

TESL IN HAWAII'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by William H. Cunningham

Articles in the *TESL Reporter* usually offer some answers. This article provides no answers, only questions. But maybe we need a good question now and then.

For some time TESL teachers in Hawaii's public schools have had to contend with some controversy over our goals. Is our primary objective (1) to teach standard English to immigrant students, or is it (2) to assist them in reaching a functional level of communication and inter-action with their peers? In short, do we see TESL more in terms of academic or social goals?

Current thinking tends to favor the latter goal. Indeed, there is strong belief that an immigrant student's academic successes are often dependant upon his social successes. Tom Hale, State TESOL Program Specialist, writes in a handbook for classroom teachers that, "The idea that second languages cannot be learned unless 'taught' has been seriously questioned, and considerable evidence has been gathered which supports the notion that second languages can be most effectively and efficiently learned through concentrated interaction with those who speak those languages natively... the major objective should be to provide ample opportunity and encouragement for the non-English speakers to freely interact with their English speaking peers from whom they will learn to speak and understand

*Thomas M. Hale, "Some Guidelines Concerning the Role of the Regular Classroom Teachers and School Administrators in Assisting the Non-English Speaking Students in Hawaii's Public Schools," Office of Instructional Services, Dept. of Education, State of Hawaii Aug. 1973.

most of their English"*

A keen observer of the Hawaiian scene would have to agree with Mr. Hale's analysis. In fact, the language learning process which he describes has produced what is now often referred to as "Hawaiian Dialect", our state's own brand of English!

But the tension in TESL is this: Should we settle for social adjustment and Hawaiian Dialect, or should we expect our immigrant students to learn standard English and to speak it well? This is a difficult question.

On the one hand, it can be well argued that children will learn to speak the way their peers speak, and our efforts for "Correctness" in English will make no difference. Furthermore, most of our students will spend their lives in Hawaii, in which case local dialect will serve them sufficiently well.

In addition, the state's TESL program is not really equipped to actually "teach the language" on any serious scale. Only in the Honolulu District are there a few schools where TESL teachers have a primary teaching responsibility. In each of the state's six rural districts, such as my own, the TESL program consists of only one TESL teacher, assigned to service a multitude of elementary and secondary schools. In this situation, the TESL person acts as a resource teacher, conferring with and advising teachers and administrators, testing and counseling students, and guiding a tutorial program. These "tutors", in turn, are not required to teach, but as para-professionals their job is simply to assist classroom teachers who have relatively large numbers of non-English speaking

students. The role of TESL, therefore, is one of helping the assimilation of immigrant students into the district schools.

Concurrent with this *decreased* emphasis upon special English language instruction for immigrant students, there is now an *increasing* interest in bi-lingual education--which includes teaching immigrant students in their native language. Hawaii's Department of Education is considering a pilot program within one district in which the Ilocano language would actually replace English as the language of instruction in certain subjects, and instructional materials in Ilocano would be developed. This would

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initially involve lower elementary Filipino children at selected schools, but the program might be expanded to other grade levels, other school districts, and other immigrant languages.

But the opposite horn of the controversy has not withered away. The sentiment does persist among a number of classroom teachers and others that the greater need is more *English instruction* for the immigrant student, as opposed to social assimilation or bi-lingualism (which themselves have conflicting strategies). From this point of view, TESL should concentrate more heavily upon being an instructional instrument in the state's schools. We should raise our sights. These aims, however, run directly into the debate over standard English vs. Hawaiian Dialect, of trying to "teach" a language vs. the reality of peer learning.

I find that this tension is expressed in a double standard in my own life, a double standard between school and home. At home, my younger children, whose language

acquisition has been entirely in Hawaii, are incapable of using a number of standard English patterns, such as in asking questions. (A good example of the relative weight of peer and parental influences!) They grow on a rich diet of Hawaiian Dialect, both at school and at play. And I try to correct their speech. But why should I correct them, why worry? Yet I do, because I know that outside of the local speech community my children would be at a social disadvantage. Like it or not, the world has its hang ups, and judging people by their speech is one of them. But if I am concerned about my own children's language, should I be any less concerned about the children I am employed to teach? Is it sufficient for them to be consigned to a "language ghetto" all their lives? A ghetto in itself may be a pleasant enough place to live, but what makes a ghetto a ghetto is that it is difficult to leave it. On the other hand, assuming my concerns are valid, is this really a matter which I have any power to influence at all? Should I, and can I?

And so the objectives of TESL become complicated by the broader issues of education in Hawaii. Our schools repeatedly come under public attack and defense. What is the meaning of our high school diplomas? Is a diploma intended to signify a certain level of competence in reading, writing, and speech, or rather that a student has attended school for twelve years? Public schools are under pressure to graduate as many students as possible, to avoid drop-outs, yet, on the other hand, to toughen standards. Is it even possible to have the best of both worlds?

Although issues raised here apply specifically to Hawaii, they probably have a wider relevance also. What should be the goals of TESL in this state's public schools? Well, I promised you no answers, only a question. I hope I have been sensitive to both sides of that question.