

# ESL Programs in Multicultural Australia

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## I. Introduction

In Australia, the ESL (English as a Second Language) program for immigrants has been developed to a high level as it has in the United States, Canada and England. While ESL programs are used as a means of teaching English in non-English speaking countries, they are also used to teach non-native English speaker in countries where English is spoken as the first language.

New arrivals to Australia who cannot communicate fluently in English have disadvantages in many different social situations. They cannot participate fully in political, economic, cultural and social activities due to their lack of English proficiency. Most of the newly arrived immigrants and refugees require intensive English language training, and become the subjects of ESL.

For adult immigrants to Australia, there are adult migrant education programs in each State and Territory, while immigrant children learn ESL at language and multicultural centers before entering mainstream education (Majewski 1990 : 14).

The characteristics of Australian ESL programs reflect the multiculturalism which permeates every aspect of Australian society. Australia's national language policy as is seen in *National Policy on Languages* by Joseph Lo Bianco (1987) is the reflection of the immigration policy which resulted in multiculturalism.

ESL programs in Australia maintain the learner-centered and affective way of teaching. Not only teaching materials but also the social and psychological factors of the learners are taken into consideration for effective ESL teaching.

## II. Multiculturalism in Australia

Australia is a multicultural society, which developed from Australia's national policy in the 1970s to build a multicultural society (Sugimoto 1991 : 8).

According to *YEAR BOOK AUSTRALIA* 1991, the estimated resident population as of June 30, 1989 was 16.8 million, which had increased by 1.8 per cent since the previous year. The total increase of 294,900 in this one-year period comprised 131,300 from natural increase and 163,600 from overseas migration. In 1991 approximately 0.1 per cent of the total population in Australia were the immigrants. In the past, immigrants from Britain were the largest

number of settlers in Australia. In a four-year period from 1986 to 1989, however, the number of British immigrants amounted to a little more than 100,000, which was about 19 per cent of the total new arrivals (514,200 people). Other European immigrants were mainly from Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Germany, and Netherlands. Australia also accepted many Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s. Recently the number of immigrants from Asian countries has been increasing. The number of immigrants from the Philippines, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Vietnam was almost the same as the number from Britain (100,000) in the same four-year period.

Australian multicultural policy encourages migrants to maintain their cultural backgrounds and traditions, and seeks to increase and enjoy the cultural wealth in the society by integrating various cultural backgrounds (Sugimoto 1991 : 17). Australian multiculturalism is regarded as relative culturalism which respects the standards of each culture without discrimination. In order to understand someone's culture, it is important to put yourself in his/her place (Sugimoto 1991 : 107). This is an attitude which is quite different from the one which imposes assimilation to one's society.

As a result, the immigrants' mother tongues as well as the customs of their homelands are respected, and are encouraged to be maintained while the immigrants learn ESL. The first language is an asset both for them and for the Australian community (Bianco 1987 : 87). For this reason, the Commonwealth (Australia's national government) uses several languages for its announcements or publications (Nakano 1990 : 40).

### III. National Policy on Languages and ESL programs

No other document has had a greater influence on the Language Policy in Australia than Bianco's *National Policy on Languages* which was written at the request of Education Minister, and was submitted to the Ministry of Education in 1986.

Bianco regards language as a form of human communication which is critically important to individual and social life. He declares the English language to be the national language of Australia, which means that English is the language to be used by the Commonwealth and the State and Territory Parliaments : the language of the formulation, promulgation and interpretation of Australian law (Bianco 1987 : 71).

According to Bianco, the aims of language learning are to acquire the abilities to receive and convey information, apply logical processes, and plan and execute practical tasks individually or in groups, based on the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (Bianco 1987 : 79).

His philosophy on language learning is based on multilingualism. Bianco says, "Australia's history and geography have bequeathed the nation with a unique, complex and rich linguistic

situation. This policy regards this a resource which requires cultivation and development. The fundamental objective of language planning in Australia becomes, therefore, to ensure that Australia derives maximum benefit from its rich linguistic resources (Bianco 1987 : 5)." The overall purpose of teaching ESL to children is for them to obtain full access to English proficiency and, to aim for first language maintenance where possible. Thus Bianco maintains that "English and the mother tongue ought to be developed in a complementary way, making it possible for young ESL learners to attain benefits both for their individual intellectual functioning and for the wider Australian community from their bilingualism (Bianco 1987 : 87)."

#### IV. ESL in Australia

##### 1. Immigrant Policy and ESL Programs

Educational programs like ESL for immigrants are related to the economy and a labor situation of a country. Australia's economical development has largely been dependent on the work force of migrants.

The Commonwealth is responsible for the economy and the labor market of Australia. The commonwealth is also responsible for recruiting immigrants to Australia and their settlement in Australia (Bianco 1987 : 87). The commonwealth's educational authority, however, is not to provide educational services and programs but to devise directions for education and provide supplementary funding.

It is the States and Territories that are mainly responsible for providing educational services and programs, curriculum planning and administration.

The economic situation has been a motivating force behind the migration policy, which demanded ESL programs. Today, company restructuring, due to the changing economy has caused many migrants to change jobs from traditional areas to more specialized jobs, which require information and knowledge, and therefore, another kind of ESL program is needed for those workers.

##### 2. History of the ESL program in South Australia

According to Majewski (Majewski 1987 : 13-15), the Child Migrant Education Program started in Australia after the passing of the 1971 Immigration (Education) Act. In South Australia, about 20 staff were hired in schools where there were so many newly-arrived NESB (non-English speaking background) students. It was at that time that the South Australian Education Department was provided the funding from the Commonwealth.

Most of the teachers were not fully qualified and worked part-time. After receiving a two-week introductory program, they were sent to schools. A typical work pattern of these ESL

teachers were to bring about a group of 10 students at a time from mainstream classes, and to teach them ESL through the situational approach which was then used for teaching adult immigrants. For those secondary school age students with minimal English, a special six-month course of intensive English was given at that time.

In 1976, the Commonwealth Schools Commission changed the funding guidelines in order to take account of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of immigrant students. This change meant a philosophical change in ESL teaching. From this time on, assimilation was clearly rejected, and it was expected that the ESL Program would function in a context of support for the first language and culture development, and valuing of diversity.

Commonwealth funding of the ESL program in the South Australian Education Department grew from \$339,000 in 1972 to a peak of \$5,767,000 in 1982. The funding are provided on a per-capita basis.

### 3. Guiding Principles for ESL Teachers

Learners entering a New Arrivals Program in Australia are obliged to learn English and at the same time are obliged to learn the content of the school curriculum through English in order to participate equally in the wider Australian English speaking environment.

The New Arrivals program is designed to facilitate English language development while at the same time acknowledging the language and cultural understandings that learners bring with them from their own social and cultural contexts.

In order to widen their networks of interpersonal relations, and to use and give information (eg. fact, ideas, opinions), and to think and express themselves freely, the curriculum materials have to be aimed for the learners to develop communication skills in English (Majewski 1990 : 3).

One of the most important things in education is the guiding principles of the teacher in teaching students. Techniques and skills are the secondary things. The teacher's attitudes toward students are far more important. Teachers can best support their learners by recognizing the learners' conditions.

Majewski (1990) proposes the following guiding principles for ESL teachers :

1) Teachers should create an environment where learners feel secure and are prepared to take risks.

In order to attain this goal, teachers should :

- respond positively to learners' initiatives and challenges.
- give encouragement to learners to take risks and new steps.
- share personal experiences with learners to show everyone makes mistakes, and making mistakes is an acceptable part of learning.

- allow conversation to flow by not interrupting it to correct errors which can be corrected at a later time.

- give assessment feedback which focuses on the successful achievement of objectives and indicates in a positive way how any desired improvement can be realized.

2) Teachers should facilitate learners' transfer from one environment to another.

In order to attain this goal, teachers should :

- recognize the difficulties learners may face during the settlement process, including dealing with homesickness, difficulties with housing, etc.

- value the learner's previous educational experiences and cultural background through encouraging a sharing of knowledge and understanding among learners.

3) Teachers should understand that learners are transferring knowledge and concepts from their first language into English as well as developing new concepts and knowledge in English.

In order to attain this goal, teachers should :

- draw on the learners knowledge, skills and abilities in their first language as a basis for activities which the learners will recognize and therefore value in relation to their own perceived needs.

- build on content which is familiar to the learner and including unfamiliar or problematic material which will add to previous knowledge.

- be sensitive to learners' own concept of language learning and therefore gradually introducing new approaches to learning which may challenge previously held views.

4) The teachers should support and value learners' language and culture.

In order to attain this goal, teachers should :

- encourage learners to share their culture through providing opportunities for learners to teach each other about their culture.

- set up situations where learners can share their heritage with English speaking peers.

- invite parents/guardians and other adults from diverse cultural backgrounds to visit the class to share information or participate in class events.

## V. Conclusions

Australia is a land of migrants like the U. S. and Canada. The unique aspect of Australian ESL, however, is its spirit of multiculturalism. Migrants to Australia can be made to feel at ease in the new society when they are taught by ESL teachers. The new arrivals do not have to suppress their cultural background or mother tongue. Rather, in Australia, these cultural heritages including their mother tongue are encouraged to be maintained.

Acceptance of the previously mentioned guiding principles would help to raise the quality of ESL teachers. ESL teaching principles in Australia are a very student-centered and affective way of teaching. However, creating an environment for quality ESL education is very difficult in Japan. Japan needs to learn and adopt the compassionate and understanding attitude of the ESL teachers in Australia.

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