

Language Leads to Learning

One of the key responsibilities of an international school to students from other language backgrounds is to teach them English so that they may actively engage in classroom learning as quickly and as fully as possible. Over the past 50 years, FIS has developed a strong English as a Second Language (ESL) program using well-established instructional methods, and by employing qualified and experienced teachers. And what a difference dedicated teachers make!

The case in point is an initiative championed by the Primary School's ESL and Grade 1 teachers. The team wondered how they might help beginning ESL learners better understand the concepts presented in the Units of Inquiry and engage more meaningfully in classroom work during Unit study.

Together the Grade 1 team decided to try a new approach. They first asked for parent volunteers to come and facilitate a discussion about the

Unit with ESL students in their own native language. These mother tongue sessions were an eye-opener for the teachers. During the sessions, groups were charged with energy and students eagerly shared what they already knew about the topic, asking thoughtful questions and reflecting on what they had been learning in their homerooms.

Interestingly enough, as the mother tongue sessions gained momentum, teachers realized that the ESL students had a wealth of prior knowledge, which their limited English had prevented from sharing in detail. What had started as a way to help students with limited English engage more in the Unit work, turned out to have further-reaching benefits. The discussion of the Unit's concepts in their home languages stimulated the interest of all the ESL students, even those already comfortable with English. It also helped to reinforce what they had already learned in the homeroom.

One particularly precious benefit became apparent when Grade 1 Students came to the Unit of Inquiry called Now and Long Ago, in which they look at the lives of children in their grandparents' generation. Grade 1 teachers had always wanted to introduce a stronger cultural component into the Unit and the mother tongue sessions proved to be the perfect vehicle. Traditionally, English-speaking grandparents had been invited to speak to the students in English about their lives as children. However, they could not always paint a picture that resonated with many of the nationalities in the room due to cultural differences. With the mother tongue sessions in place, it was a natural step to invite grandparents from other national backgrounds to speak to the children as well – this time in their own languages.

The task of finding grandparents – especially from distant countries – to visit Germany in mid-February turned out to be somewhat difficult.



However, the resulting mother tongue sessions were such a rich experience for the children that the teachers felt they were worth every effort. The guest speakers last year included three sets of wonderful German grandparents, among them a retired school inspector. Travelling the greatest distance was a lively Korean woman who was visiting her son's family in Oberursel.

Since September 2011, when the idea was first put to test, 11 mother tongue sessions have taken place in languages including German, Korean, Japanese, Dutch, Russian, Swedish, Arabic, French, Hindi and Chinese. "An initiative of these dimensions would not have been possible without strong support from ESL parents", says Kasia Pomykol, Grade 1 ESL teacher and the sessions' coordinator.

"The logistics of running five to seven concurrent sessions involving up to 45 first graders without causing a disruption in their homerooms, requires lots of planning and a reliable team. It's immensely reassuring to know that I can rely on our ESL parents to answer our call for volunteers, come on the appointed day and do a wonderful job. The mothers leading the sessions have been the true heroes of the program."

The Grade 1 team's initiative has been a great success. In addition to raising the involvement and interest of ESL students in the Unit work, it has been a great opportunity for parents – and grandparents – to contribute to their children's learning in a rewarding way while forging a stronger bond between home and school. Word about the benefits of the approach is

spreading in the Primary School. This year, many of the students flocking to their first mother tongue session in Grade 1 exclaimed "It's like what we did in Primary!" For them, activities in their home languages have already become a familiar feature of their learning environment.