

# Chapter 14

## English as a Second Language Program

International students can be an invaluable addition to Alberta schools. However, students who are not native English speakers often require language support to succeed in Alberta schools. This chapter explores the best practices of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and provides some guidance for those interested in developing or improving the ESL programs in their school authorities.

### What Is ESL Programming and Who Is It For?

English as a Second Language (ESL) programming assists English language learners in increasing their proficiency in the English language. English language learners are students who speak another language or dialect of English. English language learners may be bilingual or multilingual students whose English proficiency is lower than their grade-level peers. ESL funding is provided to assist schools in offering programming and supports for students whose level of English language proficiency impedes their ability to fully participate in the learning experiences of their grade-level classroom. English language learners have a variety of backgrounds that may include:

- having enrolled in an Alberta school as international students from countries where the primary language of education is a language other than English
- having recently immigrated to Canada
- being born in Canada and living in homes where the primary spoken language is not English
- being born in Canada and living in multilingual homes, where English is one of the languages spoken
- being born in Canada and living in homes where the primary spoken language is French and whose level of English proficiency is insufficient to achieve grade level in English language arts.

## Why Is ESL Programming Important?

More newcomers are immigrating to Alberta than ever before (see Chapter 2: Benefits and Trends in International Education for more information) and while the influx of new Albertans enriches the province economically and culturally, it also presents new challenges. For example, our increasingly diverse population has created greater demand for ESL programming and there is no sign that the demand will subside in the coming years.

- In 2001, approximately 15% of Alberta immigrants spoke English or French as a second language.<sup>1</sup>
- By 2017, between 16% and 19% of Alberta immigrants will learn English or French as a second language.<sup>2</sup>
- The increase in ESL students is most remarkable in Alberta's urban boards. For example, Calgary School District No. 19 saw numbers swell from approximately 3000 English language learners in the 1991–1992 school year to over 15 000 English language learners in the 2004–2005 school year.<sup>3</sup>

Strong ESL programs are critical to the success of thousands of students throughout the province.

Experience has shown that the needs of English language learners are best served by integrating them into mainstream classrooms with age-appropriate peers at the earliest opportunity. Responsive programming for English language learners is critical to their successful integration. English language learners at various proficiency and grade levels require different programming ranging from ESL specific programming to integration with support. These supports are designed to make content matter accessible to English language learners.

## Where Do I Start?

Several Alberta Education publications have been designed to assist administrators as they plan and implement ESL programs. Some key publications are:

- *English as a Second Language K–9 Guide to Implementation*
- *English as a Second Language Senior High Program of Studies*
- *English as a Second Language Senior High School Guide to Implementation*
- *Supporting English as a Second Language Students: Promising ESL Strategies in Alberta*
- *Alberta English as a Second Language Proficiency Benchmarks.*

The subsequent information has been drawn, in part, from these publications. All of the above publications can be downloaded from Alberta Education's Web site at <http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/program/esl/resources.aspx>.

## Establishing an Intake Process

The intake process gives a school the opportunity to welcome the English language learner to the school and to provide him or her with important information. During an intake, the school learns important things about the student and his or her family. In turn, the family has an opportunity to share information and have questions answered. The school should provide an interpreter, if possible, or invite the family to bring a translator (e.g., a representative from an immigrant serving agency or a friend) who can help them with the registration process. The following is a list of information that schools may wish to gather during an intake:

- official citizenship, landed immigrant or refugee documentation
- school report cards or transcripts
- informal family history and information
- informal previous schooling history of enrolling student
- expectations of the school from the family
- expectations of the student from the family
- student's academic and social strengths
- what the student needs help with
- future supports the family may need; e.g., translation, community supports
- questions from the family.

After the required information has been gathered, it is recommended that students be given a tour of the school.

If your school authority does not have a reception centre that provides an initial language assessment, you may wish to assess the following during the intake (see Chapter 2 of the *English as a Second Language Kindergarten to Grade 9 Guide to Implementation* for additional information):

- letter naming
- decoding
- reading comprehension
- writing sample in English
- writing sample in the student's first language (to be kept on file and interpreted later, if needed, to assess first language on arrival)
- speaking assessment using a picture or informal conversation
- listening assessment throughout the entire assessment
- the ESL benchmarks to assess the initial proficiency of the student.

### Simultaneous Multilingual Development

Students and families from other school systems and cultural backgrounds bring in different and sometimes new ideas, perspectives, family stories and life experiences. This rich knowledge of other languages and cultures should be valued. Educators should encourage multilingual families to continue speaking and developing their child's literacy in their other language(s). Translating new English words and concepts into the home language helps the student with meaning and ultimately supports his or her learning in both languages. It also helps to involve the parents in the school experience.

This process typically takes 30 to 90 minutes depending on the services provided by the school authority, the assessment tools used and the English language proficiency of the student and family. With this information, the school has enough information to make initial programming decisions and has a better understanding of the student and the family. The family has had an opportunity to ask questions and often feels valued and acknowledged.

## Placing English Language Learners

English language learners in elementary and junior high schools are generally placed in age-appropriate classrooms and receive additional language and content instruction from their classroom teachers through differentiation and modification depending on the student's English language proficiency. English language learners may also receive support from certificated ESL specialists, teacher assistants, community volunteers or peer tutors.

English language learners benefit from:

- explicit language instruction
- visuals and graphic organizers
- demonstrations
- highly formatted texts
- levelled texts in fiction and nonfiction
- modified assignments (English language proficiency 1 and 2), differentiated assignments (English language proficiency 3, 4 and 5)
- opportunities to make connections or translate into first language (depending on first language proficiency/literacy)
- access to bilingual resources, including bilingual dictionaries, texts and Web-based resources
- access to assistive technology
- extra time to complete assignments
- extra time to complete exams, including provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations.



In senior high school, English language learners may receive programming by their proficiency level. For example, English language learners who have English language proficiency levels 1, 2 and 3, beginner to intermediate proficiency, generally register in ESL courses, complete the ESL program of studies and integrate into fine arts, physical education or other optional courses with their mainstream peers. English language learners who have an English language proficiency level 1 or 2 or are in early stages of Level 3 require additional supports when they are integrated into mainstream

classes. These supports can include modified materials and assignments, direct language instruction, additional time to complete assignments and examinations, access to tools to translate language/concepts into first language, access to study support, access to an ESL teacher or assistant, and cultural mediation.

English language learners who have English language proficiency levels 3, 4 and 5 (upper intermediate level) generally register in mainstream core courses, such as English, mathematics and social studies, and optional courses with their mainstream peers. English language learners who are English language proficiency levels 3, 4 and 5 generally require support from their classroom teachers with the language (linguistic complexity) and cultural references associated with academic content areas. The supports can include adjunct classes, direct language instruction, increased discussion time to mediate cultural references and process concepts and language, additional time to complete assignments and examinations, access to study support, and peer tutoring.

### Culture Point

#### Scenario

When Atin enrolled in school in Alberta, the school guidance counsellor recommended that she complement her ESL and mathematics courses with optional courses like drama, art, physical education or career and technology studies. The counsellor felt that because these courses were, by nature, visual and interactive, they would help Atin to practise and improve her English. For her optional course, Atin chose cosmetology.

After a month of classes, Ms. Thompson, the cosmetology teacher, went to Atin's ESL teacher, Mr. Shepherd, for advice. She doesn't understand why Atin is behaving so rudely. Atin refuses to look at her even when Ms. Thompson directly addresses Atin or provides Atin with constructive feedback. At first, Ms. Thompson wasn't sure that Atin understood what she was saying but now she believes that Atin is deliberately disobeying her. One time, when Ms. Thompson asked Atin to look at her, Atin looked at the floor and smiled as if the whole interaction was some practical joke! Ms. Thompson wants to know if Mr. Shepherd is having the same trouble with Atin and, if so, how he is addressing her odd behaviour.

#### Analysis

Mr. Shepherd tells Ms. Thompson that Atin is likely not trying to be rude. He notes that in her culture, it is considered polite to avert one's eyes when speaking to someone of higher rank or status. He also knows that Atin, like many people from indirect cultures, is very uncomfortable with confrontation. Smiling during confrontation is how Atin attempts to minimize conflict. It shows that she still holds good will toward the other speaker. Having developed a relationship of trust with Atin, Mr. Shepherd offers to speak with her about how her behaviour is being perceived. He also recommends some cultural specific resources for Ms. Thompson.

## Learning English

Both social and academic language acquisition is important for English language learners. Jim Cummins distinguishes between two important aspects of language development: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.<sup>4</sup>

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) focuses on the conversational fluency of English. This is the language used in social situations. When we chat informally with our friends about the events of the weekend (e.g., soccer match, family outings and celebrations), we are using BICS.

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) focuses on language required to achieve academic success. Academic language is necessary to engage in cognitively demanding learning tasks that are aligned with programs of study. When we explain concepts, give opinions, participate in a debate, summarize text or write a research paper, we are using CALP.

BICS and CALP develop simultaneously.

## Funding and Coding English Language Learners

International students studying in Alberta do not qualify for ESL funding. However, funding is provided to students who qualify under section 8 of the *School Act* and who meet the definition of a funded student as set out in the *Funding Manual for School Authorities*. The following information was taken from the *Student Information System User Guide*. It may be useful when determining whether a student is eligible for ESL funding and which ESL code to apply.

ESL funding assists students whose level of English language proficiency impedes with their ability to fully participate in the learning experiences of their grade-level classroom. From a funding perspective, there are two categories of ESL students, funded and nonfunded.

### Funded Codes

- Code 301: English as a Second Language (Funded). Included in this category are students who have a right of access to education under section 8 of the *School Act* and who meet the definition of a funded student as set out in the *Funding Manual for School Authorities*. This code applies to foreign-born students, including recently arrived immigrants, refugees and children of non-Canadians who have a valid work or study permit.

For more information on right of access for foreign-born students, visit *Access and Funding for International Students: Frequently Asked Questions* in Appendix G: International Student Programs.



- Code 303: English as a Second Language (Funded). Included in this category are students who have a right of access to education under section 8 of the *School Act* and who meet the definition of a funded student as set out in the *Funding Manual for School Authorities*. This code applies to Canadian-born students, such as First Nations, Métis and Inuit; Francophone; Hutterite; Mennonite; and Canadian-born children of immigrants.

### **Nonfunded Codes**

- Code 302: English as a Second Language (Unfunded). This code is assigned to students who do not qualify for any funding from Alberta Education, ESL grants or otherwise. It is assigned to international fee-paying students who require ESL programming support.

### **A Profile of a Typical English Language Learner Coded 302: International Student**

International students typically come from families who have access to a range of opportunities for their children. Usually, but not always, they arrive in junior high school and senior high school. These students are typically successful academic students, who have had some English reading and writing skills and some meta-grammatical knowledge but often have limited oral fluency. The needs of international students are often different from the needs of other English language learners, such as refugee students, who may not have such an academic background. Differentiated instruction ensures that ESL classes support the language development of international students while complementing their prior learning.

Parents of an international student seek a school system that will provide their son or daughter with a strong academic foundation and support to achieve increased English proficiency. They want the most for their child and believe that, if their child can listen, speak, read and write in English, he or she will have more opportunities in the future. An international student may move to Alberta with his or her parents. Usually, the student will live with relatives or family friends who reside in Alberta and are appointed to be his or her custodian. Other times, the student will be placed in a homestay or a residency type program.

## **Planning for an Inclusive Classroom: Integrating English Language Learners**

Teachers who have English language learners in their classroom have a special challenge of structuring learning to effectively cover the program(s) of studies and, at the same time, meet the unique language needs of English language learners. The following planning and teaching strategies are meant to help teachers. The list is not exhaustive and additional strategies to support the instruction of English language learners can be found in the *English as a Second Language Kindergarten to Grade 9 Guide to Implementation*.

### During the planning phase:

- identify key concepts, language and prior knowledge required to engage with the outcomes of the program(s) of studies
- design a pre-assessment to determine what learners know and what needs to be taught with the outcomes of the program(s) of studies
- develop ‘activating’ or ‘creating’ prior knowledge learning experiences based on the learners’ needs in the class (from pre-assessment)
- develop lessons, gather resources and create materials based on learners’ needs; take care to adapt to the language level of the English language learners while maintaining the “conceptual” level of grade-level outcomes
- modify learning activities for English language proficiency levels 1 and 2 and differentiate for English language proficiency levels 3, 4 and 5, as needed
- design lesson plans to include the following:
  - mini-lessons on explicit language instruction associated with the concepts being taught at the English language proficiency level of the student
  - the reiteration of key curricular concepts and ideas
  - cooperative learning opportunities that provide every student with a role and a requirement to speak (provide supports and scaffolds as needed)
  - dynamic assessment, such as observations, mini-conferences, comprehension checks and student self-assessments.

### Teaching Language through Content

The key objective of teaching language through content is to help students comprehend and demonstrate understanding across a variety of topics, tasks and situations in all subject areas. Language and concepts that are continually introduced and reinforced in a connected way not only provide continuity of learning for all students but provide necessary reiteration for ESL students. When teachers integrate explicit language instruction in their content lessons, English language learners simultaneously gain academic knowledge and cognitive academic language proficiency.

### The Importance of Cooperative Learning

English language learners need purposeful interaction with English-speaking peers in order to learn English. This can occur during pair or group work when students solve problems together in experiential, hands-on learning environments. Structured cooperative learning helps English language learners to:

- develop positive interdependence, learning from the language models and group skills of their peer group
- demonstrate knowledge of their culture and their own area of expertise
- benefit from the natural redundancy that is created by asking and answering questions and by working together to solve problems.



**During the teaching phase:**

- ensure lessons have clearly defined objectives and recognizable beginnings and endings; e.g., establish routines and/or predictable lesson components marked by changes in locations, visual supports, props
- engage students with a variety of content inputs; e.g., demonstrations, visuals, videos, digital resources, texts, cooperative learning, discussions
- allow time for English language learners to process what has been said, read, viewed or heard and to construct their responses
- capitalize on opportunities for students to interact during or following lessons by:
  - asking questions (whole group, small group, pairs)
  - re-stating to peer (turn and talk)
- recognize teachable moments and provide supports and scaffolds to learners as needed
- provide access to tools, such as reading pens, translators and bilingual dictionaries
- provide opportunities for peer discussion in the English language learner's first language (depending on the first language and first language proficiency of the English language learner)
- assess students using dynamic assessments and informal assessments; e.g., quizzes, exit slips, assignment checks, reports
- provide students with opportunities to correct, revise and redo assignments and tests when language interfered with performance
- repeat or revise lessons, as needed, based on learners' comprehension of concepts and language.

## Conclusion

Because of their familiarity with other countries, cultures and/or languages, English language learners bring an international flavour to Alberta classrooms and schools. When given the opportunity to develop the language skills they need, these students are natural leaders in promoting global awareness and cultural understanding, not only in Alberta schools but in Alberta's society as well.

**You may find the following section in this handbook helpful:**

- *Appendix G: Access and Funding for International Students: Frequently Asked Questions*

## Endnotes

1. Coalition for Equal Access to Education, “Demographic Trends,” <http://www.eslaction.com/index.php?page=demographics> (Accessed August 5, 2010).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Jim Cummins, *Empowering Minority Students* (Sacramento, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education, 1989).