

“Reflections” is a forum for the voices, opinions, advice, and anecdotes of ESL professionals. Please send submissions to the column editor, Marisa Aiello, at columns@idiom.nystesol.org.

A Reflection on Two Teaching Models for Meeting the New CR154 Mandates by Barbara Suter

I recently attended the LI ESOL mini-conference The Changing Landscape of Teaching ENL Learners to Learn. This conference was specifically about how ENL (English as a new language) and classroom teachers are responding to the CR Part 154 amendments, which now require a “push in” model for ENL students. The two presentations I attended at the conference seemed diametrically opposed in their fundamental understanding of best practices for teaching ENL students.

Integrating the ENLs

In the first workshop, both presenters held doctorates—one has long-term experience in special education, and the other is chair of ESL and social studies. Together, they had conducted a district-wide workshop introducing the new requirements; next, they had visited the classrooms participating in their integrated-classroom model; finally, they had held a follow-up workshop.

Although they offered five teaching models for collaboration, they preferred three: (a) dividing the students into three groups that would rotate during a class period; (b) separating the ENL and native English-speaking students while teaching the same curriculum; (c) separating the ENL students from the native speakers to focus on a lesson more relevant to the ESL students’ needs.

The presenters believe that the smaller the groups within the integrated class, the more intense the instruction would be. They dismiss distractibility as a concern: “It’s the teachers who mind the commotion, not the students,” they stated.

There was no mention that language learning occurs in stages and that progress is highly individual, or that intensive scaffolding and focused academic-language instruction are essential for comprehension. I was left feeling that research-based instructional strategies for ENL learners were simply disregarded. My suspicion, shared by several ESL teachers I spoke with, is that many ENL learners were perhaps “faking” their way through these classes . . . a talent for survival they acquire quickly.

As an aspect of their experimental workshop, however, during the classroom-visit phase of their experiment, the presenters noted that they had encountered many surprising variations on their proposed co-teaching models. They found these to be learning opportunities for the district, for the teachers involved in these arrangements, and for themselves.

Separating the ENLs

The second workshop was presented by an experienced high school ESL teacher. She proposed a pilot plan to her district for the new ENL directives that insisted the model be put into effect for two years before it could be evaluated. Her proposed interdisciplinary Global Studies-Language Arts class for ENL students required two years of continuity in staffing and scheduling. The ENL students are in a separate class taught collaboratively by her as the language arts specialist and a global studies teacher interested in working with ENL students.

She insisted on block scheduling because she believes that longer periods would better serve the interests of the ENL learners.

Because the presenter was reluctant to ask for additional time in her teaching load for collaboration, she and her colleague resorted to a lot of texting, emailing, and using personal time planning their lessons. Their proposal consists of one double-period language-arts class, one double-period social studies class, and two mid-week single-period LA/SS classes. This arrangement allows the teacher to spend more time with her students scaffolding the curriculum while attending to their language development.

Without native English speakers in the room, she feels ENL learners are less shy about speaking. The double-period social studies class allows her to co-teach as needed to explain concepts that might be challenging for the ENL students. The mid-week single-period classes are devoted to quizzes.

I asked the presenter if she had been exhausted by her efforts to create the model, seek its approval, and oversee its implementation. She responded, “The kids are so wonderful, I’m willing to do whatever it takes to help them.” When asked how well she thought they would do on the Global Studies Regents, she replied, “Honestly, we are aiming for a passing grade to get them on to the next area of the curriculum. That is the best we can hope for, given the current constraints.”

I was curious about how the ENL students could be in a self-contained class when the new regulations call for an “integrated ENL” model. She responded that there is no specific mandate to integrate students; she is, instead, integrating the curriculum.

Summary

All the presenters are doing the best they can to meet the new requirements. All are highly experienced educators. All have created models to better help ENL students to meet the demands of the curriculum. All are committed to success. As an ESL teacher, however, I couldn’t help favoring the latter plan. It includes the best practices of teaching ENL students: “affective filters”; second-language-acquisition stages; extended class time; and the right to be taught by a qualified ESL instructor. All of that matters, as it should.

Barbara Suter is a retired ESL teacher who taught Grades 1–5 in East Meadow and developmental writing classes at Suffolk Community College for close to twenty-five years. An active member of NYS TESOL, she is a consultant for the Long Island Writing Project, blogs occasionally for LIWP Voices, and is a weekly blogger for Two Writing Teachers, writing about educational matters and personal observations. <barbarasut@icloud.com>