

# Teaching ESL in English in Quebec: A Necessity?

Thierry Karsenti, Université du Québec à Hull  
Jessica Saada, Collège Edouard-Montpetit  
Stéphanie Demers, Université du Québec à Hull

IN QUEBEC SCHOOLS, ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) IS TAUGHT USING VARIOUS PROPORTIONS OF FRENCH AND ENGLISH. IN FACT, IN SOME OF THIS PROVINCE'S INSTITUTIONS, ESL IS TAUGHT IN FRENCH ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL. HOWEVER, THERE ARE MANY GOOD REASONS TO TEACH ESL IN ENGLISH. FIRST, IN THE CONTEXT OF QUEBEC, THE TEACHER MAY PROVIDE THE STUDENTS' ONLY EXPOSURE TO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. SECOND, IN KEEPING WITH EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING STRATEGIES, IT SEEMS IMPORTANT TO TEACH STUDENTS TO AVOID TRANSLATING FROM THEIR MOTHER TONGUE INTO ENGLISH AND TO ACTUALLY HELP LEARNERS THINK IN THEIR SECOND LANGUAGE. FINALLY, THE PURPOSE OF ESL AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL IS TO GET THE STUDENTS SPEAKING AND WRITING IN ENGLISH.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE IS THEREFORE TO HIGHLIGHT SEVERAL MEANS THROUGH WHICH TEACHING ESL IN ENGLISH MAY BE ACCOMPLISHED. A NUMBER OF STRATEGIES MAY BE EMPLOYED TO GET MEANING ACROSS IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE WITHOUT RECOURSE TO THE STUDENTS' FIRST LANGUAGE. THESE CAN BE GROUPED INTO THREE BROAD CATEGORIES: CONTEXTUAL STRATEGIES, COGNITIVE STRATEGIES, AND VISUAL STRATEGIES.

### CONTEXTUAL STRATEGIES

According to Terroux (1995), contextual strategies include the use of opposites, simple definitions and synonyms, as well as the referral to the context (in which the word is used) and the description of how an object is used or what an agent does. They involve employing the word in such a way as to promote understanding of its meaning.

#### Opposites

A word may be explained by comparing it to its opposite. For example, a statement such as "*Gentle is the opposite of rough*" does in fact convey the meaning of the adjective "gentle". Another example would be to state that "*Shallow is the opposite of deep*", this in order to define the word shallow. It must be noted that the antonym should be a familiar and accessible word. As the word "rough",

for instance, is part of the French slang in Quebec, its meaning might be more accessible to the second language learner in this context.

#### Simple Definitions

Teachers may also give definitions composed of simple words appropriate to the students' level of language acquisition, utilizing a synonym or a familiar word with similar meaning. However, especially when working with beginners, teachers need to remember that the definitions need not be extremely precise. For example, the word "huge" may be defined by saying that huge means big, or "forlorn" may be defined as lonely. The latter word in both cases, though not an exact synonym, can be more readily understood and does suggest similar signification.

#### Context

Meaning may also be conveyed with

the use of context in which the word is used. If, for instance, you were asked to define the word "sleewy" (word invented for the purpose of this article), you might not know what to say. However, if you were told that when it is -30°C outside, people are often sleewy, or that when you are sleewy, you should wear a jacket, you might guess that sleewy means cold.

#### Use

Describing how a given object is used can also convey the meaning of a vocabulary item and promote recall. It may be as simple as stating that "*you wash your hands with soap*" to convey the meaning of soap or that you "*bake bread in an oven*" to help students understand the word oven.

#### What the agent does

Specifying what an agent does also provides contextual clues for comprehending meaning (Terroux, 1995). In this light, students can be told that "*a wolf howls*", "*a bird whistles*", and so on. The meaning of howl and whistle is better understood within this context.

### COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Cognitive strategies include cognates, cognitive islands, identifying the odd one and various graphic organizers such as webs and semantic networks. In general, since it is both easier to teach and learn vocabulary when it is organized (Brown, 1994), students tend to learn more words when they are made aware of the vocabulary to be learned.

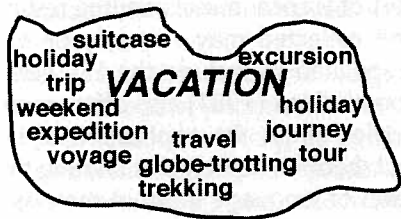
#### Cognates

Cognates are words that have the same meaning and sound in two different languages. For the most part, these words can be used to help learners expand their vocabulary (Nunan, 1994). In the case of English and French, these include words such as hamburger and *hamburger*, table and

table, dangerous and *dangereux*, and so on.

**Cognitive islands**

Cognitive islands are used when several items of vocabulary are to be taught. Words are presented in groups, highlighting the relationship between them. For example, a cognitive island could be used to contextualize and convey the meaning of words pertaining to "vacation" by including words such as suitcase, trip, holiday, weekend, and so on. (Figure 1).



**FIGURE 1**  
*Example of a Cognitive Island.*

**Webs**

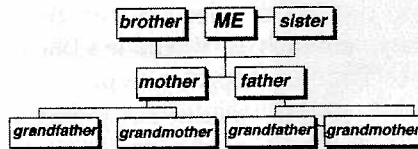
Webs and other graphic organizers are similar to cognitive islands in that they also organize vocabulary to promote understanding and recall by establishing the relationship between words. Webs, which are also known as semantic maps, are created when students write down words which they associate with the topic being studied. They connect these words in such a way as to display the interrelationships within and across subtopics (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). For instance, a Web built around the concept of superheroes might resemble Figure 2.



**FIGURE 2**  
*Example of a Web.*

**Semantic Networks**

Semantic networks can also convey depth of meaning by associating vocabulary items which share semantic features or components, while highlighting similarities and differences. (Nunan, 1994 ).



**FIGURE 3**  
*Example of a Semantic Network.*

Another variation of this exercise is known as "Spot the Odd One out", in which students must find the word that does not belong to the given semantic network.

**Visual strategies**

Visual strategies include mime as well as the use of authentic objects, mnemonic, thematic, semantic, idiomatic, and cultural pictures.

**Mime**

Mime is especially useful for conveying the meaning of actions and feelings. For example, a teacher can mime the words "waving" or "yawning", or "to be nervous", rendering these words easier to comprehend than they would be with a verbal explanation. Mime is also a very effective strategy to teach the present continuous. To get all students involved in a fun activity of this kind, the teacher writes down action verbs on small pieces of paper, which are then put in a hat or container of any kind. A student picks a piece of paper and must then mime the action while classmates try to guess what the verb is, using the present continuous (e.g. "She is jumping" or "He is running").

**Realia**

The use of authentic objects, or realia, to communicate meaning is another

visual strategy. For example, "ladle" is a word that may be difficult to understand if the students depend on the dictionary definition. However, if the teacher brings a small ladle into the classroom, students may immediately infer the meaning of the word.

**Thematic pictures**

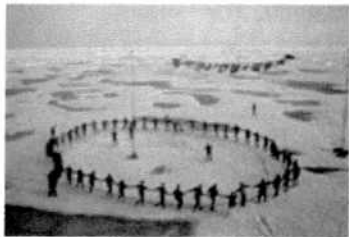
Thematic pictures are visual strategies that are based on a given theme and suggest pertinent information (Terroux, 1992) without conveying specific meaning. They hint at the theme of the lesson and allow students to anticipate possible vocabulary items and guess at the topic of the day's lesson. A lesson structured around Earth Day, for instance, might begin with the presentation of a thematic picture which includes images of nature, of people recycling waste, and so on:



**FIGURE 4**  
*Example of a Thematic Picture.*

**Mnemonic pictures**

Mnemonic pictures, although somewhat ambiguous, serve to help students remember elements of language that have been presented. Students can memorize the meaning of a word by associating it with a familiar visual image, perhaps a geographical location. In this way, the word "freezing" may be linked with a picture of the North Pole, as the word "hot" may be associated with Florida (Figure 5).



**FIGURE 5**

*Examples of a Mnemonic Pictures.*

### Idiomatic pictures

Idiomatic pictures can convey the meaning of an idiomatic expression without having to resort to verbal explanation exclusively. As these expressions are often cultural and as the references that would help to define them are not always easily accessible to elementary ESL learners, an image truly can be worth a thousand words. For example, the expressions "a bull in a china shop" and "monkey business" may be best explained and made more amusing in this way:



**FIGURE 6**

*Examples of Idiomatic Pictures.*

### Cultural pictures

Cultural pictures are pictures that assist in the comprehension and recall of vocabulary items related to elements of culture, such as cultural events. For example, the meaning of Valentine's Day is better conveyed by an image depicting cupids, hearts and displays of affection than by a statement such as "Valentine's Day is a celebration of love".



**FIGURE 7**

*Example of a Cultural Picture.*

### PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

Terroux (1992) highlights three practical techniques that can also be applied to teaching English in English. First, the teacher should address classroom verbs, these being verbs which refer to the small number of actions that students perform constantly in the classroom (begin, speak, read, stand up, stop, listen, and other such verbs). Second, the teacher should use common formulas that promote the students' use of the L2 language: "How do you say \_\_\_ in English?"; "What does \_\_\_ mean?"; "I don't understand"; and so on. Finally, the teacher should demonstrate or give examples rather than explain.

While many elements of this article have been inspired by the work of Terroux (1995), who really believes in the importance of teaching English in English, other researchers such as Cook and Swain (1993) have developed theories about the level of input required to maximize second

language acquisition. Many feel that it is beneficial to students to listen to authentic language consisting of judiciously chosen samples of unexpurgated native speech (Cook, 1991). This authentic speech, however, needs to be rendered understandable to the learner in order to be useful. Swain believes that comprehensible input consists of elements known or accessible to the learner, plus foreign elements that will gradually be understood through their association with these known elements. Although her research was conducted in the context of French immersion, the results she collected may certainly be extrapolated to include the ESL classroom. Cook (1991) also offers some advice about the application of input theories, namely that limiting the level of language input in the classroom may deprive students of genuine examples of language use and set a tone for the class that influences much that happens in the second language activities. Cook does warn, however, that teachers are not the only source of input; language also comes from the textbooks and other media used or exposed to and from other students within and outside of the classroom. Finally, he reminds teachers that students learn what they are taught; students taught by listening procedures are better at listening, those taught through reading are better at reading.

### TEACHING ENGLISH IN ENGLISH

It does appear that teaching English in English provides greater opportunities for students to manipulate the elements of the language. Procedures that convey meaning, such as pictorials and cognitive islands, promote the coding process by giving a vocabulary item more than its one verbal reference, thus assisting in the recall of that word and its meaning. Research demonstrates that new items can be stored in long-term memory

only if some form of active involvement on the part of the learner occurs. A learner who has acquired knowledge through active involvement is more likely to retain it than a learner who has merely seen the item and its translation (Nunan, 1994). Meaning gathered through conscious participation becomes specific and learners can eliminate other possibilities once they have a number of references that favor the recall of meaning for a word or an object. The strategies presented here favor the treatment of information at the different sociocognitive levels involved with the process of giving meaning. In other words, they favor the integration or storage of information in the original sensory memory, as well as in long-term memory as representational, referential, and associative meaning. Students may then encode the signification of vocabulary items in ways that favor recall in English, thus promoting language acquisition and opportunities for creative practice.

While the purpose of this article was to demonstrate the importance of teaching ESL in English, and various means through which to do so, it must be noted that many other areas of second language teaching, such as getting the students to speak, are also essential and warrant further investigation.

#### References

- Brown, D.H. (1994). *Teaching by Principles*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Cook, V.J. (1991). *Second language learning and language teaching*. London: E. Arnold.
- Nunan, D. (1994). *Language Teaching Methodology*. New York: Prentice Hall.

Scarcella, Robin C. & Rebecca L. Oxford (1992). *The Tapestry of Language Learning*. Boston: Stern, H. H. (1992). *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University

Swain, M. (1993). 'The output hypothesis: just speaking and writing aren't enough.' *Revue canadienne des langues vivantes* 50(4): 158-164. Press. Heinle & Heinle.

Terroux, G. (1995). *Teaching English in a world at Peace*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 1995.

**Quartet**  
English as a Second Language  
Elementary School Level

The only series planned for a four-level program!

Éditions HRW  
Groupe Éducalivres inc.  
955, rue Berger, Laval (Québec) H7L 4Z6  
Téléphone: (514) 334-8466 • Télécopieur: (514) 334-8387  
Internet: <http://www.educalivres.com>  
InfoService: 1 800 567-3671



**Concordia**  
UNIVERSITY  
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W.  
Montreal, QC. H3G 1M8

#### TESL Centre

Tel. (514) 848-2450 Fax (514) 848-3494

- ♦ **TESL Certificate** A 30-credit program offered to applicants who are certified *or* who have some experience in second language teaching.
- ♦ **B.Ed. in TESL** A 120-credit program leading to provincial certification in Teaching English as a Second language.
- ♦ **M.A. in Applied Linguistics** A 45-credit program offered primarily to university-trained, experienced teachers who wish to pursue graduate study in second language education and applied linguistics.
- ♦ **ESL Credit Courses** A 4-course sequence, for students who must upgrade their reading and writing skills in English for academic purposes.

#### Centre for Continuing Education Language Institute English Language Programs

Tel. (514) 848-3607 Fax (514) 848-2806

- ♦ The courses are designed to meet the needs of students seeking language training for professional, social, and academic purposes. There are three distinct English language programs offered: \* Day intensive - 240 hrs. (8 levels); Evening or Saturday conversation - 40 hrs. (8 levels); and Saturday writing workshops - 40 hrs. (5 levels).
- ♦ **ESP courses and English Proficiency Test preparation courses** are also offered according to demand.
- ♦ **Certificate in Teaching English for Academic Purposes (non-credit):** A Certificate in TEAP is awarded to all in-house instructors upon successful completion of eight full sessions of teaching in each level of the EAP program.