

## ESOL WITHDRAWAL CLASSES: MAKING LINKS THROUGH SOCIAL STUDIES

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### Abstract

The issue of whether to withdraw ESOL learners from their mainstream classes is often discussed among teachers in schools. In this article, we review some arguments in favour of mainstream English language support programmes, and use the case of Warsame to explore why one teacher nevertheless made a decision to withdraw a student for ESOL classes. We explain how she planned and implemented a programme for him through making links with social studies. We draw on concepts from sociocultural learning theory to explain the programme and its success with this learner.

### How should we organise English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programmes in our schools?

These days, most people would argue that English language support in mainstream classes is the most appropriate way to address the English language learning needs of ESOL students in our schools, and we would agree. In-class support can take a variety of forms, such as an ESOL teacher providing one-to-one support in a mainstream class for individual ESOL learners, or a class teacher and an ESOL teacher team teaching. What it means in principle is that students stay in regular mainstream classes and ESOL work is done in a way that involves teachers going to students rather than students going to teachers in specialist ESOL classes.

Perhaps one of the most commonly used and strongest arguments in favour of the mainstream solution is that it allows more time for learning English. If language learning is integrated across the curriculum, then more time can be spent on it than is possible in special-purpose ESOL withdrawal classes (e.g. Vine, 1997).

Collier and Thomas (1999) report longitudinal research in the USA which shows that bilingual programmes are more effective than ESOL-only programmes, but that if ESOL-only is all that is possible, then programmes which are taught through mainstream academic content are more effective than ESOL withdrawal programmes taught through "traditional" language-focused approaches. Their research tracked ESOL learners' scores on standardised reading tests in English through their primary and secondary schooling.

Willett (1995) compares the learning and socialisation of three different-language ESOL girls who form a solid and lasting friendship group, with that of an ESOL boy who does



not have such a support group. She states that "language learning is the process of becoming a member of a sociocultural group. By engaging in the sociocultural practices of the group, newcomers gradually appropriate the languaculture needed to be considered an insider" (1995, p. 475). The important word here is "engaging". Learning is not a one way process by which the individual absorbs knowledge and skills. Knowledge and skills are appropriated through participation and interaction in the development of shared understanding.

The main focus of Willett's study is on the success of the girls in using their combined resources to construct identities that support their movement towards fuller participation in the community of practice of the classroom, and thus forwarding their learning. The position of the boy, however, is different. As the only ESOL boy, Xavier did not find a support group. While he was accepted by the other boys, and made a great effort to be part of this group, the boys were competitive rather than co-operative and he was unable to get the help he needed to get on with his learning. In addition, unlike the girls, Xavier was from the *barrio*, and there was a belief "explicitly stated by several school personnel, that children from the *barrio* were semilingual" (Willett, 1995, p. 497). These factors gave rise to the belief that Xavier needed extra help. He was withdrawn for extra ESOL classes and given ESOL workbooks to use in class. The extra help fits the individualistic approach of traditional learning theories, but from a sociocultural perspective it was harmful. Xavier often cried when he returned to class after ESOL and he refused to use the ESOL workbooks. He was removed from the group he needed to gain fuller access to. The workbooks, which were no more suitable to his needs than the class books, marked him as different; he was denied the chance to perform classroom tasks well and thus marked as deficient.

However, in spite of evidence which suggests withdrawal classes are not generally effective, they are still used in some programmes. In this article, we tell the story of how we designed a programme for one student that involved some withdrawal lessons: Why did we do it? How did we do it? And how did it work?

### **Warsame, an ESOL learner**

Warsame (a pseudonym), a 12 year old Somali student, had been in New Zealand and at an inner city school in Wellington for two years. He was repeating Year 8. Warsame's overall level of English was low. He took part in art and sport class activities, and he was a peripheral participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in group projects where his friendship group supported him. He had a particular problem with speaking. According to family members he was "shy" in his own language. At school, while he communicated within his own friendship group, he did not speak to teachers, nor did he speak publicly in class.



He spoke to his ESOL teacher in one-to-one situations. He would say one word, or one of a small repertoire of short utterances or questions, which she could recognize through familiarity with his way of speaking. When he became enthusiastic and tried to communicate something new or different, it took a major effort of concentration to understand what he was saying. This often resulted in his ESOL teacher saying "pardon" or asking him to say it again, and him feeling disheartened and saying "I don't know".

### **Sonia, an ESOL teacher**

Sonia, the first author, worked ten hours a week at the school for six months as a teacher aide with special responsibility for ESOL students. Although she was employed as a teacher aide, Sonia is a well qualified and experienced ESOL teacher, but this was her first experience of working in a primary school. There were 14 funded ESOL learners at various levels. Sonia mainly worked in mainstream classes to provide English language support for those children.

Sonia was supported in planning her ESOL programme by Elaine, the second author, who was advising the school on ESOL matters at the time. Sonia also attended ESOL teacher "cluster groups" which were arranged by Teacher Support Services advisors. She found those helpful for working through issues. Also, Warsame's class teacher was keen to find ways of helping Warsame more, and was very supportive of Sonia's work.

### **Why withdraw Warsame from his mainstream class?**

Sonia scheduled 45 minutes a day to work with Warsame, and she had to decide whether to spend the time supporting his learning within the mainstream class, or to withdraw him from his class for ESOL lessons.

In reports of a longitudinal study of ESOL children in the first three years of school, Toohey (1996, 1998, 2000) discusses two children. Harvey, unattractive, aggressive and with poor English, is unable to break into friendship groups and remains on the periphery of the larger classroom community. The teacher and Toohey both note that while at first he works fairly well, his learning seems to decline as the year progresses. He does not move towards fuller participation in the class. Amy, on the other hand, is cute, quiet and compliant. She arrives in the class with no English, but she is accepted into the group where her learning is supported and she quickly starts her move towards full participation. Harvey is stigmatised and Amy is petted, constructed identities that arose largely from physical characteristics. Interestingly Amy constructs a different identity in her Chinese-speaking community. Here she is forthright and even bossy with her male peers. Amy has strategically constructed her identities differently in the two groups to achieve her goals.



Warsame was stigmatised linguistically at school, "Warsame can't speak English", but not socially. In Warsame's class, students could sit with whoever they wanted to. Unlike Harvey, Warsame spent most of the time with a friendship group which included a Pakeha student and other non-English-speaking background students. They played together at break times, met after school, and always grouped together for classroom projects. In this community of practice at least, Warsame was a full participant and had been for two years. Despite this, he had not achieved full participation in the whole class community of practice because his low level of English precluded his participation in many classroom activities.

Like Amy, Warsame was "petted" in his group, where his friends helped him too much and had created for him an identity of, "he can't do it, but we love him so we'll do it for him". He did not have to do anything and he was comfortable having others do things for him. For example, on one occasion, Sonia was admiring some work that Warsame had done on the computer in class, when his best friend said, "I typed that. Warsame was too slow." The same friend confided that he had done most of the homework for an ESOL correspondence course that the school had arranged for Warsame. His constructed identity of deficiency expressed itself in two of his favourite expressions: "I don't know" and "You read (do) it".

Warsame's participation in one community of practice, his friendship group, had not helped him gain the English skills that would support his move towards fuller participation in the wider classroom environment. One reason, then, for withdrawing him was to provide an opportunity for him to develop a "can do" identity in the absence of his overly-supportive friendship group.

A second reason had to do with time. Warsame had been in mainstream classes for two years, but appeared not to have made much progress. Much of his class time was spent watching others do, or engrossed in his own thoughts. His class teacher could not spend much time working with him individually, and Sonia's efforts to do so in class were foiled by his friends' "helpful" efforts. For both his class teacher, and for Sonia, it was difficult to establish just what Warsame could do in English.

Sonia was very aware that to withdraw Warsame from what he needed to be a part of, his mainstream class community of practice, was apparently contradictory in intent. However, the time he would spend out of class would be concentrated on skills that he had not appropriated in class and which he urgently needed before his move to an arguably more peripheral or marginal position at high school the next year.

Sonia thus decided to withdraw Warsame from class for ESOL lessons, but she also felt that it was important to tie the work they did in withdrawal classes as closely as possible



with what was happening in his mainstream class. This required a class teacher who was willing to spend time communicating with Sonia about what was going on in the class programme, so that Sonia could link her work with it, adapting and adjusting to address Warsame's academic learning needs, his English language learning needs, and his social needs in terms of seeing himself as an effective member of the school community.

In this discussion of Sonia's work with Warsame, we have drawn on Sonia's planning notes and entries in her teaching diary, entries in Warsame's learning diary, and entries in a notebook which Sonia and Warsame's class teacher used to communicate about their teaching.

### **The project**

Sonia decided to organise their ESOL work around a project on Warsame's country, Somalia. Warsame's classmates were doing social studies projects on Indonesia. Sonia aimed to model her work with Warsame as closely on class work as possible. In doing class related work, the ESOL work was not "taking him away" (Toohey, 1998), but supporting him in appropriating culturally approved, curriculum-relevant knowledge.

For four weeks Sonia and Warsame spent from 10 to 40 minutes a day in the withdrawal class on work relating directly to the Somalia project and Warsame did a great deal of homework and private study and research as well. The project was based on a series of questions, modified and simplified from the class project on Indonesia. Sonia and Warsame used the questions as a basis for reading, vocabulary work, research in books and libraries, sentence construction, paragraph construction, question and answer practice, speaking practice, computer skills and presentation work. In addition, much talk was generated by Warsame's pictures, diary entries and quickwrites, and by library books on Africa and animals. Sonia also included work on pronunciation, intonation and voice projection because the culmination of the project was to be a spoken presentation about Somalia together with a written project which would be hung on the classroom wall along with the other children's projects. To make the spoken presentation, Warsame needed to be heard and understood.

### **How the project worked**

#### ***Macro and micro - setting goals for Warsame***

Wells (1996) describes teacher roles at "macro" and "micro" levels of activity. The macro level sees the teacher as initiator of classroom activity, responsible for leading the activity and ensuring that students have appropriate and challenging goals and that expectations are made clear. The micro level, on the other hand, has to do with how the student takes up the challenge that the teacher has created. The teacher's job here is to support the student in achieving the negotiated goals.



At the macro level, Sonia took the leader role in deciding what they would do and the goals she wanted Warsame to achieve. At the micro level, she would assist him in the use of the tool of the English language to appropriate the skills needed to carry out the task. Sonia set Warsame the goal of making a speech about Somalia using only a key word note card. She believed this was a difficult but achievable challenge for him. She challenged him to do something that he and his teachers thought he could not do, and required standards that were difficult, but within his capability with assistance. She was mindful that the micro level is concerned with how the student takes up the challenge offered by the teacher. Motivating Warsame to accept the challenge, and do more than he thought he could, was a large factor in helping him gain confidence in his own abilities, and construct his identity as a person with skills and expertise in the eyes of himself, his classmates, teachers and other members of the school community.

*Warsame as expert - achieving engagement*

A project on Somalia would parallel the mainstream class work, but would be on material more familiar to Warsame. Constructing Warsame as expert would support opportunities for meaningful communication, where he had knowledge and experiences that she did not, and would therefore involve engaged and thoughtful struggle to co-construct the meaning together. According to Wells and Chang-Wells (1992), talk is "the very essence of educational activity" (p. 26). Sonia was interested in supporting Warsame's thoughtful, engaged talk for making sense of the tool of English language for sharing and appropriating cultural knowledge. If she could get him to talk, she hoped to break down his constructed identity of "Warsame is a great guy and he is good at sport but can't do anything else really".

Engagement or active participation is a basic principle of a sociocultural theory of learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) draw on the traditional idea of apprenticeship to argue that learning occurs through doing and participating rather than through teaching or instruction. Their continuum of levels of participation begins with simply being there, and progresses to full participation in the group. Wells (1996) states that "members engage collaboratively in actions which they find personally meaningful, and socially relevant" (p. 98).

The most meaningful exchanges were, in fact, when Warsame got frustrated with Sonia for not understanding. Here a higher level of engagement occurred and co-construction of meaning began in earnest. Cazden (1988) notes that teacher talk has a lot to do with control, "control of behaviour and of talk itself" (p. 160). Where Warsame was the expert, he had control of the talk. However, not only did Sonia want him to have control of the talk, in order to achieve her goal of ensuring that he spoke, she wanted to construct a situation where he had to talk. In choosing Somalia as the



subject of his work Sonia constructed Warsame as expert, and by turning the tables, put him in a position of having to, as well as wanting to, talk.

Achieving engagement as a total commitment to and absorption in an activity is a major challenge in teaching and learning. It is the macro-level task of the teacher to motivate the student to take up the challenge, to want to do. Over the four week period of the Somalia project, Sonia noted in her teaching diary several occasions when Warsame was fully engaged and dredging to the depths of his knowledge to explain something to her that he knew, and she did not, and that both of them wanted her to know. It was at these points of greatest engagement that his best use of English occurred. In a one-to-one situation it could be argued that both parties are engaging just by being there. While participation of a sort is going on by physical presence, it is at the highest levels of engagement that the most useful learning is likely to occur.

### *Co-construction*

The project was based on a question sheet (see Appendix) which Sonia modelled on the question sheet being used for the Indonesia project in the mainstream class. First, Sonia introduced the idea of a project and gained Warsame's interest. Second, she presented the question sheet to Warsame and explored the meaning of each question with him. Her aim was for him to use as much talk as possible, to provide her with opportunities to understand what he knew and to work out what he needed to complete the task. They spent a lot of time co-constructing the meanings of the questions by, for example, reading the questions, saying the questions, making drawings and diagrams, eliciting, repeating and asking each other the questions. The questions came within Warsame's zone of proximal development (ZPD): "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Unassisted, Warsame could not have understood or answered the questions, assisted he was able to do so. "What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87). Poole and Patthey-Chavez (1994) note that within the ZPD "expert guidance amplifies novice performance, but does so by drawing on novice contributions" (p. 2). This is the notion of co-construction. Wells and Chang-Wells (1992) call it "constructing knowledge together".

Wells (1996) argues that a teacher's role is based on two seemingly conflicting goals of education. The first is cultural reproduction, "the transmission to successive generations of the currently valued resources of the culture", and the second is "the development of individual students in such a way that each is enabled to achieve his or her full potential" (p. 82). Rather than seeing conformity and individuality as incompatible, sociocultural theory views them both as necessary and dialectically related. Wells claims



that "schooling should provide an apprenticeship into the semiotic practices – the ways of making meaning – that are valued in the culture; and that the teaching-and-learning involves an essentially dialogic relationship" (p. 83). This implies that both parties should work together to jointly construct meaning. The roles, however, are not equal. The teacher has the role of leader and guide, and the responsibility of ensuring that the student engages with and appropriates the curriculum knowledge.

Sonia took the role of leader and guide, but further than this, Sonia and Warsame switched expert and novice roles in the process of asking and answering the questions. Warsame had knowledge about his home country, Sonia had knowledge about English. Together they completed the task.

### *Scaffolding and taking ownership*

The four weeks of work on the Somalia project involved Sonia in scaffolding Warsame's learning. Rogoff (1990, p. 94) discusses scaffolding in terms of arranging and structuring learning activities, motivating and focusing attention, simplifying the steps to achievement of the task, as well as modelling the required goal and setting standards. The aim of scaffolding is to foster engaged and participating learners, rather than recipients of input knowledge.

Wells and Chang-Wells (1992) argue that, ideally, learners must take responsibility, or ownership of the project from the outset: selecting the tasks, deciding the means, evaluating the outcomes. "However efficient it is in ensuring the production of acceptable outcomes, therefore, the distribution of responsibility for task performance that vests control in the teacher is not well adapted to the development of knowledge and control by the learner" (p. 56). They allow that, where this ideal situation is not possible, the second requirement is for "appropriate support" that is made available "at the time when it is needed" (p. 56). In Sonia's work with Warsame, she judged that Wells and Chang-Wells' ideal situation was not appropriate. Warsame needed more support and guidance.

A major aspect of scaffolding is providing help as needed, and this implies decreasing the amount of help when it is no longer needed. Another way of looking at this is the learner gradually taking ownership of learning activities. As Warsame became more involved with the project, he did extra work which had not been required by Sonia: he went to the library to get books and maps, he did extra pictures of animals and people. A further step in Warsame taking ownership occurred when he shared his project with his classmates. On his class teacher's suggestion, he went to a small room with two separate groups of classmates, not just his friendship group, and showed his work and answered questions about his project.



## Conclusion

In co-constructing opportunities for talk, Warsame's Somalia project fulfilled both the macro and micro levels of teaching (Wells, 1996). Sonia decided at the macro level that he should do work associated with the required class curriculum, constructed as societally valued, of interest to him and about which he was the expert. At the micro level, he took up the challenge, and together they worked within his zone of proximal development, with Sonia assisting his performance.

Did the assisted performance help to progress Warsame's learning? It goes without saying that working together with an expert will produce a better result on a particular project than a novice doing it alone. However, whether knowledge and skills are appropriated and made available for later use is harder to judge.

We believe the evidence suggests that Warsame did learn from the Somalia project. By producing a unified and substantial piece of work, Warsame challenged his constructed identity of "Warsame can't do it". Warsame made his spoken presentation of two minutes twenty seconds about Somalia to Sonia, Elaine when she was visiting the school, his classmates, his class teacher, the school principal and the school office manager. He also showed his written project to groups of classmates. He proved to himself and others that he could engage with the social studies curriculum, and that he could say more than a word or two.

Two months after Warsame made his spoken presentation, Sonia asked him to say it again into a tape. After noting down the key words, he was able to make his presentation at a standard similar to the original presentation.

The Somalia project generated a lot of talk. The talking carried over into Warsame's mainstream class. Warsame's class teacher observed in her notes to Sonia that "Warsame is definitely talking more".

Warsame subsequently produced a modified project on the class topic of Indonesia. On this project, he worked much more quickly and was able to produce a similar standard of work with considerably less assistance. Also, some time after the project work ended, he wrote a poem about Somalia which was published in the school newsletter.

Warsame's identity began to undergo a change. He was seen more as a person who can do things and take responsibility. He was more a part of the class group, more of an insider in various ways. An example is that, with a classmate who was not a member of his friendship group, he was entrusted with the responsibility of morning break staffroom duty.



In this particular case, ESOL withdrawal classes worked well, because the project work was closely linked with the mainstream class social studies curriculum. Warsame's friends were welcomed when they dropped in to the withdrawal class from time to time - to be nosy, to tease Warsame, or to get him when there was class work they wanted him for, such as rehearsing for a production, or working on a group project. Sometimes he went and sometimes he decided to stay and finish what he and Sonia were doing. Sometimes his friends stayed. Sonia also worked in the mainstream class, both supporting Warsame's English language learning, and trying to educate his friendship group to let him do things himself. In short, the withdrawal work supported his inclusion in the class.

If there had been any sense that Warsame was being stigmatised socially in his classroom, we would have come to a very different conclusion about the wisdom of withdrawing him. As it was, Warsame was very comfortable in class, but not engaging in any significant way with the academic content of the class. There were limits to how much time his class teacher could spend with him. Sonia, on the other hand, had time to wait. She could take her turn in interaction with Warsame, and then wait for him to take the next turn. He did, but on occasion it took him a very long time to make his next contribution to the interaction. In the hurly-burly of the mainstream classroom, the class teacher does not have the luxury of being able to do that sort of waiting on a regular basis. In this particular classroom, there was the additional issue of stopping Warsame's very positive helpers from doing everything for him. The whole school had a very supportive culture, where children supported each other, teachers supported students, and so on, but in this situation, the supportive culture was working against this particular child.

When ESOL students first arrive in a school, a supportive culture is a very positive thing. It leads to social acceptance, advice, helping out, and showing new students what to do. The issue is how to move on from there. For Warsame, the Somalia project served to demonstrate to the student, to his peers, to his teacher and to other members of the school community, that there were certain things that he could do in English, given the time and the appropriate support. That demonstration was an important step in educating his peers, in particular, to move beyond supportive help in their interactions with Warsame.

Our judgement was, and still is, that in this case what Warsame was missing in class was outweighed by what he was gaining from the withdrawal programme.



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## Appendix

### **Somalia Project**

To be handed in in mini project format.

1. Where is Somalia?
2. What is the area of Somalia?
3. What is the capital of Somalia?
4. What are the main cities?
5. Are there any ports?
6. What is the population of Somalia?
7. What ethnic groups are there in Somalia?
8. Where do they live? (e.g. in the south, in the mountains)
9. What languages are spoken in Somalia?
10. What is the currency of Somalia?
11. What is the geography of Somalia? Mountains, flat areas, rivers, lakes?
12. What are the main industries?
13. What are the main products?
14. What are the main exports?
15. What are the main imports?
16. What are the main religions in Somalia?
17. What is the climate of Somalia?
18. What are the popular sports in Somalia?
19. What is the national dress in Somalia for women and for men? (Draw a picture.)
20. Tell me two interesting things about Somalia.

**Draw a large map of Africa. Show Somalia and its neighbours.**

**Draw a large map of Somalia. Show the geography and main cities.**