

# Second language acquisition

## Patricia Mertin discusses strategies for success

Among many variables in an international school are the number of students in need of English as a Second Language instruction. Each school is a special case. Not only can we not rely on a set number of these students but we also rarely know when they are coming or what their level of English will be and, at least in advance, how we can accommodate them best.

Düsseldorf, for a variety of reasons, attracts a large Japanese business population. In fact there are so many Japanese citizens resident in the Düsseldorf area that for some years now they have had their own kindergartens, an elementary school and a middle school.

However when the students graduate at the end of ninth grade, there is no high school for them to go to. They are faced with the choice of going back to Japan without their families, going to a Japanese boarding school or coming to the international school. As these students graduate from ninth grade in January each year, we in ISD get set to welcome a group of between 12 and 15 students, whose total school experience has generally been only the Japanese system.

Coming in the middle of the school year as a group presents a number of problems. How do we give them equal access to the curriculum, address their language learning needs and integrate them into our ninth grade successfully? Over the years a number of strategies have been tried but the most successful so far was implemented last year.

The director, Neil McWilliam, hired a new ESL teacher just for these students. Our goals were two-fold: on one hand to make learning English fun and enjoyable; but also to prepare as many of these students as possible to join the mainstream class in tenth grade. Their timetable was designed to give them maximum English language input balanced with a solid course of academic content. The class consisted of 16 Japanese students and one Korean student.

On their first morning they were each assigned a 'buddy' at a welcome party. The buddy was to show them around, help them with the daily routine and check up with them at break and lunch times. During class time, they were working together as a group which of course limited their real contact with the mainstream students. The fact that they all knew each other well from the Japanese middle school also made it more difficult to get them to integrate than had they been separate new arrivals. Furthermore, the importance of the group in Japanese culture and the maintenance of

group harmony made individual students reluctant to break away from the dominant group.

We quickly discovered that our emphasis on academics and language acquisition had left too little chance for sports or the arts, so there was fine tuning to be done. The students worked with other teachers besides their main ESL teacher, Maria Perreau, but she became the person they relied on most. They were taught Mathematics, Science, Humanities, to give them the language of the subject matter and English in a variety of ways focussing on the four skills. As they had been learning English for a number of years, in theory, they had a good command of the grammar but, because of the culturally different teaching methods, they had had very little chance to use their knowledge of the language independently or extensively. They were unused to communicating in English or using the language for learning other subjects.

The culmination of this intensive language and content learning experience was a two-week summer programme aimed to give the students opportunities to use their English outside school and in variety of situations. Several CAS students joined in the activities to increase opportunities for communication.

The activities included field trips with visits to local museums and other places of interest as well as a one-day canoeing trip on the river Niers. Between the activity days the students were in school practising their academic English skills but with new topics to write about.

All-in-all the programme was a great success. The students were highly motivated and several of them were able to move into mainstream 10th grade classes after the summer break. This January we repeated the programme with a number of changes. The students are joining in the arts programme of music, drama or art. They are also able to join the choir or band and they will have three periods of physical education per nine-day cycle.

We plan to repeat the summer programme and have high hopes that this venture will provide these young people with the opportunity to learn English and content to a standard which will equip them for the tenth grade mainstream classes, and be a thoroughly enjoyable experience for all concerned.

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