
Preface

This is an exciting time to be teaching English as a second language. Events of the past few years have made it clear that immigrants and hyphenated Americans want their children to speak English and to speak it well. The standards movement is drawing attention to the importance of academic performance for all ethnic groups. There is a genuine realization that all students can and should learn.

When I began teaching English as a second language in Texas two decades ago, I often heard the comments, "It takes three generations to educate these people," and "Once a LEP [a student with limited English proficiency], always a LEP." I have not heard either comment lately. One hopes those dark days are gone.

Clearly the mastery of English is not negotiable. Pressure is increasing to improve both English-language education and the English-language component of bilingual education. The demands made on teachers of English as a second language are great. In many states these tasks fall to teachers who have had little preparation. Some states require only a few college classes for an ESL endorsement, and some certify teachers to teach English as a second language based only on inservice training. Many states allow out-of-field teachers to teach ESL or offer emergency credentials to teachers who have language teaching training that is short of what is normally required. Teachers of mathematics, social studies, or science who have had no training in language teaching whatsoever may have non-English-speaking students placed in their classes. Because you have picked up a book that professes to be a quick-start guide for teachers of English learners, chances are you are or will soon become one such teacher.

Like the blind men who felt and then described an elephant, a novice teacher may fixate on just a few aspects of language. English is no more a mere collection of grammatical rules than an elephant is just its trunk. It is no more just the written word than the elephant is just its tail. This book will deal with all key aspects of language.

This book will also deal with some of the realities of language learning that are sometimes avoided in textbooks. If you are in a typical public school ESL situation, you will teach some students who have attended little school in their native countries. You will sooner or later encounter peers

xvi Teaching English Language Learners K–12

and superiors who want to use your program as a tool of segregation. You will deal with those who confuse incomplete mastery of English with learning disabilities or lack of intelligence. These are challenging but not insurmountable problems. Forewarned is forearmed. This book will help you negotiate these situations.

In many ways, ESL teachers can feel intellectually isolated. Teachers and administrators who have not been trained to teach math or science at least have studied those subjects. The United States is not a nation of language learners, so a great many of your peers and superiors, and perhaps you yourself, lack the experience of successfully learning a second language. Sometimes explaining what you are doing to those who have neither taught nor learned languages is like trying to describe colors to the blind.

Although this book is written primarily for the novice teacher of the English language, it is my hope that experienced teachers will also read it, not as a guidebook, and certainly not as a quick-start manual, but rather as one side of a conversation with another old hand. It might have a few new ideas that an experienced teacher will want to consider, or it may be worthwhile just to read about what worked in another teacher's classroom. Or an experienced teacher might use this book as a tool to help educate fellow teachers and superiors about some of the realities that ESL teachers face.