

BIG GAPS, DIFFICULT SOLUTIONS: TEACHING ENGLISH TO HIGH SCHOOLS IMMIGRANTS

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Abstract

Despite the current situation in the Valencia Community in Spain, there seems to be deep differences in the opinions of legislators and teachers about the needs and difficulties in Secondary education. The key issue for many schools is how face an increasing number of undereducated immigrants. Indeed, many Spanish and English teachers wonder how to go on working given this state of affairs. The number of students who need remedial language education can be amazing in certain schools and communities especially in Alacant and Valencia, and teachers know little of what they are supposed to do with these students. Besides, they lack the necessary institutional and linguistic support so many give up and just consider that they can only do just what they do for the rest of the class. This paper addresses the problems currently found in language education for immigrants: (1) educational policy; (2) current offer of remedial classes; and (3) presence and methodology of English as a foreign language. In doing so, the paper revises current practices in language education for immigrants in Spain. The paper concludes that mixing immigrant students and local Spanish students can benefit both groups and input is enhanced through mutual interaction resulting in better learning. However, more staff and funds are recommended if a change of this kind may be intended by any local or regional education board. (The paper includes 1 reference)

Key words: immigrant, high school, multilingualism, integration.

Text:

EFFECTIVE POLICIES FOR REMEDIAL EDUCATION

Despite the current situation in the Valencia Community, there seems to be deep differences in the opinions of legislators and teachers about the needs and difficulties in Secondary education. The key issue for many schools is how face an increasing number of undereducated immigrants. Indeed, many Spanish and English teachers wonder how to go on working given this state of affairs. The number of students who need remedial language education can be amazing in certain schools and communities especially in Alacant and Valencia, and teachers know little of what they are supposed to do with these students. Besides, they lack the necessary institutional and linguistic support so many give up and just consider that they can only do just what they do for the rest of the class. This is especially significant for English (and foreign language) teachers who are often required to give up instructional hours of some of their students for remedial or additional instruction in Spanish. And there is still another the question of how schools can afford the situation given the scarcity of really well trained extension teachers. And if this is so needed why the Conselleria doesn't provide with the funds to hire more staff.

Far below the legislative level, we teachers also question ourselves about the degree of competence, goals, purposes and intentions we should have in mind when having these students in our classes, and how responsible we should feel about our instruction for immigrants in our Primary and Secondary school. Should the burden of non-existing bilingual education in regular schools take away our will to help somehow? What practical guidelines should we follow to help? Who is going to train us?

NEW DIRECTIONS IN EFL TEACHING TO IMMIGRANTS

One of the key concepts to address the problem is the current research undertaken in relation with the total number of immigrants in school age in each local community. However, the continuous flux makes accounting and even predictions almost impossible. Also, It seems necessary to try to either get the immigrants together in the same schools with no other Spanish students (segregationist trend) or divide them and immerse them in the current schooling streamline. This second alternative could seem more democratic but fails to open a possibility of specialized schools where ethnic groups may even have teachers with the same mother tongue as the immigrants (an approach to some kind of bilingual education for some groups as Moroccans). Current data indicates a high demand for language education both in Spanish and English. As for English specifically, there is a wide range of immigrants who require the revision and remedial classes in English. Asians, Latin Americans and North Africans bring important deficits while Eastern Europeans usually have good conversational skills but not so good writing skills.

As many other concerted schools, Colegio de Jesús (Madrid) offers its immigrant students reinforcement and extension classes in three different subjects: maths, English and Spanish. Students in English attend classes of 45 minutes twice a week in groups of 5. The main goal is to immerse students in the language and

force them to increase their study time up to 3 times at home. The first year the program was in danger of failure but from the third year (as the students have become familiar with the system) the proficiency of many students has become clear. The class is supported on 5 main principles:

- 1- most communication is in English;
- 2- no matter what skills the immigrant brings, s/he can master the language eventually;
- 3- Accelerated learning is based on vocabulary and grammar structure acquisition;
- 4- Students are allowed to be silent until a minimal competence is acquired;
- 5- their feelings, cultural tradition and personality are central to any learning activity, and it must be focused to attract their attention.

The main problem arises from the lack of qualified teachers as these remedial classes are taught due to special institutional support not always available. Besides, despite the fact of its need, providing concerted schools with much extra staff is not a popular measure among some institutional forces, and programs like this require an additional budget that is provided outside the context of all instructional costs. But if we really want to find a solution, bilingual education assistance, as the one given by the British Council, needs to be accessible to all state and concerted schools (provided that in concerted schools there is no state school nearby that can do the same service). English language teaching policies require a complete understanding of the students' ages and origins, the type of program to run, skilled teachers, and overall program evaluation.

According to McMillan, Parke, and Lanning (1997), a number of studies document a high level of correlation between student success and the following program characteristics:

- 1- required entry-level testing
- 2- mandatory placement in basic skills courses
- 3- continuous evaluation
- 4- using technology to offer remediation through alternative instructional media.

REMEDICATION CLASSES

To begin the remedial classes, Colegio de Jesús requires a placement test to get students of the same level together so most ESO remediation classes are also mixed age classes. Remedial classes also require students to leave aside some other classes, at least, partially and focus on those subjects that both parents and school consider more important. These courses are not mandatory but highly recommended thus most parents are also willing to cooperate. In some cases, after two years of remedial classes, students are able to get the same instruction in all the subjects as their level classmates. Although this program has been operating for 3 years results are clearly positive with Moroccan, Chinese and Russian students recently arrived to the district of Barajas. This 2001-2002 year English studies have been enforced, and about 20 immigrant students are expected to benefit from the program. May programs in English be intensified in state schools in the future, the relation among the Inspector Office, the high school and its feeding primary schools will need to operate more effectively.

THE CASE OF ENGLISH

There is no question that English has turned more and more demanded recently, and that some parents who only 10 years ago considered maths as the central subject today turn their eyes to the English teacher's achievements. A successful English teaching should take into account that students have different cultural and

linguistic background and that the only language they share (if any) is Spanish. Therefore, although classes must be taught in English, Spanish and Valencian as a communication languages should not be totally disregarded. Besides, teachers should also use physical response exercises as well as miming and drawing. For the teaching classes students should get together in groups of 4 and receive intensive training in grammar, writing and reading. They are also need to be cheered to act in English. Teachers should use both conscious learning through rule study and drilling and subconscious through film and graded readers loan. However, the main problems that teachers are likely to face in the program are:

- 1- Deficiencies in L1 and L2
- 2- lack of previous instruction in English
- 3- differences in methodology from previous teachers
- 4- difficulties in reading and writing (sometimes even in their own mother tongue)
- 5- problems in study skills, note-taking, and academic skills
- 6- problems in understanding Spanish culture
- 7- motivation and self-esteem.

As mentioned above, despite these problems, the program in Colegio de Jesús has proved to be a valuable asset for immigrants arriving to the school. However, the concept of remedial education for immigrants requires institutional financing efforts and more support to state schools.

POSSIBLE WAYS

As a recommendation, maybe CEFIREs, Inspection offices and educational advisors should be looking at the individual ethnographical and cultural backgrounds and maybe develop special units to reinforce first their skills in curricular areas up to the Spanish requirements. These centers rather than being a segregated institutions, could promote multi / intercultural education for both Spanish and foreign students by giving special attention to English as the language for international communication, Spanish and Valencian as communication and education means and to third languages as Arabic, French, German or Russian. These centers have the advantage of being able to optimize human and material resources and specialized teachers in curricular and language areas could be extensively used. For instance, by having Spanish literature along with English Sciences or Arabic physical Education. Foreign Languages could be taught in the target language totally, give emphasis to intermediate and advanced courses, and students of many nationalities could be able to interact in their daily lives providing at the same time immigrants with the integrative skills and enough social knowledge and experience to immerse them in the local and national streamline. Additional advantages could include a reduced number of students in each class, extra assistance in the language skills and motivational and affective reinforcements.

CONCLUSION

The changing educational situation in Spain requires strict and rapid measures related to providing immigrants with Spanish and English language skills. Remedial education should not be considered as superfluous but a definite need that must be covered as soon as possible. State bi/multilingual centers can become a solution to promote multicultural understanding, and cope with the curricular problems that most schools have to face. May this solution be unpractical, the Conselleria and the MEC should provide school institutions with enough funds to run their own adapted programs. It is also necessary to create subject teams to increase the research on educational policies and needs for immigrant population. The current situation requires deep changes in educational policies that can address the problems and

issues appeared in the last 10 years. The educational institutions should also consider successful bilingual international programs, and supply schools with enough staff and support. In this way, the core issues related to language education for immigrants will be covered, and certainly quality in education excel.

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