

## CHAPTER IV ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Implicit in the decision to admit international students to whom English is a foreign language is the school's willingness to modify its curriculum and to reconfirm its commitment to seeing that all its students' needs are met by its programs. The impact of these students on the curriculum may very well go far beyond the area of language study. Indeed, it can involve all academic disciplines and affect the school's reputation within independent school and college admission circles.

### ESL TEACHERS

In many areas, current faculty members who are well-intentioned, interested, and willing to make the investment in further self-education can adequately serve the needs of international students. This is generally not true, however, when courses in English as a second Language (ESL) are needed. Schools that enroll students possessing a minimal knowledge of English are best advised to employ faculty with training and experience in teaching ESL. This is a highly specialized field; assuming that "anyone can teach the international kids English" can be a devastating mistake!

ESL teachers are usually more valuable if they have experience living abroad. Having experienced another culture first-hand, they are normally much more aware of their students' feelings, especially when students first encounter North American culture. These teachers are often perceived by international students as an "umbilical cord" to the new culture, central to their emotional stability, academic success, and general sense of well-being. As such, ESL teachers are their vital link to the greater school community. Keeping this in mind, school administrators should make adjustments in the usual faculty-to-student ratio when assigning extracurricular duties to ESL teachers. Also, ESL classes must be small for emotional and pedagogical reasons. Even with a lighter student load, the good ESL teacher will be in extreme demand.

While it is sometimes more effective to employ U.S. natives as ESL teachers, schools with many international students might consider developing an international faculty. International faculty members can contribute a special cultural richness and sensitivity, thereby enhancing the educational climate of the school community.

### SETTING UP AN ESL PROGRAM

The scope of the program of instruction needed in ESL will depend on the number of students and their levels of proficiency. This, in turn, will affect the number of ESL classes that should be offered. As already mentioned, ESL classes should be intentionally small, especially at the beginning and intermediate levels, so careful planning, testing, and staffing are essential. A school should also give consideration to what role the ESL program is designed to serve within the entire academic curriculum and with respect to scheduling international students' courses of study. Likewise, the selection of appropriately-trained and experienced professionals is critical to the quality and effectiveness of an ESL program.

### **ESL Program Models**

In general, three program models merit description:

1. *The Autonomous Program.* Some ESL programs exist apart from the day-to-day curriculum of the school. Students in programs such as these study nothing but ESL all day. This type of program is ideally suited to the true beginner in English. There are two main drawbacks to such an approach: first, that the students, because of their limited language backgrounds, have little chance for intellectual expression; they are committed fully to language study and acquisition.

Second, because students are academically isolated from their peers in the mainstream, they are often socially isolated as well, developing social relationships only with other international students. When they are finally mainstreamed, in full or in part, they may continue to maintain social relationships only with their international peers rather than integrating themselves fully into the school. On the other hand, this intensive approach has the advantage of dramatically raising the students' English proficiency within a short time. This program model is most appropriate for schools who admit large numbers of beginning-level students. Once students are at the intermediate level, they should be mainstreamed in at least one content course.

2. *The Supplemental Course.* In some schools the admission of an international student carries with it the assumption that the student can keep pace with his U.S. peers. (It falls to the Admission Office, by the way, to make this assessment extremely carefully and to convey its academic expectations clearly to the family before admission of the student.) This student takes all the classes his classmates take. However, the school may recognize that because first language interference exists, the international student may need supplemental assistance to overcome some minor handicaps that keep him from becoming fully fluent. An ESL course at this level is somewhat akin to a tutorial session – highly individualized and specialized. These advanced students may work on sophisticated vocabulary, research skills, or essay writing. It is not uncommon for students at this level to determine, along with the teacher, the scope of their own course. This program model is not appropriate for students at the beginning and intermediate levels; courses, which are often electives, are designed to support learning in the mainstream classroom, not increase students' general knowledge and understanding of the English language, which is needed at lower levels. The drawbacks of this model are that schools may be unprepared to serve students who arrive without appropriate preparation in the English language (in which case, decisions should be made in advance how to handle these students) and that, because this model only serves high-advanced-level and near-native-speaking students, the numbers of international students who meet admissions standards for English-language ability may be limited.
3. *The Partially-Mainstreamed Model.* Some ESL programs place the international student in some mainstream courses (usually mathematics or science) while postponing the study of others (e.g., U.S. history or literature courses). This approach assumes that the less verbally-loaded courses can be attempted with a reasonable element of success while the highly language-based courses should be taken at an appropriate time in the future. Some schools mainstream students gradually – for example, math only at the beginning level; math and science at the intermediate level; and math, science, and history at the advanced level. After completing the advanced level, students are mainstreamed in all academic subjects. Advantages of this kind of program include that it serves multiple levels of students and that it allows flexibility in scheduling and placement. On the other hand, students may have difficulty meeting graduation and/or college entrance requirements without summer study or an additional year of school. In this program model, schools should make a concerted effort to admit only those students who can complete the advanced level of ESL by graduation.

### **English Proficiency and Placement Tests**

With so many international students studying in the United States, a number of standardized tests have been developed to measure English language proficiency. Some schools also develop their own testing devices.

Testing for placement into an ESL program should be done once students have arrived on campus, ideally during an orientation for new international students. Although students may have taken the TOEFL or TOEFL Junior as part of the admissions process, the test may have been taken

months before, and English language proficiency may have changed during that time. In addition, because of security issues and the high-stakes nature of admissions testing, it is better for schools to have a measure of English proficiency that they know can be attributed to the actual student. It is not unusual for schools to discover that the student who looks like an advanced-level learner on paper actually has much weaker skills.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) has produced both the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the TOEFL Junior. The TOEFL is designed to determine whether or not a student has enough English proficiency to attend college in the United States or Canada. As such, it is generally not appropriate for younger learners because it assumes a level of academic maturity that generally is not present in students younger than 16 years old.

The TOEFL Junior is designed for low-to-medium stakes testing of students at the middle and lower-secondary levels (11-15 years old). It can be used as both an admissions test and as a placement test. ESL programs can contact ETS directly by phone (the information is not available on their website) for information on using the TOEFL Junior as a placement test. Because TOEFL and TOEFL Junior scores do not correlate, it is best to use only one test as a placement test.

The TOEFL ITP (or Institutional TOEFL, as it is better known) uses previous TOEFL questions to determine English proficiency and is used by many university-level programs to place students. However, because of the same limitations mentioned above about the TOEFL, it is generally not appropriate for middle school or secondary-level programs.

Cambridge Michigan Language Assessments offers the English Placement Test (EPT), which is a short multiple-choice item test designed to place students in intensive English programs. According to Cambridge Michigan, this test is also appropriate for learners as young as 14 years old. The test is distributed in three forms and can be administered and graded on campus.

Other tests are available, but most are not appropriate for younger learners, cannot be administered on campus or in a timely manner for placement, or test non-academic language proficiency. The IELTS test is essentially the British version of the TOEFL and, as such, is not appropriate for younger learners. The CASAS test assesses language that is more appropriate for adult learners in the workforce and does not assess academic language proficiency. The TOEIC, another ETS product, measures English ability in everyday situations but does not test academic language proficiency.

The WIDA assessments, used by public schools in many states, offer tests that would be appropriate for students at the middle and secondary levels, but these tests must be administered one-on-one and take significant time to administer. These tests may be worth looking into for schools who have very small international student populations.

### **Grouping ESL Students**

Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks is determining which students belong in which classes, given the number of students and the size of the teaching staff. The task is made more complex by the variables involved. At the beginning of the life of an ESL program, placement is often hit-or-miss, and movement up or down in levels should be expected once teachers have a greater sense of students' skills. Once the program has been using the same testing procedures for several years, more accurate testing data, along with the history of movement of students between levels, can be used to determine more hard-and-fast testing guidelines and placement procedures.

Placement into courses – ESL or mainstream – should take place before the first day of school. Testing and placing students after classes have begun runs the risk of taking students out of higher-level courses and placing them into lower-level courses, which can be a blow to the ego of an international student already dealing with jet lag, culture shock, and homesickness. Having students test and completing course placements before the first day of classes shows that the school values

students' learning, and it allows for any changes in overall course scheduling that may need to be done to make sure that students are placed appropriately in all courses.

ESL faculty should be careful to monitor new international students who test out of the ESL program upon arrival. Mainstream teachers of these students – especially in English and history – should be consulted regularly during the first month or two of the school year to determine whether or not students are appropriately placed and not struggling with language issues that could be remedied by placement in an ESL course. While it is sometimes difficult to move students into ESL once they have been placed out, many students who are obviously struggling with mainstream English courses are relieved to find that there is a place for them to go where they will be supported. In addition, they are often unwilling or unable to advocate for themselves, sometimes not realizing that it is ok – in fact, encouraged – for them to seek assistance if it is needed.

Much of how students are placed depends on the courses available. If the ESL program offers courses in speaking/listening, reading, and writing, it will be easier to place students according to their skill base. For example, a student who speaks like a native English speaker will not necessarily need a speaking/listening course, but he may need an intermediate-level writing and/or reading course. The reverse is also possible – a student may place into advanced-level writing course but still need a beginning-level speaking/listening course.

If, however, the ESL program consists of one course at each level that covers all four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), placement can be more difficult. In general, the recommendation is to skew the placement towards the reading/writing skills of the student. In a boarding situation, speaking and listening skills often develop naturally and quickly outside of the classroom, so if a student has advanced-level reading and writing skills but lower speaking skills, there should be less concern about placing him in an advanced-level four-skills course. Teachers should be aware of the lack in one skill – for example, speaking – and should, therefore, make an effort to challenge the student appropriately in that skill, perhaps explicitly giving the student the goal of participating in class once per day or twice per week in order to develop weak speaking skills.

Placement in an ESL program should never be set in stone. Movement in and out of the program and/or between levels of the program should be possible once teachers – both ESL and mainstream – get a sense of each student's skills. In general, it is more difficult to move a student back into ESL once she has left the program; in that light, it is better to err on the side of caution and place students with marginal skills into ESL if there is any question about whether or not they can handle the demands of the mainstream curriculum. They can always be moved out of ESL later if necessary.

Decisions about movement in and out of ESL and between levels of the ESL program should lie primarily with the ESL teacher(s) who have direct experience with the student in question. Administrators should resist pressure from parents and students to move students out of ESL courses without consulting the ESL faculty. In addition, although many schools struggle with scheduling conflicts between ESL and mainstream courses, whenever possible the ESL course should take precedence, especially if the student is at a lower level.

Much thought should also be given to how students will exit the ESL Program. Some schools use additional testing to determine whether or not students are prepared to enter mainstream courses; others require students to complete a prescribed number or level of courses. In addition, some schools allow students to “skip” levels of ESL or retake placement testing after completing summer coursework. Whatever the school's policies, they should be communicated clearly to parents and students, ideally during the admissions process, and they should be adhered to by all. A consistent message regarding ESL policies and procedures regarding exit from the program from all school personnel is important to maintaining the school's reputation among international parents, who often are a school's largest source of prospective student referrals.

## ESL Courses

ESL courses should be designed to fit the school's curriculum and graduation requirements while still providing enough support for students whose proficiency is not sufficient to handle mainstream courses. While course curricula will vary depending on the students admitted, the expectation of English proficiency on the part of the school, and the school's overall curriculum, some generalizations about courses can be made.

- *Beginning Level:* ESL courses at the beginning level should be split into as many separate skills as possible. For example, rather than offering one beginning-level ESL course that covers reading, writing, speaking, and listening, schools might contemplate offering a reading course, a writing/grammar course, and a speaking/listening course to provide students with as much exposure to the language as possible. This has the advantage of supporting students in many different forms and giving students a broad foundation upon which to build their language proficiency. In addition, a content-based course, such as an ESL science or history course, may help students become familiar with both content material in English and American classroom culture in the content areas (see below for more information on content courses).
- *Intermediate Level:* While students at this level are often verbally competent, they still need quite a bit of support in reading and writing, and they may still be uncomfortable with participating in content classes outside of ESL. As a result, courses at this level should include explicit instruction in reading skills, especially literature, and writing. Literature should be below grade level but will provide an introduction to literature analysis. Writing skills move from constructing a coherent paragraph at the beginning of the year to the basics of a standard five-paragraph essay by the end of the year. A speaking/listening course may also be helpful for some students. Students at this level should have enough language proficiency to be successful in mainstream math and science courses.
- *Advanced Level:* Students at the advanced level may be itching – and pestering faculty – to leave ESL, but they do still need significant support, especially if they are older and have missed courses in the mainstream curriculum that teach them how to write a standard five-paragraph essay and/or how to analyze literature. These skills cannot be assumed in older students entering American schools from other educational systems. Students at this level often need additional instruction in reading grade-level literature and writing longer essays and research papers. Additionally, advanced-level grammar should be taught at this level.
- *Support Courses for Mainstreamed Students:* Students who are mainstreamed in all courses may need to take a support course as an elective or study hall. Support courses do not have their own curricula, instead taking their curricula from the courses they support. For example, a support course for a literature class might provide individualized “tutoring” for writing assignments, additional discussion of the literature (especially if the literature assumes cultural concepts that are understood by American classmates, was written more than 200 years ago – e.g. Shakespeare, Chaucer, or even Hawthorne – or contains a significant amount

of figurative language), or extra time to read and analyze homework assignments. ESL teachers providing these courses should keep in close contact with mainstream teachers.

- *ESL Content Courses:* Some schools also offer special ESL courses such as ESL History. This is accomplished by grading the language content downward but supplying all the major concepts of the mainstream course. For example, an international student may be capable of learning the facts of American History but may not be fully capable of reading a mainstream history textbook. The student may also need some additional explanation of concepts indigenous to American culture which a standard text would assume are familiar to readers. Because U.S. history is a course most students across the United States must take to graduate from high school, many publishers have designed U.S. history texts for English language learners. Some publishers have also created science and math textbooks for beginning-level ESL students.

## OTHER ACADEMIC ISSUES

In addition to ESL courses, schools may also consider making minor adjustments to the mainstream curriculum and sequence of courses. For example, a reordering of science courses may be called for with certain students. More mathematically-oriented sciences like physics and chemistry might be studied before biology, which requires greater proficiency in reading and vocabulary skills. Interestingly, both mathematics and science courses – especially for students from educational systems which advance more rapidly in these two areas than does the U.S. system – can be valuable vehicles for improving students’ knowledge of English. In such cases, the students may already be reasonably familiar with the subject content yet lack knowledge of English terminology. The “duplication,” in one sense, then makes for significant advances in the students’ mastery of the English language.

A program that gradually mainstreams its students into the regular school curriculum cannot be too possessive about keeping the international student in ESL courses. Some students may want to join the regular program sooner than they are able. Others may wish to cling to the more supportive setting, even after their language skills have reached the desired level. Consequently, it is essential that the academic curriculum be designed with much forethought. That way the options, course sequence, and ultimate objectives will be clearly delineated. Further, it will be evident from the outset whether and how a given international student can hope to complete the school’s academic requirements within the desired span of time.

One academic issue that is more common among international students than among U.S. students is a student with an undiagnosed, usually minor, learning difference. Experienced ESL teachers are often aware when academic issues are not due entirely to lack of English language proficiency. (TESOL International Association, the largest professional organization of ESL teachers, often offers workshops in differentiating between learning differences and language proficiency issues.) However, experienced professionals – learning specialists either at the school or from outside – should be brought into the picture as soon as learning differences are suspected.

Students with suspected learning differences should be formally diagnosed if at all possible. Testing should be done in the student’s first language, as results of tests done in English may be skewed by language proficiency. Parents should be consulted before any testing is done and should give permission for testing, as it is often expensive and sometimes not covered by insurance. In approaching international parents about testing for learning differences, school personnel should be as culturally sensitive as possible, as parents from many cultures are often either not as aware of

learning differences as Americans parents might be or unwilling to consider the idea that their child may have learning differences. It may be a struggle to get international parents to approve testing, but persistence sometimes pays off, and schools should always keep in mind the best interests of the student. Schools who suspect that an international student has undiagnosed learning differences but are unsuccessful in convincing the student's parents to approve testing should still make an effort to accommodate the student as much as is possible without confirmed diagnosis.

## GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

It may seem reasonable to some schools to adopt different graduation requirements for international students. For example, those students interested in pursuing university studies in science or business may be exempted from the usual modern language requirements. Many schools consider proficiency in English as meeting the foreign language requirement for international students. Similarly, perhaps international students should not be expected to complete the same sequence of English courses required of native speakers. In some schools, an ESL Reading course, which addresses literature analysis and many of the elements of a mainstream English course, may count towards the English course requirements. Also, an ESL history course might fulfill a social science requirement, such as U.S. history.

No single course, academic discipline, assigned credit value, or graduation requirement, no matter how long-standing, has intrinsic merit. All such decisions are consciously determined in consonance with a school's view of what is deemed valuable in the way of content exposure, skill development, personal growth, and preparation for the future. In wrestling with these issues, each school must ultimately consult its institutional statement of purpose for guidance. Using this as a touchstone, each school must determine which international students it can best serve and what kind of curriculum and academic requirements are appropriate.

The matter of waiving graduation requirements inevitably raises the issue of the credibility of a school's standards, particularly as they pertain to college placement. Questions which each school admitting ESL students will have to answer for itself include the following:

1. How many years or semesters should ESL students be segregated before being mainstreamed? Should they be mainstreamed at all? How should their credits be counted in comparison to U.S. students? Should their grades be weighted for ranking purposes? When and if mainstreamed, should the grading standards be the same as for U.S. students or more flexible? How should discrepancies be accounted for, if at all, in a ranking comparison?
2. Should normal graduation requirements be demanded of international students? If not, which and how many should be waived? Should career interests or ability be the determinant in granting waivers?
3. Should international students who do not meet normal graduation requirements be granted a regular school diploma or a certificate of attendance? What effects might the presence of international students meeting different standards of achievement or different requirements have on the college placement of other students?

Though there are many different ways of answering these questions, any school serving international students who require ESL instruction will undoubtedly have to come to terms with them. Schools experiencing anxiety over these issues might, however, find comfort in the knowledge that international education is in a flourishing condition and that many institutions involved in it, colleges and universities no less than secondary schools, have adjusted, though not necessarily lowered, their academic standards and graduation requirements. As in all other professional matters, the one sine qua non is honesty and consistency in publishing policies and enforcing standards.

Likewise, students should be turned away if they cannot reasonably be expected to handle the school's curriculum.