

A Study of the Effectiveness for the Learner of an ESOL Teacher's Support in a Year 13 Economics Class

http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/esolonline/teachers/prof_read/anne_holmes/home_e.php

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ABSTRACT

How is a second language acquired? How can ESOL teachers best support ESOL students in secondary schools? These questions remain areas for discussion.

There are many professionals who strongly believe that language is best acquired in the context of the mainstream classroom where language learning is content-based but often incidental. I have always thought that it is desirable that ESOL students are in mainstream classes wherever possible. However, if the content and language of the lesson is largely incomprehensible because it is not within the *students' zone of proximal development*, or the teacher is unable to provide sufficient language scaffolding, then the students need to be supported in some way by the ESOL teacher if they are not to become passive members of the class, or drop out of the subject altogether.

This research seeks to explore some of the current issues in second-language teaching and learning, highlight several of the problems both students and teachers experience, and document the effectiveness of ESOL teacher support in a mainstream classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Planning an effective and supportive programme for ESOL students is an often perplexing task due to the extreme diversity of students and their needs. The Ministry of Education in *ESOL Effective Provisions for International Students* (2003) advises that:

"Planning for delivering the teaching programmes to international students requires careful thought. This process should include:

- Conducting effective assessment at different points of learning
- Linking the ESOL programme to the curriculum
- **Supporting students in mainstream classes**" [my emphasis]

However, the support of such students in mainstream classes raises some interesting questions:

- In what ways should they be supported and by whom?
- How much funding should be set aside for this support?
- How effective is ESOL teacher support if that teacher has little or no knowledge of the subject?
- Should staffing and resources be concentrated on providing ESOL instruction in a withdrawal situation?
- Would it be worthwhile to provide more support in mainstream classes? What flow-on effects would there be, if any?

Jannie van Hees in the Ministry of Education's Handbook for Schools offers some solutions to these questions:

ESOL teachers, working in partnership with classroom teachers, can provide specialist assistance in planning appropriate learning activities and can help to choose learning materials. When providing support in another teacher's classroom, the ESOL teacher can promote effective language-learning approaches that will benefit others as well as ESOL students. At the same time, ESOL teachers will learn at first hand about the language demands of the different curriculum areas and the specific learning needs of ESOL students in the mainstream, which will help them to plan relevant programmes for their ESOL classes. (Ministry of Education, 1999)

Edwards documents some recent observations of the value of supporting ESOL students in a mainstream mathematics class:

"... And the unobtrusive assistance the teacher aide regularly provided by clarifying instructions and new information, reminding them about taking responsibility for making their own notes, and encouraging them to complete work in class. Any school enrolling ESOL students at any level could well consider the value of initiating in-class support of this nature." ([Edwards, 2003](#))

In order to investigate the question of the effectiveness and possible flow-on effects of providing ESOL teacher support in the mainstream classroom, even if that teacher knows nothing of the particular subject, I took the opportunity of supporting six Year 12 ESOL students in a Year 13 economics class at the beginning of this year. Working in partnership or team-teaching with the economics teacher was not an option as I had no knowledge of the subject, and this was his first year of teaching at this level. We felt that I could best support the students by learning the subject with them and by being present in the classroom to motivate and assist where possible. The classes ran between four and five times per week and I was able to be present for approximately 80% of the time. In addition to this, I ran an "economics catch-up" class whenever possible, during which the six students and I spent time sharing our understanding of the concepts and ideas of economics and examining the specialist vocabulary of the subject. Approximately once every three weeks I produced a simplified version of information given in the economics textbook, and a brief glossary of the economics terms covered during the lessons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989, as stated in Brown , 1993, p.23) believe that learning English in mainstream classes in conjunction with a mainstream subject provides more incentive to the students. Learning English in a withdrawal situation is more likely to be of extrinsic concern to the learners and therefore less motivating.

Content-centred instruction, according to Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989), is 'the integration of content learning with language teaching aims. More specifically, it refers to the concurrent study of language

and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material' [p. vii].
When language becomes the medium to convey informational content of interest and relevance to the learner, then learners are pointed toward matters of intrinsic concern. Language becomes incidental to and a vehicle for accomplishing a set of content goals. (Brown, c1993)

Levine (1985) believes that "the best language learning will take place when we can arrange for them to learn and practise the language they are learning in communication and interaction with other speakers of that language as they engage on the subject matter of school..." (p. 2).

In terms of the support we could give our ESOL students and in answer to the question of how we should organise ESOL programmes in our schools, Millett and Vine (2000) make the following statement:

These days, most people would argue that English language support in mainstream classes is the most appropriate way to address the English language learning needs of ESOL students in our schools, and we would agree. In-class support can take a variety of forms, such as an ESOL teacher providing one-to-one support in a mainstream class for individual ESOL learners
What it means in principle is that students stay in regular mainstream classes and ESOL work is done in a way that involves teachers going to students rather than students going to teachers in specialist ESOL classes. (p. 67).

Barnard (1998) has some comments to make on the problems facing ESOL students in mainstream classes:

The reaction of many ESOL students when placed in the mainstream classroom is to keep silent while they try to absorb this new experience and make sense of it all.

However, when the silence extends into weeks, even months, one may wonder whether such silence is receptive acquisition or evidence that the ESOL learner has opted out of the learning environment because the massive amount of input is simply incomprehensible. If that is the case, the student not only fails to learn the content of the lesson but worse, fails to become a full member of the classroom community.

However, the time for initial induction is limited, and in any case what is really needed is ongoing support once the new learners are in the mainstream (p. 5).

Law and Eckes (1990) agree that input must be comprehensible. They state that non-native-English speakers do not need to master English by studying it formally as a separate activity before they can begin regular class work. They suggest that language can be learned through content material as long as the material is comprehensible.

The research is clear that input and material needs to be comprehensible. ESOL students need to be supported in the mainstream, because, all too often, the language demands of mainstream subjects are simply beyond them.

But what are the views of the mainstream teacher when ESOL students are placed in their classes, often with elementary English skills and perhaps with little support? In a recent informal survey at the school where I work, teachers were asked the question 'In what ways do you think they (ESOL students) are best supported?' All but one of the respondents indicated that they believe that teacher/teacher-aide support in the mainstream class would be of value.

Johnston (1999) in a survey of mainstream teachers found that "the extra workload that having ESOL students in the class placed on the teacher seemed to be the most pressing problem for many of the teachers. Teachers felt that ESOL students often needed one-to-one instruction in their classroom and that when the teacher took time to meet their needs, this often slowed down the progress of the rest of the class.

The most frequently selected response (to the survey) was 'Having ESOL teacher assist ESOL students in the classroom' " (p. 21).

Research (Nam and Lewis 2000) indicates that collaboration between ESOL and mainstream teachers has beneficial effects. Their study of language demands in New Zealand secondary school classrooms suggests that links between ESOL and mainstream teachers have a flow-on effect. Such links give immediate benefit to ESOL teachers and their students, and mainstream teachers gain feedback on their subjects' language and learning demands as ESOL teachers share the results of their expertise in analysing language and language tasks.

Harklau (1994) agrees that partnership between ESOL and mainstream teachers is desirable in order to develop a suitable curriculum. She suggests that the development of a curriculum that reflects both mainstream content objectives and the particular language needs of ESL students requires that ESL teachers work closely with colleagues who have expertise in subject areas.

THE PARTICIPANTS

This class consisted of three disparate groups that interacted quite independently of each other. One group consisted of Year 13 native English speakers. Another was composed of between five and six Year 12 and 13 Chinese students. The third group was made up of two Japanese and two Korean students in Year 12. I sat with the last group during teacher talk because it was the least obtrusive position in the class. I also focussed most of my efforts at motivation and support on them because the two Year 12 Chinese students consistently worked with Year 13 Chinese students whose ability in the subject was manifestly greater than mine.

I supported the six students from the beginning of the year but maintained my observations for the purposes of this research during a period of five weeks in term three which approximated twenty periods of fifty minutes duration.

AIMS

My intent was to observe and evaluate the effects of my support of six Year 12 ESOL students in the Year 13 economics class. Support included prompting students to listen carefully to teacher talk, checking on understanding and doing the subsequent class work with them.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This research relies primarily on qualitative methods of data collection in the form of student and teacher questionnaires. In addition to these, I have included my own record of ways in which I was able to assist my six students. Some measure of triangulation was afforded by quantitative data gathered from a test given at the end of the period of five weeks. It should be noted that these students were not chosen at random; they were the total number of Year 12 ESOL students in that particular class.

RESULTS

Student Questionnaire

Question One

How has my support in the economics classroom helped you:

	Not at All	A Little	Quite a Lot	A Lot
To understand vocabulary?		4	1	1
To understand economics concepts and ideas	2	3	1	
To do the exercises in the text book?		4	1	1
To understand what the teacher is saying?		3		3
To copy what the teacher has written on the board?	3		3	

Question Two

How did you feel about having an ESOL teacher in the class?

I think it was very helpful 1

I think it was quite helpful 4

I think it was helpful 0

I don't have an opinion 1

[Copy of Questionnaire](#) (see Appendix I)

Teacher Questionnaire

The teacher felt that my support in the classroom was useful in that there was extra help in keeping the students on task, motivating them and explaining concepts.

My presence changed his teaching methods by reminding him to slow his explanations, and to repeat and/or explain key words and concepts.

He agreed that the students appeared to be more motivated to listen and to do the class exercises, noting that when I wasn't in the class, they were off-task and harder to motivate. However, the students rarely completed any homework.

My unfamiliarity with the subject he felt was unhelpful and noted that in the future the compilation or purchase of native language dictionaries of economics terms would be useful.

[Copy of Questionnaire](#)

Ways I Assisted the ESOL Students in the Classroom

High frequency - every period

- Copying notes from the whiteboard or overhead transparency
- Explaining vocabulary
- Helping with exercises
- Encouragement to listen to teacher and/or do the class work

Medium frequency - at least once per week

- Highlighting important features of the text
- Checking on understanding with the teacher
- Explaining cultural aspects of the text and/or notes

Low frequency - occasionally

- Copying notes for absent students
- Helping to find the correct page
- Copying answers to the exercises from the board
- Lending the text book
- Helping to buy the correct materials

The Test

The test comprised two sets of comprehension questions and two sets of words for which the students were required to write definitions without the use of a dictionary. The first set of comprehension questions and target vocabulary (Part A) were taken from a chapter of the economics text book which had been covered in class but for which I had not written any notes for the students. The answers to the questions were embedded in the text, but, nevertheless, were fairly explicit. The definitions of the words were far less accessible and as such were implicit to the text.

The second set of comprehension questions and words (Part B) were taken from the simplified notes that I had made from a class handout. The answers to the

comprehension questions were not embedded in the text and were explicit, as was the target vocabulary.

Only five of the six students participated in the test.
Copy of the Test (see Appendix II)

Results of the Test

NOTE: Student 4 did not attempt the vocabulary questions and students 1 and 5 scored 0% in Part A.

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

Effects on Students

The effects of my support on the six students are difficult to judge and variable in nature. This is due in part to my physical position in the classroom and the fact that I

tended to offer more support to the three students who were sitting at the same set of tables as I was. (It is sometimes difficult to be "unobtrusive" in a classroom.) It is also due to the diversity of the natures of the students themselves. One Japanese student consistently refused to sit at the same table as me, and withdrew himself from the group because of personality clashes with one of the other students. Of the two Chinese students, one had been absent for almost all of Term Two, and the other frequently used a friend's economics textbook which contained all the answers to the exercises.

However, the results of the questionnaire do reveal that the majority thought my support was "quite helpful" and that all had problems with vocabulary (as further evidenced by the test). Assisting the students to understand economics concepts and ideas and helping with the exercises was very limited because of my poor knowledge of the subject. I believe that the students would have felt a good deal more supported if I had known something of the subject. The students found it helpful to have me there when copying notes from the board and explaining what the teacher had said - although this was limited in scope due to the "unobtrusive" nature of my presence in the classroom. In terms of students' motivation, I felt that some of them would certainly have dropped out of the subject had I not been there, and others would have been passive members of the class. Four of the students have elected to study economics level three next year.

Effects on teacher

The teacher's answers to the questionnaire provide a more positive view of the intervention. Additionally, there proved to be some flow-on effect to my presence, if only to make him more aware of the specific language difficulties experienced by ESOL students. However, another aspect of my presence proved to be that the focus group tended to ask me for assistance and not the teacher. He, in his turn, tended to divert his attention to the New Zealand born students, believing that the focus group were generally well-served by me.

Observations

The ways in which I assisted the students proved to be numerous and diverse, and sometimes, unexpected. It is interesting to note that one of the ways in which I assisted most frequently was in copying notes from the board. It is particularly difficult for ESOL students to do this as they are often unfamiliar with the spelling of many words and cannot guess meaning from the context.

Helping students with the exercises occurred frequently. Nevertheless, it is something that they felt I was not too helpful with, and I attribute this to my lack of knowledge of the subject.

The Test

The test, although not particularly valid as a piece of quantitative research, nevertheless revealed that the vocabulary of this level of academic English was a huge obstacle to their understanding. With regard to comprehension, there was some indication that students were able to take meaning from the textbook but that the scores were generally better for questions based on my class handout.

The Economics "catch-up" class

This class was not intended to be part of the study but was instigated when an opportunity arose. It didn't take place regularly due to timetabling difficulties, but I felt that it was invaluable for both the students and me. In the economics class there seemed to be little time for consolidation of knowledge, or for explaining specialist vocabulary, as we raced through the syllabus. A regular weekly slot of this nature would be ideal when practicable.

CONCLUSION

Assisting the six students has been an interesting and valuable experience because I have gained first-hand knowledge of a mainstream subject and can now feel confident that I am more cognisant of some of the challenges facing ESOL students in the mainstream. The flow-on effect for the economics teacher, the students and me has been generally positive.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of an effective ESOL programme, I would advocate as much funding as possible being allocated to providing a certain level of support in mainstream subjects, despite the logistical difficulties. Even if the assistant knows nothing of the subject, this research has shown that it is possible to support and motivate students in other ways.

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Appendix II

The Test Part B - Economics Notes August 10th

This is a shorter and easier version of the notes on the handouts:

Section B2 Externalities

1. **Externalities** [external or outside factors and situations] are things which happen to people who are **not** the consumer or the producer. [third party]
The externalities may be good or bad, beneficial or detrimental, positive or negative.
There is no payment made by the consumer/beneficiary [the person who benefits].
There is no payment made by the producer/perpetrator. [the person who causes something to happen]
2. **Positive externalities** happen when **benefits** come to people who are not the producer or the consumer.
e.g. vaccinations- because the person who has been vaccinated will not cause **others** to catch the disease, nor will they become ill and have time off work.
The **others** do not pay for the benefits they receive.
3. **Negative externalities** happen when **costs** come to people who are not the producer or the consumer.
Costs are not just money but negative things like sickness.
e.g. passive smoking - because people who are near people who are smoking will be affected by their cigarette smoke and may be ill because of it.
Passive smoking is a **cost** to people who do not smoke but they are not paid for this cost.

At the bottom of the page.

Private goods

Rival - in competition. The All Blacks are rivals of the Springboks.

Depletable - to deplete - to use up until there is nothing left.

Excludable - to exclude - to shut out, to keep out. Naughty students can be excluded from school.

1. **Consumption [noun] - the use of things is rival.** This means that if you buy a can of coke noone else can have it unless you give it to them. You own it.
Consumption is also depletable. This means that if you buy a can of coke and drink it, it is gone for ever.
If you buy a CD player or car, you are the owner for a longer time. The benefits of ownership [owning the CD player or car] are still **rival**.
2. **Consumption is excludable by price.** If you don't have enough money for the can of coke, the shop will not sell it to you. You are **excluded**.

If people do not pay for things they receive then the producer will not make any money.

If you do not pay for something, then you are not the owner.

3. **Private goods** have no externalities or side effects. People who produce or consume them do not receive third party positive or negative effects.

Externalities and resource allocation in the market

Property rights

If you own something, you have the right to use it in any reasonable way you wish.

Some property rights are easy:

If you buy a Moro bar you can do what you like with it.

Some property rights are not so easy:

If you have a cell phone you can use it whenever you like but you do not have the right to upset the teachers by having it switched on in class.

If you own a stereo system you can play it whenever you wish but you do not have the right to play it too loudly and annoy the neighbours.

If you have a dog you can walk the dog wherever you are allowed by law but you do not have the right to let your dog make a mess on the beach or run around eating people's sandwiches and lunches.

Property rights increase efficiency. They make sure that:

- The owner can use the resource/property.
- Other people do not use the resource/property.
- Someone can make a profit from using the resource/property.
- That the resource is not used so much that it is depleted [used up and all gone] or that it causes pollution.
- Waste is minimised [as small as possible] and efficiency is maximised [as large as possible].

