of time at home on school work and extra English work – often with a private tutor⁶. It is essential that such time is as productive as possible, and the ESL department has the clear responsibility to advise on this. Establishing lines of communication with the parents is, in any case, good practice. Research has shown that a strong school-parent partnership is conducive to academic success:

“The involvement of families is an important element of school success for all students. Students with parents that are involved in their education are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores; enroll in higher-level programmes; be promoted, pass classes and earn credits; attend school regularly; have better social skills; show improved behavior; adapt well to school; graduate and go on to post secondary education.” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002)

The ESL department can promote parental involvement in various ways: parent forums, newsletters, online information (see Shoebottom, 2007b), being open to contact at any time, arranging for important documentation to be translated into the home languages. ESL parents are usually very ambitious for their children, but they often need guidance in the best way to help their child. It is not uncommon for them to believe, for example, that they should talk a lot in English with their child at home in order to maximize exposure to the language. It is essential, therefore, that the ESL department conveys to parents what research tells us about the role the mother tongue has to play in the learning of the second language (Cummins, 2000). In this respect, it is of crucial importance that parents are encouraged to enter their children in bilingual or mother-tongue programmes, should they exist at the school.

Another important message that the ESL department needs to convey to parents concerns expectations. In many cases the ESL students join the international school having been successful in their home country’s educational system. It can be difficult for the parents to accept that progress at first will be slow. It is common that new students experience considerable stress on moving to a new country and new school system (Shoebottom, 2007c). This stress will be exacerbated if the parents have unrealistic expectations about how quickly their child will be able to catch up with his or her peers and start achieving to his or her full potential. Collier (1989) claims that it may be as long as seven years before this process is complete.

Parents should also be advised on the best way to help their children with school assignments. They should know, for example, that process is more important than product. Teachers almost always prefer to receive work that is incomplete or of poorer quality than perfect work that has essentially been done by the parent or private teacher. Parents also need to know that allowing their children a little more time for recreation or relaxation, especially self-selected reading in English and the mother tongue, is often

⁶ It is not uncommon for ESL students to work until after midnight on school days and for 8-9 hours or more on Saturdays and Sundays. (Information based on surveys undertaken at Frankfurt International School.)

more productive in the long run than requiring them to work with a tutor or do extra grammar or vocabulary exercises.

The ESL department has one final area of responsibility: to advise and guide the school's administrators. Administrators have the most significant influence, albeit indirect, on the academic success of the ESL students since without administrative approval there will be no appropriate language programmes, no mainstream teacher training, no parent forums. The ESL department needs to be able to provide guidance based on latest research findings in second language acquisition so that the administration can make sound pedagogical decisions. In terms of general curriculum, for example, research suggests that a thematic approach with greater depth than breadth is better for ESL students (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). It is clear also that ESL students do better when their cultures and cultural perspectives are integrated into day-to-day teaching. As Cummins (1996) states:

".. when students' language, culture and experience are ignored or excluded in classroom interactions, students are immediately starting from a disadvantage. Everything they have learned about life and the world up to this point is dismissed as irrelevant to school learning; there are few points of connection to curriculum materials or instruction and so the students are expected to learn in an experiential vacuum. Students' silence and non-participation under these conditions have frequently been interpreted as lack of academic ability or effort, and teachers' interactions with students have reflected a pattern of low expectations which have become self-fulfilling."

The ESL department should also seek to make its influence felt in the issues of hiring and evaluating faculty. It is in the interests of ESL students if newly-employed mainstream faculty have already had some experience of teaching non-native speakers, or make a clear commitment to attend in-service training. Probably all international schools have some system of evaluating faculty, often with a view to offering or declining tenure. It would be helpful if one of the criteria for a good evaluation is evidence of a willingness and ability to modulate teaching to accommodate the special needs of students with limited English proficiency. The administration, and not just the ESL department, needs to convey the message that all teachers are language teachers and that, for the most part, what is good for the non-native speakers is also good for their native speaking peers.

In terms of hiring new ESL colleagues, it is in the clear interest of the ESL department, and thus in the indirect interest of the students, that the appointed teacher has a qualification in TESOL. It is important that administrators, teacher colleagues and parents have confidence in the ESL teachers as specialists with the necessary knowledge and training.

The ESL department also needs to be represented on the school's major administrative bodies so that it can be a constant advocate for ESL students in all aspects of their education. This is of particular importance in the advocacy of and assistance in setting up a bilingual or mother-tongue programme.

In summary, English-medium international schools that admit non-native English speakers have the duty to ensure that, lesson-by-lesson, these students are receiving the best possible education. This is most likely to be achieved if the school has a strong ESL department that designs the optimal ESL programme for those students and actively assists the other key contributors to the students' academic success (administrators, mainstream teachers and parents) in fulfilling their vital roles in this process.

Appendix A

Following is a brief overview of the Upper School ESL programme at Frankfurt International School (FIS) – a partial pull-out model that is common at many international schools (Sears, 2003). Cummins (1994) in his report to the school on language policy states that "... the model of gradual transition to the mainstream over a 2-3 year period appears coherent and appropriate."

General aim: To fully mainstream ESL students as soon as possible, but to recognize that, for a limited period, they need not only direct instruction in acquiring English but also the safe haven, extra time and mainstream subject assistance that the ESL programme provides for them.

Organization: ESL students are placed into one of three ESL classes according to their English proficiency. All students follow the mainstream programme, including German, with the following exceptions:

- Level 1 ESL students have ESL class at the same time as the other students have mainstream English, humanities, French/Spanish.
- Level 2/3 ESL students have ESL class at the same time as the other students have French/Spanish or an elective.

Most students who join FIS Upper School with little or no English spend 2-3 years in the ESL programme before joining the full mainstream.

ESL class: The students' time in ESL lessons is spent either doing ESL work (see below) or getting help with mainstream subject assignments. The proportion of time spent on a.) ESL work and b.) mainstream subject work is based on the ESL teacher's assessment as to how much mainstream subject support is necessary at any given time so that students can keep on top of their work for other teachers.

ESL work: The ESL curriculum is content-based (see Mohan, 1986, and Brown, 2007), the topics being chosen to complement those in mainstream classes. Students spend several weeks on a topic (for example, *Games and sports through the ages* or *Tomorrow's World*), and perform various tasks in the four language skills. The emphasis is on building a strong general academic vocabulary (Shoebottom, 2007d) and gaining practice in the academic skills of making formal oral presentations, understanding spoken and written language, and conveying knowledge, understanding and opinion through formal writing. A crucial component of each ESL course is the development of students'

reading ability (Nuttall, 1982). Part of the ESL instruction time for Level 1 students is a course in humanities that mirrors the mainstream humanities course.

In-class support: The ESL programme includes scheduled time during which ESL teachers can visit mainstream classes and assist the students directly or team-teach with the mainstream teacher. Such visits also give the ESL teacher the chance to monitor students who have recently exited the ESL programme.

Appendix B

The training of mainstream teachers in how to meet the needs of the English language learners in their classes, as exemplified in programmes such as *ESL in the Mainstream* (DECS, 2008) or in-house courses such as the one developed at Frankfurt International School (Shoebottom, 2007a), has its foundation in the work of Krashen (1982) in the field of language acquisition and Vygotsky (1978) in respect of learning in general. In essence, both Krashen and Vygotsky postulate that learning takes place when the learner enters the notional realm a little beyond his or her current state of knowledge or ability.

Krashen claims that being exposed to input (written or spoken language) that is somewhat more advanced than the learner's current level is a sufficient condition for language learning to take place. He refers to this comprehensible input as $i+1$, where i can be equated to the learner's current ability and $+1$ to the next level a little further on. Vygotsky calls the notional realm the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), and claims that the learner can move into it, i.e. develop knowledge, understanding or skills, with the help of a knowledgeable, competent teacher.

Thus, a significant amount of time in teacher training courses is devoted, firstly, to helping mainstream teachers understand what makes the language of classroom tasks, and the tasks themselves, difficult for non-native speakers of English; and, secondly, to showing how the task language can be made comprehensible and the intended task outcomes achievable.

A critical concept in this respect is *scaffolding* (Wood, 1976). Scaffolding⁷ is the term for the assistance given by the teacher to the learner in order to make the task comprehensible and manageable. Scaffolding includes such diverse strategies as pre-teaching key vocabulary, activating background knowledge, cooperative group work, graphic organizers, graduated questioning, use of visual aids and manipulatives.

Teachers who regularly and appropriately use scaffolding techniques make a significant contribution to the development of the English language proficiency of the non-native speakers in their classes, as well as ensuring that they learn the subject content and skills.

⁷ Gibbons (2002) has a useful guide to scaffolding language and learning for younger children. Shoebottom (2007e) explores the theory and practice of scaffolding via interactive visual media.

REFERENCES

- Brown, C. (2007). *Content-based ESL instruction and curriculum*. Exchange Quarterly. 22 Mar. 2007.
- Brown, H. (1994). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Carder, M. (2007). *Bilingualism in International Schools: A Model for Enriching Language Education*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Chamot, A. U., & O'Malley, J. M. (1994). *The CALLA handbook: Implementing the cognitive academic language learning approach*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Collier, V. (1989). How long? A synthesis of research on academic achievement in a second language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23(3), 509-531.
- Cummins, J. (1984). *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Cummins, J. (1994). Report to The Frankfurt International School on Language Policy Options.
- Cummins J (1996). *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*. Ontario CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- DECS (1999). *ESL in the Mainstream*. Hindmarsh, South Australia: Department of education and Children's Services.
- < <http://www.elgazette.com/> >
- Genesee, F. (Ed.) (1999). Program alternatives for linguistically diverse students. Washington, DC: CREDE/CAL. Available <http://www.cal.org/crede/pdfs/epr1.pdf>
- Gibbons, P. (2002). *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning: Teaching ESL Students in the Mainstream Classroom*. London: Heinemann.
- Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Hinkel, E. (2003). *Teaching academic ESL writing: practical techniques in vocabulary and grammar*. New Jersey. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Jameson, J. (1998). *Enriching Content Classes for Secondary ESOL Students*. McHenry, Illinois: Delta Systems.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Krashen, S. (2003). *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use: The Taipei Lectures*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (1999). *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford; OUP.
- Mohan, B. (1986). *Language and Content*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Murphy, E. (Ed.) (2003). *The International Schools Journal Compendium – ESL: Educating Non-native Speakers of English in an English-medium international school*. Saxmundham, England: Peridot Press.
- Nuttall, C. (1982). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Sears, C. (1998). *Second language students in mainstream classrooms: a handbook for teachers in international schools*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

- P., Shoebottom. (2007a). "Helping ESL students achieve academic success." *A Guide to Learning English*. Frankfurt International School, Apr. 2007. Web. Aug. 2009. <<http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/fis/index-w.htm>>.
- Shoebottom, P. (2007b). "For Parents of ESL Students." *A Guide to Learning English*. Frankfurt International School, April. 23 Aug. 2009. <<http://esl.fis.edu/parents/index.htm>>.
- Shoebottom, P. (2007c). "ESL students and culture shock." *A Guide to Learning English*. Frankfurt International School, April. 23 Aug. 2009. <<http://esl.fis.edu/parents/advice/shock.htm>>.
- Shoebottom, P. (2007d). "General academic vocabulary." *A Guide to Learning English*. Frankfurt International School, April. 23 Aug. 2009. <<http://esl.fis.edu/vocab/index-a.htm>>.
- Shoebottom, P. (2007e). "Using the Smartboard to provide visual scaffolding." *A Guide to Learning English*. Frankfurt International School, April. 23 Aug. 2009. <<http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/fis/index-s.htm>>.
- Thomas, W., & Collier, V. (2002). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement*. Santa Cruz, CA and Washington, DC: Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind and Society - The Development of Higher Mental Function*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Wood, D., Bruner, J., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*, 17, 89-100.