Equity Today: The Region VIII EAC Podcast
Episode 108 – “A Brief ESL Discussion”

The Region VIII Equity Assistance Center at Metropolitan Statue University of Denver is guided by its vision to provide, upon request, technical assistance, training, and staff development for school boards, school districts, tribal education agencies, charter schools, and other responsible government agencies. We strive to promote equitable education opportunities and access for all students. We seek to improve equity, access, and participation and high quality, research-based opportunities for all students. We work to reduce disparities between and among groups where they may arise.

Tyler: Hello, and welcome to another edition of Equity Today, the EAC Region VIII podcast. I’m Tyler, and today I’m here with Marcela Parra, and today we’re going to talk about English as a second language, English language acquisition, that kind of thing. What are some of the main struggles that people kind of experience in trying to learn second languages in general, specifically English?

Marcela: When a student starts school in the United States, they tend to go through several stages. The first would be a kind of a culture shock, if they’re coming to a big city from a small town in their native land, then it’s going to be a lot of hustle and bustle, very different for them; then it would be getting adjusted to their school, getting adjusted to the American school system, getting adjusted to being in a classroom where they don’t understand what’s being said; they might know the content but they can’t communicate it because it’s not in their language. The second, and they’re probably already at this point in the experience, they’re probably in it, it’s called the silent period, where they’re just quiet and they’re trying to take things and they’re trying to figure out things. They’re navigating the social network among their peers, they’re navigating the school, they’re trying to learn where the bathroom is, trying to learn which book is the science book, which book is the spelling book. So they’re trying to learn several things, and they’re quiet because they’re taking it all in like a sponge. And then eventually they’ll be out in the playground, and you’ll hear them speaking in their native language to their peers from their same homeland, and then once in a while you’ll hear them try to add in an English word here and there, and then eventually you’ll hear them speaking what a lot of people would consider fluent English. But basically it’s what we would call survival English, or basic interpersonal communication skills, which is exactly that, it’s learning the right words to be part of your peer group, part of your classroom, but it doesn’t necessarily mean you’re fluent, or that your academic English is at a high level for you to be progressing out of a sheltered English instruction, per se, into a mainstream, all-English classroom. And so, we want to get our students, from BICS, which is basic interpersonal communication skills, transferred into the CALPS, which is the cognitive academic language proficiency skills, which is where we want to get them all into that. Unfortunately, the school system doesn’t allow enough
time for that to happen because it usually takes between 5-7 years, perhaps even more depending on the students background and educational career before they arrived to their new environment, their new school, their new language.

T: Yeah, it sounds like, you’re saying it takes 5-7, ideally we would give a person 5-7 years to catch up to where someone who has been immersed in it their whole life would be, and that’s a really long time, and I don’t see, you’re not even in the same school, generally, for that long, and having consistent advising within the school or throughout your school career.

M: That’s a good point that you make, you’re not even in the same school for that long. It takes the United States 12 years to graduate a student from basic k-12 education. Yet somebody comes in from a different school system, a different country, is expected to do the same with no support. They might have the lessons, the ESL classes, but they’re still not getting enough support in their content areas, depending on where you are. In Arizona they have the 20-hour block session and it’s nothing but ESL students sitting in a classroom learning English, but they’re missing out on their math, they’re missing out on their science, they’re missing out on their chemistry, they’re missing out on their algebra, they’re missing out on all their other content areas. Because you know, they don’t have an ESL algebra class.

T: Yeah. That’s what I was thinking, was it’s too bad that there isn’t classes that teach the material, the actual curriculum material, in the second language, or incorporating English into the lessons with the material.

M: Well, there is, and that is called dual-language classes, dual-immersion classes or curriculum, where you offer the content area fully, wholly in the native language of your student, so in a lot of cases it would be Spanish.

T: Do we see that at all in public schools, or not really?

M: Yeah, it’s very popular in Florida, Oyster Bay I think is the district. It’s a very good model. You used to see it a lot in Arizona. Colorado used to be really strong in it. California as well. But, you know, it is part of the animal that we call politics. Ron Owens came along and started doing away with a lot of that.

T: Yeah, I mean I can see how someone would try to argue that it’s, a misallocation of resources or something, to have second language classes like that, but obviously it’s incredibly important. I mean, it seems like also, is, it helps the kids who, Spanish is their first language, but also if you want your kid to learn Spanish as a second language, you could have them take, a –

M: They would be part of that school. The school is a dual-language school, parents actually seek out schools like that, because they’re getting free foreign language instruction for their English speaking child. And once that happens, then that child is that much more valuable to the market, when they graduate high school, and to
get in to college. The United States is probably the only country that does not encourage another language throughout the educational career of students.

T: Yeah, it’s a big blind spot I think we have in this country. So, we have just classes taught in the primary language of the students, what are some other solutions that we’ve looked at here?

M: We have different types of dual-language. You have the 50/50 model, the 90/10 model, ideally you want to get them to the 50/50, and that’s where you start; it’s a matter of percent, so 100 percent of the day, you break that up into ten blocks into blocks of ten. So, first grade, kindergarten, whatever grade you start them in, is done in the second language, or the first language of the student, whichever you prefer. And then the following year, you raise it to 20%, and you would add a content area class, and that only one teacher would be able to speak to the student in the second language, and the other teacher would be designated the English speaker teacher. And then the third year, you go 30%, so say, by third grade, the child would be receiving science, language arts, and social studies in Spanish, and the rest would be in English.

T: OK, then it’s kind of a gradual, it’s a gradation.

M: It is, and so you get them what you want to end up, is 50% of the day in English, and 50% of the day in Spanish, or the child’s language.

T: Awesome, yes, whatever that might be. What are primary languages? Obviously, Spanish in our region. What else do we work with here?

M: There’s, Chinese would be one, Vietnamese would be one, Laotian, different types of Spanish, different dialects of Spanish, there’s a big movement to revive and revitalize the Native American languages also.

T: Interesting, that would be very cool. What are, do we have any current ESL projects, or…?

M: Well, we’re getting a lot of requests to do basic knowledge on ESL, so like the basic pedagogical foundation for second language acquisitions, the basic theories and methods for sheltered English instruction, and then, we’re getting a lot of those from Charter Schools, so we’re keeping busy with that. Colorado, through the department of ed. In Colorado, they have a certified trainer, so a lot of the schools already are certified or trained in SIOP.

T: That’s good. I guess, just to kind of cap things off, do you have any advice for anyone listening, who either have students working with ESL, or is themselves an ESL learner?
M: Make sure you follow your language objective skills, your content area objective skills, use a lot of visuals, use a lot of group work. Offer all the support and enrichment activities that you can as a teacher to your students. Support is the main thing. Make them feel comfortable in your classroom, and allow them to be successful in your classroom.

T: OK, awesome. I know immersion tends to be the best way to learn a language..

M: No.

T: No?

M: Dual-language immersion, yes.

T: Yeah.

M: If you do immersion, it’s sink or swim. There’s no support.

T: Yeah, that’s kind of what I was thinking, and in such a chaotic environment like the school, it really...

M: It does nothing for your long term retention either. You can go to a country and learn Spanish in six weeks, but then you come back and you forget.

T: You have to relearn it all over again. Interesting. I never knew. Cool. So, anybody listening, if you have any issues with English as a second language, either in your students, or you or your child has peers that are struggling, or your child is struggling, any of these things, please don’t hesitate to contact the Equity Assistance Center here, we are always just here to help and advise whenever we can. So thank you. This was short and sweet, but I think hopefully some good information.

T: If you would like to contact the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center, you may do so at our website, metrostate-eac.org, phone 303-556-6065, or via email, at eac@msudenver.edu. Listeners are also invited to join the conversation by following us on twitter @EACRegion8, or by liking the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII facebook page. Special thanks to the band Northbound for the use of their song Forward in this podcast. Thank you.