

Swimming not sinking – practical solutions in the mainstream context

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Closer examination of the English language learning needs of the ever expanding cohort of full fee paying students in our schools is a matter of ethics. These students cannot be left to 'sink or swim' in the face of the many challenges of a mainstream educational context using English as the language of instruction. Students enrol in Australian schools from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds having a broad range of English proficiency levels as described by the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA) ESL Bandscales (McKay, Hudson & Sapuppo, 1994) now widely used throughout Queensland and other Australian states. The purpose of this paper is to share the practical ways in which teachers at Kelvin Grove State College (Qld) and The Armidale School (NSW) provide for this diversity in their schools.

In 2003 the Teaching Emphases for English Proficiency Levels (TEEPL) project www.kelvingrovesc.eq.edu.au/asp/teepl/teepl_cover.asp began out of a concern for students finding the mainstream tasks beyond their linguistic capabilities and for teachers struggling to learn how to meet the needs of such students in their subject areas. TEEPL provides a practical solution for teachers working not only with those less proficient students at risk of 'sinking' in the system but also those well on their way and needing only minimal linguistic 'fine tuning.'

The materials are built into the Whole School Literacy Plan at Kelvin Grove State College which means responsibility for supporting students' learning of English lies with all content area teachers regardless of their subject area. For many teachers this means taking responsibility for a part of the syllabus with which previously they were only peripherally concerned. These teachers need considerable support-more than short visits by ESL teachers can provide- in helping their international students navigate the complexities of the mainstream curriculum. In meeting this responsibility, teachers have found in TEEPL, a ready-made 'toolkit' for use in differentiating their planning to better suit the international students in their classes at various Bandscale levels. The database of teaching emphases in TEEPL can be used to rework mainstream unit plans into 'ESL friendly' versions which cater more specifically to the international cohort.

The TEEPL materials have an even wider application in boarding schools where the school's responsibility extends beyond teaching, to total care of the international students. At The Armidale School the materials are being used to inform not only teaching staff, involved more with the 'cognitive and academic' aspects of language as specified in the Bandscales, but also boarding house staff, administrative staff and even peer mentors, whose involvement is more with the language required in 'personal, social and general school contexts'. TEEPL facilitates a smooth transition from the Intensive Language Centre into mainstream classes when Bandscale levels indicate readiness.

This is a practical paper which will be of interest to anyone involved in helping international students meet the linguistic, cultural and academic demands of school curricula.