
LANGUAGE LIMBO

The urgent need for more ESL instruction in school

By MARCELLO DI CINTIO



HETTY ROESSINGH

IN DECEMBER 2014, HETTY ROESSINGH OF THE University of Calgary's School of Education received a call for help from her colleagues at the Faculty of Engineering. A third of the faculty's first-year students—200 in all—were failing so badly that they were on academic probation. It was not the math that was doing these students in. "Their math marks were good," Roessingh said. The problem was language. The students could not understand their textbooks or decipher questions on their mid-term exams. Somehow, these freshman engineering students had made it all the way through grade school in Alberta and into university without ever learning to read and write in English.

About one quarter of all Kindergarten to Grade 12 students in Alberta do not speak English as their first language. They are either new immigrants or Canadian-born children from homes where English is not the primary language. Such students are identified as English Language Learners (ELLs). In the 2014–15 school year, there were more than 90,000 ELLs in Alberta schools and the numbers are rising. On average, ELL enrolment increases in Alberta by 8 per cent each year—between 6,000 and 7,000 students.

Despite the ever-increasing population of children needing language instruction, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in the province are often poorly funded, under-served and haphazardly administered. In the 2013 Alberta budget, the province reduced the time it would fund an ELL to five years from seven years. The Calgary Board of Education (CBE), realizing the importance of maintaining instruction, decided to cover this shortfall by reallocating budget. In the provincial budget revealed before the 2015 Alberta election, the annual enhanced funding per ELL (the money administrators use to design, implement and staff ESL programs) was to be reduced by \$40 per student to \$1,141. The budget died with the PC government's election defeat, but shows what a low priority English Language Learners were for the previous government.

As the number of young ELLs in the province continues to rise, the consequences of lacklustre ESL programming could be disastrous. The failing freshmen at the U of C represent the tip of the language iceberg. No matter what Alberta students do after they leave school, those who emerge without a grasp of English are linguistically crippled. Roessingh doesn't mince words: "This is going to cost us a generation of good little kids," she says.



HETTY ROESSINGH EMIGRATED TO CANADA FROM Indonesia with her Dutch parents when she was a child. She began life in Canada as an English language learner. Today she is recognized as one of Canada's leading scholars in ESL

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instruction. Her research has consistently shown that the key to achieving proficiency in English is vocabulary. The number of words a student knows makes all the difference. A 5-year-old with good English skills who speaks English at home will know on average 5,000 words. Children from homes where English is not spoken will know far fewer. Professor Roessingh has measured 5-year-olds from immigrant homes who knew as few as 500 words—probably from watching television. "You can only get so far with *SpongeBob Squarepants*," Roessingh says.

They might not get far, but the *SpongeBob* kids can get by, at least for a little while. "They can get away with it until Grade 4," Roessingh says. In the earlier grades, young students can express a basic level of fluency in conversational English using relatively few words. Teachers can be fooled by otherwise chatty and gregarious children into believing their language skills are fine. Much of Roessingh's work revolves around helping elementary school teachers to recognize gaps in their students' vocabularies. Teachers should be able to notice when some of their charges are using made-up words such as "shoeprints" for footprints, or "hospital truck" for ambulance, and others are using more complex words such as "design" instead of "draw" or "construct" instead of "build."

If teachers do not work to enrich and expand their students' vocabularies, the gap between the number of words a child knows and the number they need to know grows exponentially. Without specialized instruction, children missing 4,500 words in Grade 2 might suffer a word deficit of 60,000 by the time they leave high school. "That hole grows over time," Roessingh says.

Sometimes, well-meaning parents inadvertently hinder their children's English language learning. "Elaine Banks" (who wished to speak anonymously) teaches at an elementary school in Calgary's northwest where about a third of her students are English Language Learners. She noticed that the ELLs who do best in her class are those who have a solid foundation in their primary language first—a phenomenon that Roessingh's research also bears out. "The biggest problem we have is that parents think they should speak English to their kids at home," Banks says. The parents have the best of intentions, but since many don't speak English well themselves, they end up teaching their children poor English. "The kids lose their own language and are not getting good foundation in the new language," Banks says. "We try to tell parents to speak whatever language you normally speak at home. Speak it well. Teach your children to write it. If they know grammar in Urdu, say, they will learn English better. They will get it."

MOST OF CALGARY'S IMMIGRANT students begin their Canadian school experience at the CBE's Kingsland Reception Centre. Teachers at the centre assess and score the English language proficiency of students before assigning them to a school. The assessment rates a student's Language Proficiency (LP) level with a number from one through five. Students with LPs of one or two will require specialized ESL education, while those with higher LPs will be integrated into regular classes.

The structure of English language learning the students receive varies from school to school. A high school student with an LP of one or two will likely sit in ESL classes designed "in-house" by teachers to introduce them to the language of social studies, science or math. Most junior high students also have such locally designed courses available to them, in addition to optional classes where they receive more focused English language instruction.

In elementary schools, such as the one where Elaine Banks teaches, English language instruction is integrated into regular classrooms, with pull-out groups providing the extra instruction ELLs need. Due to time and budget constraints, there is only

so much Banks can do for her ELL students. She will teach a concept to the class, then, while the other kids are working at their desks, she will gather a group who need additional instruction at a "circle table." The system is not ideal, as students with language difficulties end up grouped with a whole spectrum of special-needs children. "I think they are doing okay," she says. "I can't say we are failing them. But we can do better."

Whether or not students succeed in these programs, they are usually moved through the grades. Even kids with stunted language skills are rarely held back. School administrators want students in age-appropriate classrooms and hope that differentiated language instruction will allow the ELLs in their care to eventually catch up with their peers. "But this is not what we are noticing," Roessingh says. "What we see over time is a growing number of boys and girls whose language falls farther and farther behind." She has assessed Grade 12 students with a Grade 5 reading level.

Many of these students make it into post-secondary institutions anyway by relying on their good grades in math and science. "We've seen kids who repeated English 30 five times," Roessingh says. "They finally get a marginal pass and think 'I am in Engineering now. I am never going to have to

FAST-CHANGING ALBERTA

NEARLY 20 PER CENT of Albertans are foreign-born, with the number highest and rising fastest in big urban centres. By 2020, for example, Calgary's immigrant population—both permanent and non-permanent residents—is expected to grow from about 304,000 to half a million. The Philippines, India and China are the leading source countries for immigrants to the province, though people come from all over the world.

Many of these people arrive with limited fluency in English. In the Edmonton public school

system, new immigrants and refugees are given an initial English language proficiency assessment at a reception centre, where a first-language family interview is also conducted. In 2013–14, some 56 different first languages were requested for those interviews. Among the top requests were African languages such as Somali, Oromo and Tigrinya; East Indian languages Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu; Arabic; Cantonese and Mandarin; and Korean.

The need for English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in Alberta has grown dramatically.

In 1999–2000, the first year that Canadian-born ESL students qualified for provincial funding along with foreign-born students, 17,531 ESL students attended Alberta's K–12 public schools. In 2014–15, there were 90,486 students, excluding charter and francophone boards.

The growth in the number of ESL students mirrors Canadian immigration data, which show steady growth provincially and especially in Calgary. Roughly 25 per cent of students in the Calgary Public and Calgary Catholic school systems are now English

Language Learners (ELLs), though the relative proportion of first languages varies between the systems and the number of ESL students is unevenly distributed between schools. In public schools, Tagalog, Punjabi, Spanish, Mandarin and Vietnamese are the most common first languages for ESL students. In the Catholic system, which in 2010 had 114 first languages, the most common, in order, were: Tagalog, Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, Dinka, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Korean, Polish, Amharic and French.

25% 
of students speak a first language that is not English

20%
Growth in Alberta student population 1999–2014

516%
Growth in ESL student population 1999–2014

**TAGALOG
PUNJABI
SPANISH
MANDARIN
VIETNAMESE** } Most common first languages of ESL students in Calgary public schools

read Shakespeare again. I am done. My math will get me there.” But they are wrong. “It is not impossible, or even rare, to see students score 100 per cent on their math diploma, then come to university and fail their first semester,” Roessingh says. Her research shows that the strongest predictor of how well a student is going to do in engineering school is not math grades, but the mark received on the English 30 diploma exam.

In an effort to assist U of C’s failing engineering students, Roessingh designed a free ESL program for them. Not a single student signed up. The program was not compulsory and offered no course credits, and short-sighted students didn’t see its value. Most had a difficult time even acknowledging that they had a language problem. English, after all, was the only language some of these students understood. They just understood it poorly. Even if those students who manage, over six years or more, to squeak through university with an engineering degree, they do so with such a low GPA that no one will hire them. “Where we find these kids way too often is selling cell phones at the Telus booth in Market Mall,” Roessingh says.



A student’s ability to learn English can be affected by many factors, including age upon arrival; literacy level in the home language; prior experience with English; and the similarity of a home language to English, which is a Germanic language closer to German and Dutch than to, for instance, Slavic languages such as Russian or Sino-Tibetan languages such as Mandarin. Still, regardless of home language and country of origin, research shows it takes at least 5–10 years for a student to acquire an English language proficiency that includes abstract

concepts and complex language structures.

For Alberta’s students, the earlier language proficiency is acquired, the better. “Estimating the hours of intervention needed to equalize children’s early experience makes clear the enormity of the effort that would be required to change children’s lives,” wrote US researchers Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley in their 2003 paper “The Early Catastrophe,” which found early experiences with language were predictive of later life outcomes. “The longer the effort is put off, the less possible the change becomes.”

TAGALOG
SPANISH
VIETNAMESE
ARABIC
DINKA



Most common first languages of ESL students in Calgary Catholic schools

114 

The number of first languages spoken in Calgary Catholic schools

HIEU VAN NGO IS ANOTHER ALBERTAN who fears for the future of the province’s English Language Learners. Like Roessingh, Ngo had to learn English when he arrived in Calgary as a refugee from Vietnam in 1990. He was 18 years old and enrolled in an ESL program at Crescent Heights High School. At that time, such language instruction in Calgary schools was delivered in a consistent and structured way. Ngo studied non-language-intensive subjects such as mathematics and physics with the general student population and, for the language-heavy subjects, attended ESL classes where qualified specialists taught needed language skills.

Ngo’s ESL teachers stuck to the Alberta Education core curriculum but added emphasis on language development. Ngo read *Macbeth* just like everyone else at Crescent Heights, but he and his ESL classmates studied the play with a greater focus on learning Shakespeare’s vocabulary. The same was true in his ESL social studies classes. Instead of giving students a textbook and telling them to read about Canadian colonization, Ngo’s ESL teacher handed out sheets that explained key concepts in simpler language the students could understand. Gradually, as their English language skills improved and their vocabulary caught up, the school integrated Ngo and his peers into mainstream classes.

The well-designed and properly funded ESL instruction that taught Ngo English eroded soon after his graduation. When Ralph Klein became premier in 1992, he decided to eliminate Alberta’s provincial debt. In 1994 Klein slashed education funding by a quarter of a billion dollars, part of a 12.4 per cent cut over four years. He took more than \$1-billion in education property taxes from local school boards. These local taxes had provided 50 per cent of ESL program funding. ESL programming in the CBE suffered an 80 per cent reduction in funding. Kindergarten programs—which Roessingh deems essential for young ELLs—were eliminated.

Vocal English-speaking families managed to claw back funding for half-day kindergarten, but immigrant families clamouring for ESL support were easier to ignore. “The government assumed that ESL kids and their parents don’t speak English and so no one will come out and protest,” Ngo said. Instead, people were outraged. The ESL community held a demonstration in front of the CBE in 1992.

The Klein cuts to ESL spurred the creation in 1993 of the Coalition for Equal Access to Education (CEAE). Hieu Van Ngo joined the organization and eventually became its chair. In 1998 CEAE successfully fought new legislation that would have made ESL funding available only to immigrant students, a rule with dire consequences for Canadian-born children living in homes where English is not spoken. The following year, CEAE defeated an illogical cap on the number of students who could apply for ESL funding each year. In 2000 the Coalition stopped a move to reduce the number of years a child could receive ESL funding.

For all these wins, ESL programming still suffered many

losses in the 1990s. Funding cuts across the board meant fewer ESL classes and fewer specialist teachers. In 1992 one of the teachers “surplused” from her ESL teaching job was Hetty Roessingh. After losing the job she had held since 1980, she enrolled in a university doctoral degree program. By the time she was ready to return to the CBE in 1995, there were no jobs left for ESL teachers. The structured and effective ESL classes that Hieu Van Ngo attended as a high-schooler had disappeared. ESL instruction has never truly recovered.

Alberta Education is fond of saying that “all teachers are ESL teachers.” But just saying it does not make it so.



PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT OBSTACLE TO effective ESL instruction in Alberta schools is the absence of specialized language training for Alberta’s teachers. Neither the University of Calgary nor the University of Alberta offers ESL training for Bachelor of Education students. Students graduating with teaching degrees are not trained to deal with the ELLs, an expertise gap that troubles language education advocates like Ngo and Roessingh. Were she “queen for a day,” Roessingh would make ESL training mandatory in B.Ed. programs. Considering the thousands of ELLs in the province, this sounds like common sense. Alberta Education is fond of saying that “all teachers are ESL teachers,” but saying it does not make it so. Roessingh and Ngo believe education grads must emerge from their programs with a sense of who these children are, what they need and how to help them.

Elizabeth Spittal-Cote, co-ordinator of the CBE’s Kingsland Reception Centre, objects to the idea that all teachers are ESL teachers. “The truth is that we are all teachers of [ESL students]. They are in almost every one of our classes. To say that I am an ESL teacher is not true according to my training.” Teachers in the system realize there is a gap in their knowledge when it comes to ESL, and many seek out training and professional development on their own time. The Kingsland Reception Centre runs a five-day institute in the summer on English language development for teachers willing to give up some of their vacation time. According to Spittal-Cote, these classes fill up every year. “Do our teachers know they need to know more? Yes. Do they want to know more? Yes. Are they going to do it on their own time? Yes.”

Still, relying on teachers to fit extra training into their busy schedules is hardly the solution. Most teachers simply do not have the time. Teacher Elaine Banks acknowledges that she could use specialized training. “The CBE offers ESL training and professional development,” she says. “You have to sign up and get a sub, and they might have only 30 spots in Calgary for that session. Because I am part time, it is not as easy to figure out how to get those sessions in.”

SOME ALBERTA SCHOOLS ARE DOING better. But the school that truly “gets” ESL is outside the public system. At the Almadina Language Charter Academy, teaching English is the school’s core mandate. Every one of Almadina’s 1,020 Kindergarten to Grade 9 students are English Language Learners. The C.D. Howe Institute’s 2013 Identifying Alberta’s Best Schools report noted the excellence of Almadina students in provincial exams. More telling was that Almadina exceeded what would be predicted from a school with Almadina’s “socio-economic environment”—a measure including household income, rates of single parenthood and percentage of recent immigrants. “Our students shouldn’t be succeeding the way they are,” says superintendent Yvonne DePeel.

Almadina enjoys a long partnership with Hetty Roessingh, and her influence is evident. A “word wall” where teachers post words and definitions related to current lesson plans is a nod to Roessingh’s emphasis on vocabulary enrichment. The school employs a full-time English language co-ordinator and caps class size at 25 students. The school is like a laboratory of English language learning where administrators stay updated on research and educational technology.

Shakila Raja, principal of Almadina’s Mountain View campus, taught previously in the public system. The approach to ESL instruction in regular schools frustrated her. “People can say they support English language learners,” Raja says, “but where is the resource allocation? You have to actually designate resources for English language learning and have staff. Who is supporting teachers in a regular school?”

Almadina’s English language learning is embedded in every program of study, including in subjects such as math. Jamal El-Rafih, now principal at Almadina’s Ogden Middle School Campus, taught math when the school first opened in 1996. “My first co-ordinator had some issues with me,” he admits. El-Rafih wanted to teach algebra and integers as he always had, but the co-ordinator insisted he focus on vocabulary. “It took me a while. A year. But you see the results.”

Alberta’s 90,000 ELLs could benefit from Almadina’s expertise if that



ARCHIVE: “Over the Rainbow” by Cheryl Mahaffy (Mar/Apr 2002) albertaviews.ab.ca/archive

school’s methods were imported into the public system. We need to recognize the changed reality in Alberta classrooms. All public teachers need some ESL training, and ESL specialists are a requirement in many schools. The system must have adequate and stable government funding for ESL instruction.

Hieu Van Ngo believes that ELLs should not be viewed through a lens of pity. Ngo didn’t want to be wept for as a Vietnamese “boat person” when he arrived in Canada back in 1990, and he won’t cry for the Sudanese “lost boys” who call Alberta home now. “Instead, I want them to know that their life story is really rich, that if I invest in them they can help a generation of Albertans appreciate the global condition.” ■

Marcello Di Cintio is the author of Walls (Goose Lane), the winner of the 2012 Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for political writing.