TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD STUDENTS IN ESL

by Mary Anne Schmidt

The primary aim of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) is to give students a linguistic foundation for successful inclusion in mainstream classrooms. This case summarizes the dilemmas confronting Sarah Townsend, an ESL teacher at Hawthorne Jr. High, and describes her efforts to get ESL students fully incorporated into classrooms as accepted participants. While the case is based on interviews with Sarah and her faculty peers, some of the information is also derived from the author's observations. Part A presents background information about Hawthorne and about Sarah as well as different teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward the students in ESL. Part B describes the attitudes of two groups of teachers toward the ESL program—those who did not want an ESL program and those who thought the program should be self-contained. Part C describes a group of teachers who were somewhat receptive to working with Sarah to accommodate ESL students in their classes, but saw it as a struggle.

Part A

Hawthorne is located in a highly diverse, working class neighborhood. About 20% of the school's population is non-English or limited English speaking. ESL students attending Hawthorne live within the school's boundaries; no students are bused into the program. Classes in ESL were initiated in the school district about five years ago, so the program at Hawthorne is fairly new. Mechanisms for identifying, testing, and providing services for the students are still being developed. The school district is currently being audited by the Office of Civil Rights, so Hawthorne is under pressure to correct any problems in its ESL program.

Sarah began her career as a social worker in a small school district in the Midwest. She worked mainly with children with learning disabilities and emotional problems. After five years, she moved to the West coast and earned her teaching certificate in elementary education. There, she taught in a bilingual setting; instruction was in Spanish, with ESL taught three times per week. When she moved to her present location, Sarah started teaching ESL classes, which emphasize learning English rather than retaining the student's native language. Sarah finds that her various professional experiences have helped in dealing with diverse student populations.

When Sarah first arrived at Hawthorne over a year ago, there was no full-time ESL teacher. Students wandered in the halls and were tutored by untrained college students. Sarah organized ESL classes in science, social studies, and English. Students currently attend a maximum of four ESL classes per day; the remaining three periods must be in mainstream classrooms. This year, each ESL class averages about ten students, with 34 students in all who are registered in the program. Because families change jobs frequently or move due to rent increases, Sarah's program experiences a 50% turn-over rate each year. Sarah estimates that she serves only 75% of the eligible students.

This year's ESL program consists entirely of students who were Mexican American or who were recent immigrants from Mexico. Since students in an ESL setting usually represent
disrespectful. They should just be put into regular classes and treated like everyone else.

Ms. Ryland observes that some ESL students try harder than others to succeed:

A student from Poland, who had attended a Catholic school in his native country, moved into the school two years ago. When he began taking classes in the ESL program, he noticed how similar English is to the Latin he had taken in the Polish school. After a year, he started speaking English fluently. Now he's enrolled in the Honors Program. Teachers don't mind this kind of ESL student. It's the ones that don't try to learn that we object to.

Along with Mr. Haynes, Pat believes that ESL students belong in regular classes and shouldn't be "pampered" with special programs. When asked how they would handle immersion students in their classes, both teachers replied that they would probably never see them since they only teach honors classes.

At the other end of the spectrum are faculty members who want ESL students segregated in a self-contained unit. Kathryn Larsen, the Special Education teacher at Hawthorne, is one of these. She has three students in her cluster unit who also attend Sarah's classes. Ms. Larsen has consulted with Sarah several times about providing appropriate material for the ESL students, but, according to Sarah, she is reluctant to reciprocate with information about how Sarah can deal with the behavioral disorders she encounters. Kathryn explains her attitude as follows:

I'm not sure you want to know how I feel about ESL. I occasionally consult with Sarah to get materials my students can understand. But I don't see the need to help her because I'm not sure her program is useful in its present form. Yes, we need more ESL classes because these students aren't receiving adequate service; but mainstreaming ESL students isn't effective. Non-natives can't learn English in school because they have no English skills in the first place. Besides, the students stuff and goof off in class when they don't understand. They should then be in their own class the entire day. After they can speak well, students should be put in regular academic classes full-time.

We need to work with the home environment as well. Most of these kids come from dysfunctional, illiterate homes with non-supportive parents, and that translates into absenteeism, poor performance, and possible gang involvement. Students should also be taught English with their parents after school, using bilingual textbooks and materials.

Sarah reports that other teachers actively attempt to get ESL students out of their classrooms. She reports that teachers make fun of the students' accents, refuse to allow them to speak Spanish, accuse them of cheating, and complain to the administration about their behavior problems. Sarah does acknowledge that ESL students can be challenging, but she is sympathetic to them when they're in classes where teachers do not want them and are unwilling to make any accommodations:
I'm frustrated with several aspects of teaching ESL students. The success of students in my class depends on their motivation. Some of the students really try -- they participate in class and do their homework. I won't neglect a student who will work. Others don't bring anything to class and do nothing, no matter what I try. They have a high detention rate because of tardies, absences, and behavior problems. I can tell that some students understand what's going on, but they manipulate the system. They won't do the work if they can get other students to do it for them. You have to look at ESL students as individuals, but generally they try to get away with not understanding, even though they do.

Jolene McKendrick is a veteran teacher at Hawthorne. She currently has several ESL students in her social studies class called "Single Living":

I don't mind having ESL students in my classes. That's a good thing since many of them end up here because I don't have what's considered a strictly "academic" curriculum. I set up my classes so that I can give a lot of individual help to those who need it. I pair up English speakers with non-English speakers so they can help each other. I also let the students work in groups. This can be hard on the students who want to work. The ESL students get pretty noisy when they're together. That's a little uncomfortable for me, but if I don't let them work together, they don't work much at all. They usually want one student to do the work, then they'll copy from that paper. I don't grade ESL students any differently than the others. By the same token, I won't fail any student unless he or she doesn't put forth any effort.

ESL students tend to get restless when I lecture. Sometimes I think that's due to behavior disorders rather than language difficulties. I just deal with it. For me, getting material that the ESL students can understand is my biggest problem.

We need an ESL program for students to get basic English skills, but they should be mainstreamed as soon as they understand any English. But please don't put them in the system until they're ready. Ideally, ESL students would have an aid with them in the classroom like the special education students have. We also need more teachers for ESL--Sarah is expected to do too much by herself. I know we need to find a way to educate ESL students and get them into regular classrooms, but the current programs seem pretty ineffective the way they're carried out.

Perhaps Annie Fletcher is the most successful example of how ESL students can be included in a mainstream classroom. Ms. Fletcher teaches reading and English:

I cut ESL students a lot of slack. I let them work with students who speak their language. My curriculum is oriented around projects that involve a variety of successful outcomes. I try to make my classroom a safe place to learn. I also give students a break on their grades when they're trying to achieve. For example, if a student is close to monolingual and earns a "D" in my class, I'll usually give him or her a "B." As students become more proficient in English, I determine their