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
diverse nationalities and languages, this situation is atypical. The majority of Sarah's students this year have difficulty reading and writing in their native language as well as in English. As Sarah states:

The majority of students have come from situations where they have not been in school full time. As a result, their academic skills are not strong, even in Spanish. When these students are asked to do grade level work in English, the situation is ripe for failure. Most teachers, however, don't even realize that the students can't read because they assume that at this age students can read. There is a certain amount of hiding [the students] do because they don't want to be thought of as dumb.

Sarah also describes the students this year as unfamiliar with the procedures and expectations of the school's culture. Because copying another student's paper isn't prohibited in the cultures of many of the ESL students, she said, one person will often do the class work and pass it around. Students do not view their actions as cheating, although that is how the school culture interprets it. Teachers also complain because the students' behavior isn't "age appropriate"; for example, teachers complain that the students have difficulty remaining in their seats or concentrating for more than a few minutes.

Sarah notes that since all the students in the ESL program this year speak Spanish, they have formed a strong group identity. They find it difficult to relate to people who don't speak their language. Sometimes it feels like a betrayal to speak English or to like someone who hasn't learned their language. Feelings of alienation and discrimination in mainstream classes exacerbate the group dynamics. Because the students feel most comfortable in the ESL classes, they resist full inclusion, according to Sarah, even to the point of purposefully failing exit tests from the program.

Part B

Mainstream teachers have widely varying opinions about what to do with ESL students. On one end of the spectrum, teachers think the ESL program is totally unwarranted. Two teachers that think students should be immersed in mainstream classes without any accommodation are Ed Haynes and Pat Ryland. Although neither one has students from Sarah's program in their classes, they strongly believe that the ESL program is detrimental to second language students. Mr. Haynes asserts the following:

These students should be immersed in English so they are forced to learn it. Letting them speak too much Spanish means the students won't work in English. ESL students shouldn't be allowed to speak Spanish in school at all, even in the halls. I think ESL students understand and speak more English than they admit. Once I was in the hall during class time and came across a group of ESL students talking to some other students. I heard these kids speaking in English. But when I asked everyone which class they belonged in, the Spanish speakers pretended they didn't understand me and ran off laughing. These kids are getting special breaks because they pretend they don't understand English. Then they're
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 sluff 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:
If I were put in a class where they were speaking a language I didn't understand and there were no clues to help me understand it, I would tune out, go to sleep, write letters, or see what kind of entertainment I could create for myself in the classroom. That's what happens in many of the classrooms where the students don't understand English.

Even students who understand English, but who resent the class or resent the teacher tend to be troublemakers and get into all sorts of things. They feel that the teacher is picking on them and they end up with a lot of referrals to the office for behavior, a lot of detentions, and often are suspended or excluded from the school. Even a student who's really motivated and wants to do well has to struggle very hard to be successful. There isn't enough support in the other classes for them; they really have to put in the other effort if they want the success.

These teachers have made Sarah's professional life more difficult. Last year, they persuaded the administration to move the ESL students to a smaller room with no windows. They also pressured the administration to take ESL students out of the mainstream classes and keep them with Sarah all day. Sarah reminded the administration that it was unlawful to discriminate against ESL students through inadequate facilities or limited opportunities. Faced with the legal ramifications of their actions, the administration restored Sarah's classroom and suspended plans to segregate ESL students. However, Sarah's forceful stand made her political enemies on the faculty.

Part C

Three teachers on Hawthorne's faculty are receptive to mainstreaming ESL students and have included them in classes with varying degrees of success. Eileen Campbell, who teaches English, shared the following observations:

I try a lot of different things to help ESL students in my class. First of all, I talk to Sarah to find out what I can expect of a particular student. Then, for example, I will let a student do his or her book report in Spanish. Sarah grades it since I don't speak Spanish, and I put the grade in with the others. I like to take advantage of the diversity of my classes. I let the students tell about the countries they come from. Sometimes the other students make fun of their accents, but I won't allow that. I also come from a different country, so I know what it's like to speak differently from the majority.

Sadly, I think hiding behind the ESL program becomes like a game. I'm not sure it's helpful to treat the students differently. I wouldn't do away with the program - especially with monolinguals — but maybe we've swung the pendulum too far in order to avoid lawsuits. Students seem to know all the ways to get something for nothing. I think there needs to be stricter guidelines for mainstreaming these students. In the long run, they'll have an advantage by being bilingual speakers.
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 can 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
grade accordingly.

I recognize that most ESL students come from the lowest socioeconomic class, and therefore lack some of the advantages available to other students. Many of them have had few previous educational experiences, either because of a scarcity of money to send them to school or because they have had to quit school to find a job and help support the family. When you're illiterate in both a native language and in the school culture, you lack many of the skills that would make learning a second language easier.

When Sarah first came to Hawthorne, I questioned her about her curriculum and methodology. I was concerned because there wasn't a good program for the ESL students, and they were really suffering. Sarah knows what she's doing, and I support her efforts in the school. Of course, each student determines his or her ultimate success. Students who just don't care won't succeed in any program; but those who are motivated will benefit from this ESL program.

Because of the initial chaos in the ESL program, teachers had originally refused to discuss ESL issues or consider ways to better accommodate ESL students in their classrooms. Now that the program is more ordered, teachers come to Sarah for help. Some are looking for bilingual materials that ESL students can complete during their class. Others want information about specific students. A few ask for suggestions that will include ESL students in a more active learning. As Sarah explains:

It would have been impossible to come in as a new person and tell teachers what to do because it would not have been received well. When they saw that the program was better organized and that students were under control, some became more willing to talk about the students and to seek some help with teaching them.

Now, giving suggestions is easier to do because the teachers know me better and they're more familiar with what's happening in the ESL class. Many teachers have seen a lot of progress in their students, so they're more open to looking at how they can be more helpful as well.