
Facilitating Understanding Between the ESL Teacher and the Classroom Teacher

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The elementary-school classroom teacher plays an important role in the education of limited English-speaking children. Although ESL teachers provide supportive help, it is often the classroom teacher who decides whether a child is promoted or retained. Furthermore, the classroom teacher is perceived by many children as being very prestigious and influential; consequently, a classroom teacher's attitude towards an ESL child may have far-reaching consequences in terms of a child's enthusiasm for learning.

Marsha Santelli describes an unfortunate situation that sometimes poses an obstacle to good relations between ESL teachers and classroom teachers.

Our colleagues in the regular program, who have long been frustrated by their own inability to meet the needs of their limited English-proficient students...begin to resent us—especially us—when their friend down the hall with some seniority is transferred or laid-off while the brand new ESL...specialist is retained. The experienced teacher...who would hold friendly chats at lunch time... now gives only a cursory "hello" and fears for her own job. (Santelli 1982:15)

Despite such difficulties, it is important to enlist the support of classroom teachers since they can share with ESL teachers valuable information concerning the elementary-school curriculum. Drawing from the curricular concerns of the classroom teachers, ESL teachers can help pupils achieve immediately relevant and meaningful learning goals.

Carefully selected content from several of the subject-matter fields can be

used by the ESL teachers as content for language instruction. In the ESL class, pupils can learn basic elements of the social studies ... science ... and mathematical processes (Allen 1979:81)

This article centers upon appropriate behaviors and suggestions that elementary-school ESL teachers can implement in order to promote better professional rapport with classroom teachers. Suggestions for establishing and promoting good relations with classroom teachers will be discussed and followed by a summary of the ideas presented.

Resolving Misconceptions

One situation that may hinder rapport occurs when classroom teachers' expectations of the ESL teacher's role are incongruent with the ESL teacher's actual responsibilities. For this reason, it is a sound practice to disseminate an overview of the ESL program as soon as possible so as to avoid any misconceptions. Elinor Gregor elaborates further:

One device that I have found effective in facilitating a collegial, working relationship is to spend a few minutes with each classroom teacher prior to the opening of school.... The first topic discussed is the nature of the ESL program...I have found it especially helpful to assure the classroom teacher that the ESL program is designed to provide non-English speaking children with the shortest and smoothest route to English language competence. (Gregor 1980:33)

An open and sincere invitation to classroom teachers to observe an ESL lesson can help nurture rapport. By having classroom teachers observe an ESL lesson, several positive outcomes can result such as: (1) the classroom teachers obtain first-hand information about the ESL program, (2) the classroom teachers may learn some techniques that would help them teach their limited English-speaking pupils, and (3) the classroom teachers can observe their own students in a different setting and learn additional information about them.

Improving Interpersonal Relations

In her article, "Survival: The Itinerant ESL Teacher," Rose Davidson offers some excellent advice.

1. When teachers get sharp with you, realize it's often because they're worried or frustrated and you are the convenient person who gets it—it's usually not a personal slight.
2. Everyone will not always agree with you so be very clear about your reasons for doing or saying something.
3. Intimidation—someone can be doing it to you or you to them, and neither way is good. Work it out in the most positive way possible. (Davidson 1981:11)

Self-evaluation and introspection can help to identify and to remedy counterproductive patterns of interpersonal behavior. More specifically, better relations may result by carefully considering the following questions:

1. Are there recurring patterns of incidents that tend to undermine my rapport with my colleagues? If so, what are the patterns?

2. Can such incidents be avoided in the future, and if not what is the most tactful way to deal with the difficulties?

A List of Recommendations

The following list presents other recommendations for promoting rapport in addition to a summary of the topics discussed thus far:

1. Clarify teachers' misconceptions concerning the scope and specifics of your teaching duties as soon as possible.
2. Demonstrate a genuine interest in the classroom teacher's curriculum and offer to incorporate such items in your own teaching.
3. Invite classroom teachers to observe you teach an ESL lesson. Communicate a willingness to exchange teaching ideas.
4. Whenever it is possible and appropriate, present some teaching techniques or cultural insights to your colleagues at faculty meetings.
5. If teachers are curt with you, try not to take it as a personal slight; handle such situations as tactfully as possible.
6. Everyone will not always agree with you so be very clear about your reasons for doing or saying something.
7. Strive to identify and to avoid incidents that tend to undermine communication; ask other ESL teachers how they have dealt with similar situations.
8. Listen intently to teachers and discuss issues in a calm fashion.
9. Cultivate patience and make it a habit to praise teachers whenever they merit it.

10. Attempt to exhibit the following behaviors equally: telling, suggesting, reflecting, and asking questions.
11. Try to schedule conferences at the teacher's convenience.
12. Don't overwhelm teachers by attempting to accomplish too much in a single conference.
13. Attempt to work up to important matters gradually.
14. Attempt to close your discussion on a positive note.
15. Avoid getting involved in school gossip.
16. Don't be reluctant to admit that you've made an error in judgement.
17. Maintain assertiveness without showing hostility or excessive aggressiveness.
18. When making a point, be tactful yet clear.
19. Intellectually, be broad without spreading yourself too thin, and deep without seeming too "bookish" or "pedagogical."
20. Be helpful but not solicitous.
21. Make promises judiciously and keep them faithfully.
22. Don't burden or depress those around you by dwelling on your personal problems.
23. Attempt to sympathize and to empathize with the classroom teacher's point of view and unique set of circumstances.
24. Focus on the topic under discussion; don't point out mistakes that teachers

have made previously just for the sake of winning an argument.

25. Develop a sense of humor. Making your point with a smile can be more effective sometimes than the most cogent polemic.

Communication and Coordination Promote Success

In closing, it is extremely important that ESL teachers and classroom teachers share and discuss the salient specifics of their respective curricula so that one instructional program may truly complement the other. For without a well coordinated and relevant elementary-school curriculum and the genuine support of our classroom colleagues, the limited English-speaking child has little chance for academic success in the mainstream culture.

About the Author

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Dr. Cortez's articles have appeared in journals such as: English Language Teaching, English Teaching Forum, TESL Reporter, Modern English Teacher, and TESL Talk.

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