

## CHAPTER 1



# How Can a Good Understanding of English Learning Transform Your School?

“**W**hy can’t you just call it ‘ESL’ like everyone else?” complained a teacher in a professional development seminar on teaching English language learners, reacting to my abundant use of the acronym “TESOL.” Another teacher piped up, “Well, in our school we call it ELL. I agree—there are too many acronyms, and I don’t understand why we can’t all just use the same one. It would be a lot less confusing.” I am all for reducing confusion, so I explained to these teachers that TESOL<sup>1</sup> (*teaching* English to speakers of other languages) is what teachers do, and an ELL (*English language learner*) is a **student**. ESL (*English* as a second language) is what the student learns—**English**. I even dared to share a new acronym, ESOL (*English* for speakers of other languages), as an alternative to *ESL*, because for many ELLs, English is a third or fourth, not a second, language

Still, I left that seminar feeling uneasy, knowing that I had not adequately addressed the true pressing question: Why does it matter? Are we just learning terminology for the sake of knowing all the right terms in the alphabet soup of TESOL? No. The lack of appropriate, common language for discussing the needs of ELLs is simply a manifestation of the tremendous challenges in educating this exploding population in our schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), around 10% of American school children are ELLs, and this percentage is growing each year. In large cities, this number rises to nearly 17%. About half of all immigrants are limited in English proficiency,

<sup>1</sup>The term “TESOL” also means “Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages” when used to refer to TESOL International Association.

according to the Migration Policy Institute (Zong & Batalova, 2015), and 8% of the total U.S. population over age 5 is classified as limited English proficient (LEP). But the current statistics aren't even the most compelling. Rather, it is the predicted growth in this population that really gives us pause: according to some predictions, ELLs will comprise 50% of the American school population in another 25 years.

And the growth in numbers is only a part of the picture. There is also increasing diversity in the ELL population. In many schools, ELLs now represent a dozen or more native languages and cultures, and virtually every major global region. And the diversity does not end with language and geography. Many schools have among their ELL populations both students coming from world-class preparatory schools in their home countries and those coming from refugee camps, with very little formal education.

Given these realities, it is perhaps not surprising that teachers often place “instruction of ELLs” as their number one professional development need. In some school districts in Pennsylvania, it is rated as twice as urgent as other training needs (Burchard, Dormer, & Fisler, 2015). And Pennsylvania is not unique. (See, for example, the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011, for more on the growing number of ELLs.) Throughout the United States and around the world, teachers are asking the question: How do I teach students who are not yet proficient in English?

A clear mandate from teachers for more and better preparation is not the only reason a school leader might want to read a book like this one. The lack of understanding of ELLs, of multilingualism, and of multiculturalism can have damaging consequences—not only for the teachers and students involved, but for the school. For example, what happens when uninformed teachers make statements or engage in actions that are perceived as threatening or discriminatory to immigrant families or international students? And what is the result of ELLs spending a majority of their school time in high stress conditions due to a pervasive lack of understanding of the realities of language acquisition? And what about the potential for linguistic, racial, and ethnic divisions in schools when a culture embracing diversity is not fostered? Beyond our need and desire to truly *educate* ELLs lies the very real potential for legal and safety problems if we do not. But beyond legal, safety, and compliance issues, we find the most compelling reason for embracing the ELLs in our schools: the richness that they bring. The linguistic skills, diverse life experiences, and multicultural perspectives that ELLs bring to our schools are priceless, as we will see throughout the remainder of this chapter and book.

This chapter introduces three key steps that school leaders can take to ensure that the needs of teachers, ELLs, and indeed all learners are well met in their schools: 1) fostering a school culture that values and welcomes multiple languages and cultures; 2) ensuring that all teachers have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet the needs of ELLs, especially given changing teacher roles as a result of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS); and 3) creating school schedules conducive to meeting ELL needs.

## ■ ■ ■ Fostering a School Culture That Values and Welcomes Multiple Languages and Cultures

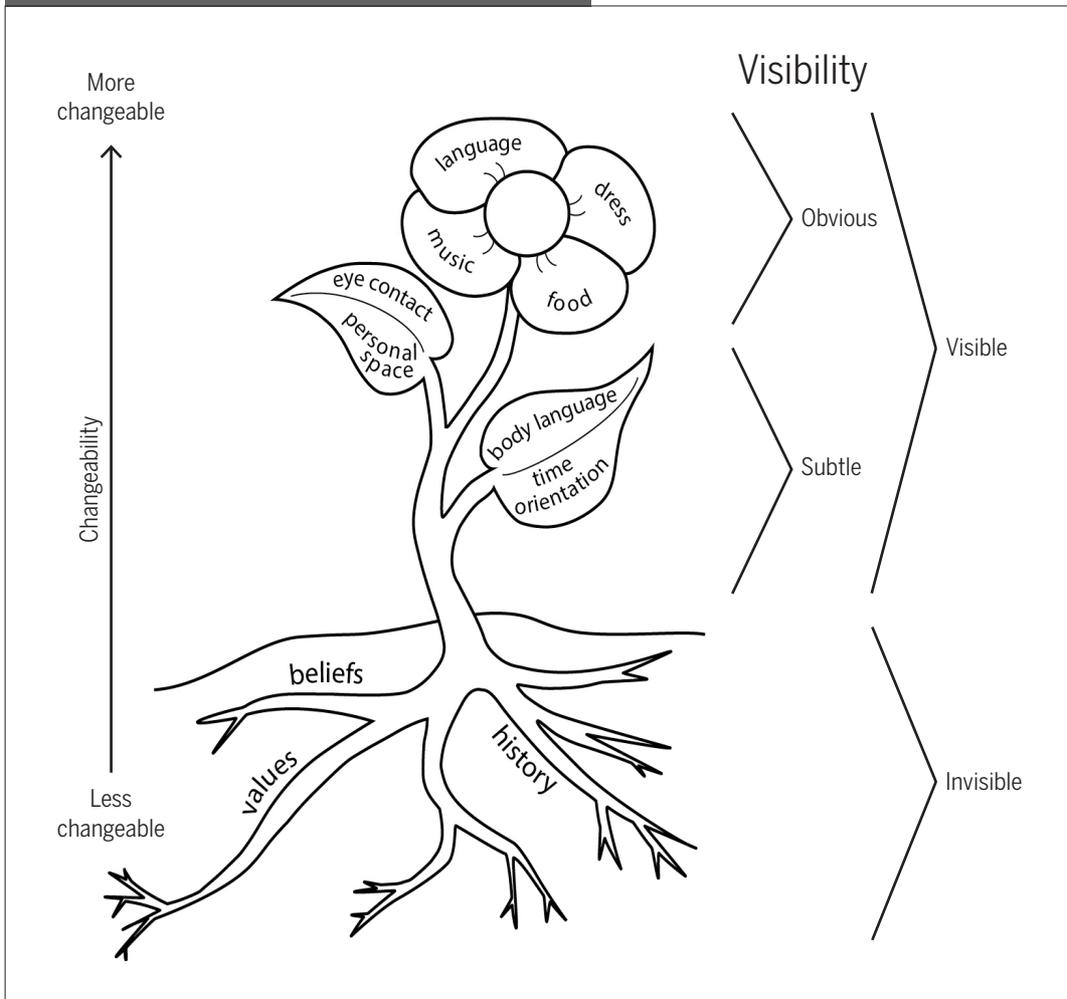
The ability to speak more than one language is something that we would all say we value. The fact that foreign language classes are a regular part of a high school curriculum affirms this value, as does the fact that foreign languages and global awareness are identified as 21st-century skills. We also know that bilingual individuals outperform monolinguals in a number of ways. However, our language practices and policies often tell a different story. They often send a strong message that only English should be used in school. Often, even foreign language students are not encouraged to use the Spanish, French, or German that they are learning inside the classroom outside the foreign language class. This view of language as a *subject* is detrimental to all language development. It encourages native-English-speaking students to disconnect their use of language in the hallways from their learning of French, or English grammar, or world literature in class. And it causes ELLs to feel that their bilingualism is not valued. Native English speakers are lauded for their baby steps in German or French, but ELLs typically do not receive the same accolades for their impressive bilingual skills.

In addition to valuing language, a school should embrace the multiple cultures within its walls. Many schools do in fact create positive opportunities for learning about food, dress, dance, and other visible cultural differences. Some schools also strive to build a global culture through maps and photos on walls, and diverse languages on bulletin boards. These are very positive steps! However, these steps only address the very obvious parts of culture.

To gain a more in-depth understanding of culture, we can envision culture as a flowering plant (see the Flower Model of Culture, Figure 1). In this model, the most obvious parts of culture are symbolized by the flower. Food, music, and dress are parts of culture that are easy to see and appreciate. Other customs and practices, represented by

the leaves in the model, are also visible, but are more subtle. These may include behaviors such as body language, timeliness, and a child not looking an adult in the eyes. Finally, the roots represent invisible parts of culture, such as values, beliefs, and history. This model also shows that the roots are the least susceptible to change, while the flower is the most susceptible. As individuals acculturate to a new environment, their language, dress, food, and other obvious parts of culture may change most quickly as they seek to fit in, and their underlying values and beliefs may not change, or may change more slowly.

**FIGURE 1. The Flower Model of Culture**



In a school environment, it may be easy to appreciate the obvious parts of culture, but more difficult to accept and understand subtle culture-driven behaviors such as standing just a little too close when conversing, failing to state opinions, or copying others' writing for an essay. Though we can certainly expect ELLs to eventually adapt to local norms, it is important to understand and accept the diverse ways in which people around the world interact and learn, with our first response always being, "I wonder if this behavior reflects culture?" rather than the gut reaction that the student is not trying to adapt, or worse—actively defying a school value or rule.

How can a school intentionally welcome multiple languages and cultures, and the students who bring them, within its walls? The following list can help to create a rich, global, welcoming environment:

1. **Provide basic professional development for all teachers on language and culture.** Teachers need to understand concepts such as surface and deep culture, and to create a "culture lens" through which ELL behaviors are viewed. Teachers also need to understand some basic concepts about language, such as the fact that bilingualism is an advantage (and that ELLs are emerging bilinguals), and the understanding that if students develop their first language, it will increase their ability to develop their second language. (See more in Chapter 4 on the positive impact of first language learning on second language learning.)
2. **Get rid of "English only" policies.** Most teachers who insist that ELLs spend a 6- or 8-hour school day all in a language that they are learning, without any breaks, have likely never tried to do this. Learning a language is mentally and physically exhausting. Students need breaks during which time they can "be themselves" and use their first language, in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Students may also sometimes need to use their first language in class, to scaffold their learning. They may have legitimate questions about words or content, and the most efficient way they know to have their questions answered is to ask a friend who speaks the same language. There are, of course, times when students use their first language inappropriately—and this does not just apply to the ELLs. Native English speakers occasionally use their first language inappropriately, as well. Make sure any bans on talking apply to everyone in the room, and not just to those who happen to be speaking in Spanish or Korean.
3. **Foster multilingualism.** Along with not demanding "English only" should come active cultivation of other languages. Encourage everyone in the school to learn greetings in all the languages represented in the school, and to use them in the hallways. Post information in multiple languages. Get the foreign language

teachers on board with encouraging the use of languages being learned outside of the classroom. For example, native-English-speaking students could be encouraged to use the foreign languages they are learning for simple exchanges such as “Excuse me” and “What time is it?” outside the foreign language classroom. Assure teachers that having a multilingual school environment will *not* reduce the ELLs’ learning of English. Rather, the increased climate of acceptance is likely to lower stress, increase participation, and increase English language acquisition.

If possible, create a multilingual section in your school media center. Allow for books and audio/visual media in other languages to be used at appropriate times. The internet can provide a multitude of language resources so that ELLs can both take a much-needed break from English learning and continue to develop their first language, and foreign language learners can further their language skills on topics of interest to them.

## ■■■ Ensuring that All Teachers are Trained, Skilled, and Empowered

Second language acquisition is a developmental process that is not specifically addressed in many teacher education programs. Some states in the United States require that all teachers take a course on meeting the needs of ELLs, but others do not (Samson & Collins, 2012). Even when teachers have had a course on meeting the needs of ELLs, there has not been clear consensus on what content should be covered in such a course (Samson & Collins, 2012). Some may focus mainly on the acculturation of the ELL to the local environment and providing accommodations in content classes while language is being learned. Some may not help teachers develop a strong understanding of how a person actually learns a new language.

General education teachers need a clear understanding of how to help ELLs acquire the English language needed to be successful in their math, science, or social studies classrooms. Some general education teachers may think teaching English is not a part of their job. However, they do actually teach English to all of their students, all the time. When presenting new content such as writing a geometry proof or constructing a lab report, they are indeed teaching students the English necessary to be successful in their class, and this English teaching can be extended to ELLs.

However, many teachers do not think of themselves as language teachers, and place the language needs of ELLs squarely on the shoulders of the TESOL professional—regardless of how much (or little) time this specialist has with each ELL. Along with actual

English language acquisition, TESOL professionals are often expected to ensure that ELLs somehow learn both the content and the accompanying academic language of any regular classes they are in—either by helping them as they “push in” to those classes or by working with them on content during “pull-out” times. (More information about push-in and pull-out models is provided in Chapter 6.) Content teachers sometimes do not understand how many new words and structures can be learned in a given time-frame, and how limited an ESOL teacher’s time is with each student. Further, they may not be aware that the ESOL teacher often must divide what precious little ESOL instructional time he or she has among students of several different language levels.

Added to the need for increased understanding about the nature and reality of second language acquisition is the fact that, in many school systems, *all* teachers’ roles and responsibilities are rapidly changing. In the United States, the recent introduction of the CCSS has prompted much discussion about how ELLs will meet the standards, and who bears the responsibility for ensuring that they do. (See, for example, Valdés, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014, and TESOL International Association’s [TESOL’s] professional paper, “Implementing the Common Core State Standards for ELs: The Changing Role of the ESL Teacher,” 2013.) While the dust is far from settled on this discussion, no one disputes the fact that if ELLs are to achieve both high English proficiency and high academic standards, they must be actively learning language in all their classes—not just ESOL class. When this understanding is paired with the understanding that language is acquired through exposure to and use of language at the appropriate level—not through submersion in incomprehensible language, all teachers can begin to understand why it takes a school to develop an English speaker. It is not the solitary job of the ESOL teacher.

How can a school leader ensure that all teachers have the skills to address the needs of ELLs, and that ESOL teachers can have maximum effectiveness?

1. **Hire well-educated TESOL professionals.** As mentioned above, the role of the ESOL teacher in many schools is rapidly changing. A recent document published by TESOL states “ESL teachers must be redefined as experts, advocates, and consultants” and “the roles of principals and administrators also need to shift to support the CCSS and ESL teachers’ new responsibilities” (TESOL, 2013, p. 9). With these changing roles, schools will be best served through the hiring of TESOL professionals, rather than simply ESOL teachers. All TESOL education programs are not created equally. (For a list of *minimal* qualifications for TESOL expertise, see the *Standards for the Recognition of Initial TESOL Programs in P–12 ESL Teacher Education*, TESOL, 2010.) Doing your homework before hiring will

eventually result in a lot less work, as you will have a TESOL professional capable of taking on leadership and training roles in the school. Take care when developing the appropriate job descriptions for the specific TESOL professional that your school needs. You have already started on this path by picking up this book.

2. **Empower your well-educated TESOL professional.** It is important to understand the ways in which the TESOL expert on staff is not like other specialists. Special educators, for example, are experts in characteristics of disabilities, specific pedagogy, and interventions that meet the needs of children with those learning characteristics. Simply not knowing the English language is not a disability, nor does it require intervention. The job of the TESOL professional on staff is to formulate individualized plans for placing each ELL in the best possible learning environment to gradually acquire the English language while continuing to learn content. And though ESOL is often viewed as a special class, like art or music, it is not an academic subject. Rather, it impacts students' learning in *all* subjects. So, knowing that the role of the TESOL professional is unlike that of other school specialists, consider well where this educator needs to have a voice and a role.

For example, the TESOL professional should be empowered and administratively supported to provide training for general education teachers and staff. He or she will also need to ensure that parents of ELLs receive orientation and regular communication, which must often occur in languages other than English. It should go without saying that the TESOL professional needs time to actually teach English to ELLs. (How much time is needed for pull-out English language teaching depends on proficiency levels and other factors. See Chapter 6 for a discussion of where ELLs at various language levels may be best served in different grades.) Finally, the TESOL professional will likely be the one administering placement and progress tests, and documenting services and progress. These are time-consuming jobs and roles. Special attention must be given to assigning manageable caseloads. This means school administrators need to keep their finger on the pulse of their growing ELL population. Keeping count of the number of ELLs in your school will help you decide when it is time to hire additional TESOL professionals.

3. **Equip all teachers who teach ELLs with skills to further language acquisition in their classes.** All teachers should be prepared to address the unique language demands of the ELLs in their classroom. (This is not to say that all ELLs should *be* in all grade-level content classrooms. For more on placement of ELLs, see Chapter 6.) Content-area teachers have unique opportunities to help ELLs see how language works when talking about real ideas. For example, an ELL might learn in math about “if-then” sentences when a teacher poses a question such

as “If a car is traveling 60 miles per hour, (then) how long will it take to travel 100 miles?” and purposefully draws attention to “if” and the optional “then.” Or, in social studies, a teacher might make the statement, “Justice Sonia Sotomayor has been on the U.S. Supreme Court since 2009.” This could be followed by a moment of private conversation with an ELL, asking, “Does this sentence mean she is still in office? Or is she out of office now?” The teacher could point to the words *has been* and *since*, explaining that these words mean it is still happening. All this would take less than 30 seconds, as the rest of the class is engaged in another short reading or task.

Why do teachers not naturally have such language-focused conversations with ELLs? I would argue that there are four reasons: 1) They don’t know enough about the English language, 2) they don’t view it as their job, 3) they are teaching ELLs with very low English levels who really should not be in their classes, and 4) they simply don’t think of it. All these factors can be addressed through intentional, focused professional development.

And who can provide this needed development? Your TESOL professional on staff. This educator is equipped to not only provide workshop or seminar-type training, but also to engage in rich collaboration with general educators. If your school day allows, provide time for content-area teachers to meet with TESOL professionals to learn more about second language acquisition, discuss the needs of certain students, and plan content-area lessons together. The TESOL professional may be able to provide appropriate scaffolds if he or she sees what the content-area teachers are teaching. In a picture-perfect scenario, encourage content-area teachers to visit ESOL pull-out sessions or, even better, invite the TESOL professional to team teach a lesson or two. As teachers interact more with each other, everyone will see an increase in ELLs’ classroom participation and overall school success.

## ■ ■ ■ Creating School Schedules and Courses Conducive to Meeting ELL Needs

All the expertise and skill in the world will fail to result in an effective program for ELLs if the school schedule does not allow ELLs to be in the classes where they can best be served. Time and again, when I ask a teacher a question such as why the Level 1 ELLs are in social studies, a content area with high language demands and requiring considerable cultural background, I am told that it is because of scheduling. “Oh, the ESL teacher isn’t available at that time” or “we can only pull them out during English class.” School scheduling can

indeed be a nightmare of a puzzle, and perhaps it is not possible to meet every learner's needs all the time. However, most educators would agree that it should still be our overarching goal: to place ELLs where they can progress best in both language and content learning. What are some ways of thinking that can help to accomplish this goal?

1. **Prioritize the TESOL professional's time with ELLs when creating the school schedule.** TESOL professionals cannot effectively teach more than one language level or age group during the same time period, in the same classroom. The problem of a wide range of levels might be partially solved by investing in general education teachers and training them to address the needs of the intermediate and advanced level students, as proposed above. This would leave the TESOL professional free to work intensively with beginning ELLs (who are sometimes, but not always, newcomers with additional settlement and acculturation needs). However, intermediate-level students do also benefit from some pull-out time with a TESOL professional, and advanced students may benefit as well. So, it is crucial to determine who needs time with the TESOL professional, and to schedule in that time as the master schedule is being created. Including both TESOL professionals and classroom teachers in creating schedules for individual ELLs can ensure that the ELL's language needs are given prime consideration, while also taking care to place the student in content classes where he or she will be motivated and successful.
2. **Realize that ELLs at different levels will need to be in or out of different content classes.** The issue of language level is such an important one that considerable time is devoted to it in Chapter 6. In this first chapter, it will suffice to say that the lower the language proficiency level of the learner, and the higher the grade, the less likely it is that the learner will be well served in a regular classroom. This is especially true for more language-dense subjects like history and literature. Because learners at different proficiency levels have such vastly different needs, it is very important *not* to create a system in which all designated ELLs in one classroom are pulled out for instruction at the same time, into the same ESOL classroom, by the same TESOL professional. It is more important to have students of the same proficiency levels, taking into consideration age and grade level, in a given ESOL classroom. Personalized learning plans are the key to effective ELL placement.
3. **Ensure that intermediate and advanced ELLs continue their language learning through sheltered content classes, or time with teachers trained in language and content learning.** Just as harmful as putting a beginning ELL in a 10th-grade

history class is pulling an advanced ELL out of that class and placing him instead in an ESOL class. The advanced ELL does indeed need specialized language learning in that history class. However, it need not be the TESOL professional's job to provide it. Rather, there could be a sheltered course (an easier English version of the course) or sheltered instruction (a teacher providing easier English for an ELL, within the regular class) for the advanced-level ELL. (Sheltered instruction is addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.)

4. **Schedule teaching blocks of sufficient duration to make language learning feasible.** A final problem found in some schools, especially at the elementary level, is very short class times. A 20-minute block is simply not enough time to make progress in an ESOL class. By the time we account for movement to and from the ESOL classroom, and some light conversation as a warm-up, the length of instructional time may be down to 10 minutes. Teaching for language acquisition should be unhurried, organic, and stress free. It is hard to make a very short class period anything other than hurried, scripted, and probably stressful.

## ■ ■ ■ Conclusion

Well, how are you feeling? Are you convinced that a good understanding of English learning can transform your school? I hope you have been inspired to read on, given your influential role in your school. Where school leaders embrace language and cultural diversity, teachers and students are likely to do the same. Where school leaders place a high priority on skill and knowledge development to meet the needs of ELLs, teachers are likely to rise to the challenge, grateful that their leader has reasonable expectations and seeks to equip them to meet those expectations. And where school leaders consider the needs of ELLs when prioritizing and scheduling, the TESOL professional can effectively do his or her job, resulting in a well-functioning, effective program. It's a tall order, but not an impossible one. Remember, the TESOL professional is a resource you can call on to help answer some of the administrative quandaries you may have. As for the TESOL alphabet soup, he or she can help with those questions as well.

The remainder of this book will equip you with the foundational understanding needed to implement these ideas. And the pay-off is huge: teacher satisfaction, globally-minded students and staff, preparedness and confidence in the face of rising numbers of ELLs, and, of course, effectively meeting the language and content needs of ELLs.



Go to [www.tesol.org/school-leaders](http://www.tesol.org/school-leaders) to access the Grab and Go links and downloads for this chapter.

## How Can a Good Understanding of English Learning Transform Your School?

1. Foster a school culture that values and welcomes multiple languages and cultures. See the **School Leaders' Professional Development Guide** in this book and online.
  - Provide training for all teachers on language and culture, and fostering multilingualism.
  - Get rid of "English only" policies.
2. Ensure that all teachers are appropriately trained and empowered. See the **School Leaders' Professional Development Guide** in this book and online.
  - Hire and empower well-educated TESOL professionals.
  - Equip all those who teach ELLs with skills to further language acquisition in their classes.
3. Create school schedules conducive to meeting ELL needs.
  - Acknowledge that ELLs at different levels will need to be in or out of different content classes. See **Table 3 in Chapter 6, Sample Placement Chart**.
  - Ensure that intermediate- and advanced-level ELLs continue their language learning through sheltered content classes, or with teachers trained in language and content learning.
  - Prioritize the TESOL professional's time when you create the school schedule.
  - Schedule teaching blocks of sufficient duration to make language learning feasible. See **Sample Schedule of an ESOL Specialist** online.

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