

Teen Talk

Language and Learning in Canada

ESL PSA conference session reviewed by SYLVIA HELMER

ESL teens have a lot to say about their experiences in school in Canada. As a teacher, it can be both fascinating and unnerving to sit back and listen as they describe their struggles and triumphs in their efforts to learn in a new language and cope with a new school system.

This session, hosted by **Judith Robson**, ESL Department Head at Gladstone Secondary, led off with a refugee from the mountains of Vietnam



Yet, with Le Van Chu

telling us in his **second** language, Vietnamese, about his experiences coming to Canada and going to school here.

His youth and family worker – and soccer coach – speaks Vietnamese and English but not the Jrai language of the region from which Yet has come. Standing proudly and dressed in his traditional vest – every region has its own design – he spoke at some length while everyone listened enrapt as his story unfolded through three languages.

This was a potent example of the complexity with which ESL students must cope when they arrive as strangers in a strange land.

The other students who volunteered had us smiling, laughing out loud and making hasty notes as they told us about their perceptions of what we did or did not do to support them and what the going to school experience has been like for them. It is both enlightening and sobering to hear how they perceive our best efforts.

What should we do more of?

- take the time to get to know them
- say their names properly
- take more field trips

What should we do less of?

- take field trips
- explain quickly without writing things on the board

Oral Language – Tips & Games

Verena Foxx, Workshop Presenter & ESL Consultant,
Vancouver School Board

Research tells us this

- ★ ESL learners are not a homogenous group
- ★ ESL students often bring a wealth of knowledge and experience in their own language and culture; however, they are lacking English vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm, intonation & grammatical structure
- ★ Oral language proficiency can appear fluent long before reading & writing skills are at an age-appropriate level
- ★ An ESL student's self-esteem is supported when their first language is accepted, valued and recognised
- ★ ESL students need support to learn and develop academic English skills
- ★ The language competency of ESL learners in their first language can be well developed by the time they reach intermediate grades
- ★ ESL students and families are encouraged to continue to support development in their native language. In this way, basic concepts continue to develop in one language, while the student is learning the new language

Have some Fun

How many things can you think of that...?

- Are black?
- Make a noise?
- You can sit on?
- Are made of metal?
- Are larger than you?

Silent speech

To focus on pronunciation and mouth movement, list a series of words on the board which illustrate various sounds that you are concentrating on. Tell the class to listen carefully – then switch to mouthing the words silently. Students have to try and guess the word by watching your mouth movement.

Numbers in my life

Each student thinks of a number that is important in their life (a date, telephone number, age, holiday). One student volunteers to write their number on the board, and others try to guess what it is and why it is important.

(Source: Five Minute Activities: A resource book of short activities by Penny Ur and Andrew Wright: Cambridge University Press (ISBN 0-521-39781-2) Listed online).

Other useful oral language resources:

ESL Teacher's Activities Kit: Elizabeth Claire: Prentice Hall (ISBN 0-13-080478-9)

Games Language People Play: Jerry Steinberg: Dominie Press/Pippin Publishing Ltd (ISBN 0-88751-0175-5)

Discussions that Work: Penny Ur: Cambridge University Press (ISBN 0-521-28169-5)

No Glamour Language: LinguiSystems (ISBN 1-8-9876543)

www.ESLgold.com

Supporting ESD Learners

Sylvia Helmer, ESL Consultant, Vancouver School Board

Supporting English as a Second Dialect (ESD) Learners

Many schools across the province are supporting the unique needs of Aboriginal* Learners. The following outline offers some useful information to support your thinking and planning with regard to this special group of students.

*First Nations children in Canada are growing up in a variety of contexts (50% urban, 10% rural off-reserve, 40% rural/remote on-reserve) within a variety of cultural ecologies and languages. Some children, **though not all**, are exposed to a non-standard English dialect as the primary language of their family or community. In order to provide First Nations children with effective and respectful programs of child care, education and support, practitioners need to be aware of First Nations English grammars and community-based norms of language use.¹*

The linguistic differences exhibited by ESD learners are differences, not deficits. No one variation of English is more standard than any other – except by political [in-group/out-group] agreement. Instead, differences may be rooted in a number of other factors.

These include:

Grammar

Each dialect of English has a slightly different grammar. In addition, learners may be using the grammar of a different home language. Some examples:

- **verb form is invariable** [also true of several Asian languages]
 - I go, you go, he go
 - I goes, you goes, he goes
- **pronouns may be optional** [also happens in Japanese]
 - You hear about the accident?
Was on my way to town. . .

Speech sounds

Many languages have sounds that we cannot hear, and we give meaning to sounds that those of other languages have learned to ignore. The difficulty with 'l' vs 'r' for many Asian languages speakers is a case in point. The same is true with some ESD speakers.

- e.g. 'd' used in place of 'th' so that 'this' becomes 'dis' and 'mother' becomes 'mudder'

Discourse structures

- Narrative may not be chronological but thematic
- Connections between/among ideas may not be explicit
- "brevity" is valued over "elaboration"

Interaction Styles

In addition to issues of grammar and discourse structures, the style of classroom interaction may appear at odds with what we have come to expect in BC classrooms. Some examples of different ways to view interaction include:

- Hesitation and silence can mean thought rather than lack of comprehension
- Listening and observing may be considered more valuable than talking
- One-to-one may be preferred to group or class work
- Trial and error learning may not be considered “normal”
- Listening behaviour may not include looking at the speaker nor include “listening support” [nodding, uh huh, really?, etc.]
- Lack of response to “display questions” does not necessarily mean lack of listening.

What to Avoid/What to Do

Changing the way a learner interacts with her/his own community is not what we wish for ESL/immigrant learners. For ESD learners, as well, it is important to recognize the value and validity of the home language system. Intervention should therefore be aimed at helping these learners become ‘bi-dialectical’, namely to learn the dialect that we call ‘school English’ **in addition to** the dialect of English they already use in their daily lives.

ESD learners need support via a specialized ESD programme that includes **some** of the same techniques and strategies that are used with ESL

learners. However, since they **are already English speakers**, it is important to stress language development techniques that:

- draw the learner’s attention to the differences between the dialect they speak in the home community and the dialect used at school and in books.
- help the learner recognize situations where it is appropriate to use each of their two dialects – home dialect and school dialect.
- provide many opportunities for learners to practice and use the grammar and phonology of “school English”.

* *Aboriginal people is the inclusive term for all peoples of indigenous ancestry in Canada.*

¹ Ball, J., Bernhart, B. & Deby, J. *Implications of First Nations English Dialects for Supporting Children’s Language Development*. Paper presented at WIPC, Nov/Dec. 2005.

**Encourage your colleagues
to join the ESL PSA**

How do you join a PSA?

Download and print the [PSA application form](#) at: www.bctf.ca/psas and mail it to the BCTF with the appropriate fees. The mailing address is on the form.

For information concerning PSA applications, contact [Elizabeth Lambert](#), 604-871-1848 or 1-800-663-9163 (elambert@bctf.ca).

Learning Disability? Language Development? Just Learning to Do School?

By SYLVIA HELMER, ESL Consultant, Vancouver School Board

This article is a compilation of what I have learned, experienced and read about in my efforts to support those ESL learners who have learning needs that are above and beyond learning the English language. I would be most pleased to receive feedback, suggestions and additional tips for supporting such learners. [shelmer@vsb.bc.ca]

As more and more ESL students arrive in our schools and districts, it is to be expected that some of them will have learning needs in addition to simply more time to learn English. So how can we tell the difference? What can ESL - not learning disabilities - specialists do? No one wants to “label” a learner inappropriately but neither do we want to make learning a hugely frustrating challenge.

First, it must be recognized that if an ESL learner has not had the kind of home literacy environment our school systems consider the norm in Canada, it could be easy to assume that there is “something wrong”. Snap judgments such as an impoverished environment and/or lack of preparation for school come to mind. However, what is really at play here may be a completely different way of living and learning.

For example, a child from a country where school does not begin until the age of seven would arrive here, be put in a Grade 2 class and certainly appear to be significantly behind. When you consider how much a child learns in school in those first two years, the response from a teacher might well be to assume that there is a learning problem. If the learner happens to be of

secondary school age and does not appear to have the prerequisite “doing school” skills needed to begin learning in a new language, this *gap* is wider.

Second, it is important to remember that all learners new to a language, its culture, and its schooling system will experience some forms of culture shock. Culture shock, in extreme cases, has been known to last for months, even years. Though we cannot make an assumption that a child who does not thrive in school is simply in culture shock, it is a factor to consider when progress appears to be very slow. Culture shock can mean a learner is reluctant to speak, if at all. Cultural differences can mean the learner will seem extremely passive or refuse to participate in some activities or with opposite sex peers. Linguistic differences can mean the learner simply does not “hear” the sound you might be trying to help her/him learn.

Keeping the above in mind as mitigating factors, the list that follows includes some of the more obvious ‘assumptions’ we make about what learners bring to school:

- reading/writing progresses left to right and top to bottom
- Roman alphabet system
- sound/symbol relationships
- storytelling is done from beginning, to middle and then the end
- holding a pen or pencil
- raising your hand
- using a pencil sharpener
- playground/gym turn taking

- borrowing/ returning school or personal property
- being on time
- using a locker and knowing how a combination lock works
- students change classes [rather than the teacher] and do not get lost
- participation is expected
- gym strip and showers are a normal part of school life

Most trained ESL teachers are well aware of these types of skills, knowledge and attitudes and proceed to make them explicit learning experiences for their students. However, a learner who comes to our schools lacking in several of these areas could be considered “slow” by teachers new to experiencing such differences. So, how CAN we tell the difference? What CAN we do to support learners?

STEP ONE

Ask questions:

1. Has the problem persisted over time? [at least a few months]
 - a. E.g. oral **language** problems will improve over a period of time unless the problem is not language based.
2. Has giving **explicit** instruction in the problem area made a difference?
 - a. If no explicit instruction has been given, try that first...over a period of time.
3. Does the learner show strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others?
 - a. E.g. does the learner have good oral skills but poor written skills?

4. Is the learning haphazard?
 - a. The learner ‘gets it’ one day and seems to have totally forgotten it the next?
 - b. ESL learners tend to make systematic errors in grammar; those with additional learning needs tend to make random and **inconsistent** errors.
5. Does academic progress seem stalled? [again, after a considerable period of time]

If you find yourself answering, ‘Yes!’ to **most** of these questions, it is quite possible there is a learning problem – masked by the stages of language acquisition.

STEP TWO

Learn as much as you can about the student. This could include:

- learning milestones – when did the learner start talking, walking, etc.
- educational history [both in English and the home language, if applicable]
- writing samples [in both languages, if possible]
- speech/oral samples [in both languages]
- teacher summary of student strengths and weaknesses,
- teacher anecdotal evidence of social and emotional state, behaviour, academic interests, etc.

Needless to say some of this information requires the participation of the caregiver and someone fluent in the home language. Gather as much detail as you can.

STEP THREE

If the learner in question were an English-speaking Canadian, the next step would be to refer her/him for a detailed assessment. However, trying to diagnose what exactly the challenges are for ESL learners is problematic as the learner's level of English precludes a valid and fair assessment of their capabilities. At present, no school district in BC has more than haphazard access to psycho-educational evaluation tools or those trained to administer them in languages other than English. In the meantime we find ourselves doing the best we can as such learners continue to struggle in both language acquisition and content learning.

Here is what you CAN do:

- Document in detail what you do with the learner.
- Put the learner on the list for screening and further evaluation as is done in your district.
- Document every effort - on your part and that of others who work with the learner - to support the additional needs of the learner.
- Advocate for home language assessment, if appropriate.*
- Provide additional support.

**An increasingly large percentage of our young ESL learners are not immigrants or even refugees. They are Canadian children, born here but raised with a different set of linguistic and cultural norms. Few assumptions can be made about their ability in either the language of the home or English. Therefore, trying to assess such learners in their home language may not be the best option.*

STEP FOUR

Advocate, advocate, advocate!
ESL students who have additional learning needs deserve the same level of support as any other student who has such needs. Waiting until their linguistic ability is enough to allow for detailed assessment and evaluation in English is unfair and unjust. You, who understand best, must speak on their behalf.

Opportunity for Leadership

Take on the role of
Conference Chair – or
team up with a
colleague to Co-Chair
the 2007 ESL PSA
Conference

When?
Friday October 19th, 2007

Where?
TBA

Info?
Sydney Dean
604.517.6220
sedan@sd40.bc.ca

