The Changing Role of ESL Teachers: Tips for Supporting Mainstream Teachers

Shaeley Santiago
Jamie Cardwell

Abstract

Given the increasing population of ELLs in PK-12 education and the increased demands of the Common Core State Standards, the role of the ESL teacher is changing. No longer can ESL teachers stay in their classrooms, teaching small groups of ELLs in isolation. Instead, ESL teachers must broaden roles to that of specialists and serve as expert resources for colleagues in mainstream classrooms. This shift may involve a variety of approaches ranging from sharing information about students’ backgrounds and English proficiency levels or suggesting strategies and resources for differentiating instruction to providing professional development for mainstream teachers around essential information for teachers of ELLs.

The Changing Role of ESL Teachers: Tips for Supporting Mainstream Teachers

The role of the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in the PK-12 setting has changed in recent years. Gone are the days of pulling small groups of English Language Learners (ELLs) behind a closed door for instruction. Instead, ESL teachers today are called on to collaborate more with their colleagues through roles such as co-teaching, providing professional development, and serving as an instructional coach, model teacher, or mentor. They may also be tasked with serving as coordinators for their programs crossing over into a quasi-administrative role. One of the reasons for these changes is increased levels of accountability for sub-groups like ELLs which began under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and continues today under the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. Another factor in changing roles is English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards aligned to college- and career-ready
standards such as the Common Core. These changes mean the expertise of ESL teachers is ever-increasing in value. At the same time, the demands of being an ESL teacher have changed; therefore, new ways of interacting with our colleagues must be adopted.

In a March 2014 report published by the TESOL International Association, Valdés, Kibler, and Walqui write about the changes in the ESL field as a result of new and revised standards. The first challenge is the level of content-specific knowledge required in order to teach key practices related to specific disciplines. “These disciplinary Practices (with an uppercase P) are comprised of subcomponent practices (with a lowercase p) of conceptual understandings, analytical tasks, and the language required to develop them and engage successfully in academic activity” (p. 10). In other words, teachers must have a deep enough understanding of a content area in order to unpack the underlying concepts of the discipline, the types of analytical thinking (higher-order thinking skills) that are common in that particular discipline, and the accompanying language to match the practices of the discipline. This conceptualization of the intersection between language and content leads to thinking about what students can do with language (function) rather than what they know about language (form). In other words, the focus of ESL instruction is shifting from the students’ knowledge of the structure of language (form) to how they apply that knowledge to specific contexts (function) in various disciplinary settings. When considered in tandem with the convergences between various core disciplines, a subset of critical practices for language instruction emerges. Cheuk’s (2013) triple Venn diagram provides a visual of the connections between math, science, and English language arts (ELA) standards where some math and science standards, some math and ELA standards, and some ELA and science standards overlap. However, the center of the triple Venn represents the greatest area of convergence across the standards of all three content areas, indicating the important role of evidence in math, science, and ELA standards.

A second challenge mentioned by Valdés, Kibler, and Walqui (2014) is instruction that is aligned with rigorous content standards while providing adequate support for ELLs. In the past, ELLs may have been prevented from participating in rigorous, college preparatory courses because of their lack of proficiency in English. This is no longer acceptable due to accountability requirements in the Elementary
Santiago & Cardwell - The Changing Role of ESL Teachers

and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization. The challenge is providing instruction that meets the needs of students so they can access more rigorous content. This is an important feature because *Lau v. Nichols* clearly states that adequate accommodations must be offered for ELLs to access content. In other words, it is not enough for students to attend classes; they must also be able to understand the information presented during those classes. Exacerbating this issue is the fact that college- and career-readiness standards require a different focus in instruction. Nonfiction text is emphasized over fiction, students are required to use textual evidence to support their claims, and exposure to grade-level, complex texts is a must (TESOL, 2013). Teachers are left then to grapple with how to accomplish these tasks in an era of changing demographics such as students who are increasingly entering U.S. schools with a lack of prior educational experience and/or exposure to traumatic events.

In the face of these challenges, Wolfe and Platt (2015) outline three major roles of ESL teachers. The first is the traditional role of supporting English language development (ELD). The second, newer role for some ESL teachers is providing access to core content at the grade level based on ELD standards from state consortia (e.g. WIDA, ELPA21, or state-specific ELD standards). The third role is that of capacity building and advocacy. This role involves sharing expertise with classroom teachers in terms of which strategies, skills, and information about Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory will meet the needs of ELLs (Wolfe & Platt, 2015). These newer roles are part of the reason why Valdés, Menken, and Castro (2015, p. 204) suggest, “In the new era of college- and career-readiness standards, in-service teachers need opportunities for professional learning as much as pre-service teachers.” In other words, to adequately meet the challenges of new roles, practicing teachers will likely need additional training and support which the ESL teacher is uniquely positioned to provide.

Based on the challenges and roles teachers are called upon to fulfill, the following six areas are addressed to help ESL teachers in their shifting roles: supports and scaffolds based on English language proficiency (ELP) levels, communication, empowerment, collaboration, professional development support, and resources (Valdés, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014).
Santiago & Cardwell - The Changing Role of ESL Teachers

Supports and Scaffolds Based on English Language Proficiency Level

The first of these tips is to share information on the level of English language proficiency a student is at currently. This will help teachers determine which types of scaffolds will provide an appropriate level of support such as Primary Language Support (PLS), graphic organizers, cooperative grouping, one-on-one support, multiple modalities, and literacy strategies in the content areas. Although it has been common practice to share names and background of ELLs with classroom teachers, an extra step is to share more details about their ELP level and what it means in terms of reasonable expectations for the student’s performance in the classroom. That in turn leads to a better understanding of what kinds of support will assist the student in reaching the high expectations of standards at the grade level. A chart such as the WIDA (2016) Can Do Descriptors or the accompanying poster in Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010) which contains student descriptors, instructional, and assignment/assessment strategies provides detailed information about proficiency levels in an easy-to-use format, even for teachers who may not have much background in SLA theory. One practical suggestion is to put small notes with the initials of students at the appropriate place on the poster to provide a visual for the teacher of which ELLs are at which levels and the associated performance for that level.

Communication

Communication is a simple, yet effective tip in supporting classroom teachers. In order to build effective communication, the ESL teacher needs to focus on building trust and mutual respect between colleagues. The relationship of the ESL teacher to the regular classroom teacher is a peer-to-peer relationship and should be used as a vehicle of support and not evaluative in any way. This can be done through consistent and efficient communication during a common planning period, emails, calls, texts, etc. Another way of establishing trust would be to use respectful language and value the colleague’s experience. This is especially important when colleagues feel intimidated by someone coming into their classroom. A compliment goes a long way, so the initial meeting may be a good time for the ESL teacher to talk about something admirable about the general education teacher. Creating a safe, comfortable, judgment-free zone is another way to establish trust. Trying something new, especially for seasoned...
teachers, is difficult, so this type of environment would allow for trial and error without retribution. A comfortable environment will also encourage questions and clarify misunderstandings. Trust is particularly important in the age of accountability where teachers are responsible for the assessment of all students. Teachers are hungry to try new things, especially when it will raise achievement, but a circle of trust needs to be established to reap the most benefits. Although establishing trust with a colleague takes time, it will pay dividends in the end to raise achievement for all students.

**Empowerment**

Empowerment is a powerful tool that an ESL teacher can use to support classroom teachers in a non-threatening way. When teachers feel supported, they feel empowered to try new things and take risks. This type of relationship can be seen through peer-to-peer coaching between a classroom teacher and an ESL teacher. In a study conducted by Vanderburg and Stephens (2010), they found teachers felt more empowered trying new strategies when respectfully supported by another teacher. The ESL teacher can use objective feedback through reflection and discussion with the classroom teacher. This helps foster empowerment because the teachers feel successful in trying new strategies and have the support of the ESL teacher to guide them, and then they are willing to try even more new strategies. When teachers feel supported, they feel more empowered to support students.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration is especially powerful and works in conjunction with communication. The most difficult part about collaboration is finding time to plan together, but ESL teachers can think outside of the box when working with teachers. Collaboration ranges from informal arrangements such as a “hallway meeting” to quickly discuss a strategy or resource to a more formal situation like co-teaching where both the classroom and ESL teachers are seen as equals. Honigsfeld and Dove (2013) further classify formal collaborative structures as either instructional or non-instructional. Examples of instructional collaboration include activities done together like planning or assessing student work and various configurations of co-teaching. Non-instructional collaboration may involve traditional professional development, parent-teacher conferences, or other activities conducted jointly outside of the
The Conference Proceedings of MIDTESOL 2015

Santiago & Cardwell - The Changing Role of ESL Teachers

classroom (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2013). Being aware of a variety of types of collaboration gives teachers
more options of how to work together.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are another avenue by which classroom and ESL
teachers can collaborate on instruction. The focus on content instruction and assessment lends itself well
to ensuring a maximum level of educational expertise so that ELLs understand the concepts and tasks of
the discipline. Technology often plays a critical role in data analysis in a PLC where information about
student performance may be stored in a common spreadsheet allowing for sharing and sorting of results.
Likewise, technology can facilitate collaborating asynchronously via emails or shared planning
documents.

Professional Development Support

Each context is unique and is best served by a specialized plan for effective professional
development. Knight and Wiseman (2006) suggest that effective professional development for language
teachers should be contextualized, collaborative, and ongoing. In other words, an outside expert coming
in to present on a topic may not be aware of key factors in the context that could limit the strength of his
or her message. The typical one-time presentation does not allow for ongoing interactions. The same can
be said of education conferences. Better options would include using structures already in place such as
PLCs, teacher teams, or job-embedded approaches like instructional coaching. These structures allow
professional development to follow a cycle like the feedback loop. Multiple opportunities to revisit the
topic of professional development increases the likelihood of implementation of the new learning.

In the time of tight school budgets, many districts are looking internally for teacher experts to
provide professional development. ESL teachers may be called on to mentor other teachers or model
instructional approaches that are beneficial for ELLs in addition to presenting at staff meetings.
Mainstream teachers are generally very receptive to information about students’ cultures, language
backgrounds, and how to differentiate instruction for language proficiency levels. Offering to model
strategies or plan a lesson together may lead to further opportunities for the ESL teacher to share expertise
while advocating for ELLs.
A final tip in supporting mainstream teachers is to create some sort of system of organization to categorize resources so they are available when needed. Because educators are inundated with a barrage of information and resources, they need a bank of resources that can be quickly accessed when needed. This is especially important for the ESL teacher who is supporting many teachers in different content areas. One system of organization for websites is Symbaloo (https://www.symbaloo.com). It allows teachers to organize links in a visual format. There are many ways to customize this organization system through pictures, icons, and color-coding. Teachers can also use Symbaloo with students, or ESL teachers can use it with mainstream teachers. Teachers could also collaborate to create a working list of applications, resources, etc. Another possible example is a shared spreadsheet of iPad applications and/or websites where all can contribute and share resources. The list would be a living document and encourages collaboration between colleagues.

Although this article attempted to address six separate tips for teachers, the tips are interrelated. While a teacher could choose to implement just one, the power comes from the connections between them. Given the increased demands of accountability in core content classes, ESL teachers may find themselves thrust into the position of teaching students and training colleagues. This is a change from the more traditional role where an ESL teacher was only responsible for teaching ESL students. It can also be a very challenging position when an ESL teacher has not received training on how to support more experienced colleagues. However, implementing some of these tips can help in this transition from ESL teacher to specialist.
References


Santiago & Cardwell - The Changing Role of ESL Teachers

World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (2014). Can Do Descriptors.

https://www.wida.us/standards/CAN_DOs/

Shaeley Santiago is an ESL Instructional Coach for the Ames Community School District in Ames, Iowa. Prior to becoming a coach, she was an ESL teacher at Ames High School for 10 years. She also teaches ESL endorsement classes at Drake University’s School of Education. Shaeley has an M.A. from Iowa State University in TESL/Applied Linguistics.

Jamie Cardwell is the lead teacher for the International Welcome Center at Ritenour High School. With over 16 years of teaching experience, Jamie has taught various classes in curriculum methods, teacher education, writing, and assessment to adolescents through adults. She earned her B.S. in Education from Illinois State University, M.A. in English (TESL) from Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, and is currently a doctoral student at Walden University.