

They're *Everyone's* Kids: Supporting Teachers Who Support ELLs

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Oregon has witnessed unprecedented growth in the population of English Language Learners (ELLs). Between 1993 and 2003, our state experienced more than a 200 percent increase in ELL students in its classrooms (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2005). Preparing teachers to meet the needs of diverse students has become an urgent priority for school teachers, administrators, and policymakers alike.

Many Oregon educators have responded to this challenge by adding the ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) endorsement to their teaching licenses. Courses in an ESOL endorsement program typically focus on:

- the history and legal foundations of bilingual and ELL program models
- community perspectives and family involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse students
- first and second language acquisition
- methods to “shelter” or differentiate content and language instruction and assessment

Candidates also pass a standardized exam and complete a practicum experience before being recommended to the state licensing board. Teachers who pursue ESOL training embrace the rewards and difficulties of working with ELL students and adapt their practice to address the specific linguistic, cultural, and psychosocial needs of this student population.

Properly preparing teachers to meet this demographic challenge is important, but too often this

responsibility overwhelmingly falls on the shoulders of a few. If we truly wish to support ELL students, then we also need to provide the necessary systemic supports for teachers who work with these students. As higher education institutions begin to understand and shape the necessary components of a targeted teacher preparation program, P-12 settings (pre-kindergarten through grade 12) must also be structured in ways that support teachers' implementation of these best practices. We have evidence to suggest that while ESOL-trained teachers in Oregon feel empowered to be advocates in their schools, P-12 institutions still have strides to make before they can fully support teachers in their work with ELLs.

Feedback from ESOL Teachers

As ESOL teacher educators at public and private institutions in Oregon, we have long been aware of the significant benefits that ESOL certification brings to teachers. Lately, however, we have been concerned about significant systemic challenges and working conditions that have an impact on ESOL teachers in P-12 schools by reducing ESOL teachers' efficacy and limiting their opportunity to effectively support ELLs.

In order to learn more, we engaged in a range of data collection at our institutions, interviewing and surveying teachers who had completed our endorsement programs to examine the following questions: What supports and challenges do teachers with ESOL expertise have as they seek to improve student learning? How do school environments help or hinder the implementation of best practices for ELLs?

In this article we share the daily realities of rural and urban ESOL practitioners in Oregon, with their names omitted to preserve confidentiality. Based on our findings, we offer specific recommendations related to policy and practice in our state. We believe that the situation of Oregon teachers is not unique, and we therefore hope that educators from across the nation will learn from their experiences and find local solutions to support teachers in meeting the needs of their ELLs.

Benefits from Increased Knowledge, Marketability, and Advocacy

Surveys and informal conversations with our graduates repeatedly emphasized the benefits of acquiring ESOL expertise. As one graduate explained, training on “intentional practices aimed at ESL students” offers essential knowledge and skills to address students’ linguistic and cultural learning needs. Many graduates echoed the comments of a first grade teacher who reported she was able to effectively shelter her instruction after gaining “a better understanding of how language is acquired and the stages [her] ELLs go through.” This knowledge provides benefits school-wide as well as in the classroom. According to one teacher, “I am now familiar with laws and history and can use my knowledge to advocate for my students.”

Numerous teachers have also become involved in committees where they have had an impact on policies for ELLs, and some have become site or district administrators. A former teacher who “implemented ESOL strategies on a daily basis” now works as an elementary principal, where she utilizes her “experience to advocate for [ELL] students ... in creating supportive programs and schedules.” Some teachers have used their increased knowledge to serve as instructional coaches and to play major roles in creating appropriate program models.

One such teacher who designed and implemented a two-way immersion program at her school “presented at the national level on effective practice for ELL students.” Many of our graduates found they were more “marketable” because districts clearly

recognize that investing in ESOL training generates major pay-offs for ELL students and their teachers.

Systemic Challenges

Although an ESOL endorsement is optional for Oregon teachers, federal policies to measure ELLs’ language proficiency have led an increasing number of districts to require teachers to seek additional ELL training or to hire those who already possess the ESOL endorsement. To comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2002), the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) introduced English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards and the corresponding English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) to measure proficiency levels of ELLs in Oregon public schools (ODE, n.d.).

Students’ English language proficiency results from the ELPA are used to gauge progress in terms of the federal measurement guidelines of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Clearly, the development of

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language standards and assessment measures and increased professional qualifications are positive advancements. ESOL faculty, policymakers, and teacher

practitioners value the recent focus on policies and practices that affect English language learners.

However, too often P-12 schools fail to provide the support structures that teachers of ELLs need to effectively implement best practices. Equipped with deepened linguistic and cultural understanding and new ESOL strategies, teachers and specialists expect to make change in their classrooms and schools. As one teacher said:

We learn a lot of wonderful information during our endorsement [program], yet the best practices are still not being applied in the schools. We need more funding and educational support to really give these students what they need to succeed.

Teachers who completed our programs reported a critical lack of support in three pressing areas:

- reduced choice in teaching assignments,
- lack of clarity about professional roles, and
- inconsistent school and policy support.

Reduced Choice in Teaching Assignments

Many of our teachers described gaining critical new knowledge and skills and increasing their marketability as a result of their ESOL endorsement. Still, our surveys and interviews also revealed a disconcerting trend that can make the ESOL endorsement seem disadvantageous for future teachers: Once a teacher became endorsed, his/her ability to choose teaching assignments was often reduced. This trend may be reflective of Oregon's high use of specialists for language instruction.

ELL students need teachers who are trained to deliver sheltered content instruction as well as to develop students' English language skills. Teachers with ESOL endorsements learn to shelter their instruction (Short & Echevarria, 2004/2005: 11) and differentiate the language demands of content lessons so that students at all English proficiency levels can participate in classroom lessons. In addition, ELLs need specialized language instruction to develop the communicative competence in English that native English speakers naturally acquire.

Although both language and content progress is measured by AYP, the focus in many school districts is primarily on the development of language skills. The predominant model being encouraged by the Oregon Department of Education is "pullout," where an ESL (English as a Second Language) or ELD (English Language Development) specialist provides a minimum of 30 minutes of targeted language instruction during each school day (Mize & Dantas-Whitney, 2007). As a result, many graduates of ESOL endorsement programs are not using their expertise in the mainstream or content classroom, and instead are being asked to serve as ESL/ELD resource specialists.

Some of our ESOL-prepared teachers felt that they would be required rather than invited to move into specialist roles. Approximately 20% of those who finished the ESOL program at one of our institutions decided not to apply for an ESOL endorsement with the state of Oregon, in part because they feared being placed in specialist roles "regardless of [their]

wish to remain in the regular classroom." They were concerned that they would be "involuntarily relocated," "pulled out of the regular...classroom," removed from a "position that [they] love," or "forced to teach ESL just because" they held an ESOL endorsement.

In fact, almost half of the teachers we surveyed taught in mainstream or content classrooms and sought the endorsement to better their ability to meet their current students' needs, not to change their role within their schools. Teachers who possess advanced ESOL certification deserve to be consulted regarding their placement.

Lack of Clarity about Professional Roles

Another strong concern that surfaced in our conversations involved a lack of uniformity in titles, roles, duties, and even "prep" periods for teachers and specialists. Our interviewees reported that their duties included coordinating ESL programs; testing, placing, exiting, and monitoring ELLs; counseling stu-

dents in ESL programs; supervising Latino dance clubs/classes; serving as faculty advisors for student groups; and providing academic advising for ELLs. More than one educator expressed frustration when a disproportionate number of additional duties detracted from teaching. This concern is exemplified by a teacher, who noted:

What I didn't foresee was, as a specialist, how many committees or professional teams, both in our school and within our district, in which we would be required to be a part. It has greatly impacted my time for preparing lessons and teaching ESL students as an ESL teacher.

Titles for specialists ranged from "ELL coordinators," "ESL" or "ELD teachers," to "resource specialists." In one case, the school vice-principal carried the official "coordinator" title, but it was the ESL teacher who completed paperwork and served on the ELL committees. Inconsistencies were evident across schools and districts. For example, one specialist with 250 ELLs received no prep periods,

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and another with 5 ELLs worked half time on these duties.

Also troubling was that ESL specialists were often unprepared for or unclear about their roles. For instance, a newly hired “ELL coordinator” at the secondary level was not told about her duties when she was hired to be an ELD and Spanish teacher and received no training other than how to administer placement tests. For these teachers, having the ESOL endorsement meant that “you are more than just . . . a classroom teacher. You are an administrator, counselor, translator and teacher!” These vast and varied duties severely limited the time that teachers with ESOL training were able to work directly with students who needed their specialized knowledge. These findings raise serious questions about professional equity.

Inconsistent Support Structures

Most ESOL teachers felt their advanced skills were appreciated by administrators, but too often the burden and rewards of educating ELLs fell on the shoulders of a few. Many felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility, often without commensurate assistance, training, or preparation time. Teachers argued for more support “for [those] who have large groups of ELLs in their classrooms [because] it takes a lot more planning time to differentiate for ELL language development.”

One elementary ESL teacher was discouraged that “you have to defend what you do – people don’t see the value.” Another described the challenges she faced when trying to improve the climate for her students:

If I want things fixed, I just have to do more begging. When I get tired of doing that, I feel like I have a hard choice: Either give up when things aren’t equitable, which my students see, or . . . succumb to complaining and pleading.

ESL specialists in particular felt that their colleagues often did not understand their roles or did not appreciate the importance of the ESOL program.

When teachers were the only educator or one of the few in their buildings with ESOL training, they were expected to be experts on all ELL-related

issues and to act as mentors for other teachers. One bilingual teacher reported, “The greatest challenge is helping other teachers understand how [kids] learn a second language.” A veteran teacher recounted that she was expected to support a newly hired specialist who did not have an ESOL endorsement but was in charge of teaching the most advanced ELLs. The veteran teacher ended up completing the placement paperwork because the new teacher did not understand the redesignation and exit criteria.

These concerns extended to the policy arena, where teachers expressed frustrations about some of the current standards and accountability practices. One teacher reported that efforts to make positive change have gone largely unnoticed:

I feel the state keeps scrutinizing all of our hard work and have only negative comments, no assistance or help. It is much more of a political job than I had imagined!

This limited support can lead to lower teacher morale and higher rates of burnout:

If the federal/state laws surrounding teaching ESL become more cumbersome than they already are and if the school district can’t be supportive, I would go back to the regular classroom. I’ve lost plenty of sleep already over the demands of being an ESL teacher.

At a time when we need to prepare more teachers to work effectively with ELLs, schools and districts cannot afford to lose these specially trained educators.

Recommendations and Implications

Our findings confirm that in-depth, quality ESOL endorsement coursework for teachers is key to working effectively with ELLs. Whether teachers worked in a self-contained classroom or as specialists, they consistently reported feeling a greater sense of efficacy and advocacy after receiving training in ESOL theory and practice. As teachers gained a better understanding of how language is acquired, they were better able to adjust their daily instruction through appropriate sheltering strategies.

However, our research revealed that an increasing number of schools are shifting towards the

pullout model as the one and only approach to providing support services to ELLs. Yet, pullout classes rarely include mainstream academic content such as math, science, and social studies. In addition to specialized language development, ELLs need qualified classroom teachers who can adapt methods and materials to offer accessible grade-level instruction in the content areas. Core content instruction using effective sheltered instruction that targets specific linguistic needs, as identified by the ELD standards, should be a strong area of focus.

Utilizing native language instruction in programs such as dual language, transitional bilingual education, developmental bilingual education, and heritage literacy may be a more appropriate model to address student needs (see Linquanti, 1999, for definitions of program models, characteristics of successful implementation, as well as program model advantages and concerns). When native language instruction is not feasible, ELL programs other than pullout must be considered.

Teachers with training and support in how to differentiate instruction for different proficiency levels may be able to provide their own ELD support. Schools may choose to have a language development block where English language learners are receiving ELD while native speakers and redesignated ELLs are also focusing on explicit linguistic targets such as grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills (Mize & Dantas-Whitney, 2007). Native English speakers can also be instructed in a foreign language during this language development block.

When pullout is the chosen model, ESL specialists need to meet regularly with classroom teachers so that their roles are complementary. ESL specialists may be able to “push-in” or deliver instruction within the mainstream classroom to increase collaboration and curriculum alignment. ESL specialists also need opportunities to meet with others in their same role to ensure a coherent program at the district level. Specialists must have advanced training when asked to coordinate a program, administer language proficiency tests, or implement new program models.

A school-wide vision adapted to local conditions is essential for strengthening ELL education. Models

of promising practices in teacher partnerships, curricular integration, and professional development programs have been documented in schools in California, Iowa, and New York (Walqui, 2000). The positive outcomes of these programs demonstrate that we can overcome structural obstacles to improve the educational outcomes and experience of English language learners.

Too often, only a few teachers shoulder the responsibility for working with ELLs, especially when they are considered the sole experts. We cannot risk ESOL-endorsed teachers becoming more isolated without commensurate staff support or planning time. Administrators can help by clarifying the roles of ELL teachers and ensuring that extra duties such as translation, counseling, and program coordination are compensated for their workload or that additional staff – preferably bilingual – be hired to address tasks that interfere with teachers’ preparation and instruction. Moreover, school- or district-wide efforts

are needed so that all personnel understand the importance of a well-implemented ELL program. It is vital that ESL specialists and teachers with ESOL

training have support from all of their peers and administrators, including those who have yet to be formally trained in ESOL methods.

Requiring more teachers to receive ESOL training will help mainstream teachers share the burden and the rewards of working with ELLs. In Oregon, fewer than 13% of teachers have received any formal ESOL training while 41% have ELLs in their classroom (NWREL’s Equity Center, 2008). Therefore, it is urgent that more teachers be trained to work with ELLs by infusing coursework into the initial teaching license, encouraging more pre-service and in-service teachers to get an additional endorsement, and offering sustained and well-planned professional development. Perhaps not until more school staff members receive ESOL training will there be a shift in viewing these ELLs as *everyone’s* responsibility. As one teacher put it, “You’re expected to do miracles because they’re ‘your’ kids. Really, they’re everyone’s kids.” Ultimately, if we are to support our ELLs, we will also need to do a better job of supporting the teachers who work with them.

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