

Running Head: IMPROVING SECONDARY ESL

Improving English as a Second Language Instruction at the Secondary Level:

Bridging Clear Curricula and Best Teaching Practices

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## Abstract

Observations of six middle and high school Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools classrooms in the fall of 2007 raised questions about the clarity of the secondary ESL curriculum and about the knowledge that ESL teachers need to implement best teaching practices. The Tennessee and MNPS ESL standards were examined for guidance they provided to teachers, as these were the only documents that outlined the ESL curriculum. It was revealed that the neither standards document answered the question of what teachers should teach, instead focusing on the skills students should attain. Both sets of standards showed some differentiation of skills across proficiency levels, but there were also many instances of identical Student Performance Indicators across proficiency levels. In the MNPS standards there were some guides as to appropriate themes for beginning English learners, but these suggestions were not present at the higher proficiency levels. Connections are made between the lack of a clear secondary ESL curriculum and the present/future achievement of higher-proficiency, secondary ESL students. What ESL teachers should know about theory and research on ESL education to be able to effectively enact the curriculum is discussed. Finally, a unit plan and supporting materials are provided that incorporate many of the features of secondary ESL best practices while relating them to the MNPS ESL standards.

## Introduction

The demand for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction has grown mightily with recent waves of immigration, and immigrants are going to new areas of the country where the education system had not previously been equipped to teach them. Whereas California, Texas, and Florida are accustomed to high populations of non-English speaking students, the southeastern states have had to amass new resources and create ESL teaching positions where previously there were very few. From 1994 to 2004 these states experienced dramatic growth in the numbers of non-English speaking students enrolled in schools: South Carolina had a 521 percent increase in English Language Learners (ELL's), North Carolina a 470 percent increase, and Tennessee a 471 percent increase (Samway, 2007). The ESL teacher has become a common fixture in many public schools.

The goal of instruction for these English Language Learners has traditionally been to get them into the regular classroom as quickly as possible with the skills they need to succeed. On paper, this goal seems simple enough, but in practice it has proven problematic. The No Child Left Behind Act has brought to the light the sagging achievement of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, and it has hastened this pressure by requiring ELL's to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) after as little as one year of instruction in English. On Tennessee's 2007 Report Card, elementary and middle school LEP students made AYP in math and language arts, but secondary LEP students did not in either category (Tennessee, 2007). While the reasons for this are many and will be discussed later, it is important to note that there should be increased pressure on secondary ESL teachers to prepare these students to become English proficient. Thus, it only makes sense that we should critically examine the secondary ESL curriculum and the instructional decisions that secondary ESL teachers make. Assuming that proficient language acquisition does not happen wholly on its own and that teachers can influence it and even hasten it, the curricular decisions made by ESL teachers become paramount to improving ELL performance.

However, curriculum planning, when done thoroughly with an eye to best practices according to research, is a complex and time-consuming effort. It involves knowledge of the full trajectories of student skill growth across grade levels, surveying and selecting appropriate literature materials, organizing all of

the concepts students are to learn into thematic units, and planning appropriate assessments. Obviously, it is too much to expect that individual teachers should “reinvent the wheel” and design their own curriculum from scratch. ESL teachers vary widely in their curricular focuses; some focus more on reading, writing, and discussion to build fluency, others focus more on grammar and vocabulary exercises. Thus, ESL curriculum coordinators ideally do much of this foundation building for teachers. Curriculum coordinators have developed standards documents with the intent of stating what skills students should be developing in ESL class so as to improve instruction. The journey from stating what skills students should have to planning activities that develop those skills is a long one, however. Perhaps this is part of the reason why many teachers consider the standards documents not useful to their practice. It may be that they see the standards as a sort of rulebook for a game they already know how to play, rather than as a set of strategies and tips from a coach that can improve their current performance. Certainly, the ESL standards documents of Tennessee and Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools fit the image of a rulebook more than that of an insider’s guide to playing the game well. Instead of poring over the current standards documents for teaching ideas that are not there, teachers are more likely to rely on what they have learned about best practices in ESL education, self-originating activity ideas or suggestions from the materials they have available, and what they believe students should be learning. Teachers then use these synthesized ideas to organize their courses and select instructional activities and materials. The results can be conducive or disadvantageous to student achievement.

If the ESL standards are to positively impact instruction, there must be a way to bring the important curriculum planning done by the district closer to the needs of teachers. This project will explore the kinds of guidance that can be amassed by curriculum leaders to better support the practice of ESL teachers. The attempts at the state and district levels to provide teachers with guidance will be discussed, as will the understandings an ESL teacher should have, according to theory and research, to be able to carry out this guidance in an effective way. Among these, what are the proper roles of grammar study and contextualized comprehension/expression? What types of experiences in speaking, listening, reading, and writing are best to create high expectations and to actively promote skill development for

ELL's? What is the role of unit themes in engaging these students while providing for English language learning through rich contexts? Also, what does research say about the proper role of the native language (the L1) in the classroom? All of these questions need to be explored because they are central to the decisions that teachers must make everyday. Emphasis should be placed on improving teacher pre-service training and professional development so that teachers are better equipped to enact the curriculum and make the kinds of instructional choices that lead to improved student performance.

Finally, I provide an instructional unit intended for secondary students with high-intermediate English proficiency, those students who I found in my curriculum practicum in ESL to be most in need of a stronger curriculum. I discuss the literature selection for this unit and provide a unit plan and accompanying student comprehension guides. I also show the connections my unit makes to the standards and discuss its possible strengths and weaknesses for real students.

### **Secondary ESL Curriculum and Effects**

We cannot expect improvements in ESL teaching and learning without having a clear curriculum and training teachers on its content and usage. I define "clear curriculum" as possessing 4 key ingredients: 1) standards that outline the general learning aims of the subject, 2) a scope and sequence that makes clear exactly what concepts, skills, or topics students are to explore at a given level or levels, 3) Student Performance Indicators that describe what success will look like with each concept so as to guide assessment, and 4) a Curriculum Guide- suggestions to the teacher of thematic units and ways to organizing concepts into lessons with meaningful, engaging reading materials and activities. It is my belief that the ESL curriculum will function best when these four elements are clear and present, as they provide the teacher with the utmost guidance. Having a clear curriculum is an important first step to raising the achievement of ELL's; we must begin by ensuring that the skills and knowledge they are to acquire is identified, organized in a coherent way, and distributed logically across proficiency levels so as to assure continued challenge and growth of their English proficiency and literacy skills. Conceivably, the purpose of having subject area standards is to ensure that teachers know what to teach so that there is

more equitable, higher achievement across classrooms. However, the Tennessee and MNPS ESL standards are mostly a laundry list of skills and performance indicators that speak to only a fraction of the task of curricular planning. The rest of the process is in selecting appropriate and engaging reading materials and activities, organizing topics within themes, and deciding upon ways to assess student knowledge. Thus, it seems that the more initial guidance the standards documents can give on themes, reading materials, activities, and assessment the more refined the ultimate teaching decisions are likely to be (assuming that there is buy-in from teachers and that professional development has been sufficient to inform teachers as to the guidance available to them). A clear curriculum, as previously defined, is one component that is necessary for improving ESL instruction.

My observations of secondary Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools ESL teachers provide support for the lack of a clear secondary ESL curriculum. I observed six classrooms and five different teachers at the secondary level: two high school courses (one beginning and one advanced) and four middle school courses (one beginning, one intermediate, and two advanced). These teachers knew in advance that I would be observing, and I observed during class periods that they recommended, on regular school days. Five out of six classrooms that I observed ranged from a study-hall-type climate to a remedial, low-expectations foreign language course climate. The activities that took up the bulk of instructional time in these classes included word searches, round-robin reading from a book with no follow-up discussion questions or writing assignments, paper-pencil mazes, saying the alphabet over a dozen times (which most students already knew so competently they were able to speak it forward and backward), playing BINGO (using words only- no pictures to convey meaning), copying definitions from a dictionary for forty-five minutes, and filling in blanks in disconnected sentences from grammar books. There was a substantial amount of disengagement from students in three of the six classrooms, including sleeping, listening to ipods, walking around the room, and carrying on noisy social conversations during the lesson, not to mention a general sense of boredom and anxiety/frustration that hung in some of the rooms. In comparison, one middle school class seemed to parallel a regular English class curriculum. In this class, students were busy reading youth novels and children's books independently, listening to

poems and discussing imagery, analyzing the grammar of sentences using the interactive Grammar Graphics® method, working on the computer with Rosetta Stone® English language software, listening to books on tape, and writing journal responses. High student engagement in this classroom was the norm and there was no significant off-task behavior. Certainly, it is clear that there is more than one issue that would account for the differences across these classrooms. For example, some of the teachers were not demonstrating a command of classroom management skills or high expectations, were not providing adequate activities to fill up class time, and were not teaching to measurable objectives. However, another commonality between the classrooms of low engagement was a sense that there was *very little to do*- that ESL class was about playing games, doing some worksheets on vocabulary and grammar, and hanging out with friends. This seems to be caused in part by a lack of deep understanding or agreement among teachers regarding the specific content of the ESL curriculum and the scope of that curriculum for their particular course.

Such curricular decisions are critical to student success, especially for secondary ESL students at the upper levels of proficiency. I spoke with “Paola”, a junior at a local high school, during my observations of secondary ESL classes who brought to light the seriousness of these curricular and programming issues. She sat in the back of the ESL classroom listening to her ipod while the teacher was out of the room. Some of the students finished grammar exercises from a workbook; others had their heads on their desks, were doodling, or were chatting idly. She said she hated ESL class and wanted to be in regular English classes. When she tried to register for them, however, the guidance counselor told her she could not because she did not obtain a high enough score on the reading portion of the English Language Development Assessment (ELDA) to warrant her transition into the regular English classroom. I was struck by her assertion that she *wanted* to be more challenged, but the system had denied her that opportunity. It was as if the guidance counselor decided she would be better off to take an easy “A” in ESL class than to have to work hard to pass a regular English class. Or, there could be the policy that regular English teachers are not expected to make any kind of accommodations for non-native speakers, preferring instead to group these students together so the teacher can focus on the needs of “proficient”

speakers. However, instead of reading novels and writing essays in ESL class that would have built up her reading comprehension, Paola was doing grammar exercises from a workbook. Her teacher later told me that the main textbook in the course was the grammar workbook, and other students I spoke to said that grammar was usually all that they did. They were not reading at all! Despite her near-native level of spoken fluency (she had been a student in the United States since upper elementary school), she was placed in ESL in lieu of regular English classes because she did not score high enough on one or more subtests of the ELDA. Such bureaucratic definitions of adequate proficiency can be called easily into question, considering the possibility that a native English speaker with below-average reading comprehension abilities might score similarly on that section of the ELDA, but would still have access to the regular English curriculum. For these students at the upper levels of proficiency, educators must ask themselves what kinds of comparative experiences can be provided in the ESL classroom that would build the comprehension and analysis skills needed to be successful in the regular English curriculum. For these students especially, the ESL class cannot only be about learning more words in English or refining grammar and mechanics. These experiences do not prepare students for the rigors of regular English courses or college.

In my analysis of these teachers' lessons, I began to wonder about the stated curriculum of the secondary school ESL courses in the Tennessee ESL standards. Did they present a clear curriculum? What steps had been taken to specify the content and learning activities that would promote high instructional quality in secondary ESL classrooms? With these teachers in mind, I looked to the Tennessee ESL standards, asking myself two questions that I believe many teachers ask themselves, especially when they first start to teach a course or when they would like to revise the curriculum they have been using: 1) "What should I teach to these students?" and 2) "How do I organize concepts in an engaging way?"

I perused the Tennessee ESL standards to see if they would answer my questions (Tennessee, n.d.). It was clear that they tried to delineate what students should learn, but I was left with many more questions than answers about what I would teach (Table 1). The document contains standards, a scope

and sequence of student skills to be acquired, and some sample Student Performance Indicators (SPI's) across proficiency levels. These are each grouped into listening, speaking, reading, and writing modalities. There are SPI's for each skill listed on the scope and sequence for at least one of the following proficiency levels: beginning, high beginning, intermediate, high intermediate, or advanced. Upon closer inspection, however, many of the SPI's are simply copied and pasted across proficiency levels, not showing any real differentiation for many of the skills (Appendix 1). No suggestions are given for how to arrange the skills into thematic units or lessons, nor is there any guidance as to the works of literature that should be explored or the role that literature should play alongside grammar instruction. In addition, the documents do not speak at all to the proportion of time teachers should spend focusing on the speaking, listening, reading, and writing modalities. Thus, while these state documents provide a little guidance as to what skills students should attain, the lion's share of the decision-making is left to the individual ESL teacher. Ultimately, I decided that the standards and performance indicators were not helpful in informing my selection of materials, the time I would devote to each modality, or my teaching strategies. Their main benefit would be for planning classroom assessment or preparing students for a state assessment that was aligned with them. If I took the time to carefully plan my curriculum to address each of these performance indicators, my students would probably score well on such an assessment. However, would they score well on the ACT, the SAT, or on state end of course tests? Are their valuable concepts that are left out of the standards, such as exploring cultural heritage and writing research papers for example? Backwards planning from the standards would be a very tedious process that is not guaranteed to be effective for teachers and students, given the lack of pedagogical guidance present.

Perhaps the MNPS ESL standards would better inform ESL instruction. Did they present a clear curriculum? Did they better specify ESL course content and suggest materials, themes, or activities that would promote high instructional quality? Certainly, the fact that the district provides textbooks is one step towards promoting a clear curriculum, given that a good textbook usually has an organized scope and sequence with (supposedly) appropriate learning activities. However, I learned that the only books currently adopted for high school ESL in MNPS are grammar workbooks and a collection of short stories

**Table 1.** The first and second columns show sample State of Tennessee standards and SPI's for high-intermediate proficiency, 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade ESL. The third column shows the ways teachers might think about each standard/SPI and what pedagogical questions might be answered or unanswered (Tennessee, n.d.)

	What should students learn or be able to do?	What and how should I teach it?
Listening	<p><b>Sample Standard:</b>  <b>9-12.L.2 Students will demonstrate an understanding of various forms of oral communication.</b></p> <p><u>Sample High-Intermediate SPI:</u>                      b. Demonstrate an understanding of complex verbal directions.</p>	<p>...what kinds of oral communication? Should they listen and respond to speeches, debates, and lectures? Or should the <i>form</i> and/or <i>content</i> of oral communication be varied (technical, process, opinion; politics, science, literature)</p> <p>...is telling them how to complete an assignment and then making sure they understood me enough to satisfy this?</p>
Speaking	<p><b>Sample Standard:</b>  <b>9-12.S.1 Students will communicate with appropriate pronunciation, intonation, and stress.</b></p> <p><u>Sample High-Intermediate SPI:</u>                      e. Place the stress on the correct word in a sentence when speaking (e.g., do not stress function words).</p>	<p>... this doesn't give me any specific lesson ideas, but I can address this across many different types of activities</p> <p>...this is interesting, as sometimes it is appropriate to stress function words to clarify meaning: "No, he didn't see <i>her</i>, he saw Ben!"</p> <p>How do I teach students to stress the right words to convey what they want to say?</p>
Reading	<p><b>Sample Standard:</b>  <b>HS.R.1 The student will develop the reading skills necessary for word recognition, comprehension, interpretation and analysis.</b></p> <p><u>Sample High-Intermediate SPI:</u>                      j. Build vocabulary by reading and viewing from a wide variety of sources.</p>	<p>...should I use novels, or short stories and prose from the textbooks? Is one of these more conducive to higher-level analysis? What specific novels or stories should I use?</p> <p>...what should I bring in addition to the textbook? What themes should we use? Should I make newspaper articles, poems, short stories, classified ads, magazine articles, etc. all a part of the curriculum? How should I measure vocabulary growth?</p>
Writing	<p><b>Sample Standard:</b>  <b>H.S..W.1 The student will develop the structural skills of the writing process.</b></p> <p><u>Sample High-Intermediate SPI:</u>                      d. Write the correct form of modal auxiliaries (e.g. can, could, may, might, will, would, should + base form of verbs.)</p>	<p>...as in mechanics? How do I balance a focus on synthesis, analysis, and organization with a focus on correct grammar and mechanics? How often should students write? What kinds of genres should they write? How long should their writing be?</p> <p>...I should do a grammar lesson on this.</p>

intended only for the intermediate level and above. Middle schools have actual ESL textbooks that include thematic units with literature selections. Only two of the teachers I observed said that they used the district-bought books though. The teachers that did not said that they thought the books were either boring or not on students' levels. While evaluating the appropriateness of the textbooks is outside the scope of this project, I assumed that either the teachers had used their expertise to thoroughly evaluate the

books before rejecting them, or that the teachers had not thoroughly evaluated the books and rejected them anyway for some reason. Without the textbooks to help guide the course, the teachers would have had to plan (or not plan) their own scope and sequence and create their own curriculum guide, or follow such guidance from the district or state.

The ESL Standards for MNPS are more accessible than the State's, but still lack a curriculum guide component that would suggest specific content or literature that would be appropriate for students to study (MNPS, 2007a; MNPS, 2007b). Although there is a set of middle school standards and a set labeled high school, they are almost identical to one another except for a few very minor modifications. The MNPS standards are also very different from the State's, with different standards under each of the modalities (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and with different performance indicators. The MNPS district standards seem much more teacher friendly than the state standards, both in appearance and content. At the zero, first, and second levels of English proficiency, the MNPS standards include suggested vocabulary to be studied, which could be used as unit themes (e.g. greetings, colors, numbers, letters, environmental- school, home, neighborhood). At levels three, and four, these vocabulary suggestions are no longer present, but thematic ideas could be found within the communication functions that are listed, (e.g. making and accepting apologies, stating opinion about school related issues and other topics) (Table 2). Levels three and four emphasize the reading and writing modalities more than the previous levels do, so assumedly the vocabulary learned is to be determined by the reading and writing topics that the teacher selects. However, the reading standards still do not have suggestions for literature or themes. Still, teachers have to make decisions on what themes to teach and how to organize the curriculum, with little help in making literature selections, and with very few literature materials even available for their use.

It is clear that the ESL standards documents can only provide minimal guidance toward quality instruction. Teachers would need to research and acquire their own student reading materials, choose any themes or no themes at all, decide how much time to spend focusing on listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, and many other crucial curricular decisions that ideally would be equitably made across

**Table 2.** The first and second columns show sample MNPS district standards and SPI’s for high-intermediate proficiency, 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade ESL. The third column shows the ways teachers might think about each standard/SPI and what pedagogical questions might be answered or unanswered. Document available at International Newcomer’s Center, MNPS ESL district office.

	What should students learn or be able to do?	What and how should I teach it?
Listening	<p><b><u>Sample Standard:</u></b>  <b>Comprehends appropriate content area vocabulary.</b></p> <p><u>Sample High-Intermediate SPI:</u>                      Makes connections to content area vocabulary.</p>	<p>...I should review with the student the current vocabulary he is learning in his other classes.</p> <p>...what does this mean? How can I make sure the student is making connections to content area vocabulary while he is listening?</p>
Speaking	<p><b><u>Sample Standard:</u></b>  <b>Summarizes content area information.</b></p> <p><u>Sample High-Intermediate SPI:</u>                      Picks out necessary information.</p>	<p>...as in content from other classes? What kinds of content should I bring in, or should I focus on helping them understand what they’re already doing in other classes, kind of like a study hall?</p> <p>...this could be accomplished through reading materials in the ESL class or through other content area material.</p>
Reading	<p><b><u>Sample Standard:</u></b>  <b>Reads various genres with fluency.</b></p> <p><u>Sample High-Intermediate SPI:</u>                      Reads fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama/dialogue, essays, and current events.</p>	<p>...I should have students read many different genres and scaffold their comprehension and vocabulary growth.</p> <p>...these are all of the genres I should include in the course. How long should each selection be and how often should we read these?</p>
Writing	<p><b><u>Sample Standard:</u></b>  <b>Uses the writing process to write in a variety of domains for different purposes and audiences.</b></p> <p><u>Sample High-Intermediate SPI:</u>                      Writes descriptive, expository, narrative, persuasive, and informational essays.</p>	<p>...I should introduce a variety of writing assignments.</p> <p>...these are the types of essays students should write at this level. How long should they be?</p>

classrooms. Clearly, Tennessee and MNPS are relying upon the expertise of each ESL teacher to ensure quality instruction, as teachers must make broad instructional decisions that are not addressed in the standards. Therefore, what are the important components of good ESL pedagogy that teachers should know and do according to research? What do teachers need to know to compensate for what the standards lack in guidance?

**Best Practices for ESL Teachers: Selected Theoretical Perspectives**

There are several philosophical decisions that ESL teachers must make that are not clarified by the standards documents. For example, should English grammar studies be central or peripheral to the

work ELL's do? One's stance on this issue can make the difference between a course where the chief activity is filling in blanks with parts of speech and memorizing the meanings of lists of words, or a course where exploration of knowledge, comprehension and expression are the focus, with grammar and vocabulary study taking a supportive role. Similarly, teachers must know how much and when to emphasize Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing skills. For example, is answering the teacher's questions enough speaking practice, or should there be regular opportunities to converse and give opinions on thematic content? Similarly, are informal journal entries sufficient writing practice, or should students be drafting and revising formal essays? Clearly, the way a teacher interprets these and other aspects of the ESL curriculum has a tremendous impact on everyday lesson planning, which in turn ultimately decides the quality of an ESL course and of a student's learning. We may know and articulate very well what students are to learn in the standards, but it is largely what the teacher knows and does that determines student learning. It is therefore valuable to reflect deeply upon what an ESL teacher should know and be able to do.

#### *Thematic Units and Grammar Instruction*

In arranging topics, it is important to find some kind of unifying theme that can be the core of discussion, reading, and writing (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006; Echevarria & Graves, 2006; Perez & Torres-Guzman, 2001). McTighe and Wiggins (2005) refer to themes as "big ideas" that function as "conceptual velcro" for topics of study. These big ideas "connect discrete knowledge and skills to a larger intellectual frame and provide a bridge for linking specific facts and skills." As students focus on these larger ideas, they see the purpose and relevance of content (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005). For example, beginning-intermediate level students could learn English through a unit theme like "diversity in the animal kingdom", where students categorize animals by their characteristics, read stories about animals, learn about the present tense while exploring the actions animals take, write about what kind of animal they would like as a pet and why, visit the zoo, and discuss what they saw the animals doing there. For a more abstract unit requiring higher order thinking, intermediate-advanced students could explore a larger unit on "environmentalism". In this unit, students could work in groups to explore what it means to be eco-

friendly by surveying what the school already does to protect the environment, taking pictures of good and bad practices to present as evidence, researching other eco-friendly ideas in books and on the internet, exploring the monetary costs, pros, and cons of implementing these ideas, and presenting recommendations to the principal in a written and oral presentation. Along the way, the students would learn many vocabulary words like decompose, litter, and hazardous waste, to name a few. Grammar and mechanics issues would come up during the writing process and the teacher could draw attention to these in context, or even provide a structure that students are to include in their writing, such as must/should/have to + infinitive verb. In contrast, a lesson not arranged around an engaging theme might look like this: students get a list of animals to memorize, complete a word search using these animals, study the present perfect tense using a paragraph about packing for a sailboat ride, and then talk to each other freely while doing a crossword puzzle on animal characteristics. It is clear which of these lessons would be more involving of students and more likely to produce higher gains in speaking/listening, reading, and writing over time. Teaching to a theme also allows “more time for understanding and reflection as well as repetition of key English words and phrases,” and “reduces the tendency toward superficial treatment of subjects,” (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006).

If no unifying theme or purpose is present, it is very easy for instruction to deteriorate into disconnected lists of words and arbitrary grammar exercises. Likewise, if literature selections are not included, there may be nothing through which students can hone their comprehension skills except for disconnected sentences in grammar workbooks. Opportunities to read interesting stories so as to expand reading comprehension skills can be all too easy to overlook in a curriculum that is geared toward isolating the “parts” of the language. A classroom that is overly focused on the production of correct grammar and practicing a narrow list of vocabulary words will also be less apt to provide students with the necessary opportunities to discuss and write about engaging topics of interest. Obviously teaching through themed units is not a panacea for ESL instruction; it is just as possible to focus too much on higher-order comprehension activities like cause and effect in literature and oral debates on issues and not address the essential grammatical, vocabulary, and pronunciation deficiencies that students may have.

Nonetheless, we afford students with much fuller exposure to the English language and motivation to communicate when units provide context-rich experiences around themes or purposes that interest students.

### *The Role of the First Language*

Even though ELL's do not speak English fluently, they have a wealth of knowledge and expressive abilities in their native language. Sadly, these children are rarely able to develop literacy in their first language (L1), especially if they never attend school in their native countries. Research has shown that students who have strong literacy skills in their native language are able to transfer these generalized reading skills into the second language (Cummins, 1981b; Collier, 1987). These general skills include the idea that print has meaning, that letters produce unique sounds that are combined to make words, and overall reading comprehension skills like looking for the main idea, cause and effect, organizing ideas for the writing process, etc. are all skills that can be applied readily to the second language (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). Likewise, students need to know that their languages are valued in the curriculum; teachers should help students to be proud of their first language and heritage. To do this, teachers could learn phrases in the first languages of their students for use in the classroom on occasion (such as "Good morning", "Have a good day", "Good work", "Be quiet", "Listen"), or label items around the classroom in students' native languages, as well as in English. Teachers should never punish students for speaking in their native languages, as this can promote shame of a student's language and culture (Coelho, 1994).

Research has shown that bilingual education produces the highest achievement in ELL's and is more likely to lead to successful completion of high school (Thomas & Collier, 1997; Greene, 1998). The components of a strong bilingual education program are important factors to its success. First, students should gradually work up to spending roughly half of the day speaking and learning through the L1 and the other half of the day through the L2. Second, native speakers of both English and other languages should be in classrooms together. Third, teachers who are fluently bilingual in both the first and the second languages of the students should teach classes. Fourth, activities should promote

discovery learning and discussion among students so that all students feel like their input and native language is valuable (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Secondary students of such bilingual programs have been shown to have higher grades and lower dropout rates in comparison to monolingual immigrant students (Rumbaut, 1995 in Schmid, 2001). In districts where there is a strong supply of fluently bilingual teachers who plan and enact a clear curriculum along these lines, bilingual education can be very successful.

However, in some districts teachers bilingual education is not feasible, and teaches may even be prohibited from teaching through the L1. The English-only argument is a popular one as well, though it tends to be based on the fears that students will never learn English well and will form their own L1 enclaves that might ultimately change the language and cultural norms of US society (Crawford, 1992; Tse, 2001). A similar argument was used against the Native Americans during the settlement of the United States, when many native children were placed in English-only boarding schools where they were punished for speaking in their native tongues, although they knew no other language by which to communicate (Crawford, 1992). These children grew up ashamed of their native languages, and worse, unable to communicate well with their own parents and grandparents who did not know any English. Today, most of the original Native American languages have gone extinct, something that scholars now view as a tremendously lamentable cultural loss to the entire world. Also, Native American reservations are still dealing with very complex language issues; the view that the native language is shameful or of less value than English is compounded by the problem that Standard English is sometimes not spoken in the home either. Thus, some native children grow up speaking no language in its “standard” form and struggle with literacy (Crawford, 1992). L1 language loss, or subtractive bilingualism, can be an effect of English-only education in some children. This is unfortunate because it denies them a wonderful opportunity to be bilingual and can contribute to cultural identity issues and even problems with communication within the family (Fillmore, 1991; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006; Gunderson, 2000).

The English-only argument is also based on an idea that English will be acquired faster if other languages are left out: a time-on-task view of L2 acquisition. This is disputed by studies on the rates at

which children learn language. Studies show that students who begin learning the L2 between the ages of 5 and 7 take longer to reach native-level proficiency than students who begin learning between ages 8 and 11. Students over age 12 take the longest of all to reach native proficiency, and they may never reach it (Collier, 1987). Collier states that this data provides support for the language acquisition theories of Cummins (1976; 1981b): that a student needs a strong “common underlying proficiency” in the L1, plus sufficient schooling in literacy skills using the L1, before an L2 can be most readily acquired. Two years of schooling in the L1 is thought to be the average amount needed before the L2 can be acquired at the fastest rate. As for students over age 12, a complicated mixture of issues influenced their scores on the tests used to measure “proficiency” in Collier’s study. These students were expected to do more higher order thinking in the L2 than the younger students in the study, which required that they comprehend English well enough to analyze and synthesize statements. In addition, by the time that the older students had mastered the fundamentals of the L2 (basic vocabulary, sufficient decoding ability, syntax in the L2), they had missed out on 2 or more years of subject area instruction that exercised their higher order thinking abilities. Cummins calls the academic English needed for higher order tasks Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Thus, it is even more clear that secondary ESL teachers have to address a complex array of knowledge and skills in the classroom in order to help older ELL’s achieve as much as possible. Lessons must promote higher expectations; teachers must find ways to introduce language-appropriate higher order thinking into the ESL curriculum, not just rely on grammar and vocabulary exercises, if students are to learn English well enough to succeed in mainstream classrooms. The ESL classroom should not be considered a low-track class where students are expected to do very little of any real substance (Harklau, 1999).

#### *Incorporate Their Cultures and Experiences into the Curriculum*

There are themes that are more interesting than others to ELL’s, and most importantly, these preferences may be different from those of their native English-speaking peers. For example, native students might have little to bring to the table in a discussion of immigration, except for the stories of their ancestors or their opinions on immigration. However, ELL’s would each have a personal story of

their journey to the United States, one that they may or may not be comfortable sharing. Teachers should remember that some topics may evoke strong feelings for ELL's and should have a good understanding of these students' perspectives and unique struggles. These students may feel isolated in a school where students look, think, act, and dress very differently from them. Thus, it is very important to make the ESL classroom one where all cultures are respected, welcomed, included in the curriculum (Jiménez & Gámez, 1996). For example, teachers could arrange for culture days, during which a students and family members bring in items from their country, show where it is on the map, talk about life there, bring in a food, share a folk story in the native language and in English, show pictures, or plan some sort of activity for the class (such as teaching a folk dance, song, or sport, fashioning a head wrap, etc.). Other students could write reflections on how those cultural practices were similar to or different from their own.

### *Selecting and Teaching Reading Materials*

Teachers should look for opportunities to include stories that have special interest to ELL students, such as themes of overcoming adversity or being bicultural and bilingual, among others. With some effort, it is possible to locate stories from the students' native cultures as well, or even stories that incorporate words from their native languages. These can be found in literature survey books, like those used in regular English and ESL classrooms. Students are more motivated to read when they can bring their own memories, values, and experiences to the subject (Allen, 1994). Books that portray other cultures in negative ways should be avoided, such as books where the dullard, cowardly, or aggressive character is Hispanic, Asian, or black, or where illustrations of these characters make them appear so.

Students should also be taught the language of "story grammar" that they will need in order to discuss and interpret a narrative text. Words like *main character*, *obstacle*, *goal*, *outcome*, and *theme*, need to be described to students, and they should also examine the common elements of other genres of writing, like expository, descriptive, persuasive, poetry, and technical (Gersten & Jiménez, 1994; Allen, 1994). Reading materials should have enough known words so that reading them does not become too frustrating, but enough unknown words to challenge students. If students are only exposed to short

stories from a basal textbook, they will be at a loss for how to attack a novel in the regular curriculum. Therefore, teachers should seek out novels written especially for English learners. An example of such a series is the Oxford Bookworm Library, consisting of 130 titles with English that is adjusted for readers at levels 1-6. Children and youth novels can also be a good source of reading material, as long as the theme is appropriate for the age group of ELL's who will read it. Technical books and student magazines or newspapers work well to expose students to non-fiction. In addition, teachers should have a classroom library and set-aside time regularly for student reading and journal response. Comprehension should be scaffolded to help students make connections within the readings and between the readings and their background knowledge, such as concept maps, anticipation/response guides, Know/Want to know/Learned (KWL) charts, and the use of pictures and realia (Perez & Torres-Guzman, 2001). Teachers sometimes rely on round robin reading (having students take turns reading out loud as the whole class or small group reads at the same pace) because they can be more assured that students are actually reading, but Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) has been demonstrated to be more effective over time in producing reading gains (Garcia, 1994). Small group reading in chorus or whisper-reading are alternate class reading strategies. However, it is impossible to get a good idea of the types of miscues a student may be making if only silent or group reading is done. Teachers need to do authentic reading assessments with individual students periodically to determine their reading strengths and weaknesses, such as a running records and miscue analyses, story retellings, reading logs to reflect upon and keep track of independent reading, journal responses, story writing, and student-teacher conferences (Garcia, 1994).

### **Secondary ESL Unit Plan Analysis**

I designed the unit for secondary ESL students with a high-intermediate level of proficiency, given that these students seem to be most at risk of not receiving the types of challenges they need to improve fluency and reading comprehension/analysis in the ESL classroom (Appendix 2). The MNPS ESL standards (Appendix 3) that coordinate with this unit are listed as well, but for reasons already stated, they were not used as a starting point for planning. Instead, they were tacked on at the end in a

checklist fashion. The literature selection, Hatchet by Gary Paulsen, meets many of the criteria mentioned previously for selecting appropriate literature. The theme of survival in the wilderness is applicable across grades 7-12, even though the main character, Brian, is thirteen. The wilderness survival theme can also easily be related to a theme of responding to life's challenges, through which students can write about their personal experiences. Some students may be able to relate to themes of desperation and hunger, especially if they come from very disadvantaged or refugee backgrounds, but the book does not make explicit connections to other cultures. As a youth novel, its level of English is less complex than novels that might be used in the regular high school English curriculum, yet it affords many of the same opportunities for comprehension building.

My unit plan focuses on comprehension of the text and builds skimming and scanning skills through regular comprehension questions. Students are also asked to analyze cause and effect, to make predictions, and to sequence events. There is also focus on the vocabulary of each passage that would be less prominent in the regular English curriculum. As such, discussion of literary elements such as simile, metaphor, voice, and analysis of the author's plot decisions are not prominent in the unit, but there are suggestions for how and when to discuss these at the end. I felt it more important to focus instruction upon language demands, though I tried to balance the language needs of the students with the comprehension and literary analysis skills they would be expected to have in the regular English curriculum. In a real classroom where I was aware of the individual proficiency levels of students, I might also alter the length of the passages. Some students might be able to read whole chapters instead of selections, while other students may struggle with the length of the current selections. For example, some students with minimal schooling backgrounds in their home country might have just learned how to read for the first time ever, and these would likely have more difficulty than students who had been in school previously and were already used to reading in their L1. I do not make suggestions for differentiation in the unit plan, but one key way would be place students into small groups by native language and/or reading level, then shorten or lengthen the reading selections as appropriate. Alternately, a mixed grouping could be used in which better readers assist lower-performing readers. Frequent small group

discussions about content allow students to get speaking practice in English and to receive help from peers when needed. However, small groups can also be unproductive if students socialize instead of work. Thus, I would adjust the usage of small groups if necessary and would set up procedures and rules for student interaction.

I provide a few samples of supporting materials for students' use. In the Student Comprehension Guide (Appendix 4), students have all of the questions and passages they are to read in one packet, along with the Word Hint lists from each passage. These words were chosen because they were likely to be unfamiliar to students. So that students' reading is not stalled due to looking up words, synonyms and definitions are provided for their quick reference. Within the student comprehension guide, it would be easy to adjust the lengths of the passages, add page number hints for struggling readers, or provide more multiple choice comprehension questions instead of short answer. A sample vocabulary quiz is also provided (Appendix 5), and other formative assessments are written in throughout the unit, such as journal entries and small group projects. The summative assessment is not detailed, however. The final narrative essay, along with a test that covers details of the plot, questions about literary elements, and selected vocabulary would make an adequate summative assessment.

A time length is also not provided for the unit, although there is more than enough material for three weeks to a month of instruction. The first lesson is outlined more explicitly to show specific strategies for introducing the novel. After that, instructions are meant to be a quick reference and are not necessarily a comprehensive lesson plan.

## **Conclusion**

Secondary ESL education needs a curriculum that both addresses students' emerging language acquisition and challenges their critical thinking skills. Students at the upper levels of proficiency need to be building the comprehension and expression skills they would need for the regular classroom and for college. To accomplish this, secondary ESL teachers simply cannot conduct classes that are long on grammar and vocabulary lists and short on authentic reading, writing, and discussion tasks. ESL teachers

must know how to select appropriate literature and set up higher-order, engaging writing and discussion tasks. They must also be sensitive to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students, incorporating their languages and cultures into the classroom, and they should also know theories of language acquisition. However, all teachers cannot be expected to produce or locate almost all of their own instructional materials; districts must acquire appropriate literature for teachers. In addition, ESL teachers should not be expected to individually determine their own curriculum guides, especially when the recommended textbooks are not being used. Giving teachers that degree of latitude does not move towards ensuring equity or best practices. Rather, it ensures greater inequity across classrooms and is likely to produce many ESL classrooms where there seems to be nothing to do of any importance. The standards documents are designed to promote instructional quality and equity, but they fall far short of that goal if they only address the skills students are to learn and do not explicitly provide suggestions as to what is to be taught. If a clear curriculum is to be provided by the district (including standards, student performance indicators, a scope and sequence, and a curriculum guide), the district must secure teacher input and involvement at all levels of the authoring process. Most importantly, there must be buy-in from all ESL teachers and sufficient professional development to make the documents known and understood by teachers. If all of these elements of curriculum planning and teacher implementation come together, higher achievement of secondary ESL students would result.

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