INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Supporting Effective Literacy Strategies

Setting the scene
Hunter Valley Grammar School is a rural, preschool to Year 12 co-educational, independent school situated in the Hunter Region of NSW, Australia. Newcastle is the closest major city to the school. The approximate school enrolment is 800 students.

In 2001 the school began negotiations with the Australian College of English to work in partnership to establish an English language centre (ELICOS) at the school.

The working structure of the Language Centre and HVGS mainstream
When overseas students begin study at Hunter Valley Grammar School, they enter the ELICOS system where their level of English competency is assessed. In the majority of cases students will spend one or two terms in intensive language instruction in the ELICOS centre. However, from the beginning they are placed in a roll-call group and participate in sport and other non-language based activities with their peers. When individual students are assessed as ready, they are gradually integrated further into the mainstream. Usually the first core subject into which students are integrated is mathematics. The aim is for full integration with students progressing in mainstream classes to complete the HSC and obtain university entrance.

The issues
Prior to the introduction of the ELICOS centre very few students at the school were from non-English speaking backgrounds and there was only a small minority of students with a multicultural background. The inclusion of overseas students in the school created two major challenges for mainstream staff:
- Ensuring that the curriculum is culturally inclusive and
- Developing classroom strategies to assist students learn content while they are mastering English

A further challenge was to create classrooms where second phase English students could receive the support they need while at the same time providing the current level of support to mainstream students. The aim is for mainstream students to view overseas students as an asset in the classroom and a valuable source of different opinions and life experiences.

The QTP project
The Hunter Valley Grammar School’s QTP project was designed to address the issues facing classroom teachers. A program was designed to provide background information for staff and then assist staff to develop teaching strategies and resources to assist when second phase English learners joined their class. The initial group involved in the project was a cross section of teachers from different curriculum areas. The second group involved teachers who have ex-ELICOS students integrated into their mainstream classes. The final phase of training involved the entire mathematics staff. Mathematics teachers in schools facing similar challenges were invited to join the Hunter Valley Grammar School staff for this section.

During 2001 two members of staff attended the 10-week “ESL in the Mainstream” course delivered by the Association of Independent Schools. The expertise developed during this course together with expertise “discovered” in other teachers at the school and a contribution by two “experts” in the field were utilised in the action research project.
Useful resources
A variety of resources were used in the development of the teaching resources in this package. Several good Internet sites were found. The Puzzlemaker section of site DiscoverySchool.com is particularly valuable in assisting teachers to develop language activities quickly and we recommend that teachers visit this site.

What we learned from our project
We learned a great deal from working together on this project. Perhaps the most important component of the project was the opportunity for staff from different curriculum areas to interact with, and learn from, each other. The time that was provided by the QTP grant made it possible for staff to meet and to engage in professional dialogue. Sharing strategies across different subjects was a very worthwhile component of the project. Many staff involved in the project indicated that the types of professional interaction that resulted from their involvement in the project were superior to all other forms of professional development in which they had participated in recent years. This is consistent with current research in professional development which indicates that ongoing school based projects are a much superior method of inducing change in pedagogy than attendance at one-off courses. Furthermore, most of the teachers involved indicated that this type of activity is the direction in which they would like most of their professional development to take in the future. This is an exciting challenge for the school and other providers of professional development activities.

Student responses to the materials developed were very encouraging. Most of the activities were received enthusiastically and positive learning outcomes resulted for all students. From our teaching experiences it appears that materials designed to help second language learners also assist mainstream learners. Furthermore, the variety in methods of instruction resulting from the inclusion of ESL strategies in mainstream lessons increased student enjoyment of the learning process. Mainstream students’ understanding is enhanced through focused concept checking, clarification of jargon and parallel explanations.