

ESL students, mainstream teachers receive visitation rights

Stepping into each other's shoes makes smoother transition

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Questions inherent to international schools and schools with immigrant populations are: When is the student ready to be exited from ESL to the mainstream? Who should decide the readiness of the student—the ESL department, the English department, or the student? How can the program allow for individual pace and progress?

Problems may emerge when the ESL and English departments disagree over who has the right to decide the students' proficiency. English departments have been known to demand proficiency of second language learners that is far higher than that of even native language speakers. Sometimes ESL departments take offense and feel that their professional evaluation of the students' readiness is being undermined. Inexperienced and/or untrained mainstream content teachers can be insensitive to the needs of non-native speakers in the class.

There are many challenges to the students as well. In the most extreme cases, students are required to attain mainstream level within a certain period of time or they must leave the school. Thus, the pressure is tremendous to exit as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, fears about whether they can compete with native speakers in mainstream content courses are very real.

A two-pronged program that was successfully implemented at the International School of Singapore was student and teacher visitations by both ESL students and mainstream content teachers. High school students in transition classes could opt to visit main-

stream classes with just a few days' advance notice to the teachers. In the other direction, but with more advance preparation, teachers of mainstream courses were invited to teach ESL classes as "guest lecturers."

While the program was implemented for only a short time, the results were enlightening. Some of the "eligible" students who visited the classes reported that the tempo, the language, and the expectations of the teachers were too high for them at this time and chose to remain in ESL for an additional semester. A few others described feeling "comfortable" and sure that they were prepared and could fulfill the requirements successfully.

The teachers who volunteered to teach ESL classes reported a new awareness of the challenges and an admiration for the job of ESL teachers. They soon realized that in order to make their material comprehensible to non-native students they would have to use strategies other than lecture format. Some actually requested and received in-service training from the ESL department to teach them additional strategies to work with ESL students.

An additional program was that of student "probation." As English proficiency levels were tested three times per year to allow for and ensure flexibility with regard to individual progress, the probation system offered a "way out" if students were floundering or bored. Within three weeks, teachers had to decide if the level and the students were compatible. If not, the students could be transferred up or back. While this program entailed intense supervision over a short period of time, it was worthwhile because it offered the best match between student abilities and the program.

All three programs were successful because they were based on flexibility and mobility. Individual progress and learning took place—for teachers as well as students. ▼