



Are Schools Getting Tongue-Tied?

ESL programs face new challenges.

English as a Second Language programs have historically focused on Spanish-speaking students, but the ESL map is undergoing a dramatic transformation that is challenging K12 schools to cope with a burgeoning number of different native languages—more than 100 in some locations—as new immigrants arrive in districts across the country.

And the number of English language learners has increased by 65 percent between 1993 and 2004 compared to barely a 7 percent increase in the total K12 population, according to a 2006 study by the National Clearinghouse

for English Language Acquisition. And according to the Migration Policy Center, better than 70 percent of ESL students are Spanish-speaking. But the native tongues in many districts belong to recent arrivals from the former Soviet Union, a growing number of immigrants from Middle Eastern countries and Asia, and a large cohort of students—many of them refugees from war-torn or poverty-stricken lands—from the Balkan countries to Africa.

“There are more than 380 languages spoken in the United States, and they’ve spread into many geographic areas—including rural areas—that traditionally

did not have many non-English speakers,” says Rosa Aronson, executive director of TESOL, or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, an international organization.

One of the big challenges for states, districts, and educators is developing the capacity and expertise” to teach and deal with the widespread increase of ELL students across the country, Aronson adds. They include: Russian, Arabic, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Somali as well as languages that many teachers and administrators may never have heard of: Kirundi (from Burundi in Africa), Dzonkha (from



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More than 95 native languages, other than English, are spoken among 11,500 students in the Minneapolis Public Schools. Somali, Spanish, and Hmong are among the popular languages. Left, students goof around, far left, and also read together, right.

the Asian country Bhutan), Cushitic (spoken in parts of Kenya, Tanzania, and the Sudan), and Amharic (from Ethiopia).

TESOL Associate Director John Segota points out that the states with the biggest jump in ESL students, who in many districts are designated ELLs, include Kentucky and North Carolina, which has seen a 250 percent increase over the last five years.

For its part, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has developed five standards for teaching ESL students, from providing instruction and “social” English language, which covers everyday communication with teachers and classmates, and ascending to higher level and more specialized uses of English to understand and converse about core subjects such as math, social studies, science, and language arts.

Even as the numbers of foreign languages and their speakers proliferate, though, the stakes in educating them are increasing as states and districts implement the rigorous Common Core Standards in almost all subjects.

Meeting Content in Minneapolis

But fortunately, a few districts do stand out in meeting ELL needs. In the Minneapolis Public Schools, Jennifer Leazer, the ELL content lead for the district’s multilingual department, more than 95 native languages other than English are spoken, accounting for 11,500 of the district’s 33,000 students. Spanish, Somali, and

Hmong, the primary Laotian language, are the main languages.

“All of our teachers have the same basic job—teaching academic English proficiency,” regardless of the native language, says Leazer. “Our classroom teachers need to see themselves as ESL teachers,” by using techniques that tie language to specific tasks, from project-based learning to working in small groups.

ESL students born in the United States tend to acquire language more quickly than those born in other countries or their own native countries, Leazer explains. “But their English is usually social Eng-

every academic subject to reach students who speak only some English.

For instance, Leazer says, an ESL teacher and a classroom teacher might work out a science lesson focused on understanding the characteristics of various organisms. Besides following the district’s learning targets for the lesson, the two teachers would identify the vocabulary and grammatical structures that students need to describe the organisms and their characteristics in complete sentences, or even a paragraph.

The students then follow an inquiry-based approach, where students could work together to theorize about the similarities and differences between organisms. Such an approach, according to Leazer, “incites student curiosity and language development in the context of a rich curriculum that includes lots of visuals and hands-on activities.”

And Minneapolis’ educators do not shy away from making demands on ESL students. “We have higher expectations and standards,” Leazer says. “Our stakeholders and public want to see these students graduate and go off to college. And ESL teachers provide a bridge to grade-level learning.”

At the same time, the district uses formative assessments for language and content learning that give ESL students alternative ways of expressing their learning, such as through drawings. The emphasis is on reducing the “linguistic” load by providing “comprehensible content dif-

“The approach incites student curiosity and language development.”

—Jennifer Leazer, ELL content leader, Minneapolis Public Schools

lish, and one of the key challenges is teaching them academic English,” which requires they go beyond the basics of daily conversation to reading, writing, and talking about school subjects.

To fulfill that expectation, Leazer’s department deploys 150 ESL teachers to the district’s more than 50 schools. These specialists collaborate with regular classroom teachers to develop strategies in

Certification for ESL Grows

Learning the countries and cultures of students.

The University of Rhode Island (URI) has an ESL certification program that is growing like “mad,” with 90 masters candidates enrolled, according to Nancy Cloud, the coordinator for the program that leads to a masters’ degree in education and ESL certification.

ESL certification is so valuable in K12 education now because the demands for ESL teachers are growing while regular classroom positions are being eliminated in some districts, she adds.

Cloud emphasizes that her program is not preparing teachers to deal with specific languages, but it offers online materials about the countries and cultures from which students are likely to come. The materials sum up the educational system, literacy rate, languages spoken, and customs of each. For instance, in Ethiopia, the URI site notes, students study in one of several native languages through seventh grade, after which instruction is delivered in English; parents in urban areas stress student achievement, but illness and harvesting work in rural areas lead to spotty school attendance.

“We’re teaching them how to discover the features of each child’s [culture and] language,” Cloud explains. “That involves considerable data gathering, from understanding how much education they have had in their native countries to the level of English proficiency their parents have.”

But Cloud is concerned about the “absolute expectations of the Common Core,” adding that assessments need to consider the individual progress students have made in English language proficiency over their careers in American schools.

ferentiation” that simplifies the language while still trying to convey the required learning in each subject, Leazer adds.

West Springfield’s Lessons

Teachers and administrators at the West Springfield (Mass.) Public Schools have been trying to keep standards high. According to Superintendent Russell Johnston, 27 percent of the district’s student body comes from homes in which English is not the native language. While students who primarily speak one of 25 different languages receive ELL services,

the largest segments speak Russian, Turkish, Arabic, Iraqi, and Nepalese.

It helps greatly, say ESL experts, if students had been going to school regularly prior in their native countries, and if their languages follow the patterns of English, as Portuguese and Spanish largely do.

The imperative to reach these students in English, Johnston continues, is increased by a decade-old state law prohibiting using languages other than English in classrooms. All of the district’s elementary ELL students attend the Coburn School, comprising about 40 percent



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Reaching Today's ESL Students

Some tips for success.

- **Have regular classroom teachers collaborate** with ESL counterparts to create lessons that help ESL students master the learning required by state standards.
- **Focus in the classroom** on project-based learning and small-group projects that call for the development of English language in areas from science to social studies.
- **Provide aides in ESL classrooms** who speak the most frequently occurring native languages of students in the district.
- **Encourage regular classroom teachers**—especially at the elementary level—to get certified in ESL as well.
- **Use after-school activities**, from yoga to art classes, to develop language and conversation in ESL students.
- **Reach out to the parents of ESL students:** offer after-school instruction in English for parents; host open-school nights with translators in the most commonly spoken languages; and send correspondence and report cards home in those languages.

of the population. At Coburn, a regular classroom teacher pairs with an ELL counterpart and a paraprofessional who speaks one of the more popular languages such as Russian. “The two teachers create lessons that focus on higher-level thinking skills, problem solving, and inquiry-based projects,” Johnston says.

“Teachers differentiate instruction and model the language [by speaking it] that will be involved in the exercise, and the kids are great at helping each other,” he says. The English speakers help explain the lesson and, as a result, the ESL students begin to acquire more speech patterns and vocabulary in English, she says.

And such interaction is seen in small groups of students who collaborate to solve problems together, whether a math problem or a question on history or science. Teachers model the dialogue needed for each hands-on activity and include the words to use along the way—from “historical events,” “subtraction,” and “animals” to “make an observation” and

“describe in a complete sentence.”

A grant-funded after-school enrichment program merges such activities as yoga and dance with a literacy component to expand English skills and vocabulary. Any such activity, West Springfield administrators say, will require communicating in English.

In West Springfield High School, meanwhile, Johnston points out, “For any class a student needs for graduation, we offer an ELL equivalent with an ELL-certified teacher.”

The district leaders have also reached out to parents of ESL students, often in their own languages. “The biggest challenge because of the number of different languages is getting parents comfortable and engaged with the school and to help students with the English language at home,” says Colleen Marcus, the district’s ELL director.

To that end, the district runs an after-school English class for parents. For the past two years, the high school has hosted

an open house to help parents understand what it takes to graduate. The event also has provided translators in West Springfield’s five most commonly occurring foreign languages, Russian, Arabic, and Nepalese among them.

Challenges to Teacher Training

The proliferation of languages has also changed traditional thinking about training teachers. Superintendent Edward Lee Vargas of the Kent (Wash.) School District, with more than 138 languages spoken, says that in a class of 24 students, 18 of them might come from homes speaking different languages.

The biggest challenge, Vargas adds, is to develop academic language in English for all ESL students “so they can access the content and meet the standards” of the state-mandated curriculum.

Over the past three years, Kent has paid for a program at Heritage University, which provides classes in the Kent district, to get ELL certification for regular classroom teachers, administrators, and counselors through a semester-long, after-school training that continues through the summer. Eighty have earned that certification so far.

ELL Students as Assets

Regardless of the language deficits and varying proficiency of today’s ESL students, Aronson says, don’t sell the cultures and languages of these students short by only seeing the unique problems that they pose. “Stop seeing language differences as a problem and start seeing them as a resource,” adds Cloud. “The more diverse students become, the more we need to use those differences” to increase appreciation of other countries and cultures.

West Springfield’s Johnston seconds that suggestion. “We’re fortunate to have the diversity we do,” he says. “The world is coming to our doorstep.” **DA**

Ron Schachter is a contributing writer to DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION.

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