
ESL: Road to Recovery

To anyone unfamiliar with it, the concept of ESL would likely evoke images of a crowded, chaotic classroom filled with needy, illiterate immigrants and an overwhelmed instructor, desperately trying to cope with a mass of confused minds. Okay, maybe that's a slight exaggeration, but most people don't exactly have an accurate conception of second language instruction.

Here at the CCVT, we have a special brand of English instruction — one that incorporates the needs and sensitivities of a unique group of individuals, namely, survivors of torture, into our ESL program. Our students are anything but helpless and unintelligent; many are skilled professionals who led healthy and productive lives in their home countries before being forced to sacrifice almost everything to reach Canadian soil. Our instructors, although often challenged by the day-to-day trials any teacher would be expected to face, are motivated, enthusiastic and genuinely committed to the educational health and improvement of their students.

At the CCVT, our ESL program is dedicated not only to second language acquisition but to the enhancement of a new life experience for many who once thought any life at all would be a gift in itself. We share this gift and celebrate our skills, talents and cultural diversity in the spirit of friendship, togetherness and understanding. We are proud of our long-standing tradition of excellence and our opportunity to represent a truly dynamic organization.

So what does ESL mean to someone who is almost totally unfamiliar with North American life, its traditions, system of government, or economic standards? The answer to this is a first step — albeit a small one — toward a manageable life within a new society. Central to our educational curriculum is an emphasis on the practical aspects of daily living, the basic skills for communication without which most of us couldn't function. This includes instruction on transportation; shopping; making

appointments for health care or legal aid; inquiry dialogue for rent, utilities, phone services and apartment searches; and Canadian government and economy.

Cognizant of the ethnic diversity within our client base and the risk of imposing a Western-based, ethnocentric philosophy on our students, care is taken to both encourage tolerance within the classroom and promote an awareness of the need to respect others' class, gender and age, regardless of personal political or religious orientation. There is strong focus on developing methods of instruction that do not adhere to any particular social or cultural framework. This is especially important when one considers the fact that the ethnic composition of our classes is in a state of flux. The appearance of new clients at our centre often reflects changing political conditions abroad.

Furthermore, since many students are still struggling to cope with physical, mental and emotional reminders of a traumatic past, it is vital that a patient, sensitive and flexible approach be taken during instruction. I am proud to say that our teaching staff and very capable supporting cast of volunteer tutors and assistants have addressed this need effectively. Considerable effort has been invested in obtaining educational resources (i.e. workshops, conferences, specialized programs, community excursions, etc.) that are specifically designed for our clients' special needs. Finally, countless hours of extra preparation and one-on-one help sessions underline our dedication to individual initiative and progress.

What does ESL mean to students at CCVT? Is it just a class? Is it merely a means of passing time when no job or other academic opportunities have been available? The answer is an unequivocal "NO". Our ESL program occupies a special niche in each student's growth and development. Instruction and classroom dynamics are geared toward the empowerment of the student and the fostering of confidence, independence and self-esteem. In

so doing, a sense of purpose and direction offers the student a means of therapeutic guidance, helping to overcome past grief and distress in a uniquely healthy fashion.

The results speak for themselves. All that is needed to verify the system's success is to meet the countless students who come to our centre distressed, anxious and unassuming, and have emerged — at times in a matter of months — as confident, enthusiastic and self-motivated. It is not melodrama to say this is often a miraculous transformation, one that makes my own job as program assistant especially worthwhile every time it happens.

Perhaps nothing can more aptly illustrate the personal growth and fulfillment we strive to achieve than the words of one student: "Since I started English classes at CCVT, I can breathe again. I have new life. I feel happy and cared for. I am in a new home and I am finding new opportunities. I am proud of this."

If ESL isn't just another class, what is the ultimate goal for our students? Our objective within the ESL program is consistent with the guiding principles of the CCVT itself -- to help reduce our clients' isolation and to provide them with healthy avenues toward recovery and self-actualization.

As much as possible, students are encouraged to share their academic and career interests with instructors and, in particular, with myself as I search for the best possible ESL extension program and/or skills training for each student. The programs to which students can be referred are as wide-ranging as the 70+ languages and dialects to which they proudly lay claim. Everything from aviation and auto mechanics to word processing and zoology is being explored for its viability as continuing education for prospective graduates of our program. Although currently in its infancy, this project possesses great potential.

The underlying philosophy is to encourage students to undertake an honest personal exploration of their talents, skills and interests, and follow this up with a serious commitment to pursuing any opportunities they discover.

With a helpful nudge in the right direction, students commonly begin to re-establish a sense of autonomy, pride and personal fulfillment through tangible career possibilities.

Along with this "re-awakening of dreams", the student experiences both hopefulness for opportunity and anxiety over change. This ambivalent reaction is characterized by hesitancy in completing applications for the prospective program, denial of aptitude/academic skill, procrastination and pre-occupation with petty concerns and details, or in extreme cases, changing their minds altogether for prolonged periods.

These manifestations underscore the importance of maintaining an ESL program that can patiently and sensitively recognize the difficulties students will face when approaching change, particularly when these students are challenged by serious personal adversity. It is essential to ensure that a student can pursue new endeavours with a sense of comfort and security, knowing that should any counselling, additional instruction or other form of support become necessary, they need not hesitate to seek our assistance.

This pledge of commitment is anything but cosmetic in application. In fact, the availability of help offers some form of real comfort in itself and discourages despair or feelings of inadequacy on the part of the client. Ultimately, this translates into more successful graduates from our program and a new road to recovery is travelled once again.

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