

Embracing Language Minority Students

Guidelines for Instructional Support of Second-Language Learners

BY NORKA BLACKMAN-RICHARDS

Teachers and school families, as a whole, play a very important role in successful language learning.

During one of several job inquiries upon my arrival in North America, I was politely informed that my specialty, “Teaching English as a Second Language,” was not needed in any of the Adventist schools of the area. However, it seemed strange that in a large city with massive numbers of immigrants swelling its population, such a need would not exist. Upon further inquiry, I was told that this “problem” was dealt with by retaining students who did not speak English for a year or two to ensure their mastery of the language.

Learning a new language and the social rules for interaction in a new culture are, to put it mildly, challenging. As pastor’s children, my sister and I experienced some of these challenges while living on the Dutch Island of Curacao. However, the administrative staff, teachers, and students of the high school that we attended embraced us and joined forces to teach us the languages (Dutch and Papiamentu) and the culture.

On the first day of school, my sister and I were introduced in each of our classes by the principal. He took the time to explain that we did not speak any of the official languages of the region and described his expectations about how we were to be treated in and out of class. Our classmates were very understanding and constantly offered their help. Our experience there was extremely rewarding—we learned the languages, successfully passed the Dutch College Entrance Exams, and were not retained in any grades.

My sister and I credit the success of our language learning experience to the tangible support provided by our teachers and peers. From our very first day at school, the teachers recruited our peers to help us. This interaction and tutoring taught us both the culture and the language. We in turn tutored and helped our peers in subject areas such as Spanish and English. Every teacher took a special interest in our academic progress and language development and involved us in class instruction. They spoke to our parents in English and involved them in school events.

That early experience not only influenced my career choice, but

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it also made me aware that teachers and school families, as a whole, play a very important role in successful language learning. Helping students acquire the language in which instruction is given has become an essential reality in many countries today. Consequently, educational administrators must provide practical guidelines for instructional support in every Adventist school. This article deals mainly with the American system of schooling, but its suggestions can be adapted for use anywhere.

The Changing Face of America's Classrooms

During the past 20 years, the United States has experienced the greatest surge of immigration in its history. As a result, American society and schools have changed dramatically. Cultural and linguis-

tic diversity is not new to the United States. What is new, however, is its magnitude.

In recent years, a much more diverse group has been arriving than in earlier decades. Nationwide, more and more school-age children are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). About two-thirds of these children are in the elementary grades, 18 percent are in middle school, and 14 percent are in high school. Almost 75 percent of these children speak Spanish at home, with the remainder speaking a vast diversity of languages ranging from Vietnamese, Russian, Haitian Creole and Cantonese to Korean and Arabic. Only about 18 percent of the teachers of English-language learners were hired primarily to teach such students.

According to the National Research Council Institute of Medicine, American education has until recently focused primarily on meeting the needs of native English-speaking children. All others were thrown into a system that expected them to "sink or swim." However, because of the rapidly increasing number of LEP students enrolled at both private and public institutions, approaches have been designed to help them develop language proficiency and the necessary skills to achieve academic success.

Who Is a Second Language Learner?

Students whose first language is not English have received many labels, such as Limited English Proficient (LEP), Language/Linguistic Minority Students (LM), or English as a Second Language (ESL) Learner/Speaker. The most widely used term is ESL student.

An ESL speaker is defined as someone who learned a language other than English as his or her first language. Some may be fluent in both English and their native language, while others may know little or no English. Their ability to master English depends on factors such as interest, effort, out-of-school exposure to the language, and access to resources. When enrolled in a good second-language instructional program, many students take from two to four years to

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become proficient in English; but can be successful in other subject areas such as math, science, music, and art before achieving such proficiency.

Learning a new language can be very stressful. Initially, students may feel reluctant to speak English in a group situation because they fear peer rejection due to their language limitations and differences in cultural values and customs. I once tried to illustrate this fact to some native English-speaking teachers by giving them a mini-literature class in Spanish. The words they used to express their feelings during this experience were: “left out,” “rejected,” and “lonely.” ESL students, too, can feel distressed when their special learning needs are not taken into account.

Challenges Faced by Teachers

Increasingly, teachers at all levels whose schools lack a program for ESL students have had to add this task to their daily responsibilities. They face the incredible challenge of developing their students’ writing and oral fluency in English, as well as ensuring that they master the academic content for their grade levels!

Teachers of ESL students soon realize that these youngsters need more time than other students to process information (especially in the beginning stages). They may understand a concept, but because of difficulty expressing it in English or fear of being ridiculed, they may hesitate to participate in class.

The Need for Inclusion

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is

no stranger to linguistic or cultural diversity. Our denomination has established educational institutions throughout the world that offer character-building and Christ-centered instruction. A system this diverse needs a research-based and user-friendly approach for including second language instruction within its curriculum. Unfortunately, many schools are still practicing the old approach of throwing LEP students into a standard classroom and expecting them to “sink or swim.”

One of the greatest dilemmas seems to be how to establish a safe, accepting environment of inclusion and at the same time provide the necessary framework for successful language learning. The following guidelines may prove helpful:

1. *Administrators and teachers must be committed to the academic success of ESL students.*

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Just because a student comes from a different cultural and linguistic background does not mean that he or she is intellectually or academically disadvantaged. Adapting to a new language and culture is a challenge, but when provided with the appropriate instructional support, ESL students can be successful learners.

2. *Educational leaders should ensure that teachers become knowledgeable about ESL.* They can offer in-service meetings for teachers, require that they enroll in courses at local colleges, and suggest books or journals containing suggestions for teaching such students. This will help teachers to understand ESL students’ special needs and how to teach them more effectively.

3. *Provide an ESL class/teacher for second-language learners.* In schools where five or more children have this special need, the

school should obtain the services of a full- or part-time ESL teacher to focus on the development of English-language skills during regular language-arts classes or after school.

4. *Family linguistic identity should be considered and respected.* The parents of ESL students should receive invitations to meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and school functions, whenever possible, in their native language. They should be encouraged to visit the school, and provisions for an interpreter should be made. School personnel can recruit another parent, teacher, or student to interpret for parents with limited English-language proficiency.

5. *All Seventh-day Adventist schools should project an image of cultural openness.* Because we teach that the gospel must be preached to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, Adventist institutions should value and respect cultural diversity. This philosophy should not only be stated in our institutional policies, but also lived and intentionally incorporated into our teaching practices. Everyone at school must cooperate to make ESL students feel welcome and accepted.

6. *Teachers should be sensitive to the cultural perspectives of ESL students.* Teacher authority and even peer interaction are viewed and treated differently in every culture. What might be considered as extreme shyness or introversion in North American culture might be considered as a sign of deep respect in Asian and some Hispanic cultures. Teachers should encourage students to participate in the dominant school culture, while allowing them to preserve their cultural uniqueness.

Making Instruction Accessible for ESL Students

The goal of effective ESL instruction is to help students master both English and necessary content-area information. Thus, strategies for second-language learning should be combined with regular instruction. Adventist textbooks and supplementary materials for subjects such as Bible, science, and reading provide few if any strategies or techniques for second-language learners. Nevertheless, teachers can still make the content-area instruction accessible to their ESL students.

1. *Prepare your class for diversity.* Take the time to formally introduce the language learner to the class, briefly explaining the new student's language limitations, and rally everyone's help in supporting him or her. Discuss with students how they would feel if their parents had to move to a foreign country where no one understood them and they did not know the language. Draw up a list of things that they can do to help their new classmate feel at home and learn English. Provide opportunities for the class to learn about the ESL student's culture and language by incorporating this information into social studies or foreign language study. This will help the language learner to feel accepted and enable the rest of the class to better appreciate his or her perspective.

2. *Assign a mentorship group to the ESL student.* Children learn from their peers, and so do language learners. Ask for volunteers or assign several students to serve as mentors for the new pupil. Different students can be assigned each month to help out with academics and other aspects of school life, such as recess, gym, and cafeteria. Or you can designate mentors for specific subject areas. This may make it easier to evenly distribute the mentoring tasks and to enable the language learner to make friends with classmates. To ensure that the mentoring is going smoothly, hold assessment conferences with the assigned mentors. This will help to smooth out misunderstandings and enable you to better evaluate the ESL student's progress.

3. *Provide communication opportunities within the classroom.* Small-group discussions and cooperative-learning strategies allow ESL students to learn and use the language, with their peers as collaborators. Even in the beginning stages, ESL learners benefit immensely from being exposed to the language in a variety of situations. Be sure to involve them whenever you assign collaborative activities. Language learners can also be assigned specific roles such as keeping score for games, timing various activities, going to the office for supplies, and even looking up definitions or facts in the dictionary.

4. *During instruction, be flexible.* You may need to adapt your teaching style when instructing ESL students. Be sure to speak clearly and a little more slowly than usual.

When enrolled in a good second-language instructional program, many students take from two to four years to become proficient in English; but can be successful in other subject areas such as math, science, music, and art before achieving such proficiency.

Repeat explanations of difficult concepts. You do not need to raise your voice when speaking to a language learner or to speak extremely slow. These are not normal speaking patterns, and language learners will pattern their speech after what they are exposed to. Use nonverbal reinforcement such as gestures and drawings on the board while you explain. Manipulatives and pictures also help make the instruction clear.

5. *Provide individualized attention.* During class and whenever possible after school, provide language learners with personal attention. Checking for comprehension is one of the teacher's most important tasks. Sometimes, a language learner may have difficulty understanding the instructions for a certain activity, or certain words may be confusing. Achieving comprehension in their course work is of vital importance to these students. Your interest and concern will motivate them to want to learn and excel in the language.

6. *Seek additional support.* A wealth of information is available for ESL teachers.

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Read articles in educational journals on teaching second-language learners or log onto Web sites such as the one for TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages). Two wonderful online sources are: *The ESL Magazine Online* (<http://www.eslmag.com/>), which provides up-to-date techniques and resources for teachers of second-language learners, and The Children's Only Web site (<http://www.childrenonlyesl.com/>), designed especially for teachers of young language learners.

7. *Provide alternatives.* Help ESL students improve their language skills by adapting assignments:

- Provide an "abridged" version of the assigned book or literature,
- Share videotapes of wholesome movies and have the students retell or write a summary of the plot,
- For beginners, instead of a lengthy essay, assign a paragraph of five to eight sentences;
- Encourage students to use a bilingual dictionary when working in class.
- Have them visit ESL Web sites;
- Assign exercises or activities from ESL

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Web sites. Some popular ESL online sources are: Dave Sperling's ESL Café (<http://www.eslcafe.com>), English Town (<http://www.englishtown.com>), which caters to the student's specific language, and English at Home (<http://www.English-at-home.com>).

Many Web sites are tailored to the

unique needs of both second-language learners and ESL teachers. Using a search engine, type the key words **English as a Second Language**, which will produce a number of helpful online sources.

Good teaching is student-centered and wholistic, including mind, body, and soul. It requires sensitivity to the diverse needs of each student and adapting strategies and materials to help them succeed.

Teaching second-language learners requires careful planning. Including a practical and current approach within the Adventist school system's present curriculum and instructional practices will lead to successful teaching and learning. The changing cultural and linguistic configuration of our classrooms demands that we face this challenge immediately and effectively. ✍

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