

Reflections on 20 Years of ESL Teaching in St. John's: Changes and Challenges

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My career teaching English as a second language (ESL) in K-12 in Newfoundland and Labrador began at the elementary level in 1999 and quickly shifted to secondary. For nearly two decades I have been teaching ESL at one of the largest high schools in the province, and certainly the one with the densest population of secondary English language learners (ELLs). In that time, I have witnessed some changes in the ELL population and the visibility of newcomer students in our schools. However, in some surprising ways, much has not changed at all. In this paper, I present my perceptions of the changes, along with what I feel to be the major challenges still facing schools with regard to the delivery of ESL instruction to newcomer students.

I begin with a caveat. While ESL instruction has a long history in St. John's – over 30 years of full-time ESL teachers to my knowledge – it has not always enjoyed a high degree of detailed record keeping. Even now, data on the success, failure, and graduation rates of ELLs is not readily available. At a time when newcomers were a novelty to the province, it is understandable that an ad hoc approach was taken to data collection. The result is that accurate, accessible, historical data regarding the ELL population and ESL teachers can be elusive. The information that I have included here is based on my personal experience teaching ESL in St. John's over the past 20 years. I have made every effort to corroborate my impressions with fellow teachers who were also present and with available information from the school and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). Any errors are entirely my own.

When I find myself in discussions with people who began working in K-12 ESL in St. John's after I did, I am often told how much the need has grown, how the numbers have increased exponentially, how the learners now face far greater challenges. Indeed, the need is high, the numbers are large, and the challenges are great; however, all those things were also true of learners twenty years ago. By way of example, we now have a large population of Syrian students, refugees from a war that seemed to develop in a peaceful country overnight; twenty years ago, we had a large influx of Kosovars, who also experienced unexpected upheaval from peaceful, productive lives. Twenty years ago, we had large numbers of students from Sudan and Sierra Leone, many of whom had missed years of school due to war and experienced personal trauma; now we have those from the Democratic Republic of Congo and other nations who have experienced a similar fate. In 2006, there were 193 ESL students in the District (Li, 2012). In 2015-16, there were 495 (Collins, Fushell, Philpott & Wakeham, 2017). While the number of students has more than doubled, their language, literacy, and psychological needs and their backgrounds have largely remained unchanged.

The needs are as heightened as they ever were, but in my view, in some ways we address them now no better than we did twenty years ago, although there has been definite progress. The ESL submission to the Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes (Collins et al.,

2017) outlined seven main areas of concern relating to the education of ELLs. These included issues of 1) teacher allocations and student-teacher ratios; 2) the provision of learning resources; 3) the provision of academic supports; 4) the availability of teacher supports; 5) the process of intake and initial assessment; 6) the availability of targeted mental health supports; and 7) the provision of transportation to an essential program. While steps are now being taken, as the Task Force recommendations are implemented, to address some of the most pressing issues, there are still many ways in which ELLs are disadvantaged compared to their Canadian-born peers. (More on this is available in the ESL submission to the Premier's Task Force).

One thing that has changed across the nation as a whole in the past twenty years is the visibility of immigrants and refugees in the public consciousness and overall positive change in views towards immigration (Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2018). Although much work remains to be done, an increased focus on the education of newcomer students has grown along with increases in immigration levels (Brewer, 2016; Ratkovic et al., 2017). In St. John's, some of the positive changes over the years included the creation in 2006 of six permanent ESL positions, which provided job security for a small number of ESL teachers.¹ A review undertaken by the Teacher Allocation Commission (TAC) in 2007 (DEECD, 2007) identified significant concerns regarding the allocations of ESL teachers, especially the high number of schools per itinerant teacher and the allocation of ESL positions based on enrollment in September, rather than on numbers in April of the previous year as is the case for other programs. The Commission recommended that "the current ESL model for teacher allocation be revised to base the allocation upon student enrolments in April of the immediately previous school year and that the base numbers be adjusted to provide a 0.50 teacher unit for every 15 ESL students registered" (p. 116). Also in 2007, an ESL consultant was hired at the provincial Department of Education, the first in over a decade. This led to, among other things,² a review of and revisions to the ESL curriculum, with the introduction of guidelines for service delivery at the K-9 levels, a curriculum guide at the intermediate level, and a partial review of the secondary ESL curriculum.

Since that time, change to the ESL program has been slow. The ratios recommended by the TAC for partial ESL positions and hiring based on April numbers unfortunately never materialized. Hiring of ESL teachers above the allocated permanent positions in the St. John's region is still dependent on the number of students enrolled in September, which may have increased dramatically with new arrivals during the summer and usually continues to increase throughout the year. Of course, the identification and assessment of students, as well as the process of hiring, take time. According to the report of the Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, "Delays in assessment can result in students not receiving ESL services in a timely manner and an insufficient allocation of ESL teachers" (Collins et al., 2017, p. 90). Furthermore, despite a promising start, the review/updating of the secondary ESL curriculum remains incomplete and no curriculum guide exists for the elementary level.

¹ A seventh position was created for the western region at the same time, but I will focus on the St. John's area in this discussion.

² I have listed here only the developments that addressed the delivery of ESL services directly. Many other supporting resources were also developed at the time, such as a handbook and PD for administrators and mainstream teachers, strategies for teaching advanced learners, guidelines for special services assessment of ELLs, etc.

At the same time, the focus of instruction for newcomer students seems to have shifted to a separate program which was implemented in 2007 to bridge the academic gaps for students – both native English speakers and English language learners - who missed years of schooling due to war and displacement. The Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers (LEARN) program, a program initially offered at one high school and one junior high school in St. John's, aims to provide academic support in math, science, social studies and literacy for students who are years behind their grade-level peers due to missed schooling. Given that ESL students at schools in St. John's tend mainly to be government-assisted refugees,³ the provision of academic supports, in addition to quality ESL instruction, is often crucial to academic success. The LEARN program was expanded in 2015, coinciding with the arrival of a large group of Syrian refugees, to three other junior high schools in St. John's (Collins et al., 2017). One recommendation of the Task Force relating to the LEARN program is #59 b) “examining ways to extend access to ESL and LEARN programming in more areas of Newfoundland and Labrador” (p. 92), based on contributions suggesting “that the LEARN program be available at more locations than the current five schools in the St. John's area and be expanded to include younger grades” (p. 92). After much lobbying, a second LEARN position was added at the high school level for the 2018-19 academic year.

Much remains to be done. The Premier's Task Force put forth five main recommendations on multicultural education, two of which relate to the delivery of ESL services. Recommendation #59 speaks most closely to the teaching of ELLs, addressing two of the most pressing problems identified in the ESL submission to the task force: first, improving the student-teacher ratio for ELLs and their teachers and second, establishing standards for the qualifications of ESL teachers. According to the Premier's Task Force, “Statistics show that 495 ESL students in NL received services from 12 ESL teachers in 2015-16, an average of more than 40 students per teacher. Most ESL teachers work as itinerants travelling to the schools and spending as little as two hours per cycle with students” (p. 90). This ratio, it is stated, “does not adequately respond to the complex needs of newcomers” (p. 92). On the issue of teacher qualifications, contributors suggested “that ESL teachers and teachers in the LEARN program should acquire defined qualifications like those required of other specialized teachers” (p. 92). A possible model may be the requirements for French positions, available publicly on the NLESD website, which lists several paragraphs of specific certification and course requirements.

The second recommendation most closely linked to ESL delivery is #58 on the issue of leadership, which suggests the DEECD and districts “designate individuals in leadership positions in their respective organizations to have responsibility for multicultural education to ensure that specialist teachers and classroom teachers receive the direction, support and resources they need to teach multicultural students...” (DEECD, 2018, p. 24). Historically, leadership positions in ESL have been added on to already-existing consultant positions or filled sporadically over the years, so the implementation of this recommendation with the hiring of expert and experienced leaders in ESL and immigrant education would be a welcome development.

³ For example, over 90% of the students on the current ESL list at the high school are government-assisted refugees.

Still, there is cause for hope. Although the issues above largely remain works in progress, the Task Force recommendations seem to have triggered some promising developments in recent months, such as the re-hiring of an ESL Consultant at the provincial Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, a position which had been vacant for over five years (Collins et al., 2017). If the implementation of the other recommendations is equally forthcoming, it will go a long way to addressing the needs of newcomer ESL students in the province.

Progress may be slow, but it is progress nonetheless. As newcomers to Canada continue to assume a more visible place in the public conversation, we can only hope that Newfoundland and Labrador will keep pace. I have always believed that we in Newfoundland and Labrador are in a unique position to develop ESL and academic programming for newcomer students that is second to none, that fully fosters the incredible potential of newcomer students and that can act as an incentive to retain immigrant families in the province. But it will take commitment, coordination, foresight... and ideally much less than twenty more years.

The Author

Dr. Martha Trahey has been teaching ESL for over 25 years and has taught it in a range of contexts. Most of her work has been with refugee youth at the secondary level. Her main research interest is the incorporation of language instruction into content-based second language teaching.

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