Young ESL Newcomers Need a Chance to Adjust

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Abstract

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The first day of school must be made as smooth as possible in order for children to feel both at ease and safe. While the major objective of ESL programs is to prepare students for smooth transition into mainstream classrooms, the immediate objective regarding the welcoming of ESL newcomers is social. Educators have the responsibility of providing a supportive environment that will aid in the establishment of a stress-free transition to school life for young English as a Second Language (ESL) newcomers. They must be given a chance to adjust.

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Introduction

"*I don't want to go to school today; what if the kids are mean*?"
"*You have to go; you're the teacher*."

And so went the beginning of the school year cliché between me and my wife a few years back when I used to teach children. Now I teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to adults, many of whom are newcomers and have children learning ESL in the local public schools. The parents often express concerns about the lack of care and language support that is being provided by schools, especially when the children first arrive. The initial day at a new school is indeed a daunting event for any child. For students whose first language (L1) is not English, this memorable day can present an intimidating experience; newcomer ESL students face not only the challenges of entering a new school, but also those of living in a new culture and learning another language. Thus, it is essential for teachers and schools to be well-prepared and patient in order to better facilitate a stress-reduced transition. Successful adjustment to school life will undoubtedly have a positive effect on the academic success of ESL students, and, given the premise that the major objective of ESL programs is to prepare students to function in subject areas, it is essential for all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, and parents) to help new ESL students feel accepted and valued: newcomers must be given a chance to adjust.

Who Are ESL Newcomers?

Most ESL students are children of immigrant parents, international students, or visiting scholars or professionals, and while many of these children arrive with basic communicative ability in English, others do not. Clegg (1996) warns that while some ESL students are literate in their mother-tongue, others have yet to learn the basic script of any language. Unless a school employs a system of comprehensive integration, ESL students are often separated from their English-proficient classmates and taught outside the mainstream classroom. This separation may be in a full-time ESL classroom for weeks or months, or it could be on a pull-out basis, which may be for only a few hours a day/week. Nevertheless, the hope is that the students will soon be

able to join mainstream classrooms once they have reached an acceptable level of English proficiency.

Problems for ESL Newcomers

Paregoy and Boyle (1997) stress that a student's L1 may be the child's only means of communicating with his or her parents and grandparents; therefore, teachers must understand that the L1 is an important part of the life of an ESL student. Although the children are studying ESL at school, they must be encouraged to use their first languages at home so that they maintain social and emotional relationships with family members who do not speak English.

In addition to the importance of validating the L1, all teachers must recognize the fact that learning a second language is difficult for people of all ages. Teachers, therefore, should not assume that children in elementary school ESL classrooms will learn faster than will their parents in adult ESL classrooms. It is possible that some children are more likely to be shy and embarrassed around classmates than are some adults. Many students may become anxious when they are called upon in class, and some new students may go through a period when they can understand English, but are unwilling to produce it. Also, if there are no other students in the classroom who speak the same L1 as the newcomer, her or she may feel alone; thus, a new ESL student's apparent shyness or reserved behavior may be a sign of his or her feelings of isolation.

Furthermore, children from different cultural backgrounds may also experience difficulties in school because ways of instruction and learning styles may be different from what they are used to – if indeed they are used to any. Some students may not understand why a teacher uses a casual teaching style, which may include sitting on a desk or asking for personal opinions. Other students may be surprised that there are no school uniforms and that both boys and girls share the same classroom. Other conditions to which ESL students must adjust include: a change in geography and climate; a change in the size of living environment and/or economic situation; a change in social status; taboos toward certain physical contact; and different attitudes about cooperation (Law & Eckes, 1990). Issues such as these, as well as the fact that students may be missing friends and relatives from their home countries, can make the adjustment process to a new school and culture an intimidating one. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to be aware of potential obstacles and to take action against them in order to help ease the transition for ESL newcomers.

What Can Teachers Do?

Teachers must be proactive: they must develop their own knowledge and attitudes. As lifelong learners, teachers should spend time reading about research trends in second language teaching and learning. For example, Ovando and Collier (1998) argue that young children may not reach full proficiency in their second language if cognitive development is discontinued in their primary language. Consequently, teachers must encourage ESL students to have pride in their first languages and cultural identities. Rong and Preissle (1998) advise that schools should not see a child's speaking a language other than English as a hindrance to the child's improvement of his or her education. Moreover, Esling (1989) suggests that bilingualism can be a positive factor regarding linguistic and intellectual progress. Rather than replacing L1 with L2,

schools should be endeavoring to *add* the L2 (English) to the L1. Clegg (1996) sees a student's L1 as a vehicle for personal and social identity as well as a necessity for cognitive development and future academic achievement.

Teachers should also learn as much as possible about a newcomer before the student even comes to school. The more teachers know about their students and their families, the more they will be able to help them (Ashworth & Wakefield, 1994). Perhaps the best way to learn more about a newcomer is for the teacher to meet the parents or caregivers. Asking these adults, with the help of a translator if necessary, about a child's past and present situations will enable teachers to better prepare for the child's adjustment to the classroom. Peregoy and Boyle (1997) outlined three initial steps regarding preparation for the arrival of a new student: begin to find out basic facts about the child (country, language used at home, and so on); obtain information about prior school experience (if any), be prepared to validate the student's language, culture and academic competence; and become aware of basic features of the home culture, such as religious beliefs, food preferences, and restrictions and roles and responsibilities of children and adults.

Once an ESL newcomer enters the school, the teacher has the responsibility of attempting to relieve any stress that the student may be feeling. Often the first stress factor will be social: students need safety, security, and a sense of belonging. Peregoy and Boyle (1997) advise that by paying close attention to these points, we can lay the foundation for meeting students' self-esteem needs and for growth in language and academic abilities.

Law and Eckes (1990) offer suggestions for first steps for establishing a positive relationship with new ESL students, including: sensitize the class - have the students discuss how it might feel to come to a new country and school; learn how to pronounce and spell the student's name - do not try to anglicize the name; be a model of respect for the other students in the class; and, at elementary school, if you give the new student a name tag, make sure all the other children in the class have name tags, too. Furthermore, Ashworth and Wakefield (1994) suggest that the teacher appoint a classmate as the new student's buddy. In order to help the newcomer to become familiar his or her new learning environment, the buddy's first assignment could be to conduct a tour of the school.

Teachers can also begin to create a supportive atmosphere for newcomers by getting the classroom ready. Classroom posters and teaching materials should reflect cultural diversity, and, in order to keep the ESL students involved in the class, teachers should establish seating plans that avoid placing newcomers in the back of the room or in corners. Teachers may also consider putting the students in groups. Heterogeneous groupings--in which group members represent a range of English proficiency--can eliminate the possibility of students in groups based on lower language ability being labeled as slow learners (Esling, 1989).

In regard to learning activities, Silver (1999), in a study on the effects of play in the classroom, found that during play, ESL children are capable of being on an equal footing with others in the class. Silver reported that ESL students, particularly those who have only recently arrived in Canada, are extremely dependent on other children in the class to demonstrate tasks and to help with assignments; however, during classroom play, ESL students exhibited an independence and confidence that were not otherwise evident.

Whether or not ESL newcomers are engaging in activities, they are probably taking in everything around them: they are observing not only the classroom, but also the teacher. Brown (1994) cautions that teachers be aware of their own nonverbal language when in the classroom. Furthermore, given that students also attend to routines in their classrooms, teachers should connect simple English to routines that correspond with daily school life: recess, lunch, classroom commands (such as *open your books*), bathroom breaks, rules and the consequences of breaking them, and so on. Predictable routines can help create a sense of security for students. Newcomers will observe others and learn the routines of the classroom and the school. In turn, teachers must observe the newcomers in order to be ready to meet their needs. Peregoy and Boyle (1997) expand upon the importance of observation: "By paying close attention to the social and emotional needs of new students, you will be laying the foundation for the early stages of language acquisition" (p. 15).

Conclusion

Most people want to live, work or study in a stress-free environment. The first day at work or school is a critical one. If a teacher can create a safe and caring atmosphere in the classroom, the first day for an ESL newcomer can be a success. Teachers have the responsibility of establishing an environment in which newcomers will be able to feel valued and accepted. Although the major objective of ESL programs is to prepare students for smooth transition into mainstream classrooms, the immediate objective regarding the welcoming of ESL newcomers is social. Newcomers must be given a chance to adjust.

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