Language, Literacy, Content, and (Pop) Culture: Challenges for ESL Students in Mainstream Courses

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Abstract: This paper examines issues confronting ESL students in mainstream content areas at the secondary school level. Relevant research on the integration of language, content, literacy, and culture in courses is reviewed, followed by a discussion of findings from an ethnographic study conducted at a Canadian school with a high concentration of Asian-background ESL students. The focus is the discourse contexts for mainstreamed ESL students in two Grade 10 social studies classes. Requirements for ESL students’ successful participation in such courses included, but went beyond, existing prescriptions and practices for students’ integration and academic success. Recorded observations over a two-year period revealed that to succeed in class, students needed to participate in a variety of types of classroom discussion and reading and writing activities; they also needed a current knowledge of popular North American culture, mass media, and newsworthy events; an ability to express a range of critical perspectives on social issues and to enter quick-paced interactions; and a great deal of confidence. Examples of these features of social studies discourse, implications for ESL students and content teachers, and some instructional remedies are presented and discussed.

Résumé: Cet article examine les problèmes auxquels se heurtent les étudiants d’Anglais Langue Seconde (ALS) lors de l’étude de sujets du programme général au niveau de l’école secondaire. L’article présente une évaluation d’études portant sur l’intégration de la langue, du contenu, de l’alphabétisation et de la culture dans les cours. Cette évaluation est suivie d’une discussion portant sur les résultats d’une étude ethnographique effectuée dans une école canadienne comprenant une forte concentration d’étudiants d’ASL d’origine asiatique. L’étude se concentre sur les contextes de discours d’étudiants d’ALS intégrés dans le programme général, dans deux classes de sciences sociales de dixième année. Les conditions requises à la participation réussie des étudiants d’ALS dans de telles classes incluaient les prescriptions et pratiques existantes visant l’intégration et le succès académique.

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de ces étudiants, mais les dépassaient. Les observations enregistrées au cours d’une période de deux ans ont révélé que, pour réussir dans ces classes, les étudiants devaient prendre part à différents types de discussions en classe, de lectures et d’activités écrites. Ils devaient également connaître la culture populaire d’Amérique du Nord et les mass-médias, et être au courant des sujets d’actualité. Ils devaient pouvoir exprimer un éventail de perspectives critiques sur les problèmes sociaux, prendre part à des échanges communicatifs rapides et posséder une forte confiance en eux-mêmes. Cet article présente des exemples de ces caractéristiques dans les discours du cours de sciences sociales, les implications que cela suggère pour les étudiants d’ASL et pour les enseignants de sciences sociales, et il offre quelques solutions possibles aux problèmes que pose cet enseignement.

Introduction

In English-speaking countries with rapidly changing demographics and large numbers of ESL students entering public schools, many challenges face minority-language students, as well as their teachers, parents, and majority-language classmates. To become fully integrated into the mainstream curriculum, these newcomers must learn to adapt to the linguistic, sociocultural, discursive, and academic norms and practices in content areas, and various kinds of accommodation on the part of the school community are also required (Mohan, Leung, & Davison, 2001). Yet policy-makers and content specialists are not always aware that ESL students’ linguistic, social, and academic success is neither immediate nor assured, or that it usually takes many years for incoming students to catch up to the language and literacy levels of their English-L1 academically successful peers (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1981). The pressures are perhaps greatest for secondary students who are newcomers to an English-speaking academic environment, because they have relatively little time in which to master the sophisticated academic English, literacy skills, and subject matter needed to graduate and to make decisions about their future career paths. With limited time and such heavy academic demands, which may be compounded by the strain of geographical and cultural displacement, they may exhibit lower achievement and completion rates than expected. Collier (1995), summarizing the results of her earlier study of 2,000 immigrant students (65% Asian, 20% Hispanic) in an affluent American suburban school district, wrote:

[a] big surprise of the study was the extremely low achievement of the high school students. They were very well schooled in their home coun-
tries and demonstrated that by scoring about the 50th percentile in mathematics in two years after their arrival in the U.S. But after six years of excellent school in all English in the U.S., while making steady progress in each subject each year, they had not yet reached the 50th percentile in English language arts, reading, science, and social studies by the time of graduation. (p. 10)

Frustration and failure may lead to higher than average drop-out rates among immigrant students in high school, especially those whose home-country education or L1 literacy skills are limited, or those occupying certain socio-economic, sociocultural, or immigration categories, such as refugees (Adger & Peyton, 1999; Valdés, 1998). Gunderson (2000) found that Russian immigrants in a Western Canadian urban area, and particularly those who had arrived as refugees, 'had one of the highest drop-out rates (nearly 85%) in the school district' (p. 697). He also reported that students from Spanish and Vietnamese backgrounds, many of whom had arrived as refugees and/or whose education had been interrupted, were at much greater risk within the school system than were relatively more affluent and educated investment-class immigrants from Chinese backgrounds, particularly Mandarin-speakers from Taiwan (Steffenhagen, 2000). However, as Collier reported above, more privileged ESL students also face linguistic challenges and potential under-achievement in the mainstream.

Given the special needs of secondary students compared with their elementary school or university counterparts, and the high stakes involved, new research and program development must focus on secondary students' experiences and outcomes (Faltis & Wolfe, 1999). Educational programs designed to assist newcomers with their academic language needs typically provide intensive language instruction in early stages of their schooling, ideally with subsequent sheltered or content-based language instruction (CBLI), in anticipation of the transition to mainstream coursework (Davison, 2001). The actual number of years that students are eligible for ESL support and the form(s) that support takes are educational and political matters usually determined by state or provincial governments and are therefore quite variable from one region and year to the next. Currently in England, Australia (e.g., the state of Victoria), and Canada (e.g., the province of British Columbia), because of local demographics and the need for students to advance through the curriculum with peers of the same age, the expedited mainstreaming of ESL students - with or without appropriate levels or types of language and literacy support for newcomers - appears to be a growing trend (Mohan et al., 2001). In some
contexts (e.g., in England and Australia), mainstreaming is seen as both positive and pragmatic, with ESL specialists working in collaborative, institutionalized ways with content teachers within the mainstream (Clegg, 1996a; Davison, 2001). Thus, the ESL teachers are being 'mainstreamed' along with ESL students, and are viewed as not only legitimate but also essential partners in this process (Leung & Franson, 2001). In addition, highlighting the role of language in learning across the curriculum is seen to be beneficial to all learners, not just minority-language students. Yet, relatively little research has followed students from ESL programs into mainstream subject areas in the senior secondary (high school) years, or has examined the classroom discourse, activities and assignments as well as the ongoing language-related challenges they encounter there. It is this gap in research that this article addresses, with the view that understanding the language and content (L&C) requirements of students in particular subject areas and the levels of support that are – or are not – provided will reveal sources of potential difficulty and remediation for ESL students and their teachers.

In what follows, I review research and recommendations for integrating secondary school ESL students into the academic curriculum, contrast ESL and mainstream learning environments, and summarize principles for L&C integration in secondary social studies. Next, I describe an ethnographic study conducted at a Canadian secondary school with a high concentration of students from Asian backgrounds. The challenges of classroom language and literacy activities for ESL students in mainstream classes and some pedagogical implications are discussed. I conclude that while certain instructional approaches may reflect current content-teaching priorities, they do not always reflect best practices in CBLI that would benefit both English-L1 and ESL students.

Research on ESL students in secondary schools

Until the mid-1990s, there was little published research on secondary-level immigrant or minority-L1 bilingual students in mainstream school curricula in the United States and Canada, despite the growth in this population and the numerous challenges these students encounter in the school system (Faltis, 1999). In the United States, 1990 census figures revealed that 3.4 million youth aged 14–19 spoke a language other than English at home or were born in a foreign country, and of those almost half were Hispanics (Waggoner, 1999). Canadian statistics also reveal large numbers of non-native English speakers at the secondary school level, particularly in Toronto and Vancouver. The Vancouver School District, for example, has had an ESL population at both elementary and
secondary levels averaging approximately 50% for several years. Due to the urgent need to provide a robust and equitable education for minority-language students, new research is examining their experiences in ESL classes, in mainstream classes, and in their transition to postsecondary education, as well as the issue of early attrition.

Several recent studies have examined differences in learning environments for secondary-level immigrant students in ESL classes versus mainstream courses, particularly in California, which has the highest concentration of 'linguistically different and newcomer youth' in America (Waggoner, 1999). The research usually draws on students' interview narratives about their experiences at school as well as researchers' ethnographic observations of classroom contexts. Some of the studies deal specifically with ESL students from Asian backgrounds similar to those in the present study. For example, Harklau (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2000) conducted a multi-year ethnographic study in a northern Californian community that tracked four 'newcomer' high school students of ethnic Chinese backgrounds in their transition from ESL to mainstream courses; she later examined their school-to-college transitions. Harklau noted that high school English and social studies posed some of the greatest linguistic demands on students because teachers tended not to modify their speech for ESL students, either through verbal adjustments (e.g., rate, complexity of speech) or non-verbal support (e.g., graphic organizers); they spoke rapidly and used puns, humour, sarcasm, and asides that were difficult for ESL students to understand (Harklau, 1994).

In addition, Harklau observed that ESL students in large mainstream classes were unlikely to have more than one turn in 30 (if any) per lesson, and generally were required to produce only short responses in typical Initiation-Reply-Evaluation (IRE) exchanges. Thus, they had few opportunities to produce extended, syntactically complex, cohesive discourse. Especially noticeable was the finding that recently mainstreamed ESL students were likely to be placed in 'low-track' mainstream classes, which were academically less demanding and also interactionally less varied than 'high-track' classes. ESL classes, on the other hand, which were smaller, contained more interaction. Teachers called on students more frequently using open-ended questions and employed varied seating arrangements, and used a dynamic, spiralling curriculum, with a wider range of creative and authentic literacy tasks.

In an Australian study with a similar population of ethnic Chinese immigrant students, Miller (2000) also reported that ESL speakers had 'more real opportunities to use English [in an ESL reception program] than in their mainstream high schools' and 'in the mainstream they found they were neither heard nor understood. The irony is that moving
into a mainstream high school actually limited their chances to use English’ (p. 96).

Several Canadian studies have examined ESL students in the secondary school curriculum and mainstream community as well (e.g., Early & Hooper, 2001; Gunderson, 2000; Liang, 1998; Mohan, 2001), with the goal of documenting and increasing students’ access to, and acquisition of, target L&C resources. Kanno and Applebaum (1995) describe the experiences of three Japanese international secondary students in Toronto and their perceived lack of integration within the larger English-speaking community at school. Two of the students described their lack of English social or conversational language abilities as a greater obstacle to integration than their lack of academic language or cognitive skills. But keeping students in ESL classes for an extended period of time to develop their oral skills is not viable either, due to the mismatch between the language, literacy, and content coverage in ESL classes versus the mainstream and the lack of contact with highly proficient local English-speakers. Once in mainstream classes, however, in one student’s words, ‘you understand the content of the class, but when you have to find a partner and work on a group project, you can’t get into a group. You feel too embarrassed to ask someone to be your partner’ (p. 40). The ambivalence and tension experienced by ESL students, who, together with their parents, seek quick entry into the mainstream but then find it to be a hostile and unwelcoming environment, is also captured in the following interview extract from a Cantonese-speaking teenager:

As I first stepped in the regular [mainstream] classroom, I could easily feel the coldness and bitterness in the air. Everyone was indifferent to me. I was standing in front of the classroom like a fool waiting for the teacher to come. I was so embarrassed that I wanted to cry out and run back to the ESL class.... (Gunderson, 2000, p. 699)

Therefore, whether ESL students are immigrants or temporary sojourners, major issues and dilemmas - social, affective, linguistic, and academic - are associated with their being mainstreamed, particularly when insufficient linguistic and social support is provided.

Language and content in secondary social studies: Principles and practices

Many approaches have been developed for the integration of ESL students in specific content areas in the United States, Australia, England,
and Canada, and for successfully combining L&C instruction (e.g., Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Christie, 1992; Crandall, 1987; Martin, 1993; Mohan, 1986; Short, 1994; see overviews by Davison & Williams, 2001; Stoller & Grabe, 1997). These approaches highlight the syntactic, lexical, and rhetorical structures and genres associated with academic disciplines and with particular types of texts; they also stress the importance of providing corresponding graphic support, cultural connections, and study skills and strategies. Much successful L&C integration takes place in theme-based ESL or 'sheltered' Social Studies courses designed to cover academic content but normally reserved for ESL students (e.g., Evans, 1996; Filson, 1996; McKean, 1996). Explicitly combined L&C instruction is found less frequently in mainstream content courses unless major reforms initiated by ESL specialists have been implemented successfully, often due to a lack of coordination between ESL and content specialists, little or no applied linguistics training among the latter, and the misguided notion that ESL students' needs are not the responsibility of content specialists, even though they may constitute more than half the students in a course. Nevertheless, some content teachers are finding ways to effectively accommodate the needs of their ESL students (e.g., Clegg, 1996a, 1996b; Mohan et al., 2001; Snow & Brinton, 1997), usually with input from language teachers.

ESL students in mainstream social studies classes are often disadvantaged in several ways: (a) they may lack the linguistic, cultural, and geographical knowledge to interpret oral/written texts; (b) by entering the Canadian education system in advanced grades, they have missed earlier social studies courses whose content is often studied again in more depth in later grades; and (c) the content with which they do have expertise, familiarity, or personal experience, such as Chinese history, is often missing from the North American curriculum. In some cases, ESL students may not have had social studies instruction of any kind in their native countries, depending on their age and background (King, Fagan, Bratt, & Baer, 1987). A further challenge is that in newly emerging social studies curricula in Canada and United States, students are expected to view historical events and controversies from multiple perspectives, often reflecting a critical awareness of social justice issues and the differing experiences, viewpoints, voices, and representations of historical figures or groups (e.g., First Nations people vs. Whites; males vs. females; see Case, 1997; Seixas, 1997a, 1997b; Short, 1997; Singer & Hofstra Social Studies Educators, 1997; Turner & Clark, 1997). This 'critical turn' is positive for many reasons, but students from education systems that do not encourage the critical analysis of historical texts and the questioning of textual and institutional authority often find the task extremely challenging.
Short has carefully examined the teaching of social studies content to ESL students in the middle school years and has produced strategies and materials that teachers can use to facilitate students' comprehension and learning (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2000; Short, 1994, 1997, 1999). Among those strategies is the identification of 'key vocabulary terms, concepts and tasks that are specific to social studies' (1997, p. 218), as well as more general language functions, such as being able to define terms, retell events in sequence and compare outcomes of events, and perform various kinds of assignments, oral and written. Since social studies typically relies heavily on lectures and textbooks, Short (1997) also examined the discourse of various social studies textbooks, finding problems in cohesion and coherence, limited explanations of key vocabulary (e.g., 10 or fewer words explained per chapter), and confusing displays, headings, and sidebars. Likewise, Beck and McKeown (1991) have examined social studies texts at lower grade levels, finding them 'hard to understand' because, among other things, they assume levels of background knowledge that students often lack (see also Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 1996). Therefore, the challenging content, texts, language, and activities associated with social studies, combined with sociocultural, educational, and linguistic differences among mainstreamed students, make it a fertile subject area for further research.

The study

*Context and participants*

The research site for the present study was a large secondary school housing Grades 8–12 that had experienced considerable growth in its ESL population in the 1990s, particularly among Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking newcomers from Taiwan and Hong Kong. About half of the school's 1,300 students were born outside of Canada. Many had been in Canada for under two years, during which time they had taken a series of ESL courses, and social studies was the first course into which they were mainstreamed. Others had immigrated to Canada as elementary school students.

The two teachers in the study, 'Bill' and 'Pam,' both taught Grade 10 social studies (SS10) and were recommended for this study by their colleagues, who considered them to be effective, creative, and committed content teachers. Both were young and energetic, with several years of teaching experience; they were concerned with issues of equity and diversity and the integration of ESL students within the school and the
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curriculum; and they regularly supervised student teachers from a nearby university. Neither had training in CBLI, but they had become increasingly aware of the difficulties of teaching very heterogeneous classes.

The research was situated in two SS10 classes, each having 24–28 students. There were 17 ESL students in Pam’s class and eight in Bill’s, comprising a mixture of Cantonese and Mandarin speakers, with a small number of Korean, Japanese, and Indonesian newcomers. The students’ English proficiency was deemed sufficiently high for mainstream SS10, as opposed to a transitional sheltered social studies course. However, students’ oral and written skills varied considerably, influenced by the length of their residence in Canada. About half still took non-credit ESL classes at school for additional language support, although these were not linked to the content of their courses. Many of the same students also had private tutors. Local students were mostly Caucasian English speakers representing a range of academic ability levels.

Research methods

The research question addressed in this article is: What are the observed and reported challenges facing ESL students in two SS10 classes, in terms of language, literacy, content, and culture, and how, if at all, are those challenges met? The research was not designed to compare or evaluate the teachers but, rather, to examine issues related to communication and learning and to consider possible implications. I observed and audio- or videotaped classes and individually interviewed the teachers and students who agreed to participate. My class observations took place approximately once a week for each course from January to June, 1998 (Pam) and January to June, 1999 (Bill), with gaps each fall while I negotiated access to classes, informally observed these and other courses, scheduled future visits, and sought formal consent from all parties. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students at lunch time or after school, for an average of 30 minutes each. Roughly equal numbers of English-L1 and ESL students (n = 39 in total) were interviewed. English-L1 students were included in order to obtain their perspectives on the presence, needs, and status of ESL students in SS10 and in the school. Interviews with teachers lasted 45-60 minutes and were conducted on several occasions, in addition to informal interactions before or after classes. All of the recorded classroom data and interviews were later transcribed. In the following sections, I discuss some of the themes that emerged in connection with the overarching research question.
Literacy demands: Textbooks, tests, and reading/writing assignments

The content of the SS10 curriculum is eighteenth-to-early-twentieth-century Canadian history, the development of Western Canada, and contemporary national and provincial economics. The official course textbook both years was *Our Land: Building the West* (Bowers & Garrod, 1987), which both teachers agreed was dated and problematic because of its exclusively white male perspective and content. Pam did not use the textbook in class, as a result. Students had copies of the textbook for home use, but during lessons Pam brought in photocopied pages of short articles dealing with the same general material in a more culturally inclusive and sometimes critical way. Bill also supplemented the textbook with materials that would provide a wider range of perspectives on social and economic issues, particularly those dealing with First Nations people, women settlers, and discrimination. Often historical or newspaper accounts were read aloud by Pam or by a series of students (e.g., a paragraph each) with the sheets collected again at the end of the class; alternatively, the material was distributed and read silently by the students, who later answered worksheet questions on their own. Collecting printed materials from students at the end of lessons (because the school photocopy budget did not permit making copies for all students) meant that students could not easily reread the texts more carefully later. On handouts that students were allowed to keep, ESL students often wrote L1 translations of numerous unfamiliar English terms.

Students in both classes were responsible for the content in *Our Land*, which was covered in study guides, lectures, discussions, and other activities, materials, and assignments, even if the textbook itself was not used. Although lists of key terminology were not foregrounded in lessons or in the textbook (which only included a three-page glossary of terms), review materials for tests often included worksheets with 'key names, dates, and terms’ for which students were responsible (e.g., Oregon Territory, Alaska Boundary Dispute, Manifest Destiny), questions, and crossword puzzles. After every two units or chapters, students were tested using multiple choice and true-false format items plus short-answer or essay questions (see sample essays in Appendix 1, A and B).

Students produced few extended essays or written reports over the course of the year, and most writing was one-to-two handwritten pages. Written feedback from the teacher was usually brief and related to factual errors or general comments. One reason for providing short assignments and limited corrective feedback was that each teacher
taught over 200 students each week and had many other school duties, leaving little time to grade longer written reports. Oral presentations, posters, and short written paragraphs were more commonly assigned (see next section). Students were sometimes asked to read typed, anonymous historical accounts and then consider who was writing the piece and what their point of view and feelings might be. Alternatively, short articles from published sources were reproduced and students were asked to determine the accuracy of the account, ways of authenticating or verifying it, comparisons with other renditions of the same historical event, and the attitude of the writer. Students also read short essays, answered comprehension questions, and then briefly explained or interpreted the content. Homework such as this was normally discussed in class at the end of one lesson or beginning of the next, generally by local students who volunteered answers. In sum, the textbook seemed to play a more minor role in these SS10 classes than in other studies, and was replaced or supplemented by other texts and activities instead, a situation that was somewhat problematic for ESL students.

Demands of orality and narrativity

Both Bill and Pam were very articulate and knowledgeable about the course content and had an impressive grasp of current social and political issues in the world. In lectures, they spoke clearly, at a normal rate, but one that was fairly rapid. Under pressure to cover the material in the mandated curriculum and to retain student’s otherwise wandering attention, opportunities to work individually with ESL students were limited. Also, the more time the teachers spent addressing ESL students’ comprehension needs or soliciting (and negotiating) input from them during lectures or discussions, the more unruly the others became. That is, the local students, collectively, required higher teacher maintenance and vigilance than their less disruptive and less outspoken ESL peers.

Perspective-taking, empathy, and positionality in history were emphasized in both sections of the course, in keeping with current recommendations by leaders in social studies education (e.g., Seixas, 1997b). Narrative and critical approaches often accompany this emphasis, and are reflected in oral histories, journal-writing, and reading, and a consideration of different ways of representing and interpreting human experience. In the CBLI literature, Short (1997) also suggests using different modes of presentation and expression, in addition to academic expository texts, including: ‘art, literature, hands-on activities, structured and creative writing opportunities, reading scaffolds for text passages, and activities that promote discussion and debate’ (p. 221),
and ways of helping students 'see connections between their own lives and history' (pp. 221–222). This multimodal approach was evident in both SS10 classes I observed. Moreover, critical discussions about residential schools, treaty and land-rights disputes, racism, and other issues were common. Prominent in units on First Nations' history, culture(s), and experiences, were art, mythology, storytelling, rites of passage, dance, music, and other narrative and nonverbal accounts, especially in Pam's class, to which guest speakers from the local (aboriginal) community were also invited. However, the more narrative the approach, the more language seemed to be used and the fewer CBLI techniques, such as graphs, diagrams, and other visual aids and organizers. Long narratives were occasionally read aloud or presented by teachers. The lack of visual support in some SS10 activities was underscored by one Cantonese-speaker: 'for Science [students] can do experiments and look at diagrams and stuff? So it's harder in Social Studies.' He explained that it was 'harder to concentrate' when the text was read by the teacher or when dense overhead transparencies were used. Following along on paper helped, but there wasn't enough time to read and comprehend the material.

Educational films were another very popular source of narrative; topics included the lives of First Nations young people and immigrant women in Canada (e.g., The Spirit of the Mask; Where the Spirit Lives; No Time to Stop). The film-makers' compelling visual images and soundtracks, and the teacher's pre-listening questions and worksheets, helped focus students' attention, but time constraints and the need to return films to the school board in a timely way did not permit much negotiation of meaning of the spoken texts until the end of the film, sometimes several days later. In Pam's class, song lyrics were occasionally studied as well, making connections between expressive popular culture and social studies. Common narrative assignments included having students write diary entries or 'post cards' from the point of view of a First Nations woman regarding the arrival of European settlers and traders, for example, or from a Scottish (Selkirk) settler in 1814 back to relatives in Scotland about the experience, environment, feelings, and views of the Metis (see Appendix 1, C and D).

Group projects and other activities

To promote student engagement with the content as well as social interaction, Bill and Pam used a variety of assignments and group formations allowing students to participate in role plays, debates, poster-making, group presentations, and other activities requiring various
language, literacy, and interaction skills. 11 When same-L1 students worked together, they were allowed to use their L1, which their local classmates viewed as perfectly normal, albeit mildly irritating. In this way, they could work comfortably together using their L1, although students who wanted to practise their English felt in-group peer pressure not to do so (see Liang, 1998):

And then when I came to this school ... [and] there’s lots of Taiwanese people here. And then when I try to like speak English to them ... [to improve my English] ... they will say ... ‘you’re Taiwanese’ or ‘you’re a Chinese why don’t you speak in um Chinese instead of the English?’ like that. And I just can – feel kind of sad. (AK)

One group project had students work in groups of three, mainly in same-L1 groupings, to recreate the front page of a 1858 local newspaper and reflect the attitudes of townspeople, miners, and businesses. Advertisements, photos, and other graphics were featured, in addition to key articles, headlines, and quotes. In Bill’s class, students researched local British Columbia economic activities and made presentations on them, using posters they created. Information was obtained from the Internet, government agencies, and visits to fisheries and docks, then displayed in charts, graphs, expository text, and pictures. A similar assignment was used in Pam’s class, for which groups analyzed the economic activity and viability of a region in Canada, brainstormed for possibilities for a new business there, and created an advertisement for the new business for television, newspapers, or magazines, which they then presented. Each student submitted a one-to-two-page essay about what they had learned about Canada’s economy and how their product might contribute to it. Therefore, multiple types of literacy and orality were encouraged. However, relatively little extended writing was involved, and students therefore had reduced opportunities to develop their expository writing skills – skills that are essential in post-secondary social science and humanities courses.

Structured debates or discussions were also used. In a debate and role drama about Louis Riel in Pam’s class, students researched a role they had been assigned and then took part in a mock trial of Louis Riel. Although every student was required to participate in role (e.g., as Riel, John A. Macdonald, a court reporter, judge, or attorney), only the local English-L1 students and ‘oldtimer’ ESL students who had been in Canada for many years produced extended or elaborated talk. The newcomer ESL students generally produced short, relatively unelaborated utterances. Thus, although debates, dramatic enactments, and other
group projects were popular among students as a creative means of exploring content and controversies, they posed challenges to ESL students who lacked confidence speaking English spontaneously in public, especially in simulated situations.

Current events discussions

Current events is a major component of the official SS10 curriculum. In Bill’s class, one period per week – nearly a third of the course – was devoted to the discussion of current events. Each week a student brought in a newspaper headline and article clipping for a current event, and a short written summary and statement of his or her personal opinion. The item was then presented, with the student often reading from a prepared text and then fielding questions. Both oral and written components were graded. The topics were to be important issues and controversies and ‘not just tragedies’ (like car crashes) that would generate an extended, free-ranging discussion afterward. In Pam’s class, current events were usually discussed for a few minutes at the beginning or end of each class period, with somewhat more time devoted to the highly publicized APEC meeting in Western Canada in fall 1997. ESL and local students both reported enjoying current events discussions.

However, the interaction and topics in both courses favoured local students’ oral participation almost exclusively during open discussions; ESL students were never observed to propose a topic and, when asked specifically for input, they often hedged and provided brief, partially audible responses. Participation in such spontaneous discussions requires familiarity with headlines in the news, including the English names of people, places, and events (usually from the city’s main daily newspaper), plus sufficient content and confidence to introduce a topic, process information, and take turns quickly. Topics included White House scandals, the Columbine High School shooting, wars and unrest in other countries (e.g., in the Balkans, the Middle East, Ireland), natural disasters, scientific breakthroughs, little-known facts, and local events. Interspersed with these topics were references to sports scores, new movies or television shows, and pop culture celebrities. Appendix 2 provides one excerpt from a teacher-led discussion based on a newspaper clipping about malicious gossip being spread on the Internet at school, with interwoven references to bathroom graffiti, the television shows Ally McBeal and The Simpsons, American television announcements from the 1950s, and so on.

ESL students with limited English listening comprehension could catch keywords and perhaps ask someone for more information later, as one Cantonese speaker reported:
Sometimes you don't even know what [the topic is]. But you try to listen to it and you can go back home and find it what was that and - when you find it you go uh 'it's so interesting' ... Maybe I ask my dad.... Like when they talk about the sport thing? That 'Canucks?' I don't know what was that but - it sound like so familiar to me? I like hear from somewhere else? And I just go ask my dad 'What is Canucks?' 'Oh a sport team' .... (MC)

Thus, peers or parents occasionally provided some latent scaffolding for ESL students, assistance that no doubt would have been more useful and effective during the original discussions in class. Otherwise, comprehension was postponed for hours or days or precluded entirely. To prepare their own current events topics, ESL students sometimes read an L1 newspaper first to find a news item, then located a corresponding article in an English newspaper. However, their selected topics were sometimes judged to be too uncontroversial or uninteresting to warrant extended class discussion, or the audience simply had difficulty hearing and understanding the presenter.

Sociocultural issues, (pop) culture, and the negotiation of learners' identities

SS10 deals with many aspects of Canadian and Western Canadian ethnic/cultural identity(ies), First Nations and Pacific Rim cultures, and issues of racism. Although cultural and meta-cultural discussion runs throughout the course, ESL students rarely referred to aspects of their own heritage cultures in class, even when encouraged to do so. For example, none of the ESL students interviewed said they had suggested topics connected with Asia or Asian-Canadians for current events discussions during the year. They felt that such information was not welcome or significant, or they simply lacked the language and confidence to broach those topics. References to popular Anglo-American culture, on the other hand, and especially to Hollywood-produced television series and movies, were common in open discussions (see Appendix 2), as were humorous interjections, jokes, and friendly banter. However, these elements were seldom produced publicly by ESL students. Thus, besides needing literacy skills to read the front pages of newspapers or academic texts and the listening comprehension to extract highlights from radio, television, and teachers' accounts of the news, students needed a more general pop-culture literacy, contained in mass media such as magazines (e.g., for girls, Teen People, People, Seventeen; and for boys, magazines about cars, sports, or music), certain youth-oriented radio stations, and other media. Students living in multigenerational Chinese homes where monolingual Chinese
elders preferred Chinese language radio or television, or whose own
generational leanings were distinct from those of the Anglo-
Canadian majority in their classes, or who did not subscribe to English
ewspapers, had major gaps in cultural knowledge that had currency
and cachet in class.

Furthermore, if understanding references to pop culture were not
challenging enough, students also needed to make quick intertextual
connections between references across these modes and from one lesson
to the next and to understand how the topics made sense together, if at
all (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Fairclough, 1992; see Appendix 2).
Teachers often elaborated on the content of discussions, but local
classmates, and sometimes teachers themselves, seemed unaware of
English learners’ needs as listeners or, in the case of many local students,
felt that ESL students’ lack of comprehension or participation was ‘their
problem’ and that they should ‘try harder.’ The more proficient ESL
students who had been in Canada for many years seemed to follow the
discussions, unlike some newcomers, but did not participate actively.
Therefore, to learn effectively in this context and to become an active
member of the classroom discourse community, students’ ‘social’
communication, interaction skills, and cultural knowledge seemed to be
as important as their ‘academic’ proficiency.

Affective issues: ESL versus the mainstream

Some newcomer ESL students were observed in both their SS10 and ESL
classes, revealing differences in the learning contexts, as others (cited
above) have found: for example, in opportunities to interact using Eng-
lisht (ESL > social studies), the complexity of content (social studies >
ESL), and students’ confidence levels (ESL > social studies). Therefore,
both contexts had the potential to enhance students’ linguistic, social,
and academic development, but in quite distinct and complementary
ways. In ESL class, students made presentations about themselves and
their interests, including representations of their complex, multicultural
lives and identities. They practised listening and speaking, with more
occasions to negotiate the form and meanings of utterances; they also
presented their own cultures, lives, and interests and thus became
known and validated – something that was rarely observed or achieved
in mainstream SS10 classes. Whereas local native English speakers in
the mainstream often displayed their interests, alliances, and identities
through their selection of topics, opinions, and responses, and through
their very visible social networks, ESL students who probably did this
privately among themselves remained rather uni-dimensional, seem-
ingly invisible and inaudible, in the public sphere. Yet their status as observers allowed them to witness how their mainstream peers and teachers used English for both academic and social/interpersonal communication.

Notwithstanding the benefits of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991), ESL students’ marginalization, insecurity, and anxiety while remaining on the periphery of classroom discourse became evident in interview excerpts in which some newcomers compared the SS10 and ESL classes they were taking concurrently:

If in ESL class because everybody has the same level I won’t feel shy. Yeah but if some white white people here - and then - if I speak out nobody understand? That’s I feel uncomfortable.... Some of my friend when they speak [in] their class and some - Canadian boys just ha ha ha ha ((imitates laughter)) make laugh at that. (AT)

And in ESL class ... sometimes um you speak in the class so they - your classmates won’t have some opinion [about] your pronunciation [or speaking] ... Yeah but in Social class ... when you like pronounce something that’s not very accurate, and the um English speaking kids they - sometimes point that out um - I -I don’t re feel um really good about that.... They will - like repeat a [mispronounced] word and - someone will laugh? (JK)

Some students felt they were subject to occasional discrimination at school, explaining that ‘some racial things’ happened to them, such as mistreatment and mockery by local students, which they attributed to their non-standard grammar or pronunciation. This fear of being laughed at, mentioned by both male and female ESL students in both classes, was confirmed in interviews with local students, including some of the perpetrators who were frustrated by the lack of participation and/or comprehensibility of ESL students. ESL students, in turn, had trouble understanding their local classmates. As one ESL student said: ‘[the teacher] speak quite clear but uh when a student speak I can’t usually understand.’ Another said he could understand about 60% of what local students said in class, but that it would help if they could ‘speak it in a easier way, so we can easier to understand.’ His ESL class, he said, focused on writing and grammar and did not improve his aural/oral proficiency. Differences among ESL students in terms of their L2 proficiency, academic achievements, personalities, identities, interests, places of origin, L1s, and so on went largely unnoticed by their local classmates, who saw them as a silent mass. Local students did not
have friends who were non-native speakers of English and vice versa. ESL and local students were also both complicit in perpetuating stereotypes of 'sameness' by (a) the fairly uniform unresponsiveness of ESL students during class discussions and (b) the deliberate use of rapid, colloquial speech and local references by the native English speakers that would be unfamiliar to the ESL students.

Summary and implications

This article has provided an overview of certain issues facing learners and teachers in mainstream secondary-school content areas such as social studies. The teachers in the observed SS10 courses showed great creativity, resourcefulness, and concern for students' learning and engagement with social topics; they used multiple modes of presentation and genres, provided excellent explanations in many cases, had a thorough command of the material, and tried to make the class interesting for their adolescent students. They provided study guides and scaffolded learning in many ways and were seen to be very approachable, fair, and helpful. All of these strategies reflected the teachers' training and experience in teaching native speakers of English in this setting and content area. Many of the observed teaching activities provided relatively straightforward access to language and concepts for ESL students and focused on intriguing and timely controversies.

However, the study revealed that the actual requirements for ESL students' successful participation in SS10 went beyond the usual prescriptions and practices for integration and academic success in mainstream social studies. Not only was a deep knowledge of academic language or textbook content needed to participate effectively in classroom discussions but also needed were a knowledge of popular North American culture, a repertoire of newsworthy current events, and an ability to express a range of perspectives on social issues, as well as the ability to enter quick-paced, highly intertextual interactions. Students also needed a great deal of confidence, and ESL students on the whole seemed to lack such confidence and the accompanying sense of entitlement or licence to speak about their concerns, backgrounds, issues, and views.

These findings suggest three broad areas for greater intervention with mainstreamed ESL students. The first area is listening and speaking skills, since the larger study was concerned first and foremost with oral communication. In many secondary mainstream classes, like SS10, ESL students produce very little English, especially during teacher-fronted instruction and discussion. Not only were written texts 'hard to under-
stand,' as Beck and McKeown (1991) predicted, but so too were oral texts. ESL and local students reported being unable to hear and understand one another, which was also readily apparent from observations, and some could not understand the teacher's speech very well either. Therefore, more repetition, reformulation, and expansion of important student contributions for others in the class might expand bilateral student involvement and increase mutual understanding (Duff, 2000).

Furthermore, references to contemporary issues, events, cultural icons, role models, interests, and other phenomena were common, raising the bar for both oral and literate proficiency. Whereas in the official or planned curriculum teachers broached issues of social (in)justice, and spoke about various Aboriginal, national, and international cultures (including Chinese cultures, migration, hybridity, and racism), the enacted everyday curriculum was more plainly Eurocentric and Anglo-American. ESL students appeared to be onlookers or voyeurs in discussions, peripheral or marginal participants who were at times amused, puzzled, and alienated by the talk around them (Wenger, 1998). In current events discussions, reticent students might be encouraged to suggest discussion topics by submitting slips of paper at the beginning of class discussions, with topics, keywords, or headlines (Chinese or English) of which they had heard or read a bit but wanted to understand better. Discussions could also be monitored and structured better for ESL students by having the teacher (or a student) write topics on the board as they arise, with key names, vocabulary, and a note about the nature of the issue. The same technique could be used during teachers' lectures and explanations. In addition, talkative local students could be encouraged to provide a fuller and clearer explanation about topics for others. Otherwise, student discourse can be highly fragmented, incoherent, and incomprehensible. Aiming for explicitness and explanation rather than expediency and superficial sensationalism would be a useful exercise for students, whether as speakers or listeners. Later in the same class, topics could be reviewed briefly, with some reflection about which topics had been the most interesting or significant and why.

Second, although integrated L&C instruction emphasizes the role of language in learning and the genres and syntactic structures used to convey particular types of meaning (e.g., Ecchevarria et al., 2000), in the SS10 classes observed very little explicit attention was paid overtly to text structures and vocabulary that students read, heard, or were asked to produce. Therefore, an increased focus on text structure and content, and the needs of less capable readers and writers, would be beneficial for both ESL and local students (see e.g., Mohan et al., 2001). Providing more visuals on the blackboard or on transparencies with essential
terminology, vocabulary, and displays of relationships among pieces of information (e.g., cause-effect, sequence, evaluation, classification) — which is second nature to ESL teachers but apparently not (to the same extent) to experienced content teachers — would foster greater comprehension and retention of material (Tang, 2001).

Third, although ESL students in the classes observed sometimes possessed a depth of knowledge and critical insight that local students lacked, most were afraid to display their knowledge because of possible public humiliation. Although, as groups, local students and ESL students unquestionably represented considerable variability in terms of their members’ abilities, proficiency, interests, and identities, and the ‘discourses’ which they were negotiating at home and at school (McKay & Wong, 1996), ESL students regardless of their proficiency level, motivation to excel academically, or years in Canada remained quite removed from open discussions. Thus, students’ affective or social-psychological concerns and well-being, and not only their linguistic and academic concerns, must be a continuing focus of research and intervention.

**Conclusion**

In spite of the barriers to comprehension and performance that they faced, ESL students in both classes, with some exceptions, tended nevertheless to pass their tests and earn average to above average grades (typically Bs and Cs). Unlike the most at-risk populations described at the beginning of this article, many ESL students in this relatively affluent school — and the Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese students in particular — were diligent, resourceful, and privileged: many had private tutors, studied in same-L1 groups outside of class, reviewed course material regularly, were L1-literate, and had well-developed study skills and a strong academic foundation. They were part of large, thriving ethnolinguistic communities offering various cultural resources (e.g., L1 newspapers) and social networks. Ironically, local students — even the most vocal in class — often performed less well on written assignments than these ESL students; many had weak study skills or were not highly motivated, either generally or in SS10 specifically, or had learning difficulties. Regardless of their overall performance, however, the ESL students still struggled with aspects of L&C in SS10 discourse and with their identities as competent and legitimate students, English speakers, and Canadian citizens; without their determination and the extracurricular support available to them, they would not have succeeded to the same degree.13
Finally, the CBLI literature instructs us that all educators must become more aware of the complexities of language, content, and cognition in particular disciplines, and in the comprehension, critical analysis, and production of texts. Discourse socialization perspectives, furthermore, emphasize that to become an active member in a particular learning community, students must learn the discourses associated with that community and its disciplinary practices (Duff, 1996). However, incorporating CBLI principles in mainstream classes requires close, ongoing collaboration among language specialists and content specialists. Given the current trend toward the expedited mainstreaming of ESL students at the secondary level, it is incumbent on ESL professionals and content teachers in social studies and other subjects to find more effective ways of accommodating diverse groups of learners and providing the necessary scaffolding to ensure equitable access to the curriculum and the potential for all students to learn and succeed. And lastly, more research must be conducted on mainstreamed ESL students’ and their teachers’ experiences, frustrations, and strategies for dealing successfully with the challenges of L&C integration. The results then need to be disseminated widely to content-area teachers, together with practical alternatives and models of how to integrate L&C objectives more deliberately and effectively in their lessons.\(^\text{14}\)

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**Notes**

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2 Finding suitable terminology to refer to English learners in schools is problematic because of the stigmatizing or ambiguous aspects of terms that might be seen to focus on students’ linguistic deficits, rather than on
their multilingual resources and abilities, and the homogenizing value of a term like 'ESL' that seems to lump students with extremely diverse backgrounds and abilities together. Some authors now prefer the term English language learners, although again, this term places individuals for whom English is an additional language in the constant position of being learners — and foregrounds their learning of English and nothing else (Harklau, 2000). Language socialization perspectives would view all English language users (native or otherwise) as lifetime English language learners. For reasons of convention and because of the use of the term ESL in the Canadian school context, I have adopted that term here.

3 Approximately 28,000 of the 56,000 students in Vancouver schools speak English as an additional language (Early & Hooper, 2001).

4 Many of these same linguistic and non-linguistic challenges also exist for minority-language students in history courses at the university level, and strategies have been proposed to assist them academically in that context (Bernier, 1997; Srole, 1997).

5 However, she also reported that recent textbooks use 'less passive voice, complex verb tenses, and sentences with many embedded clauses' than earlier ones (p. 219), making them more accessible to students with lower levels of reading proficiency.

6 My focus during the two years differed somewhat; in the first, I was interested in academic discourse and communication generally and students' ethnolinguistic profiles and views about diversity at their school. In the second year, my focus was narrower, mainly examining oral discourse connected with weekly Current Events presentations and discussions, in which ESL students seldom participated vocally.

7 Unfortunately, some of the students in Pam's class (all Chinese) with the lowest English proficiency and the least confidence elected not to participate in the study.

8 One such hand-out from a set of 'creative controversies' was 'Introduction to the Pig War - Fight First or Wait and Negotiate.' A short reading and map were provided, and students had to decide what General Douglas should do: negotiate a peaceful settlement or force US troops from a west coast island (bibliographic information was unavailable; the materials were part of a Canadian publication with a section entitled 'Creative Controversies for Secondary Social Studies').

9 Another concern they had was how to evaluate longer essays that indicated plagiarism, excessive input from tutors, and acceptable content but weak language skills.

10 Seixas (1997b) underscores the following concepts in social studies instruction: significance (e.g., of events in one's own or one's family's life); epistemology (e.g., the ideology of writers); evidence (the basis for interpretation);
continuity and change; progress and decline; empathy (historical perspective-taking), moral judgement, and historical agency (e.g., the role of some people in profoundly changing others' lives). Seixas (1997a) has found critical, sometimes multimedia, narratives to be a relatively accessible way of exploring these themes, particularly in groups of multilingual and multicultural students. He recommends that students consider who constructed the narratives and why, what sources were used, what other accounts of the same events or lives revealed, and which accounts are more believable and why.

11 To half of the students in the Grade 10 classes who came from Asian backgrounds, who were multilingual and often highly computer literate, and whose relatives and sometimes parents still resided in other countries, a focus on the Western Canadian frontier seemed mildly interesting but removed from their current interests and more global concerns; many of the local English-L1 students felt the same way.

12 For example, the two essay-writing prompts used on one test were very different in the organizational structure they provided students: '1) Write down everything you know about the Gold Rush. Be careful with your organization; [or] 2) Compare and contrast the Pig War and the Alaskan Boundary dispute. The essay should be three paragraphs - one explaining the Pig War, one explaining the Alaska Boundary dispute, and one comparing and contrasting the two.'

13 In both classes, ESL students who did not perform well in social studies or who wanted to devote more time to other subject areas, such as science, during the following school year repeated the course or took Grade 11 social studies during summer school.

14 For example, researchers might videotape classroom discourse and then, through stimulated recall, ask ESL students what is most difficult about particular in-class oral discourse, and what they do or do not comprehend. The results could then be presented to teachers. The effects on students' levels of comprehension of different types of intervention could also be explored.

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Appendix 1

A) Sample essay by lower-ability ESL student; test of First Nations of Canada

In the age of colonization, Canada was one of the places that European wanted to taken over, for doing that, European started the conflict with the
first nation's people. For several years, the natives and Europeans were just
fight each other. At last, the Europeans had successfully colonize Canada and
put the natives in a small area called 'reserves.' But now, the natives has won
many rights to get the same position with the white people came from the
europe. I think there should be no more difference between the Europeans
and the natives cause we were all 'Canadians.' Past had been passed, why
look back?, there should be no more fights between Canadians or we will
regret forever. (Teacher feedback: 3 points/20)

B) Sample essay by highest-ability ESL student; test on Louis Riel
(first of three paragraphs)

Louis Riel was the leader of both the Red River Rebellion and Northwest
Rebellion. He gained leadership in 1869 when the Metis voted for him as
leader. They needed a leader to act as a representative to the Canadian
government to ask for more rights. The Metis wanted to make Manitoba a
province and get more rights. Riel led the Metis he ended up taking over fort
Garry (the HBC's command post at the time) where he set up a provisional
government. He then made up a List of Rights and sent it along with a few
negotiators to Ottawa to negotiate. Riel had hoped that the show of force at
Fort Garry would help the Metis negotiate (to?) get a better deal. During the
negotiations though, a band of Ontario Orangemen attacked Fort Garry and
one of their number (Thomas Scott) was tried and shot to death. In the May of
1870, the government created the Manitoba act which had all the major
clauses of the Metis' List of Rights and made Manitoba a province (though it
was much smaller than the Manitoba we know now). The government also
sent a group of soldiers to draw the Metis out of Fort Garry and put a $5000
reward on Riel's head. When the soldiers reached Fort Garry though, they
found that the Metis had all gone home and Riel had fled to the U.S. That was
the Red River Rebellion and it was mainly caused by the buying of Rupert's
Land and the way it affected the Metis. For example, the land surveys which
didn't recognize their land stripe system. (Teacher feedback: 20/20 points)

C) Sample 'Gold Rush Journal' by medium-ability ESL student
(first paragraph only)

My name is M.O. I'm a female. I'm Canadian. I am currently in San Francisco.
I'm rich because my husband died three years ago and he left me a lot of
money. I want to go to the Gold Rush because I want to be richer. I will leave
my parents and my dear doggy. On the journey, I met B*. He was very poor
and he had no money, so I decided to hire him to carry my luggage. Also, I
met A*. He is a jeweller. He wants to go with me. Later I met A.R.* who has a
crappy job and enough money for minimum supplies. She is quite nice, so I decided to go with her.... [Note: *names of ESL classmates in SS10 class]

D) Sample 'Post Card' text (by same student as 'Gold Rush Journal')

Dear B,
Look! The mountains behind me are parts of the famous Rockies. Isn’t it beautiful? During the trip, I met some friendly Indians. They guided me to lots of beautiful places. I went canoeing on a sunning day. On the way, I saw an Indian catching a buffalo. It was very interesting because I hadn’t see any buffalo before. I hope you had come with me!
Sincerely, M

Appendix 2

Sample excerpt of classroom discourse related to current events

This excerpt is part of an ongoing discussion of a newspaper article about a local scandal involving malicious gossip spread on the school internet system, issues of graffiti, and parental responsibility for monitoring students’ internet use. Also referred to are Ally McBeal, American TV announcements in the past, and The Simpsons. (T = Teacher/Bill; [ refers to overlapping speech; (xx) = unclear words; short dash is short untimed pause; italics are used for names of TV shows; boldface is used to flag pop-culture references.)

T: (Well?) you guys live like Ally in the (neo/new) generation. Right?
M: What.
T: Where they [share a bathroom.
M: [No way.
T: Right? On Ally McBeal but [what
F: [(Was (xx) a transsexual [(xx) that
T: [When I grew up it was more strict. Wait let’s finish this article.
?: ((To another student?)) That’s funny.
T: We’ll come back to it – OK. Let’s stay on topic. OK. I just threw that in – about bathroom graffiti – and
?: That issue.
T: It is interesting that uh – their findings did correspond to probably what you would have expected in terms of stereotypes – but they did by checking on it they did prove it or whatever okay? Uh for what that’s worth if anything. Anyway so here’s more from M [in the article].
((some turns later))
T: It's very hard with the Internet isn't it. Uh and he continues on to say - uh ch ch there's one more thing for him uh X School Board als yeah all these schools block it out of their school Web sites, but X School Board thought that they would be best not to publicize it, and it would just die down in interest - right? ... Mr. H checked it out when he saw this article - for research purposes only.
(some turns later)
T: You know the saying from the 1950s? Do you know where your children are? Well do you know where your kids are on the computer? Do you know what they're doing. Right? And that's - he's alluding to - probably before your time. They used to especially on American TV stations they used to have this thing that came on this public service messages it would say even in my time it's the seventies and - it's eleven o'clock. Do you know where your children are?
M: I had a brother (xx)
F: That one's....
M: (xx) Simpsons
T: Great. DE ... DE ((student's name)) and (xx) Shh.
M: It's like.
T: Quiet.
M: Homer's like - eating TV dinner - and it's like (xx) and then it says (xx) I told you yesterday I don't know.
SSS: ((Laughter.))
T: Uh The Simpsons. They're so good.