



# ESL MiniConference

## Are ESL Teachers Collaborating Too Much? Phonics Stress Impedes Language Learning

The following article is a new version of the original December 12th [eslstds@caltalk.cal.org](mailto:eslstds@caltalk.cal.org) posting by **ConnTESOL** First Vice-President Jennifer Sijmons, who edited her comments and agreed to have them published in the ESL MiniConference Online newsletter for wider dissemination. To subscribe to the eslstds list, send a message to [eslstds-request@caltalk.cal.org](mailto:eslstds-request@caltalk.cal.org), with only the word subscribe in the text of your e-mail message.

I am concerned about the teaching of direct, explicit phonics to ELLs, especially beginners. I find, lately, a strong preference of phonics programs that are created for native speaking children, including the assessments, to beat the clock of NCLB. I am not opposed to multi-sensory programs, such as Project Read or Visual Phonics, for those ELLs who are, perhaps, at a LAS level of 2 or 3 because I feel they have acquired enough phonological awareness to make the phoneme/grapheme connections. But what if they are not ready?

Recently, I've been involved in several lively debates over when or when not to hold a beginner accountable for grade level, native English-speaking phonics knowledge in his/her first or second year in the country. From the research I've read, there must be time for acquisition of the target language, including oral language development and phonemic awareness--the old acquisition vs. learning debate that you all have undoubtedly read from Krashen's articles, before direct phonics instruction begins (if it begins at all). So, I have squelched thoughts of putting newcomer ELLs into the category of an "intervention" as I defend the students' need for acquisition time.

Frankly, my defense is accepted conditionally, I feel, until the next round of assessments and it starts all over again: "Why can't this student rhyme?" "This student has failed his/her short /o/ assessment twice." "He was born here!" And this comment usually follows a sampling of student-generated community vernacular speech, which opens up another discussion of mainstream phonics programs.)

There is a growing trend to replace ESL/ESOL instruction with "interventions" that are a direct result of inclusion. I applaud inclusive classrooms, especially when ELLs are part of a learning community such

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as Reader's Workshop and are receiving comprehensible input through peer to peer interaction, but I am seeing a misalignment of services when it comes to Newcomers. Imagine a group of four children in one classroom following a guided reading lesson with a "pushed-in" special education teacher: one has processing issues and is the target child for that teacher and the other three are ELLs who read below grade level, as expected, as they are still in various stages of acquisition. (One Newcomer, five months in the country, has been sitting alone since the beginning of the school year with no support at that reading time as her level was too low to join a group of comparable readers and the ESL support was "assigned" to other classrooms, working with many non-ELL children.)

The special education teacher has no ESL training, whatsoever, but in this inclusion model it doesn't matter: all certified support people and paras are deployed to "push-in" and work with any group of children during reading. Sounds democratic and fair? Well, not for the Newcomer. I do fear that the students who are below the radar for standardized testing (under 10 months in the country), like the Newcomers, are being neglected as ESL services and its personnel are being molded into this "quasi-literacy" force, working with those students whose scores make or break a school.

Newcomers, whose numbers are usually a handful at any one time in a school year at my school, are taken care of before classroom instruction early in the morning or in those times of the day when the ESL teacher is not maximized as a reading teacher. Unfortunately, it gets tricky to find the times between specials, lunch, or math to give ESL services, as the reading/writing block used to be the exclusive time. Not surprisingly, those extra "found" 20 or 30 minutes in the afternoon are increasingly being snapped up for phonics interventions instead of English language development. Shades of submersion? As more and more personnel in our school are trained in phonics to "intervene" with all struggling readers and follow the prescribed phonics program, I have deflected any attempts to include me or my aide as we try to preserve a chunk of time for English language development, which can include "some" phonics, in my opinion.

How can we protect our area of specialization to allow us to work with those who truly need us? Can TESOL, NABE or other professional organizations help us? In a neighboring district, there is talk of doing away with ESL teachers as our strategies, some administrators feel, can be taught via the regular classroom teacher or reading specialist (once we have shared them) and bilingual paras can work with Newcomers. I

never thought that our collaborative efforts could be our downfall.

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