The Expanding Role of the Elementary ESL Teacher: Doing More Than Teaching Language

by Jodi Crandall

Teachers of English as a second or foreign language to young children must impart English skills at the same time that they foster socialization; heighten an awareness of the self, the immediate classroom community, and the community beyond the school; introduce content concepts; and expose students to art, drama, literature, and music. They must accomplish these objectives through enjoyable activities that address the whole child—the child’s physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. (Schinke-Llano and Rauff 1996)

Rising academic standards, increasing use of standardized assessments, growing numbers and diversity of English-language learners in the elementary grades, and increasing reliance upon ESL without mother-tongue literacy or language support: all these have led to a more challenging role for elementary ESL teachers, who may be expected to shoulder greater responsibility for the overall education of English-language learners. Today, elementary ESL teachers may be required to teach initial literacy, provide the major language arts instruction, introduce academic concepts, promote academic and social language development, and help students make up for missed prior schooling, as well as serve as counsellor, interpreter, and community and school liaison. While attempting to accomplish these many objectives, elementary ESL teachers may also find that the 30-minute pull-out ESL class has given way to 90- or 120-minute ESL/language arts blocks or even full-day assignments in which ESL teachers “plug in” and work collaboratively with classroom teachers in the mainstream classroom. Whatever the context, elementary ESL teachers are likely to find themselves teaching not only language but also the academic concepts and strategies to help English-language learners use their new language more effectively for learning. The new TESOL (1997) pre-K–12 ESL standards reflect this expanded role in the three goals for ESL instruction:
1. To use English to communicate in social settings
2. To use English to achieve academically in all content areas
3. To use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways

Goals 1 and 3 are important, but in second language contexts, students are likely to be able to achieve these through social interaction with peers in a relatively short time. It is Goal 2 which is the heart of the standards document and increasingly the core of elementary ESL: to help English-language learners “use English to obtain, process, construct, and provide subject matter information in spoken and written form” in content areas across the curriculum (Standard 2 of Goal 2). Children may be able to acquire social language without much assistance from the ESL teacher, but understanding social studies textbooks, reading and working math word problems, and following directions and completing science reports are likely to require the assistance of the ESL teacher, who can provide comprehensible yet meaningful opportunities for children to interact and converse in that academic
language as they explore new ideas, relate these ideas to prior learning, and react and respond to each other. And for an elementary ESL teacher to be able to help students to achieve academically in all content areas requires that the teacher become very familiar with the goals and curriculum of other content areas and be able to align or integrate ESL instruction with the core curriculum.

**Content-Based Language Instruction in Elementary ESL**

Content-based language instruction (CBLI)—which focuses on the language of academic content areas, as well as core concepts and strategies for learning these—provides a means of achieving the integration of ESL instruction with the core curriculum. In a 30-minute pull-out class, an ESL teacher might survey students on their favourite foods, colours or pets and have them construct a graph recording their results, integrating learning the language of numbers and comparisons with an important mathematical concept. Or, over the course of a semester or year, students might plant seeds and chart their growth, noting the effects of sunlight or darkness and water or drought. In discussing and recording their results, students might use the future tense to predict the outcome, the past tense to confirm or disconfirm their predictions, and appropriate measurement vocabulary as they chart their plants’ progress. To integrate key vocabulary, concepts and learning strategies from several content areas and to foster opportunities for including multicultural literature and other types of texts, the teacher might build an instructional unit around a theme such as families, animal babies, fossils and dinosaurs, the planets or food. Thematic teaching also provides opportunities for a number of different activities. Games, chants, songs, total physical response (TPR) activities, role plays, stories and drills are still part of the elementary ESL teacher’s instructional repertoire, as are software programs and electronic “keypals” or “sister classes” which link students across miles. But in a thematic unit, these activities are all integrated and interconnected through an interesting and motivating theme. CBLI, by integrating language learning with science, mathematics and social studies, helps smooth the transition for the English-language learner to the mainstream classroom, and thematic teaching helps children build on their prior learning and relate what they are learning to the larger context of their lives and world.

A sample thematic unit on trees (see below) illustrates how academic content and skills across the curriculum are developed within an ESL class. In this unit, students begin by discussing what they know about trees, filling out the first part of a KWL chart on which they record what they already know about trees, what they want to know about them and, later, what they have learned. This KWL chart will serve to mark their progress throughout the unit. They may go outside and collect leaves to press and describe in a class book, or spend time in cooperative groups studying one tree—how it looks, what it feels like and how it smells. They may use their impressions of that tree to write a diamante or cinquain poem, or collect pieces of bark or leaves and use them in a shape poem that they write about the tree. Following this, the teacher and students may engage in shared reading of a book such as *The Great Kapok Tree* (Cherry 1990) or *The People Who Hugged the Trees* (Rose 1990). Follow-up discussion might focus on the value of trees to people and other living creatures, the threat of the loss of trees and what people can do to meet their needs without overharvesting. A culminating activity might be the planting of a class tree in the schoolyard, with follow-up activities throughout the year in which students document the changes and growth in the tree over time. Sensory adjectives, the names for the parts of a tree and a leaf, and comparatives could all be taught within this unit, which integrates scientific knowledge, social responsibility and academic English through a variety of oral and written English activities. As this unit demonstrates, thematic teaching can also activate and appeal to most of Gardner’s multiple intelligences through opportunities for
movement, singing or chanting, storytelling, drawing and describing pictures, giving and following directions, and engaging in projects and experiments.

Thematic teaching can also be effective in plug-in ESL programs, in which the ESL teacher coteaches with the mainstream teacher. For example, in one Wisconsin elementary school, the author observed ESL teachers working in small groups in the morning (usually during a portion of their language arts module) on vocabulary, grammar and other aspects of English and, in the afternoon, coteaching with the mainstream teachers, who often bring several classes of students together for longer periods to accommodate science experiments or social studies projects. In one particularly memorable afternoon, all the Grade 1 students—with their teachers, the ESL teacher and some teacher aides—participated in a unit on peanut butter that began with small groups engaged in shared reading of Peanut Butter and Jelly (Westcott 1987) and a discussion of favourite foods. Some of the students had never eaten peanut butter, and few had any idea how it was made. So they engaged in an experiment in making peanut butter. They hypothesized about the taste and texture of peanut butter at various stages, followed directions to help make it, then tasted and talked about it as their teachers recorded their impressions on a large chart. Finally, they voted on whether or not peanut butter tasted good and whether it was better when it was chunky or smooth. In sequencing, predicting, confirming or disconfirming the predictions, comparing and contrasting, the children used the academic language and skills that will be needed for other scientific experiments and in other comparative activities. By having the ESL teacher in the mainstream classroom, the children not only had the benefit of a greater number of supportive teachers in the classroom, but the mainstream classroom teacher also had the opportunity to observe how the ESL teacher adapted instruction to make it more comprehensible to the English-language learners.

Thematic teaching is also possible in EFL contexts. For example, a unit on farm animals might begin with a discussion of pictures of these animals, followed by teaching songs such as “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” or “There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly.” “Old MacDonald” provides a delightful opportunity to focus on pronunciation of English long vowels (E-I-E-I-O) and singular–plural distinctions (duck–ducks, dog–dogs and horse–horses) with the appropriate pronunciation of the plural ending (s, z, iz). I have also found that children have a great deal of fun making the sounds of the animals in English and in their own language(s) while singing the song. Cards with pictures of the animals and their names can be made by the students and used in games such as Concentration, Go Fish or other memory card games. This unit can be followed by a unit on zoo animals, with a focus on similarities and differences among the various animals. A trip to a farm and a zoo, of course, would make all this even more engaging and memorable for the children. Thematic units, while taking more time to develop and present, may offer a more engaging and productive use of the short EFL class than a series of activities that are not related to a central theme. The theme helps students develop cognitive schema about their world as well as the language to discuss and learn more about it.

The Challenges of CBLI for Elementary ESL

Perhaps the greatest challenge for CBLI in elementary ESL is the scarcity of good materials. Some excellent materials are available. Science for Language Learners (Fathman and Quinn 1989) offers wonderful suggestions for integrating science and ESL through thematic units related to plants, animals or heat. The relatively new series Scott Foresman ESL: Accelerating English Language Learning integrates academic concepts and language with learning strategies and literature in engaging and appropriately challenging units. In addition, an Oxford picture dictionary of the content
areas is currently in preparation and, when available, will facilitate greater vocabulary development in the content areas. However, available texts are few, requiring ESL teachers to develop their own thematic units, a time-consuming though interesting challenge for teachers.

The publication of the TESOL (1997) pre-K–12 standards and the entire standards movement have provided additional exciting challenges, as ESL teachers work together to align their ESL curriculum, first with the core curriculum in the school and then with the standards set by TESOL. Summer curriculum-development teams provide a start on this process, but helping teachers to implement the new curriculum and standards will take substantially more time and effort. An additional challenge is class time. Even with 90- or 120-minute classes, the time for thematic teaching may be limited, and what time is available may be interrupted by requests for interpreting, testing, other special assignments, and the ongoing testing and placement of new students. Classroom teachers may overlook the scheduled departure time for ESL students or may refuse to let these students leave because “they are involved in something too important to miss.” Sadly, it is these same teachers who may also say, “You take care of it. You’re the English teacher,” when a student has trouble with the language of mathematics or the reading or writing requirements of the regular classroom.

For those engaged in preparing ESOL teachers, the challenges are also great. Prospective elementary ESL teachers need time to observe, assist and coteach in both ESL and mainstream classrooms if they are to be prepared to integrate ESL and the core curriculum in their teaching. In the M.A. program in ESOL/bilingual education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), many students have been teaching elementary school for years and want to teach ESL because of their positive experiences with the English-language learners in their classes. An experienced elementary school teacher who adds an M.A. in teaching English to speakers of other languages is a great asset to a school. However, efforts in some states to reduce ESL certification to an endorsement and to require that teachers become certified as elementary school teachers before they add a few courses in ESL are misguided and short-sighted. While elementary teachers may need to learn how to teach the increasingly diverse students in their classrooms, teaching ESL requires knowledge and experiences beyond those which would be available in a brief endorsement program. Teacher-education partnerships which link those preparing to teach ESL with others preparing to teach science or social studies offer the opportunity for these prospective teachers to learn from each other. Partnerships between schools and universities that offer long-term internships to teacher candidates are also promising. Teacher preparation is a continuing challenge, one which must be met if future elementary ESL teachers are to successfully fill their expanding roles.

**Developing Thematic Units**

Choose a theme that
- motivates and interests students (or a theme which they have selected),
- focuses on relevant content from across the curriculum,
- facilitates meaningful dialogue and interaction,
- is grade- and age-appropriate,
- appeals to different learning styles,
- offers opportunities for activities appropriate for multiple intelligences and
- is related to current events or concerns.

Plan the thematic unit:
1. Identify appropriate texts to use or adapt (stories, poetry, academic texts, trade books or students’ work).
2. Identify language objectives:
   • Functions
   • Grammatical structures
   • Vocabulary
3. Identify content objectives.
4. Identify critical-thinking skills, study skills or learning strategies.
5. Develop activities that
   • foster authentic language use;
   • integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing;
   • draw upon students’ prior knowledge and lead to higher levels of understanding;
   • are appropriate for a variety of learning styles;
   • develop learning strategies;
   • use a variety of grouping strategies; and
   • provide periodic feedback and assessment.
6. Sequence the activities.

**A Sample Thematic Unit**

Theme: Trees
Language objectives:
• Listening:
  • Listen to the story (*The Great Kapok Tree*).
• Speaking:
  • Talk about similarities and differences in trees.
  • Describe leaves or trees.
  • Discuss the value of trees to people, animals and so on.
  • Retell the story (language experience story).
• Reading:
  • Read language experience story.
  • Read and sequence sentences from the story (strip story).
• Writing:
  • Label or write captions for tree book.
  • Create a tree poem.
• Structures:
  • Pronunciation of plural endings (*s, z, iz*).
  • Comparatives (*bigger, smaller, lighter, darker* and so on).
• Vocabulary:
  • Trees, parts of tree (*trunk, bark, leaves, roots* and so on).
  • Shapes (*round, oval, square*).
  • Names of the animals in the story.
  • Descriptive adjectives (*smooth, rough, pretty, colours, size* and so on).
Content objectives:
• Understand similarities and differences in leaves and trees.
• Understand the value of trees and the importance of protecting and planting them.
Study skills:
• Sequence information.
• Compare and contrast effects of different uses of trees.
Warm-up:
• Take students on a walk around the school grounds. Point to different trees. Touch them. Talk about them. Build vocabulary. Encourage students to look closely and to pick up fallen leaves and bark to take back to class.
• When back in the class, ask students to describe their leaves. Elicit vocabulary for colours, shapes, size and other characteristics.
• Show pictures of different trees. Ask students to talk about trees in the schoolyard, in their yards, in the neighbourhood and so on. Identify ways in which the trees are the same/different, small/large and so on.
• Create a semantic web recording what students know about trees. Transfer to a KWL chart and ask what else they want to know (learn) about trees.

Presentation:
• In small groups, have students list all the ways that people, animals and other plants benefit from trees. If students need some suggestions, show pictures of bird’s nests, lumber, small trees living under larger ones, squirrels eating acorns and so on.

References


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