

# English Language Learners Speak Out

by Sally Ringdahl

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I am a teacher in a Vancouver secondary school where I teach a unique English Language Learners (we call it ESL) class designated for students who have had very little formal education for a variety of reasons. Mostly from rural parts of Asia and Africa, these students are recent arrivals from cultures where required life skills don't include literacy. This ESL class prepares them for entering regular instruction and the students move in and out of the class during the year, according to their needs.

The learners are often very shy and lacking in self-confidence, and therefore, most of their associations remain within their own ethnic group. We wanted to take them on a field trip to meet another ESL class at a different school in the district, so the teachers provided a structure and together with the students, we created a plan.

Our class decided that we needed a 'script' to make conversation easier. The students asked their classmates who would do the speaking and they chose one boy and one girl. Together we came up with a list of greetings, statements and questions that shared who they were. Then the students decided that they needed to practice before they went across the city, so we suggested that they might try out their script on the Advanced ESL class down the hall.

The Advanced class was a much higher level group, not only language-wise but socially as well. Many of these students were top athletes, and had expensive clothes and friends who weren't ESL students. Needless to say, our first year students were quite intimidated by these advanced students and ordinarily avoided contact with them, only admiring from afar. However, armed with their scripts, they trooped down the hallway to meet them.

Everyone squeezed into the small crowded classroom and immediately we could see that the usual self-consciousness our students displayed was gone. The chosen speakers introduced the class and their courage prompted others to join

in. Each of our students carried a set of questions (shown in the figure below) and quickly were matched up with a student from the other class.

<p><b>Questions for each student:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is your name? your language? your home country?</li><li>• How long have you been in Canada?</li><li>• How did you feel when you left your country?</li><li>• Why did your family decide to come to Canada?</li><li>• How does life in Canada differ from life in your first country?</li><li>• How did you feel when you first came to Canada?</li><li>• Who came to visit you at first?</li><li>• What do you like best in Canada?</li><li>• When someone says bad things to you, how do you feel? How do you respond?</li><li>• How do you feel when you don't understand?</li><li>• How do you feel when you meet discrimination? What do you do?</li><li>• How do you feel when people laugh at your English?</li><li>• When you are hurt, who helps you?</li><li>• Do you like your school? Why?</li><li>• What don't you like about Canada?</li><li>• What do you want us to know about your country?</li><li>• What are you interested in?</li><li>• What sports do you like?</li><li>• What do you do when you are not in school?</li><li>• Where do you go after school?</li><li>• What do you talk to your friends about?</li><li>• What job do you want to have after graduation?</li><li>• Which classes are you in?</li><li>• If you had a pet, what would it be?</li><li>• How do you get to school?</li><li>• Do you have a counsellor at your school?</li><li>• Do you have brothers or sisters? How many?</li><li>• What are the names of your best friends?</li></ul>	<p><b>Questions about your class:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How many students are in your class?</li><li>• Why does your class want to visit us at Tupper?</li><li>• What questions do you want us to answer?</li></ul> <p><b>Questions about your school:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is the name of your school? How many students are in your school?</li><li>• Our mascot is a tiger. Does your school have a mascot?</li><li>• What is the name of your principal?</li><li>• Where is your school? What time does school start? When do you go to school?</li><li>• How much are your school fees?</li><li>• Do you have dances in your school? parties?</li><li>• How are your teachers helpful? How do your teachers treat you?</li><li>• What do you learn from your teachers?</li><li>• Are the lessons hard or easy?</li><li>• Are you comfortable in your cafeteria? How many chefs are in the cafeteria?</li><li>• What do you think about your school? What is your favourite thing about your school?</li><li>• We have ROARS as our code of conduct. Do you have a code of conduct?</li><li>• How many students are in your school?</li><li>• Tell me about your basketball team. Your wrestling team. Your soccer team.</li><li>• What field trips does your school attend?</li><li>• How many ESL students are in your school? What countries are they from?</li><li>• Does your school have guitar classes? a choir?</li><li>• Do you have a Homework Club after school?</li></ul>
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Soon the conversation took on a life of its own. It was spectacular to watch our class become so engaged, so alive, and all the students were very interested in finding out about each other and hearing the answers.

When the meeting was over, the students gave us some unexpected feedback. The questions had been designed as a ploy to increase student interest in this effort. However, both sets of students indicated that they were disappointed that they hadn't organized enough time to go through all the questions and hear everyone's answers. It was a good lesson for teachers that 'student engagement' means just that – the students want to have follow through.

After this meeting, the class and teacher organized the questions into categories for future discussions:

- 1. Leaving** – e.g., What was it like leaving your country?
- 2. Trip to Canada** – e.g., What happened during your trip to Canada?
- 3. Life in Canada** – e.g., Tell me about your life in Canada. What is easy and what is difficult?
- 4. Life at school** – e.g., Tell me about your life at school. What is easy and what is difficult?
- 5. Picture of a Canadian** – e.g., Show a picture and name 3 adjectives to describe a Canadian.

Since that time, we have visited other classes at our school, such as the Social Justice 11 class. Once again, our ESL students used written prompts to talk about their lives and their cultures, amazing the 'city kids' with their esoteric knowledge. University researchers have visited our class on several occasions, and one professor asked an ESL student, "Don't you get tired of talking about yourself and where you come from?" The student replied, "No, because this is the only place where people care. Most teachers in my home country would never bother with refugees."

Communicating with their schoolmates was very valuable, not only for our class but for the entire school community. We have seen how these ESL students model their cultural social graces, such as politeness and kindness, for others in

the school. Even though many of the Vietnamese students are smaller in stature than their Canadian peers, several have excelled at wrestling and won medals at provincial meets, which has impressed everyone at our high school.

The major learning for our teachers was that we don't need to do dramatic things like field trips and writing to children across the globe to broaden the horizons for our ESL students. It can happen right down the hall!

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