

Jade and Rafael
2AB

Interview: Jill Follett, ESL Teacher at Century High School

Rafael: The first question is, what has been your involvement with the Hispanic population?

Follett: When the school first opened and for the following two years, I was the case manager and that involved incoming students, and testing them, placing them in classes, and then also teaching ESL.

Rafael: What levels of ESL do you teach?

Follett: This year, ESL 1 and 3, which is beginning and advanced.

Rafael: What made you decide to become an ESL teacher?

Follett: At first I was an English teacher, and I had done some volunteer work in Kansas City with adult ESL and it was really fun and many times during Literature classes the students said, "oh, why do we have to do this? Shakespeare..." but with ESL I didn't really have to explain it, because they need it, and I love grammar so much; we don't really teach grammar anymore. And it was just really satisfying so I went back to get my Master's degree and I love my job.

Rafael: What kinds of classes did you have to take to become a teacher?

Follett: Some linguistics courses, and methods of teaching English and first and second language acquisitions, so they compare, often in the ideology they compare language acquisition with babies and how they acquire language and second language acquisition.

Rafael: Are you fluent in Spanish?

Follett: No, in fact... Well, I can get by. When I started I just knew bits and pieces but actually a couple of years of just being in the classroom so much, it sort of sunk in and a couple years ago it clicked, and I went to a meeting - a parent meeting - and in the past the parent meetings that I had gone to (inaudible) and then all of a sudden I went to a parent meeting and I understood everything. And so I think I've gotten in the past couple of years more fluent. I think I could get by.

Rafael: How does the ESL program determine who is ready _____?

Follett: The teacher bases it on writing samples and not necessarily speaking ability because conversational English is so much different than academic language. I think study habits and determination override a lot, and writing and reading, but the district has a different system. We don't necessarily follow that highly because it's inaccurate.

Rafael: And what is the district's system?

Follett: They have this test called _____ and actually, it is an intelligence test and not a language test, but it happens to be in Spanish. And so it has four different sections - identification of a picture and they just have to say what the picture is, and writing, except the writing is writing one word and then they have to spell it right. And the reading section is one word and they have to basically pronounce it correctly, which is not reading. And then there's another section. But it comes up with a score and if they have a score of four or above, then they can be mainstream. However, very very few of our students, even if they've lived here for ten years, reach a four or a five. And it's been my experience that some students who have a 1-2 have done well, but if we follow the district they'd still be in ESL 1. So I think it inhibits their development and I think teachers can make a better determination.

Rafael: What are the parents' reactions to academic outreach programs?

Follett: I think they're appreciative, grateful, in my experience.

Rafael: And what do you think the kids' reaction is?

Follett: I think they're nervous, I think it's a double-edged sword, however, because they get people in their class who speak their native language except for the one or two Vietnamese/Chinese/Korean, they have their own club of Spanish-speaking friends and so they sometimes don't practice that language as much. And they're like, "Oh, my friends are here, I can't leave ESL."

Rafael: Do you feel that ESL's kind of like a push for them; that it's too much help?

Follett: I'm nodding.

Rafael: What type of feedback do you see from your Hispanic students?

Follett: Regarding my class, sometimes I think my students appreciate my class and a lot of them like it and they get excited but other classes are like "oh, I need help, I need translation and this class is too difficult." Sometimes I hear that they need assistance and so I don't know if it's because...

Rafael: What is the main issue for your kids?

Follett: Issue, I would say is, lack of turning in homework. And I tried to have a policy that said "no late work" and I thought that would work, and then the whole class failed. 80% of my students failed. So I couldn't do that, and I try to take into account that some of my students work and they have to, and a lot of my students have babies and I just have to be flexible with that. But when they're absent, getting the work in is a huge problem. Like right now, I have in both classes, they're missing about half the work. And technically they have an F. So that's a big one.

Rafael: Do you have any ideas of how you're going to change it for next year?

Follett: I change my lessons every year based on who's in my class and what their abilities are and many times I have a couple students repeat and so I don't want to teach the same thing, so I just change it all the time. Sometimes it just depends.

Rafael: Do you think the school district could make changes to better adjust kids?

Follett: I think they're making a lot of changes right now, I mean they have Hispanic Outreach program; I think they're really trying to put it in their goals. I think as a district, they think they can change things as they are.

Rafael: What is the greatest obstacle for Hispanic students in their day-to-day education?

Follett: Documentation. So many of my students don't have papers and so they can't apply for financial aid, so they might be geniuses, but they can't afford college.

Rafael: What programs do address student problems?

Follett: Well you know, the Migrant Office, we have a parent reading program, there are a lot.

Rafael: Where do you think they're going? Are they going to eventually expand?

Follett: I think they're definitely not going to disappear. Most of them are federally funded, and I think they're strong and there's a huge need there. There's a need. So I don't think they'll go away. I think unfortunately because it is federally funded, we're going the way of Special Education, which is a lot of paperwork, and I think that would waste a lot of time. Every single student who's in the ESL program has so many different documents and it's just a bunch of paperwork and files and it wastes the case manager's time.

Rafael: What are some of the reasons for changing the program to better serve Hispanic students?

Follett: If we change the program, I think we're teaching more with less assistance, like instead of having an ESL Health class, have a Health class that is taught to incorporate. You know, have the

teacher be knowledgeable about techniques and methodologies on how to teach ESL students instead of saying, 'oh those students need to go in a separate class.' That really bothers me.

Rafael: Do you feel adequately prepared to meet the needs of students who have a limited English deficiency?

Follett: I wish there was more training for us teachers, because I have my Master's but not a lot of that teaching.

Rafael: What in-service opportunities have you had?

Follett: Well we've had in-service opportunities for our staff and they've been good. I think the teachers should be required, but yet be free to take classes on methodology and sheltered instruction. I think all teachers here in the Hillsboro School District should take those. I mean I've had in-services (inaudible).

Rafael: How do you, basically, teach your class?

Follett: My main objective of each class period is to have the students speak, read, listen and write each period in English. So I try to be a little bit... In the advanced class, for example, maybe some debate, journal writing. We're doing Romeo and Juliet, so yesterday they debated some of the themes of the book. And they have to debate in English, and so I think having them give a little talk about something that they want to talk about helps them be useful. In the beginning, we do a grammar book, too.

Rafael: Do you focus on the more advanced stuff?

Follett: For a while there, when the CIM was really big, bigger than it is now, I was doing a lot of speeches and doing it as a CIM task and you had to write a CIM. I do in my classes CIM tasks, but I don't grade them as such anymore because it's just... And I think that it's valid - it's valid practice.

Rafael: Do you think in the Hillsboro School District especially, ESL students head on to college level?

Follett: No. I mean, I think teachers are, but I'm not sure the district is. I think for teaching them through high school without the abilities that other students have; like some students can go to ESL 2 and graduate from high school, and I don't know if that's right or not. I think that teachers do, and I think we talk about scholarships a lot and we try to get them.

Rafael: Are there any of your students that shouldn't be in your ESL classes?

Follett: I wish! No, I mean if a student said that, I would say, "go." In the past, if I would have that happen, there were some who would say, 'I don't want to be here' but I didn't feel like she was able, but I said, 'go try it, I think you should.' And she didn't and she came back, but I think anyone should be able to leave and try to meet any challenges that they can.

Rafael: How would you feel if the district started teaching Hispanic history?

Follett: Oh, I think that'd be great. I think all students should have that. I think it's valuable, I think there's something central about History classes, and you know and my students teach me about the history of Mexico and do presentations and it's just so fascinating. The history that I've learned is so centralized and I think it would really benefit the Anglo... Rest of the population. I think it would benefit everyone, really, to understand where they're living and who's next to them and the history of the world. Yeah, that'd be great. That would be super, and it would validate students and help them.

Rafael: We talked about a lot of students have kids and work and stuff. How do you help them get over that?

Follett: Well I think being flexible in absences helps a lot. You know, not writing them up when

they have all these absences. I mean, who can tell who's skipping and who really has life issues? And girls with babies, there's just really not a lot you can do except be flexible with their grade.

Rafael: Besides ESL 1 and ESL 2, do you like doing other things for mainstream?

Follett: I've stopped in a few of those classes and it's a nightmare.

Rafael: As far as your ESL 1 class, do they do anything that would be similar to a mainstream class?

Follett: Well, writing, and we do descriptive writing so paragraphs and introduction - body - conclusion, we start that in ESL 1. It's hard to do that when they don't have enough English for one sentence. And it takes a long time, like two paragraphs would probably take three class periods. I think writing. That's my specialty and what I love, so...

Rafael: How about the ESL math classes? How do you feel about those classes?

Follett: Well, I think they're necessary, because many of our students come in their third or fourth day back and they haven't had any math since elementary school, and they're necessary but I wish they were taught by a math teacher or someone who's trained. This year it was good because our ESL director taught it and she had taken a class about teaching math and I think that helped a lot. But it is important because if they tried to take pre-algebra, they would fail.

Rafael: If a kid has math skills but don't speak English, would they be mainstream or still ESL?

Follett: They take a math test right when they come in and if they pass the math test they don't go to ESL math, they go to whatever math they're in. And if they're fresh, fresh here, maybe wait a semester until they acquire the language and then take it. But I mean math is pretty universal.

Rafael: Do you ever feel like in math classes that the assistant kind of over-helps them and babies them too much?

Follett: Yeah. I mean I don't have an assistant but I had one in the past and I felt like they were doing the work for them. Even when I translate things I'm doing it way more than I should be. It's like, it's just too easy, she's like, giving it and it's a hard balance. I would have a hard time, too, being an assistant I think, because I would want to help them. I don't even know what assistants learn in training. So you know, I don't blame them, I blame the system because they aren't even really told what their goal is, how to do it. They don't have any training.

Rafael: Why do you think the other students do well but not Hispanic students?

Follett: In the past, in classes where I even had one student, I never spoke Spanish. Every time I do it, I'm like, "oh! Sorry!" I'm sure they - she says 'oh I don't mind, it's okay' but I'm sure it's not good. I'm sure they feel already isolated but in this place it's special because not only am I getting the Korean or Ethiopian or whoever I see, but sometimes they really are assertive because the rest of the students just talk to themselves but I have had very welcoming students. Like one of my students, she's awesome, the very first day she sat down next to her and she wanted to practice English so communicate and it was just beautiful. And so they're just friends but in the past my Vietnamese students were like, "all they do is speak Spanish! I'm here to learn English!" and they get really mad.

Rafael: Do you ever have cases where a senior's about to graduate but he hasn't learned enough English and you want to hold him back?

Follett: Yeah.

Rafael: And can you?

Follett: No. We can talk to them and try to encourage them to stay another year because you can go to high school until you're 21, and many of our students do just so they can learn English for free.

Rafael: How often do you get a student who comes all the way from ESL 1?

Follett: It happens frequently. I've had in the past five years maybe ten student, normally students from ESL 1 and by probably December they're ready for 2, then they're ready for 3. But just whizzing right through it. And usually those are the ones who came with a strong education and they learn fast.