Editorial

This special focus issue of *Prospect* has been planned with the specific purpose of revisiting questions about the nature and value of English as a Second Language (ESL) education within major English-speaking countries. The primary focus of papers in this issue is on ESL education in the schools context, as it is particularly in this context, we believe, that there is a need (once again) to articulate the nature of ESL education and to explain its educational contribution. The papers that make up this issue outline work in ESL education that is taking place in Australia and the United Kingdom (UK).

Clearly there are differences in educational systems and priorities between English-speaking countries such as Australia, the UK, Canada and the United States. However, these countries are similar in that they all have significant numbers of established and more recently arrived immigrants within the general population, and consequently have significant numbers of ESL students within their school populations. In each of these countries there has been recognition that students who are learning English while also learning curriculum content through English have special needs. Although acknowledgment of the extent of such needs has varied between countries, all have responded in one way or another by developing programs specifically designed to assist such students.

Despite what at times have been positive and constructive initiatives, in recent years a common pattern has emerged in these countries where the specific needs of ESL students have been submerged within ‘broadbanded’ pedagogical concerns about mainstream literacy and numeracy standards or about learning difficulties. The result has been that the needs of ESL students have been essentially redefined as literacy needs or special education needs or even more broadly as socio-economic needs.

This process is evident in Australia in the cycles of ‘literacy crises’ that appear every seven years or so (Freebody 1997; Comber et al 1998; Luke 2005). In the recent history of education in Australia, for example, the 1997 literacy crisis, which was (de) announced by Minister Kemp in spectacular fashion on the *Sixty Minutes* television program, preceded the release of the 1998 Commonwealth ‘Literacy for All’ policy – a policy designed to address the literacy crisis, and one that placed great emphasis on providing remedial programs for students who were deemed as ‘failing’ to achieve acceptable literacy standards. Not surprisingly, many ESL students were included in this category, and one of the consequences of this policy was the redeployment of a number of ESL teachers to remedial literacy programs.
Seven years later, as this Prospect issue goes to press, we hear, once again, that our students are failing to learn to read – this time, because they are not being taught phonics – and that Minister Nelson has announced a review into the ways in which students are being taught to read, presumably with a view to enforcing more extensive teaching of phonics. While most would agree that the teaching of phonics or other ‘basics’ of literacy education constitute important elements in early reading programs, our concern is that these alone are unlikely to address adequately the range of needs that ESL students face as they attempt to engage with the school curriculum in their second or subsequent language. As authors in this issue argue, similar processes of broadbanding have been evident in other English-speaking countries.

There appears to be no single or simple reason for the systematic under-valuing of ESL education in English-speaking countries. Rather, this process appears to result from combinations of policy initiatives that aim to ensure accountability in education and to ensure that all students achieve specific standards. Such policy initiatives are primarily directed to ‘mainstream’ populations of English-speaking students. The process appears also to result from a combination of political, social and economic factors that relate to the times in which we live.

It is not our intention here to analyse in any detail the reasons for the undervaluing of ESL education. Rather, our purpose is to highlight current work, and to make the argument that pedagogical developments in ESL education are substantial and in fact have much to offer the broader context of language and literacy education in mainstream English-medium classrooms.

Major principles that shape this work in ESL pedagogy include:

- recognition that learning, at least in the first instance, is a socially mediated activity (with the implication that although we are biologically endowed with cognitive abilities, the way our consciousness develops depends on the specific social activities in which we engage);

- recognition of the active role of all participants (that is both teacher and students) in the learning process, rather than the foregrounding of either teacher or learner (and hence a by-passing of the unhelpful debate around teacher-directed versus learner-centred pedagogy);

- recognition that knowledge is collaboratively and jointly constructed in and through participation in tasks where all participants are actively involved in negotiating meaning;
• recognition of the key role of language as well as other semiotic systems in learning.

Developments in pedagogy that draw on these principles have not been restricted to the field of second language education. However, educators concerned with the needs of second language learners have made a particular contribution in their emphasis both on the implications of sociocultural theories of learning and on their articulation of the role of language in learning. When working with students who are both learning a language and learning through it, the role of language in learning is necessarily paramount. Thus, while it has been possible for those working in other fields of education to focus on ‘content’ and to pay little, if any, systematic attention to the role of language in the learning process, that has never been an option for ESL educators.

Recognition of the central role of language in learning has meant that ESL educators have long drawn on insights from linguistics as well as sociology and psychology in developing pedagogical practices. In recent years the integration of socially oriented theories of language with sociocultural theories of learning have been particularly productive. A key theoretical foundation of this integration has been the notion of language as a social semiotic – a theoretical perspective that, in turn, enables articulation of the interrelationship between language and the context in which it occurs; articulation of the relationship between language and curriculum content; and articulation of the role of language as a resource for making meaning. Such a perspective sits comfortably with a sociocultural view of learning. As Hammond (2001: 21) has argued previously, if language constructs meanings, then teaching and learning must be understood as being centrally concerned with constructing shared understanding and shared knowledge. Such understandings and knowledge are constructed, in the first instance, in and through the spoken language interactions that occur in the classroom between teacher and students, and between students.

It is through articulation of the role of language in learning, and in the development of pedagogical practices that are designed to address the needs of students who are learning in their second or subsequent language, that ESL educators are able to make a special contribution. The nature of their dual focus on language and on learning contributes a dimension to educational work that has not always been given sufficient prominence. An outcome of such work is an emphasis on the importance of supporting-up (scaffolding) ESL students, as an alternative to simplifying the curriculum. It is our argument that such work not only has much to offer ESL students,
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it also has much to offer other students who need support as they grapple with intellectually challenging curriculum concepts and with the academic genres and registers of English that will enable them to talk, read and write about such concepts.

The papers in this issue outline a range of current theoretical and pedagogical developments in ESL education in Australia and the UK. All draw in various ways on socially oriented views of learning and language, with three of the five papers (Hammond and Gibbons; Michell and Sharpe; and Dufficy) drawing specifically on the metaphor of scaffolding and on the intersection between sociocultural theories of learning and systemic functional linguistics.

In the Australian context, Hammond and Gibbons’ paper explores the notion of scaffolding that was developed as a result of a three-year research project, which aimed to examine how scaffolding is enacted in the reality of the classroom. Drawing on the conventions of networks in systemic linguistics, they present a model of scaffolding that shows its realisations at both the macro level of the teaching program and the micro level of teacher–student interactions.

Drawing on the same project, Michell and Sharpe present a complementary model of scaffolding grounded within a contextual framework, and underpinned by sociocultural and activity theory. Based on an analysis of two secondary classrooms, their paper presents scaffolding as a complex, collaborative, multi-modal and task-enabling activity.

Dufficy’s and Wallace’s papers both emphasise the linguistic and cultural resources that young ESL learners bring to their education in English-speaking schools. Dufficy continues the scaffolding theme by drawing on data taken from a Year 3/4 multilingual classroom in Australia. He explores how, through their interactions with children, teachers can expand children’s talk roles in the classroom. His paper shows how increasing the authenticity and symmetry of the interactions not only increases the students’ engagement with the language and content of the curriculum, but also assists them in seeing themselves as capable doers and thinkers.

Wallace’s paper articulates the rich resources available to young bilingual learners through their home literacy practices. Drawing on a case study of four young children in a UK primary school, she highlights the inadequacy of positioning such learners as ‘remedial’ or as ‘failing to meet required standards’. Wallace argues that these rich resources are frequently unacknowledged in schools’ literacy teaching, thereby not only disadvantaging the children themselves, but also denying other learners the benefit of the resources these learners bring to the classroom.
The final paper by Leung takes a broader policy perspective on ESL teaching and learning in the context of the UK. He argues that while the current policy is motivated by principles of access to educational provision, the development of pedagogy for English language learners has received insufficient attention. Central to this issue is the need for appropriate teacher development. This point is a critical one in both countries represented by this issue of Prospect. As each of the papers demonstrates in different ways, teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the role of language in learning, their understanding of the specific needs of their ESL students, and their recognition of the resources these learners bring to the classroom are central to the development of effective ESL pedagogy.

REFERENCES


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