



Appalachia IU8

# ESL Newsletter

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## The President's Commission on Foreign Language Studies notes that "Americans' incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous and it is becoming worse." Is this really true, and how does this relate to ESL?

Virtually all schools in the U.S. teach languages in a predictable pattern. Many teach only French or Spanish, starting around eighth or ninth grade, with a few also teaching German or Latin. Sound familiar? What could be wrong with this?

Everything, according to most studies on the teaching of foreign languages. The Department of Defense has characterized the apathy of our country toward the study of foreign languages as our greatest national challenge. Only **fifteen cents** of every one hundred dollars in education is spent on foreign language instruction.

A study of 19 modern countries showed that foreign languages are taught as early as 1st and 2nd grade. Often, children in those grades study two foreign languages. By comparison, the average student in a US public school setting only learns one foreign language and typically does not start until 9th grade.

The 19 countries in the study also offered choices such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, or Indonesian, languages spoken by the majority of the people in the world. The fact that we are virtually non-communicative as a nation in those languages means that we are at a disadvantage in the world economically, politically, and socially.

When teaching English as a second language, the concentration is on language acquisition; foreign language instruction concentrates on teaching language structure. For example, in a typical American high school foreign language class, students primarily study sentence structure (grammar, syntax, sentence mechanics, etc.); in an ESL class, the emphasis is on vocabulary and verbal skills. Research has shown that, whereas ESL teachers are teaching students to "acquire" a language, foreign language teachers are teaching students to "learn" a language.

This difference causes problems for the American student, who has difficulty using the foreign language

in real situations, since the student is inhibited in the fluent use of the language because of the need to mentally "monitor" the correctness of speech, whereas the ESL student speaks more fluently and spends little time monitoring speech.

Additionally, studies have shown that "correct" speech comes with fluency and work on structure before fluency is wasted. Given this, educators are now saying that we need to teach different foreign languages and also teach in the ESL "acquire a language" style. Many educators are now also saying that we should be teaching Spanish just as we teach English in kindergarten!

## Are there benefits to knowing two or more languages? YES!

Many educators, and often the public too, are under the impression that learning another language is confusing for children and causes language learning problems. Extensive studies that have been done indicate that this could not be further from the truth! Children who are bilingual or trilingual actually have improved abilities not only in their native language (L1), but also in content areas such as math, science, social studies, and other subjects. Additionally, children who know two or more languages tend to be more mature and confident than those who are monolingual. Why is this? Psychologists who study the brain have

actually determined that the center in the brain for learning languages actually overlaps the languages, one on top of the other, so one supports the other, resulting in improvement in ability in both, or all, languages learned, as well as other academic subjects. As recently as the 1960's, educators and psychologists believed that learning more than one language would cause a student to have problems in speaking, reading, writing, and listening in both languages. Therefore, students were discouraged from learning another language, and students were encouraged to "forget" their native (L1) language!

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## Feature Teacher: Conemaugh Township

Our ESL spotlight is on Jane Kmetz, an instructor with the Conemaugh Township Area School District. Jane has been in education for 27 years, and has an enviable educational background: a B.S. in elementary education; a Master's of education; a certification in administration, K-12; and certification through IU8 as an ESL Program Specialist. When you meet Jane, you can see she is a high energy person who likes responsibility and a challenge—and serving the first English language learners in any district is a challenge.

Jane has taught three Russian students, one Latino student, and one Chinese student. Jane favors the “buddy” system with ESL students. An ESL student is assigned a

student with similar interests to be a “buddy” to the ESL student. The two students generally are in the same classes, eat lunch together, and so forth. This system accelerates the learning of English for the ESL student, and also assists the classroom teacher because the ESL student feels more comfortable having a friend in the classroom. Quite often, too, the two “buddies” become good friends and seem to understand each other, even though both are speaking two different languages!

ESL students, Jane has noticed, may have trouble fitting in, and may act out

aggressively to get attention, even hitting other students. The solution to this, Jane says, is to be sure to include the ESL student in all activities and be patient, as the student may not be familiar with the rules or skills necessary to play kickball or basketball. Giving the student extra turns or tries will help a lot.

Jane is married and has four children, three of whom are now engineers. Jane would like to continue her education further, but until all four of her children finish college, her turn will have to wait!

## Who are these immigrants, why are they here, and why don't they just speak English?

Quite often, ESL teachers are asked, “What are those immigrants doing here in our school district?” There is no doubt that immigrant children and their families are living and working in areas of Pennsylvania not accustomed to seeing immigrants. In our entire state, it is estimated that we have approximately 135,000 English language learners. California, by way of comparison, has 1.6 million ESL students!

The current immigrant population is rapidly changing the nature of American society. Since well before the 1850's, the U.S. experienced an influx of approximately 1.5 million immigrants a year. In fact, about 10%

of our current population was born in another country. However, whereas immigrants formerly came from eastern and southern Europe (Italians, Greeks, Poles, Hungarians, etc.), immigration trends now tend to favor those from Spanish-speaking countries, Asian countries, Middle Eastern countries, and areas of conflict and war in which the U.S. has been involved, such as Bosnia and Liberia.

These new immigrants are bringing different cultures and different religions to our communities. They are enriching our culture through their diversity and allowing us to broaden our understanding of others in our ever-shrinking globe.

Although virtually all immigrants want to learn the English language and culture, opportunities for adults to learn English are very limited, and those who are learning English quickly find out it takes years to become proficient.

One interesting note here is that the U.S., unlike virtually all industrialized nations, has no official language! Canada, for example, has two official languages: English and French; and some, like Switzerland, have three official languages: German, French, and Italian.