



First Person: JENNY

Teaching English Learners

I began my teaching career as a French and English teacher in a large school system in an urban high school. The majority of the student population was African American. In my first year of teaching I had a couple of students in my French class from Vietnam who were English learners (ELs). Perhaps because I was a language teacher, I was very interested in learning what instructional techniques I could use to help them. At that time, the school only offered an immersion program. I was very frustrated by this policy and wished that I spoke Vietnamese so that I could better support my students. After three years, I moved and began teaching in a middle-class suburban high school in a small school district. This high school has increased in its cultural and economic diversity during my twenty years of teaching there.

In my first years there, I sought opportunities to work with the few ELs who were in the school. Initially, the ELs included a variety of European, Asian, and African students who were the children of professionals, such as researchers and college professors. I developed the first English as a second language (ESL) program classes at the school, using my knowledge as a language teacher. I provided support to students with their assignments in content classes and collaborated with their teachers regarding accommodations and assessments. After a couple of years, our ESL program began assessing the English proficiency of the students and creating instructional plans. I think that being both an ESL teacher and a general education teacher helped me to collaborate with other general education teachers—we spoke the same language, and I had to do what I suggested my colleagues do.

Gradually our high school EL population increased and changed. Currently, the majority of our students are

Hispanic, and most of their parents are employed in the service industry. I went back to school and completed a master's degree in special education and certification as an ESL teacher. As a result of my training and the changes in our EL population, I coauthored curriculum for sheltered English courses to supplement our ESL classes. I also began to co-teach in some content-area classes. I still have the occasional opportunity to teach an English class, where I hone my skills at accommodation and have to practice what I ask other teachers to do. In addition, because of my degree in special education, I am a more effective advocate for the appropriate assessment of ELs who might be eligible for special education services.

One of the biggest challenges my students face is acquiring English proficiency while meeting requirements for graduation—both earning credits and passing graduation exams. As older learners, my pupils have less time to acquire English proficiency and greater course requirements to master. Other challenges may include differences in learning styles and educational expectations. In addition, teachers of ELs may have confusion about or resistance to differentiating instruction for ELs. Most teachers never expected to also have to teach their students to speak English. They may also have strong feelings about teaching students who might be undocumented immigrants.

Addressing the challenges ELs and their teachers face can be demanding, yet being an ESL teacher is a highly rewarding job. I get to work with students and their families over a period of several years and to learn from them about their cultures. I observe them sharing their culture with other students and becoming successful in academic and extracurricular activities.

—Jenny Harvey

ESL Teacher

Homewood High School, Homewood, Alabama