

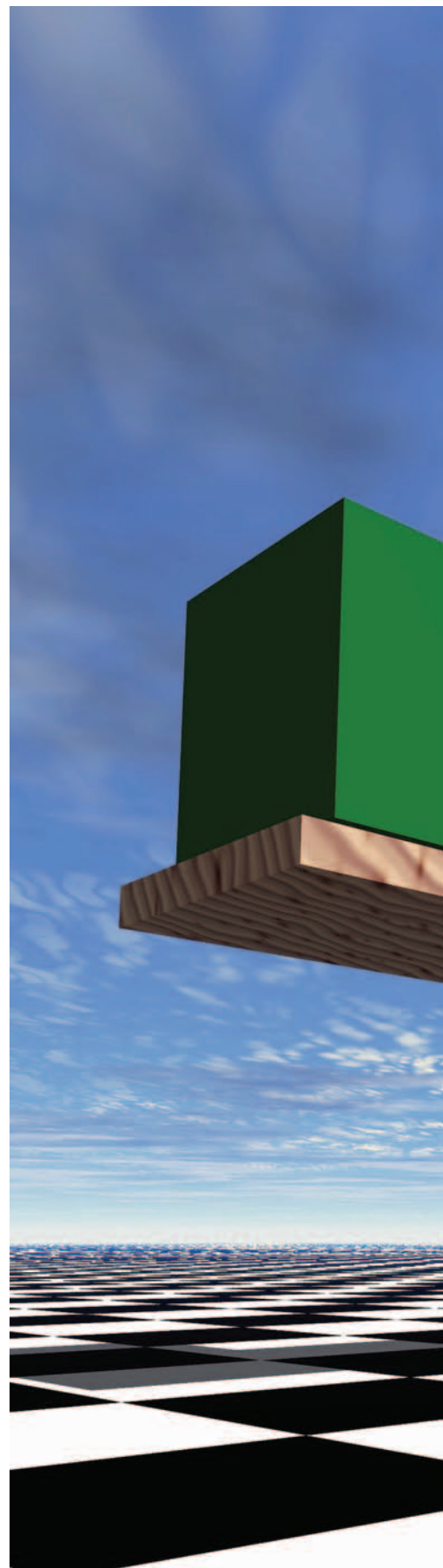
DELICATE BALANCE

**ELL STUDENTS STRUGGLE TO BALANCE LANGUAGE AND CONTENT,
WHILE EDUCATORS NEED PARTNERSHIPS AND SPECIFIC
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

BY JON NORDMEYER

The experience of the middle school student quoted above is not unique. A growing “perfect storm” challenges today’s schools: increasing diversity in the student population, greater accountability, and already stretched school budgets (Freeman, 2004). English language learners (ELLs) represent the fastest-growing student group in U.S. schools, with enrollment increasing more than 150% since 1990 (NCELA, 2006). Projections indicate that in two decades this demographic group will comprise more than one-third of students in U.S. schools (Thomas & Collier, 2002). For these reasons, balancing language learning with content learning so all students can become part of the

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It is hard to be an ESL student sometimes. Between ESL students, I could make many friends, but when I have any classes like math or science I feel an invisible space between ESL students and regular students. I envy the regular students because I was good at science in my own country, and now the only reason for my C on science was pictures in the textbook."

— Middle school student

school community is one of the major challenges facing U.S. schools today.

An important first step in supporting linguistically diverse students is understanding terminology. Referring to students as English language learners (or ELLs) is much more inclusive and accurate than calling them ESL students or Limited English Proficient. Many ELLs may be learning English as a third or fourth language, and any student who is becoming bilingual should not be considered limited.

Also, "English language learner" connotes a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind (Freeman, 2004). Students' English proficiency should be viewed along a continuum, from new learners at one end to proficient users at the other end — all native speakers do not have the same degree of proficiency.

Changing demographics and definitions require us to shift how we view the traditional role of ESL teachers and the responsibilities of the larger school community. We need to understand how language and content are related in today's classrooms and rethink our approach to educating ELLs. This has important implications for how all teachers work together.

LEARNING ENGLISH VS. LEARNING IN ENGLISH

ELLs face social, cultural, and personal challenges, but perhaps their biggest difficulty is learning academic content in English. Social English

WIDA classroom framework, grades 6-8

Standard 3: English language learners communicate information, ideas, and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of math.

PROFICIENCY LEVEL	1: Entering	2: Beginning	3: Developing	4: Expanding	5: Bridging
LANGUAGE DOMAIN: Writing	Produce information related to data presented in graphs, tables, or charts depicting practical situations (e.g. "This shows rain in summer.").	Make generalizations related to data presented in graphs, tables, or charts depicting practical situations (e.g. "It rains more in June than July.").	Summarize information related to data from graphs, tables, or charts taken from everyday sources (such as newspapers and magazines).	Draw conclusions related to data from graphs, tables, or charts from everyday sources.	Provide a rationale and explain use of data presented in graphs, tables, or charts.

In 2003, the WIDA Consortium developed the WIDA English Language Proficiency Standards and assessment tools which were anchored in its member states' academic content standards. WIDA, a group of 15 partner states, released a revised version of its standards in 2007 (www.wida.us). In 2006, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, a professional organization of English teachers worldwide) developed English proficiency standards integrated with the content areas, based on the WIDA framework (www.tesol.org). The following excerpt from the 2007 WIDA standards shows

how language and content are integrated by articulating what kind of writing skills a 6th-grade student might need to use in math class. The complete WIDA framework describes speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in math, science, social studies, and language arts. Descriptors in the WIDA standards show content-based language skills at different English proficiency levels. These descriptors, or model performance indicators, provide valuable support for both ESL teachers and content teachers in designing lessons and understanding student progress.

Source: 2007 WIDA *English Language Proficiency Standards*. Used with permission.

skills may develop within a year, but research has consistently shown that the cognitive academic language of the classroom and textbooks takes five to seven years to develop (Cummins, 1984, 1996; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002). We cannot expect students to wait the five to seven years needed to develop academic language proficiency and then start learning content.

Educators see this disparity in the significant achievement gap between ELLs and their English-speaking peers. Dropout rates for ELLs are triple those of native English speakers (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). On the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), 71% of 8th-grade ELLs scored "below basic" compared to 27% of non-ELLs (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). Teachers and administrators are asking: What can

we do about it? Fortunately, we can do a lot, and in response to growing cultural and linguistic diversity in the student population, many schools are changing.

ESL teachers are essential in helping ELLs to face the twin challenges of achieving in content areas and developing academic English proficiency. Teachers, administrators, and policy makers are beginning to realize, however, that ESL specialists cannot do this job alone and that everyone's roles and responsibilities must shift. In response to this changing paradigm, successful program reform and professional development reflect the following:

- Schools understand their student population clearly and recognize that "ELL" includes not only students currently receiving ESL and

bilingual services *but also many students in the mainstream who have exited or never received ESL support.*

- Teachers and administrators view students along a developmental continuum of academic English language proficiency and recognize that *all students will benefit from the intentional integration of language and content instruction.*
- All teachers understand how to work effectively with ELLs in their own classes, including:
 - The essential role culture plays in the classroom;
 - Strategies to scaffold content instruction to make it more comprehensible; and
 - Basic principles of second-language acquisition and how to promote the development of both social

and academic English in mainstream classes.

- Teachers and administrators recognize the critical importance of supporting students' first-language development to promote an additive rather than subtractive form of bilingualism, and communicate this to parents and students.
- Schools have explicit English proficiency standards and assessments, and teachers understand how these tools can support the development of academic English skills *in all classes*.
- Classroom and content teachers understand how to collaborate with ESL specialists in *planning, instruction, and assessment*.

These principles describe a new instructional environment for ELLs in the 21st century, and many schools are already moving in this direction.

Teacher roles are changing as the entire school community shares responsibility for educating ELLs. Two keys to understanding this evolution are *integration* and *collaboration*.

INTEGRATION

Whether it is considered "immersion" or "inclusion," more ELLs are finding themselves in mainstream classes. This integration of ELLs and mainstream students needs to be reflected in a similar integration of language and content in instruction.

- On one hand, language is a bridge to learning content. All teachers need to understand the impact of language in their classes and how they can support ELLs' subject mastery by using English in intentional ways.
- On the other hand, content can provide a means for language

acquisition, and teachers can promote the development of academic English proficiency for all students.

Some teachers already embed reading and writing across the curriculum, but with increased ELL enrollment, all teachers need to focus on helping students develop oral language and literacy skills in the content areas.

Changes in curriculum and assessment also reflect the integration of language and content. Recent revisions of K-12 English language proficiency standards have been linked to content standards, helping teachers to understand and assess the specific language skills ELLs need to learn math, science, social studies, and language arts. (See box on integrated standards on p. 36.)

Integration of language and con-

tent does not mean that ESL teachers are becoming obsolete, or that all teachers need to be English teachers. Elementary classroom teachers and secondary content teachers are still primarily responsible for teaching the grade-level curriculum, but they need to do it in ways that make content accessible for ELLs. This is often referred to as “sheltering” instruction. Sheltering is not diluting the content, but rather differentiating instruction and integrating language into all subjects. Most teachers agree that this approach helps all students, not only ELLs. When content teachers recognize the language that is already embedded in their classes, they can use English in intentional ways — both to provide access to the mainstream curriculum and to help students develop academic English.

Likewise, ESL teachers are still the

ones responsible for teaching English. Especially for students with beginning English proficiency, intensive English language development is critical, and ESL teachers are trained to meet this need. Pullout ESL classes should, however, integrate language development with content learning. Increasingly, ESL teachers are also expected to work with ELLs within other teachers’ classes, providing “push-in” support for language development.

COLLABORATION

In order to integrate language and content, ESL and general education teachers can work together to plan, teach, and assess in ways that support ELLs. ESL teachers struggle to balance being an advocate for students with how to most diplomatically collaborate with teachers so they are not seen

as mandating particular interventions but rather making helpful suggestions. Once teachers have built professional relationships and developed a shared vision for how ELLs fit into the school community, collaboration can support ELLs in a number of ways.

First, ESL and mainstream teachers can develop units and lessons that include appropriate language and content objectives, integrating content standards with students’ linguistic needs based on TESOL or WIDA standards. Common planning time is essential for this type of collaboration, and administrators need to see the value in providing this structure.

Second, in addition to support for co-planning, teachers need specific skills in co-teaching and collaboration. This includes the ability to assume different instructional roles so co-teaching doesn’t always default to

the “teaching assistant” model. For example, an ESL teacher might present a vocabulary minilesson, introduce a graphic organizer, or facilitate one of several activity centers.

Third, teachers need to collaborate on assessment and share proficiency data. Identifying individual students’ academic language proficiency in each content area will help teachers to develop appropriate linguistic expectations and accurate content assessments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

A changing student population requires a new way of looking at instruction, so one of the challenges in helping teachers to serve ELLs in mainstream classes is resistance. While it is important for teachers to know about second-language acquisition

and build skills in sheltering instruction, staff development to support ELLs should address dispositions first. An introductory training might include actual student voices describing their experience as ELLs or a demonstration lesson in another language. For example, trying to learn basic geography in Turkish can give a veteran history teacher a new appreciation for the linguistic complexity of social studies and the importance of visual cues in supporting ELLs in her classroom. When non-ESL teachers begin to see their own teaching with new eyes, they often remark that effective strategies for teaching ELLs will benefit all their students. While this is true, teachers need to recognize that sheltered instruction is not just good teaching, because it includes an awareness of the role of language in content areas.

Staff development needs to go beyond a list of strategies for teachers to use with ELLs in their classrooms. ESL and mainstream teachers should collaborate in professional learning as well as in the classroom. The Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) has outlined guidelines for professional development for teachers of ELLs (Rueda, 1998). Professional development should:

- Facilitate learning and development through joint productive activity among leaders and participants;
- Promote learners’ expertise in professionally relevant discourse; and
- Contextualize teaching, learning, and joint productive activity in the experiences and skills of participants.

These suggest professional devel-

opment that is embedded in teachers' day-to-day work. For example, a useful practice is to focus on one particular student. A mainstream teacher can work with an ESL teacher to research an ELL's home language, culture, language proficiency, and performance in content classes. The teacher can then apply new knowledge of language acquisition and consider specific ways to scaffold the student's learning. Reciprocal structures such as peer coaching, online discussions, and lesson reflection tasks can also bring teachers together with a focus on improving learning for ELLs.

Staff development for mainstream teachers is not enough. ESL teachers also need to develop new skills in order to meet the demands of their changing professional roles. Most ESL teachers were not trained to work within a collaborative environment, and some teachers have only used a

Staff development for mainstream teachers is not enough.

pullout model of ESL instruction. Curriculum integration and co-teaching require a different skill set and new ways of working with colleagues.

Many administrators recognize the value of ESL teachers as on-site resources who understand second-language acquisition, cultural dimensions of learning, and how to support ELLs and their families, so ESL teachers are asked to provide workshops for colleagues. This approach is not without challenges. Even though ESL teachers have expertise in language teaching, they may lack knowledge of specific content areas or may not have experience with teacher training. In many cases, these challenges are compounded by ESL teachers' lack of professional status within the school community or a school culture that does not promote collaboration.

If ESL teachers are asked to provide direct professional development, they need the training, resources, and

time to do this effectively. Finally, when asking ESL teachers to facilitate professional development, administrators should consider co-planning, coaching, or co-teaching in addition to stand-alone workshops. Job-embedded strategies tend to be more effective for long-term collaboration.

CONCLUSION

When all students are viewed along the same continuum of English language proficiency, teachers become more connected and programs become more cohesive. By integrating ELLs into the larger school community, all teachers develop an awareness of the important role of academic language in content classes. Within this new instructional environment, ESL teachers can continue to help students develop English language proficiency skills, while also collaborating with colleagues to support planning, instruction, and assessment that serve all students — including ELLs.

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