

## New Dialogues in Mainstream/ ESL Teacher Collaboration

- The purpose of this article is to identify some of the social, instructional, and administrative processes that both marginalize and enhance collaboration between ESL teachers and mainstream instructors and administrators. The article documents the verbal and written interactions between one ESL teacher and twelve mainstream instructors and administrators within an elementary school “pull-out” ESL program. Its findings reveal that the ESL teacher operates as a “marginal” member of many of the social, instructional, and administrative events within the school. The implications for practice suggest opening new dialogues between ESL and mainstream teachers that include and dignify the expertise of the ESL teacher in faculty, department, and committee meetings.

Problems regarding collaboration with mainstream faculty and administrators are familiar to many ESL teachers and have been documented in the literature (Teemant, Berhnhardt & Rodríguez-Muñoz, 1997). The unique demands placed on “pull-out” ESL instructors, however, deserve special attention. Unlike ESL teachers who work in self-contained classrooms, pull-out ESL teachers are specialists whose students spend the majority of their time in mainstream classrooms. Depending upon grade level and upon the particular circumstances within their districts, these teachers may face a variety of challenges. Some may shuttle from school to school and may not even be assigned a permanent classroom. Others may teach students whose grade levels range from elementary to senior high and thus must offer supplementary content instruction in a number of areas and at a variety of levels. All of these challenges are only made more difficult by

the limited amount of time most pull-out ESL teachers have been allotted to spend with their students.

To function effectively as ESL instructors, pull-out ESL teachers must be able to establish collaborative relationships with mainstream teachers and administrators. Establishing regular times to meet with mainstream instructors, providing in-service workshops, and participating in mainstream meetings are just some of the activities intended to bridge the gap between the limited training in ESL pedagogy mainstream instructors may have and the specialized instruction ESL students require. The purpose of this article is to explore some of the problems that pull-out ESL teachers have encountered when initiating these activities and to suggest some solutions to the problems of ESL/mainstream instructor collaboration in general.

Data drawn from the efforts of one elementary school pull-out ESL teacher to establish collaborative relationships with the mainstream faculty and administration are examined and reveal the marginal role of ESL teachers in the mainstream. A discussion of the implications this may have on instruction of ESL students and program services follows and is accompanied by recommendations for how all ESL teachers, whether working in a pull-out program or not, can more effectively collaborate with the mainstream.

### **ESL Instruction in Coal Creek**

Coal Creek School District (the names of all places and people are pseudonyms) began offering services for ESL students in 1992, four years before Mrs. Wordsworth was hired. Because the district was unable to find a certified ESL instructor to head the program, a stream of instructors who had never received formal training in ESL pedagogy taught the approximately 35 ESL students each year at Smith Elementary and Jacob Senior High. The teachers were part-time, certified in different areas, and, without exception, left after a few years when an opportunity opened in their mainstream discipline. Indeed, at least two members of the mainstream faculty at Smith Elementary, the focus of data collection for this article, found their way into their position via the ESL teaching route.

In their wake, they left a few English grammar books intended for native speakers, a songbook, some flash cards, and some board games for Mrs. Wordsworth. As documents describing the program either for the parents or for the mainstream faculty and administrators were outdated or simply missing, Mrs. Wordsworth surmised that only minimal communication between the past ESL teachers, the mainstream faculty and administrators, and the parents took place. Student files were present as the state required, but objectives for ESL instruction had not been com-

pleted. Other documents indicated that assessment had relied on the past ESL teachers' judgments of oral and written work exclusively, without the aid of standardized tests.

Despite the program's underdeveloped resources, Mrs. Wordsworth initially viewed her position with optimism. She was, after all, the first certified ESL teacher in the district with the expertise to create a high quality program. She set two goals for her first year. First, she would create proper testing and instructional materials for her students. The grammar books intended for native speakers and the flashcards would not suffice. Instead, she would have to create sophisticated materials aimed at developmentally appropriate instruction and the special needs of ESL students. Next, she would increase communication with the mainstream faculty and administrators by providing in-service training, joining mainstream committees, and establishing regular times to meet. She hoped that greater awareness on the part of the mainstream instructors and administration concerning the issues central to ESL students' lives would emerge from this.

Four years after beginning her position in Coal Creek, Mrs. Wordsworth had not accomplished either of her goals. She described herself as the "district nemesis" and did not know why her efforts had failed. While she had not given up hope for developing a thriving program, she had taken the attitude that there was little more that she could do to help. I joined her as a researcher at this stage and spent two years analyzing her verbal and written interactions with twelve mainstream instructors and school administrators.

Through observations and interviews, I hoped to learn not only why she had failed in her efforts to collaborate with the mainstream faculty but also the nature of her interactions. I formed two questions to guide my research: First, "What was the nature of her conversations/interactions with the mainstream faculty and administration?" Second, "What could be learned from her experience that would help others to facilitate more effective collaborative efforts with the mainstream?" In time, the answers to these questions provided a composite of the connection between one ESL teacher and a mainstream faculty, and regularities surfaced that can be formed into a theory.

### **Collaborating from the sidelines**

I investigated the first question by conducting observations of Mrs. Wordsworth's interactions with mainstream instructors and follow-up interviews with both parties. When it was not possible to observe interactions, Mrs. Wordsworth took notes and reported her experiences during a weekly taped interview. In time, the findings revealed an ESL teacher who was not

the “district nemesis” or “outcast” as she had once described herself. Instead, a more complicated picture emerged. On one hand, she was a faculty member, i.e., a specialist that many of the mainstream instructors came to for advice regarding the instruction of the ESL students in their classes. It was not unusual to see her interact with three or four teachers a day, dispensing advice on the language and social development of various ESL students. When the program at Smith was reviewed by the state, the district administrators and the principal relied on her to represent the program. She explained how testing, finances, and curriculum were organized within the program. She held their respect.

On the other hand, there was also evidence to support her claim of being an outsider in the mainstream community. A journal she kept of her interactions with the mainstream faculty recorded the fact that she had never once succeeded in planning a meeting with a mainstream instructor, despite her efforts to do so. All of her communication took place, in her own words, “on the run or in between classes.” She met teachers in the halls, during recesses, or at lunch. She was not a part of the parent or curriculum committees, nor was she a part of the grade level meetings. In fact, because of conflicting schedules generated from working at two different schools, she could not attend most faculty meetings at Smith. When she did attempt to join one of these groups, serve on a committee, or establish a path towards collaboration with the mainstream, it was often met with resistance, indifference, and even anger.

Below are just two examples of her efforts to join the mainstream community. The first occurred between the district testing coordinator and Mrs. Wordsworth. The discussion concerned whether or not two ESL students’ scores would be included in the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), the state’s testing reports. Teachers on the committee resisted the idea, arguing that it would lower the district’s overall scores and not give an accurate measure of the native English speaking students’ achievement. Mrs. Wordsworth believed that the ESL students’ scores represented the diversity of the district and should be included. Moreover, the students were required to take the exam. Both had attended school in the United States for more than one year, and both had advanced beyond level one in the ESL program.

The committee later met privately to resolve the issue, but it was not until two days later that Mrs. Wordsworth learned of this meeting during the course of a short conversation with the testing coordinator. While the testing coordinator eventually included the scores of the ESL students, his apathy towards Mrs. Wordsworth’s efforts is apparent:

- Mrs. Wordsworth: You know, we need to think about the assessment.
- Testing Coordinator: Oh, (pause) we already had a meeting and went over everything.
- Mrs. Wordsworth: When was that?
- Testing Coordinator: A couple of days ago
- Mrs. Wordsworth: O.K. Could I get the materials I need then, for the ESL students?
- Testing Coordinator: Well, I only have part of the copy. Maybe you could get the rest from one of the English teachers.
- Mrs. Wordsworth: O.K. What about the accommodation plan for the ESL students? How do you want to set that up?
- Testing Coordinator: Accommodation plan, I don't care. You just take the tests and do whatever you want.

The second example is taken from a discussion following an in-service meeting in which Mrs. Wordsworth explained how to use a large set of materials she had developed for the mainstream instructors to use with ESL students in the mainstream classroom.

- Mrs. Wordsworth: I hope you enjoyed the recent in-service.
- Dr. Billings: Well, it was fine, but I hope you don't expect me to do your job now.

Despite the fact that there were enough materials to use for every grade and all subjects, a sign-up sheet kept next to the cabinet where the materials were stored indicated that in three years no one ever checked out any of the materials. Eventually, the materials were thrown out.

While these are only a few examples of how Mrs. Wordsworth's efforts were thwarted by the mainstream, they represent what for many pull-out ESL teachers is becoming an increasingly common experience. Like Mrs. Wordsworth, such teachers are often given membership in mainstream discussions and meetings for their specialized knowledge of the issues in ESL students' lives, yet are separated from the mainstream by their unique instructional interests, students, and programmatic demands. They find themselves interacting as neither members nor outcasts of the mainstream. Somewhere in the middle, they remain on the sidelines when it comes to being able to affect the instruction of their own students.

For Mrs. Wordsworth, the message here is clear. While she was given the authority to answer the questions of state officials evaluating the program, grants and testing decisions were quickly taken from her control.

Mainstream instructors came to her for her unique knowledge of second language acquisition, yet they refused to establish formal collaborative efforts. All meetings were spontaneous and in response to a problem raised by the mainstream faculty. When she attempted to establish membership on committees and in special groups, she was brushed off despite the direct bearing her presence and input would have had on the instruction of the ESL students.

The “failure to belong fully to a positive reference group,” operating in the role of neither member nor outcast in a reference group (in this case the mainstream) has been termed social marginality (Billson, 1982, p. 185). The specific features of this marginality were identified by Simmel (1950), who used the concept of the “stranger” to describe an individual who is neither a member nor an outcast of the reference group. One’s identity as a stranger rests upon both one’s presence and involvement with the reference group as well as one’s independence and absence from it. Later, the concept of marginalization was expanded and used to describe social and academic forces in the lives of ESL students (Fu, 1995; Hakuta, Ferdman & Diaz, 1987; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Trueba, 1984), programs (Grey, 1991) and teachers (Case, 1998).

The source of Mrs. Wordsworth’s marginal position and of other ESL teachers working in similar circumstances stems from the local politics surrounding ESL programs. The district’s decision to begin pull-out ESL instruction without certified instructors left Mrs. Wordsworth not only with an underdeveloped program but also with a broken connection to the mainstream. The classic problems associated with pull-out ESL instruction thus emerged.

As students were taken from their mainstream classrooms for ESL instruction, their time in the mainstream classroom came to be viewed as a waiting period for language proficiency to emerge. ESL instruction seemed of little importance. Mainstream instructors would bring Mrs. Wordsworth their questions, concerns, and complaints about the ESL students, but they would not agree to regularly scheduled meetings. They would invite her to join various committees, but prevent her from participating meaningfully. Like Simmel’s (1950) stranger, Mrs. Wordsworth worked on the margins of membership in the mainstream faculty and on the sidelines of her students’ instruction.

### **Implications for Practice**

After examining Mrs. Wordsworth’s attempts to coordinate instructional activities with the mainstream, what can be learned that will assist other ESL teachers? While Mrs. Wordsworth’s experiences illustrate how

the forces of partial membership shape the efforts of ESL teachers to collaborate with the mainstream, they also raise the question as to how ESL teachers can begin and maintain successful collaboration. The solution has two parts.

First, whether ESL teachers are just beginning a position and hoping to build new collaborative relationships with the mainstream or have worked in the same building for many years and would like to engage with their current situation more productively, it is important for these teachers to examine the local politics surrounding ESL instruction within their schools and to develop informed positions. Taking a lesson from Mrs. Wordsworth's experience, ESL teachers should investigate how the pull-out program began and examine the work of past ESL teachers, as well as current and past efforts on the part of their schools to form relations with parents and to secure ESL grants and funding. Second, ESL teachers should survey current concerns raised by mainstream instructors and administrators, and a timely response to the issues raised should follow in the form of a report describing recent findings.

Learning about the origins of the pull-out program is a way to gain information that can inform and facilitate the planning of future in-services, planned meetings, and informal discussions with mainstream instructors and administrators. The impetus for such planned discussions should be the questions and concerns generated by the mainstream instructors and administrators' exploration of the program. Presentation of the data gathered from such investigation and follow-up suggestions on the part of the ESL teacher may serve to break the ice with mainstream instructors or administrators who may be reluctant to meet. In the first meeting, discuss the results of the data collection and respond to any questions. If the data and the local circumstances within the school warrant it, suggest future meetings or the formation of special committees to discuss instructional issues.

Once planned discussions have begun, there are two ground rules that should be established. First, in order to eliminate marginalizing patterns of communication such as those witnessed in the dialogues between Mrs. Wordsworth and the mainstream community, establish clear and productive purposes for exchange. Depending upon the needs of the individual program and teacher, flexible agendas that include both student and curricular concerns might be established. Additionally, each meeting should include a period of time for mainstream teachers to raise questions about the instruction of ESL students, to share ideas, and to develop respectful working relationships with ESL instructors.

Throughout the meeting, find ways in which everyone can participate. Draw out reticent teachers with open-ended questions, encouraging them to speak from their own experiences. This will open a forum on ESL

instruction as well as foster a shared sense of ownership on the topic. Finally, conduct discussions away from noisy halls or lunchrooms and in quiet, environments that dignify the important work that must be done. Holding important discussions about the business of ESL instruction in the hallway, as Mrs. Wordsworth had to do, diminishes the dignity and the importance of such work.

Finally, it is important to remember that Mrs. Wordsworth's experiences are only part of a much larger challenge concerning successful collaboration between ESL and mainstream teachers. Further suggestions on how to meet this challenge will emerge as ESL teachers from a variety of programs begin to investigate the social and political dynamics that shape ESL instruction at their particular schools. Until then, the lessons learned by Mrs. Wordsworth are a call for all of us to rewrite the dialogues between ESL and mainstream instructors in ways that will result in relationships that are positive, collaborative, and mutually empowering.

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