

ESL Teachers Matter!

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In 2012, when the U.S. Department of Justice found that Massachusetts had failed to take appropriate action to “overcome the language barriers experienced by ELLs by not defining and mandating the preparation and training for teachers” (McCarthy, 2011), the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) mandated that all in-service core content teachers must obtain a Sheltered English Instruction (SEI) endorsement. In 2014, this endorsement was added to the list of initial licensure requirements. SEI endorsement is earned through completion of a course that tries to prepare content teachers to make their subject matter accessible to English Learners (ELs) at all levels of proficiency and to teach academic language along with academic content. As of early 2016, almost 37,000 Massachusetts educators had earned the endorsement.

As teacher educators and members of the steering committee for the MATSOL Teacher Educator special interest group (SIG), we applaud this movement to make teachers responsible for language development in their content area. However, we are left wondering who, under this new framework, is ultimately responsible for the language development of our ELs? Can this wide distribution of responsibility for language instruction meet the needs of *all* ELs, including subpopulations such as newcomers, students with limited or interrupted education (SLIFE), and ELs with learning disabilities? What is the role of the ESL teacher and how does it differ from that of the core-subject teachers who have been SEI endorsed? Who is responsible to teach our students the language and skills that fall outside any particular

core-subject-matter discourse? Who focuses on oral language learning and the language of social communication? Who is responsible to provide schools with deep knowledge about language and second language acquisition?

We have no quarrel with the underlying philosophy of SEI instruction—namely, that language development must be supported throughout the school day. We agree that SEI teachers must adopt pedagogical strategies that support academic language development along with core academic content, and must find ways to make their curriculum accessible

to all children, including those who come from other language backgrounds. However, SEI is not a substitute for ESL instruction, which focuses specifically on the development of English. Like content-area teachers in math, science, or history, ESL teachers have a deep knowledge of their subject matter, which, in this case, is the English language, the process of language acquisition, and methods of teaching English to ELs. Although SEI-endorsed teachers play a valuable role in supporting the development of language across the curriculum, their preparation to teach language is in no way equivalent to that of the licensed ESL Teacher.


While we applaud the move to equip all teachers with the dispositions and strategies to work effectively with ELs, the ever-growing number of ELs in public schools means that the need for fully-licensed ESL specialists has grown, as well. In fact, the pressure to produce large numbers of ESL specialists has prompted MA DESE to fast-track ESL licensure, allowing practicing teachers to obtain an ESL license simply by taking a test and providing evidence of a practicum experience. This fast-track pathway to licensure does not provide schools and districts with the highly trained ESL teachers their students need. We see a trend emerging in which districts are asking SEI-endorsed core-content teachers to take on an ESL role that goes far beyond their preparation. We worry that Massachusetts may be unintentionally replicating the “submersion” model, in which ELs sink or swim in content classes and never receive the focused support in English language development that they require to succeed academically. Our concerns are especially serious for EL sub-populations that we mentioned earlier—our newcomers, SLIFE students, and students with special needs.

What is the role of the ESL teacher and how does it differ from that of the core-subject teachers who have been SEI endorsed?

In its *Guidance on Identification, Assessment, Placement, and Reclassification of English Learners* (August 2016, p. 16), MA DESE asserts the need to include “systematic, explicit, and sustained development of English as a Second language (ESL)” in all district programs that enroll any number of ELs. However, we believe that, in addition to describing the content of ESL instruction, DESE, along with MATSOL and MATSOL members, needs to reaffirm the essential role of ESL teachers, who have completed rigorous preparation programs that equip them with deep knowledge about how language functions, how it develops, and how it supports content learning.

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We also believe that expectations for SEI-endorsed core-content teachers need to be clarified. Core-content area teachers play a vital role in making academic content accessible to ELs, but, except for those at the highest levels of English proficiency, they cannot provide all the language supports that ELs need. This support is the responsibility of the ESL teacher. Core teachers and ESL teachers play important, but very different, roles. We need both of them, working together, to ensure the success of ELs in Massachusetts schools.

We welcome responses from teacher educators, SEI-endorsed teachers, and ESL teachers. Please e-mail comments or questions to teacheredsig@matsol.org. 

Editor's Note: MA DESE has recently released the Next Generation ESL Project: Curriculum Resource Guide (MA DESE, July 2016), which was developed in partnership with MATSOL as part of its project to develop ESL Model Curriculum Units. The guide addresses some of the issues that are raised in this article, especially the importance of ESL and the respective roles of ESL and SEI teachers. See the article about the Next Generation Curriculum on pg. 6 of this issue.

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