



## Great Books Programs and ESL Proficiency Beyond the Basics

As the number of students for whom English is a second language increases nationwide, educators are considering how best to guide these students through the stages of language acquisition and to empower them with the skills they need to succeed. Many educators are turning to Great Books programs to achieve these goals.

### Language Acquisition and Intellectual Growth

Research shows, and educators in the field confirm, that students learn language more rapidly and with greater facility when language is taught in a real-life context. Language is mastered as language is used. The outstanding literature in Great Books programs is specially selected to ignite student interest and the exchange of ideas. The program gives students a reason to communicate by providing opportunities to connect the literature with their personal experiences.

The elements of language acquisition—reading, thinking, writing, listening, and speaking—are not separate, linear skills. They require simultaneous use to become real language. Working with Great Books programs, students read, develop their own ideas, listen to the thoughts of others, and discuss and explore issues together. In this way students learn from each other and reach understandings they might not have attained independently. They are developing critical-thinking skills and communication skills at the same time.

Solving problems of interest to students promotes learning. The significant issues presented in Great Books selections encourage students to reflect, question, and explore. In developing satisfactory personal resolutions to issues through in-depth discussion and interactions with peers, all students, including ESL students, learn strategies for extending their communicative abilities into every area of their academic and social world. The supportive environment of Great Books programs validates students' ideas and gives them confidence to progress in the core curriculum.

### Goals for ESL Students

National and state goals for ESL students cannot be considered in isolation. Even as ESL students acquire a new language and culture, they are held to the same high levels of achievement in content learning as English-proficient students are. In order for ESL students to be successful in school and the world beyond, they must be able to read English, use spoken and written English to acquire content, and then be assessed in that content in English. Students must be able to use English in social, interpersonal areas as well as in academic settings.

ESL students need to develop many competencies, including the following:

- To interact in English within the classroom
- To obtain, build, reflect upon, and provide information in spoken and written form
- To use appropriate learning strategies to acquire academic knowledge

With its strong oral component and emphasis on thoughtful reading, note taking, and respect for one's own and others' perspectives, Great Books programs lead ESL students toward English language proficiency skills.

## Keys to Success

Discussions with teachers, administrators, and other leaders in the field of education have pointed to the following factors as contributing to the success of Great Books programs with ESL students:

- **Teacher confidence.** With practice, Great Books teachers gain confidence in themselves as leaders and in their students as learners. Leaders who go into the program with a positive attitude and a stance as a co-learner with students tend to realize more success.
- **Ongoing professional development.** The Great Books program of professional development prepares teachers to involve students of all ability levels, to develop questioning strategies for discussion, and to conduct the daily interpretive activities. Many teachers leave the professional development courses remarking that they are the most useful and substantial professional development they have ever had. However, it takes time to acquire new habits and learn to use a new program with confidence. The Great Books program of professional development is designed to support teachers' learning over time, and includes on-site consultation days as well as intermediate and advanced courses.
- **Sufficient materials appropriate for ESL students.** Ideally, each student should have his or her own copy of the student anthology and the student activity book or Reader's Journal. Program effectiveness is diminished when students must share materials.

Teachers should always have their own teacher's guides and audiotapes or audio CDs of the Great Books selections. Hearing multiple, well-modeled readings of the selections is critical when English is being learned as a second language.

- **Thoughtful integration of Great Books programs into the reading/language arts curriculum.** The Great Books approach increases achievement for students of all abilities when integrated into the school's reading/language arts curriculum.
- **Use of strategies that foster maximum involvement of ESL students.** Teachers who have achieved success with ESL students in Great Books programs have learned a variety of strategies to help students build stronger foundations and participate as fully as possible in all Great Books activities. These strategies include:
  - ✓ Text openers
  - ✓ Multiple readings
  - ✓ Sharing questions
  - ✓ Focusing on key words
  - ✓ Drawing and dramatization

Most educators agree that full proficiency in English is necessary for the future success of all students in the United States. Planning for ESL students to meet this common goal means finding ways to enable these students to join the mainstream and meet the same high standards as proficient English-speaking students. Educators who consider ESL students' social, educational, and personal backgrounds, as well as their existing skills and knowledge, will be better equipped to lead them to academic success. As one educator said, "We're not just interested in teaching a child to speak English. We want well-educated, motivated students—who speak English well." Great Books programs provide the means to attain that goal.

**To find out more about Great Books programs, please visit [www.greatbooks.org](http://www.greatbooks.org) or call 800-222-5870 and ask for the sales representative for your state.**