

# THEY'RE YOUR KIDS TOO: WORKING WITH TEACHERS NEW TO THE CHALLENGES OF ELLS

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## Vexation

For the past five years I've been working with teachers in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Miami schools are a mixed bag, with a few truly outstanding schools, a few truly abysmal ones, and the vast majority hovering somewhere in the neighborhood of mediocrity. There is one area, however, in which nearly all Miami schools are way ahead of the typical US school: the preparation of teachers to work with English language learners. Florida is something of a schizophrenic state when it comes to ELLs. On the one hand, the state has a legislated English-only law, reminiscent of the more high-profile laws in California and Arizona, which basically forbids native language content instruction or any type of traditional bilingual education for ELLs. On the other hand, Florida also has a judicially enforced consent decree (LULAC vs. Florida Board of Education, 1990) that requires all children to receive equal access to a high quality education, which specifically includes education in a comprehensible language. While in different parts of Florida, school districts find different ways to try to reconcile these seemingly contradictory mandates, in Miami this generally results in a mix of formal and informal home language instruction as needed, combined with the use of ESOL strategies to help make content more accessible in English.

The Miami approach is generally successful for two reasons. First, Miami is largely a bilingual city, where native Spanish speakers outnumber native English speakers, and over 60% of the population is bilingual, the highest rate of any major US city. Second, the major impact of the LULAC consent decree was to mandate that all K-12 public school teachers in Florida needed to receive an ESOL endorsement as part of Florida teacher certification. Again, this requirement plays out in different ways in different parts of the state and with varying degrees of success, but in Miami, it is fair to say that most teachers are reasonably well prepared to teach ELLs.

Being prepared to teach ELLs means not only knowing strategies for teaching both language and content to students who must struggle with both simultaneously, but also having the disposition and commitment to ensure that ELL students in the classroom receive an equitable educational experience. Effective teaching in a multilingual and multicultural classroom is at least as much about a belief in what is fair as it is about possessing certain skills or knowledge of certain strategies.

As I prepare to move from Miami to Georgia, the importance of beliefs about ELL students has been brought home in several conversations I had with educators in Georgia and other neighboring Southeastern states – states without a longstanding tradition of having large numbers of ELL students in their classrooms. The gist of these conversations has often gone something like this:

Teacher: So now I have these Mexican kids – two the first year, four last year and maybe five this year – and they don't speak English.

Me: So how do you teach them?

Teacher: Well, I group them together so they can help each other, but they tend to stay apart from the rest of the class and don't participate very much.

Me: Is there any support to help you with this?

Teacher: They leave me to go to ESOL class for an hour most days, and there's a Mexican parapro who comes into my class for another hour sometimes and sits with the kids and works with them.

Me: So do you think your ELL students are getting a fair education that's as good as your other students are getting?

Teacher: Probably not, but it's the best I can do. At least they are learning something and its better than them not being in school.

These conversations always remind me of the reason I left the K-12 classroom to return to graduate school. The growing realization as a young teacher that not all teachers shared my belief that schools, above all else, should be places where we strive to honor a national contract that a high quality public education must be available for all as an opportunity – perhaps the only viable opportunity – to break down socioeconomic stratification. Since then, in my role as a teacher educator, I have tried to instill in teachers this belief that they are personally responsible to do whatever it takes to provide each and every one of their students with the most challenging and rewarding education possible. Miami schools are far, far from perfect, but when it comes to working with ELL students there is a widely held belief that being an English language learner must not become an excuse for

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having received an inferior education. This belief seems much less deeply engrained or widely held in my new home state. Thus, my vexation is this: How can I help the teachers I will now be working with come to see that teaching ELL students well is their responsibility, while simultaneously providing them with some of the tools needed to begin to do so effectively.

## Venture

There are many possible ways forward in preparing teachers to work effectively with ELL students. Perhaps the most readily accessible for a teacher educator is thorough revisions and enhancements to teacher preparation programs. The state board of education in Georgia has begun to realize that its teacher education programs are not doing enough to prepare teachers for linguistically diverse classrooms, and programs are being asked to make modifications. In fact, this is one of the reasons that I was both offered and accepted the position that I did at UGA. I was asked to help enhance the preparation of teachers to work with ELL students. However, as I quickly found out, there will be obstacles and challenges.

In Miami, because of LULAC, and the mandatory ESOL endorsement for all teachers, we are required to have both stand-alone ESOL courses (two of them) and the infusion of ESOL topics in all other methods courses. Not all students (or instructors) are thrilled with this requirement and the implementation is a bit uneven at times, however, as a program, we are both committed to this approach and realize that we would largely be stuck with it even if we were not committed. In Georgia, the situation is quite different, and I have sensed that there is a good deal of resistance to adding even a single stand-alone ESOL course to the program of study. On the other hand, while an infusion approach seems more likely to garner support, infusion is often a weak and very uneven implementation strategy, especially when there is uneven buy-in and preparation on the part of instructors as well as students.

Personally, when it comes to ESOL education, I believe that only the combination of a stand-alone course plus infusion has the power to make a difference for pre-service teachers. This is an issue that is both new and challenging – cognitively and socially – for the students, and it will take a lot of work. Thus, my venture is to push for full ESOL endorsement for all graduates of UGA teacher preparation programs, an approach that would put the school way out in front on this issue in Georgia, as should be the role of the “flagship” institution.

As I reflect on first steps that I can take towards this goal, I am drawn to the national TESOL standards and to my own experiences from our Miami-based research projects. I realize that I need to simultaneously make my case with at least two constituencies. First, I must convince my new colleagues. As teacher educators, we are generally accepting of the various national professional organizations’ content standards (NSES, NCTM, NCSS, etc.) and frequently design at least part of our teaching methods courses around these standards and their resulting benchmarks. We also expect our colleagues in other courses to reinforce (or least not undermine) the major ideas and approaches in our disciplines. Introducing my new colleagues to the TESOL standards and showing them how these standards can enhance their own content learning goals can support the argument for infusing ESOL education. Simultaneously making them aware that these standards are extensive, specialized and critical for the success of ELL students can support the argument for a stand-alone course taught by someone with adequate ESOL expertise. Second, I must convince the pre-service teachers, many of whom have given little thought to this issue, that additional requirements to gain competency as teachers of English to speakers of other languages would be a meaningful and worthwhile challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching, rather than as just one more set of hoops to be jumped through on their way to certification. My experience working with teachers of ELL students in Miami has armed me with a variety of compelling stories to help me make my case to both constituencies.

Still, I know that this will be an uphill battle. I’m looking for the collective wisdom of the Crossroads community to help me think through how best to lobby for potentially unpopular program changes. What would convince you?