

ESL Classroom Struggles: Through the Teacher's Perspective

*"Language is the road map of a culture. It tells
you where its people come from and where they are going." - Rite*

Mae Brown

INTRODUCTION

It
always appears that a student is the one that faces the struggles in a
classroom, whether it's learning a new lesson, the work that they are given,
conflicts with peers, or with their teacher. However, we don't hear much
about problems that teachers face in their own classrooms. Taking on the role
of becoming an English as a Second Language(ESL) teacher takes, passion,
patience, and a strong understanding of a person that may not share the same
cultural understanding as you. Having a student that does not speak the English
language causes language barriers between the teacher and the student. In many
cultures, students do not treat or look at their teachers the same way we do
here, in America. In the 1997-98 school year there were 3.5 million English-language
learners (ELL)enrolled in the public school across the nations. In the 2008-09
school year the number of ELL increased drastically to 5.3 million students.
This means teachers need to be more aware and prepared to work with students
who they won't easily be able to communicate with.

As
most ELL students struggle in their mainstream classrooms, due to the language

barriers, it is the teachers job to modify their lessons to accommodate that child's needs. The most pressure is put on the teachers to ensure that the students are successfully learning and meeting the standards that the district holds for their teacher and students. What makes an outstanding ESL teacher is one who understands her students' emotions, and one who modifies her lessons and behavior to enhance her student's learning for them to become independent individuals socially and academically. This research study differs from many other studies that have been done as it focuses on the teacher rather than the students. It also focuses on the teachers emotions and the language she uses towards her students. Instead of focusing on her teacher style, we focus more on her emotions and the positive relationships she builds with her students in the classroom.

Conducting

an interview with an ESL teacher, an analysis is writing to explain the findings. The participant of the interview is a kindergarten ESL teacher, who has been teaching in their school district since 1996 and became ESL certified in 2001. I have conducted an interview with this teacher to research how she deals with the challenges that faces and the techniques and behaviors she uses to overcome those challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In

the article, Play and Literacy Learning in a Diverse Language Pre-kindergarten Classroom, by Kyunghie Moon and Stuart Reifel, the authors conduct a study on the benefits of using role play in a classroom of diverse language students.

The data for this study was collected over a period of a year and a half through observations and an interview. The participant of this study was a pre-k ESL teacher, Mrs. Joyce, who taught students from ages 4-5 and of many diverse cultural backgrounds. This teacher actively incorporated used play activities into her lessons to enhance the literacy learning for her students.

With Mrs. Joyce's warm attitude, students felt comfortable and as if she was of their same culture. Not once did these students need like they did not belong or as if they were not in a safe environment.

Mrs.

Joyce wanted to make the learning experience for her students fun, manipulative explorative, and enjoyable. The teacher understood that for students to be actively involved in a lesson and to ensure learning is taking place, students must be interactive. Activities included games, puzzles with pictures and words, constructive play, and dramatic play. She created a new theme for each day, which she thought made it more fun for students. Mrs. Joyce strongly believes that the use of playing with toys encourages students to start conversations as they would converse about the toys.

Mrs.

Joyce assessed her students during game time. She would answer questions wrong to see which students recognized her mistakes. If they were able to pick up on her mistakes then they learned the material. The research was able to prove that students learn literacy easier when they are actively involved and having fun while doing so. By the end of the school year, these ELL students were speaking the language very well and were correcting their own parents English and grammar.

METHODS

An

audio-recorded interview was done to collect the data for this research. I will be referring to the participant of this study as *Jen*.

The participant is currently an elementary, ESL teacher for the district that first began working at after graduating college with a bachelor's degree in education and psychology. She began working for the district 17 years ago and 12 years ago she received her master's degree in teaching English to Speakers of other languages (TESOL.) Jen teaches three kindergarten ESL class (she pulls these students out from their mainstream classroom,) two Pre-K ESL class, and one bilingual class. In the kindergarten classes there are 7 students, in the pre-k classes there are 10 students, and in the bilingual class there are 16 students.

The

interview was done in the comfort of Jen's own home. We chose a quiet spot where there wasn't any noise and we both were able to take the time to focus on the interview and elaborate on the questions. I used my cell phone to record the interview, which I made sure it was fully charged prior to when the interview began. Jen was asked a total of 14 questions which she was able to answer in less than 12 minutes. Although the interview was quite short, she gave great information and went into depth when explaining her responses.

The transcript was

analyzed by focusing on Jen's tone of voice, and her passiveness. We are able to see by her word choices, such as "I" and "my" students, that she has developed proper classroom management skills and control of her students. She also uses words, such as they, when explaining the independence of her students. Jen described classroom situations which allowed us to see how she handles her students behaviors.

DATA ANALYSIS

Motivation/Understanding

Jen

was never pressured or told to become an ESL teacher. Instead, she was inspired by her fellow coworker and she automatically knew that was exactly what she was destined to do.

M So what inspired you to go into the ESL field?

J

I was an ESL student myself, and in my second year of teaching I actually taught a first grade and second grade combined class and I had all the ESL students for the second grade and first grade. The ESL teacher would come into my classroom, every afternoon during my literacy period and she would teach the ESL students in a small group instruction and as the year progressed I looked at her and thought “wow, that is really something I would like to do” especially since I had the experience of being an ESL student; I would like to give back and become a teacher to them.

Jen

shows that she was inspired by her experiences which led her to become an ESL teacher. She shows her respect for the ESL students and she felt that it was her duty to give back. She understands what it is like to be an ESL student, therefore she can easily relate to them. Having the experience of being an ESL student allows the teacher to easily adjust her lessons when her student are not understanding since she knows what it is like to face those same struggles

Lesson Modifications

J Sure,

it’s frustrating but you get by it. You know, you overcome it. Many times I say

if they don't understand the lesson, look at him, look at her, look at what they are doing. I've modified the lesson for this young lady because we are so advanced in the classroom right now in what we are doing. I'm practicing the writing with them on the topic—whatever the topic may be and she can't do that. So I'm reinforcing phonics with her. I'm starting with the letter "A" and going through the phonics pages. "This is "A" this is the sound." And I'm teaching her vocabulary, basically. So I have to differentiate my lesson.

Jen talks about how she differentiates her lessons to modify for specific students. Many teachers can easily try to get by and make the student facing difficulties struggle and model the other students but Jen purposely made a new lesson for that student. Jen goes above and behind to ensure that her students are receiving the proper attention and learning that they should get.

Effectiveness of a positive attitude

Teachers and students should treat their classroom as a community. For the community to function, it is important that everyone does their part. In the classroom, it is important that the teacher understands her role and the attitudes she projects for her students. A teacher must be able to understand each student independently to ensure their needs are being met so they too can complete their role.

J I

do a lot of observations of their skills and I know how to communicate with them with the one who have more English opposed who have less English so ill modify my vocabulary for the ones who don't have as much English. We are actually coming up right now it's only the one major evaluation at the end of the year. We are starting it next week and that's the WIDA access --- W.I.D.A. Access. We are going to test each student individually at the kindergarten level with reading, writing, listening, and speaking. And we get the results next year in September and that will determine if the students passed the ESL program. And the test is very difficult because the student—if they do not pass the writing, they won't exit the program. I also do a lot of writing with them so I could see a lot of writing and phonics and all the other worksheets so I see how they are progressing so I can tell how much they are doing and I reinforce those skills, as well, continuously.

Jen

is constantly observing her students and testing to make sure they are learning the skills and understanding the materials. She tests her students to see their progression which also allows her to see if they are learning the skills and are able to apply them. She doesn't express a negative attitude towards the W.I.D.A. exam, the exams that determines if the student stay/ goes into ESL, which shows that she thinks the exam is fair in evaluating the students. Through her language and tone, she is confident that she knows exactly how to

communicate with each individual student and when it is appropriate to modify her vocabulary. She makes sure to take it upon herself to modify what she is doing rather than putting the pressure on her students. She also takes charge when she says "we are going to test the students" and then transitions to the students taking charge when she says "if they don't pass the writing, then they won't exit the program." Jen is constantly supporting her students for them to achieve and slowly transitions herself to allow them to show their independence. She builds confidence and a positive attitude for her students.

Student Interactions & Independence

It is important for a teacher to be aware of his or her students' behaviors and how they interact with each other.

M

How do your students interact with one another and how do they interact with non-ESL students—so do they like stick together amongst themselves or do they talk to the non-ESL students?

J They talk to all the other non-ESL students as well and they talk to each other when they are in class together. They get along pretty well together, you know they are five year-olds, they are kindergarten students so they tend to tattle and just have regular things that other kindergarten students who are not ESL students do.

Even the ones who can't speak English that well, they still manage a way to tattle. Or to tell me that something is wrong. They can figure it out. They can get their point across when they need to.

Although the students are tattling on each other, Jen is glad that they are able to express themselves when they need to. The students are also showing their independence in an environment that they may not feel completely safe in. Jen says "they can figure it out" she is respectful that they don't need her help to be able to resolve their problems on their own. These ELL students are building independent skills, communicating skills, and social skills. Jen is there to help her students but they must be able to explain themselves for her to help.

LIMITATION OF STUDY

The limitation to this study was that an observation of Jen's class was not conducted. Due to the lack a time, an observation of Jen's class was not possible. This would have allowed me to apply the information that she gave me to my observation to better my understanding of Jen's teaching philosophy. However, an observation was done of Jen's students in their mainstream classroom. The data collected from that observation is not relevant to this paper's focus.

CONCLUSION

Anyone

can be a teacher, but it takes someone who is dedicated, committed, and truly understands their students to be an effective teacher. Throughout this study and through the data that was collected, we see what makes an outstanding ESL teacher. It is one who understands her students' emotions, and one who modifies her lessons and behavior to enhance her student's learning for them to become independent individuals socially and academically. Jen exhibits all of them characteristics as we see through the data that was collected. Through creating a safe environment for her students, Jen's students no longer feel anxious about leaving their classroom to go with her. She prompts her students to feel confident in passing their exam. Overall a teacher must be able to connect with her students emotionally and understand their needs. A teacher should be able to easily modify and transition her lessons to accommodate the different learning styles of each student. Being an ESL student can be an overwhelming and stressful experience for a child, but if they have a teacher who is passionate and truly understands his or her students, then there is great a chance for that student to succeed.

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