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Article Response 1

“Commentary: The State of the Art of Secondary ESL Teaching and Learning”

Outline:

Lee Gunderson is a veteran educator with almost 50 years of experience. He is a widely published researcher in the fields of English as a second language, literacy, and multiculturalism. This article is his commentary on the state of ESL teaching in secondary schools, primarily high schools in the United States and Canada. Gunderson begins with a brief background of his work in ESL, followed by references to several laws and Supreme Court cases affecting ESL education in the second half of the 20th century. Despite seeing progress, Gunderson fears that both ESL students and American schools in general are in danger.

Following some statistics showing the increase in ESL students while comparing that to a decrease in ESL student achievement, Gunderson addresses a 2006 study the federal government requested and how the results of that study were ignored by the government. The National Literacy Panel was created to evaluate scientific research on the education of ESL students in the United States. Despite the study's use of scientific or quasi-experimental research, the Department of Education refused to publish the report. Gunderson claims this is because the study found limited support in favor of bilingual instruction over English-only instruction, which goes against the requirements in the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind legislation.

Gunderson then explains there are two major difficulties in conducting truly scientific research about secondary ESL. First, the definition of ESL is broad and encompasses students from different countries, cultures, and prior educational experiences. Second, it is nearly impossible to conduct scientifically controlled research in a high school setting. He concludes his commentary with a call to action, almost begging for an educational impetus like the Soviet launching of Sputnik I in 1957. His final thoughts are that improving ESL education cannot possibly be harder to accomplish than sending a man to the moon.

Comments:

I am a former high school teacher, having taught journalism, English, and history in three different secondary schools in two different states. I chose this article by Gunderson because I wanted to learn more about teaching secondary ESL. Gunderson's article omits any talk of theories of learning or teaching and instead focuses on what is happening in ESL classrooms. Although he doesn't explicitly state it, Gunderson seems to support bilingual education in America. He says calls for English-only education are "disturbing" and quotes studies that imply the Bush administration did not publish the National Literacy Panel's study on education because it found support for bilingual education over English-only education.

According to Gunderson's research, secondary ESL education is in trouble. He references studies that show ESL students having a very low graduation rate while stating more research is needed in order to successfully evaluate the current conditions of secondary ESL teaching. One of the studies Gunderson refers to claims that once ESL students reach a certain achievement level, they are no longer included in the ESL statistics (Jiménez and Rose, 2008). I know from personal experience that in North Carolina, data is collected from many categories of students,

including ESL students classified as “limited English proficient” or LEP. Under No Child Left Behind guidelines, at least 70% of students in each testable category must score at grade level in order for the school to be accredited and meet adequate yearly progress (AYP). The students cannot be removed from the ESL category under NCLB.

I agree with Gunderson that there should be more research into secondary ESL education. Most of the chapters we’ve read about theories seem to be geared toward adult learners. As a teacher candidate who hopes to one day return to a high school classroom, I am interested in ways to help secondary ESL students. Unfortunately, Gunderson doesn’t give any specific information about how to improve secondary ESL education. Instead, he bemoans the current state of high school ESL programs and asks for others to join him in research.

Excerpts:

“Teachers have claimed that ESL students bring down the overall learning level (Gunderson, 1985). A large majority in this dated study felt that English should be a requirement for immigration and a prerequisite for admission to their classes. It is shocking to find that these sentiments are still held by secondary teachers in the new millennium (Gunderson, 2007b).”
(Gunderson 2008)

“We need research that addresses the complexities of instruction in high schools rather than research that reduces the issues to fit into controlled and quasi-experimental design [such as the government-commissioned 2006 study by the National Literacy Panel]. Secondary ESL students ... are missing from ‘approved’ research, and teachers are not trained to teach them.”
(Gunderson 2008)

“We have known for about the last 40 years that ESL students are at risk. It seems to me that the lack of success in the teaching and learning of ESL students is a national disgrace and a colossal failure. Why has no progress been made?” (Gunderson 2008)

Questions:

1. What might be some causes of the achievement gap among different groups of ELL? As teachers, what can we do to help all our students succeed?
2. Why do you think qualitative studies about English-language learning are not taken as seriously as their quantitative, or “quasi-experimental,” counterparts?
3. As a future ESL teacher, what are your personal beliefs about having English-language ability as a prerequisite for content area classes?

Citation:

Gunderson, L. (2008). The state of the art of secondary ESL teaching and learning. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(3), 184-188.