

# Eyes on English

A persistent problem for teachers in English as a Second Language (ESL) situations concerns students who speak their shared common language instead of English in the classroom. Considering the inherent difficulty of the speaking skill, this is understandable. Learners often prefer to interact socially in their native language, allowing them to more effectively express a full range of ideas.

At my international school in South America, which has a large non-native English-speaking population, all instruction is in English and students are expected to speak English at all times, except during lunch and recess. Nevertheless, administrators became concerned by the prevalence of students who relied on their native languages when working or interacting in the classroom. This concern inspired me to develop Eyes on English, a schoolwide campaign to promote the use of English. Although it was a six-week campaign in our Early Childhood (ECC) and Elementary divisions, the number of weeks and grade levels are flexible, and Eyes on English can be easily adapted to

varying age, grade, and ability levels. This article will present the rationale for implementing Eyes on English and describe how it can help teachers increase English usage through an activity that is practical, fun, and easy to implement.

## **What is Eyes on English and how does it work?**

Eyes on English is best described as a low-cost and low-maintenance activity with big payoffs in language learning. During the six-week Eyes on English campaign, volunteer inspectors conduct brief, secret observations of classrooms to see if English is being spoken. Classes using only English during the observations win an Eyes on English award at the end of the week. At the end of the six-week period, the grade level with the most weekly awards wins a grand prize. Although we chose to make this a team-building activity by naming the winner by grade level, the winners could also be selected by individual classes.

Students and teachers know the inspectors exist but do not know who they are. This intrigue captures students' and teachers' attention and

makes it important to ensure that the inspections are conducted in secret. Mystery, intrigue, competition, and rewards are key to the success of Eyes on English.

Because the main requirement to carry out the campaign is volunteer inspectors to observe and report on the English language usage in classes, the activity is feasible for schools operating with meager resources. Publicity and rewards for the campaign do require additional resources such as inexpensive items that can be purchased or made by hand or even things that can be found in nature. The decals, banners, and other items mentioned in this article serve only as examples, and are not absolutely required to institute the program.

An excellent feature of Eyes on English is the fact that it does not create extra work for classroom teachers, which helps gain their buy-in for the campaign. While teachers promote and facilitate the activity, the main responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the students, who decide whether they will speak in English at all times or not.

### Theoretical grounding

The Eyes on English campaign is based on both cognitive research and best practice second language acquisition strategies. Activities that excite students and result in authentic, creative, and spontaneous language use will typically achieve better results than boring lectures, repetitive lessons, or the rote memorization of grammatical structures. Eyes on English and the associated activities and events empower students by giving them a choice to speak in English or not, allow them to be part of a collaborative effort, and stimulate communicative interactions related to their interests. Cognitive research has shown that these factors are key elements for student engagement, intellectual development, and successful learning (Jensen 2005). Positive language learning results when students have opportunities to practice the language they have learned through authentic interactions (Adger et al. 1995). Students also benefit when the learning situation accommodates different learning styles, such as analytical vs. global and auditory vs. visual (Walqui 2000). By its nature, Eyes on English allows students to apply their individual learning styles rather

than being forced to adapt to one particular style. In addition, research indicates that a low-stress environment with a high challenge is an important factor for student motivation (Jensen 2005).

All of these language learning factors relate to the powerful theory of *intrinsic motivation*, which is activated in a learning environment that considers students' interests, offers choices for learning, and creates opportunities for student achievement so they can develop competence and accomplish goals on their own. The Eyes on English activity triggers intrinsic motivation since the task, speaking in English, is behaviorally relevant to the learner (Ahissar et al. 1992). Brown (1994) offers a checklist of ten questions that teachers can use to determine whether a language learning activity is enhancing intrinsic motivation among their students. Items from the checklist that are particularly applicable to Eyes on English are:

- Does the technique appeal to the genuine interests of your students? Is it relevant to their lives?
- Do you present the technique in a positive, enthusiastic manner?
- Are students clearly aware of the purpose of the technique?
- Does it contribute—at least to some extent—to students' ultimate autonomy and independence (from you)?
- Does the technique present a “reasonable challenge”? (Brown 1994, 43)

Because the student-centered classroom is essential to intrinsic motivation, the role of the teacher is paramount. As Brown states, a teacher should not just deliver information to students, but should also think about being “a **facilitator of learning** whose job it is to set the stage for learning, to start the wheels turning inside the heads of your students, to turn them on to their own abilities, and to help channel those abilities in fruitful directions” (Brown 1994, 43; boldface in the original).

### The nuts and bolts of Eyes on English

In addition to volunteer inspectors, the Eyes on English campaign depends on one person (or more if desired) to run the campaign; that involves recruiting inspectors,

setting up an inspection schedule, collecting and recording the inspectors' findings, and distributing the weekly awards. Recruiting inspectors is not a problem because the inspections involve very short visits at times of the inspectors' choosing.

Inspectors are sworn to secrecy regarding their identity. They are also instructed to be creative when doing the inspections (e.g., listening from outside the classrooms; checking on students as they move from their homeroom classes to special classes). To make scheduling inspections easy, one week I had the Specials teachers of Art, Music, Physical Education, and Computers serve as inspectors during their regular Specials classes. Other weeks, the principals, secretaries, librarian, and teachers on my ECC ESL Committee were recruited to serve as inspectors. When extra teachers were needed, I chose people whose normal work in support positions such as ESL and reading assistance would not raise suspicion.

At one point I enlisted the janitors to be the inspectors. They were thrilled to participate and took the task very seriously. Because their jobs are very much a part of the daily school routine, they were never suspected of being inspectors. Everyone was so curious about the identity of the inspectors that they kept a close eye on me to see who I was talking to or meeting with in order to gain hints. So as to not give away the identity of the janitors, I had the woman who cleaned my room serve as my liaison with the other janitors.

The Eyes on English administrator must also manage the following important responsibilities:

- Send emails to inspectors the week before their duty to ensure that they will be available on their scheduled dates.
- Appoint inspectors to check on two assigned classes at least two times during the Monday–Thursday period of their inspection week. The observations are intended to be short, five-minute visits.
- Require inspectors to make their reports by email or in writing. Reports include their name, the room number of the class inspected, and a “yes” or “no” regarding English usage. These reports

must be turned in to the administrator by the end of classes on Thursday of each week.

- Remind inspectors on Wednesday morning, via email or notes, to make their Thursday reports.

Throughout the campaign, only the administrator should know the identity of the mystery inspectors. This secrecy quickly creates schoolwide enthusiasm as teachers and students try to figure out when and where the classes are being observed.

As administrator, I received and recorded the data from the inspectors each week, and every Friday afternoon I placed weekly Eyes on English award decals for winning classes in the teachers' mailboxes or delivered them to the classrooms. The teachers then announced the results to the classes and proudly displayed the decals in their windows for students and parents to see. Since the inspections were always brief, the classroom teachers had the option to return an award if they felt that the students' overall usage of English had not been very high during the week. On three occasions teachers did exercise this right. It was disappointing for the students, but at the same time it made them take the Eyes on English campaign more seriously.

At the end of the six-week period, the grade level with the most decals was declared the winner. Throughout the activity, no mention was made as to which grade level was winning at any point in time, but students could easily walk the halls and count the decals on the classroom windows if they wished.

### **Materials needed**

One of the most attractive features of Eyes on English is its low cost. At the onset of the campaign, there is a need for publicity to attract the students' attention. In our case, we put up a lot of posters emphasizing “eyes.” A colleague obtained free posters with adorable photos of children promoting eyewear, to which we added catchy captions related to Eyes on English: A poster with a young girl acting like a model had the caption “Be fashionable. Speak in English,” and a poster with a boy eating an apple proclaimed, “I even speak English at recess.” Additional posters were made by adding captions to funny pictures

from newspapers and magazines. For example, an ad for a home security system had a bulldog with a red police light on his head. We added the caption “Red alert, red alert! Did I hear someone speaking Spanish?” The posters were laminated for durability since many were placed on exterior walls in hallways.

Weekly awards and final grand prizes are also needed for Eyes on English. For weekly awards, creative teachers made two-sided paper decals that could be displayed on classroom windows. One side had the words “Eyes on English” and the other side had a pencil drawing of an eagle, our school mascot. The grand prize decal was a fancier version of the weekly award decal—a big bow with the words “Grand Prize Winner” added to it. Alternatives for the decals could be special items made with shells, stones, sticks tied to a string, seed pods, or any other item on hand at the school or from nature.

In addition to the grand prize decal, winning students receive a more substantial prize. For younger students this could be a picnic on campus with a visit by the school mascot. If the winning grade level is middle school or high school, the grand prize should be something that older students consider significant, such as a day off from school, a movie, a no homework pass, or free pizza. Middle school and high school students might openly state that Eyes on English is a silly activity, but they will actually work very hard to win these types of prizes.

### Special events

Keeping students’ attention for six weeks is tricky business, so various special events were scheduled throughout the campaign to keep the momentum going. Research shows that novel tasks engage students and encourage learning (Jensen 2005; Peck 1991). The freshness of the following events helps to stimulate learning and keep the enthusiasm level high.

#### Kickoff event

The campaign began with an assembly to explain the Eyes on English activity to the students. Prior to the assembly, teachers were given a fact sheet with rules and procedures of the campaign. The presence of mystery inspectors was highly emphasized at the first

assembly to add a sort of Harry Potter-like touch to the campaign. Grabbing the attention of both teachers and students at the start of the campaign is critical since the attitude of teachers and students can have a huge effect (positive or negative) on second language learning (Walqui 2000).

#### Midpoint event

During the third week of the campaign, we had a Recess Rock event with two teachers serving as DJs. Music blared on the playground during lunch recess for students to enjoy. Some students sang and danced to the music, while others watched or played with bottles of bubbles that were supplied for the occasion. Suggested materials include:

- a few posters or other materials to publicize the event
- two staff members to volunteer to be DJs
- a sound system
- music supplied by students, but previewed by the DJs
- bubbles, frisbees, and other items to serve as alternative entertainment

Depending on the ages of the students, other entertainment options might include:

- a music, dance, talent, or puppet show based on the culture of the country
- radio broadcasting, karaoke singing, and student performances in English

#### Fourth-week event

During the fourth week of the campaign, students and teachers arrived at school to find two huge “Eyes on English, Eyes on You” banners hanging on the outside walls of the school. I drew a basic sketch of how I wanted the banners to look and presented them to a local printshop that did not charge much to reproduce the designs on a plastic tarp-type material. The banners were a big hit and a constant reminder to students to use English at all times, and the surprise of finding them added to the momentum of the campaign.

#### Fifth-week event

During the fifth week, a fun-loving and kind-hearted teacher dressed up as our school mascot, an eagle. He walked through the hall-

ways peeking in windows and even entered some classrooms to listen for English. The identity of the teacher inside the costume was a well-kept secret until the campaign ended. Everyone had a great time trying to figure out the identity of the eagle since only his legs were exposed.

### **Closing event**

Eyes on English ended with an assembly where the students and teachers eagerly awaited the announcement of the final standings and the naming of the winning grade level. During the assembly, all the Eyes on English inspectors were asked to reveal their identities by coming onto the stage. It was a great time for teachers, students, and inspectors, since no one except the administrator knew who had served as inspectors. The janitors received a special introduction since they were the most undercover inspectors of all. As they walked onto the stage, the cheering, roars of laughter, and looks of incredulity on the faces of teachers and students were amazing. At this point it was easy to see that this simple language building activity had truly grown into a whole school team-building event.

The winning grade level had only one native English-speaker among its five teachers. The class with the least number of weekly awards had a native English-speaking teacher. These results show that classes with native English-speaking teachers do not necessarily have the advantage in this activity.

### **Using Eyes on English with various age groups**

An option for including middle and high school students is to put them in charge of designing and creating the weekly awards and providing entertainment in English such as puppet shows, radio broadcasting during recess, and special assemblies for the elementary and early childhood students. In this way, the older students use English to the maximum for a relevant purpose, even though they are not actually playing the game. They would most likely find the feeling of being in charge very motivating.

Because of the young ages of the Pre-Kinder (3 years old) and Kinder I (4 years old) students, it was agreed that these grade levels could decide how they would like to

participate in the Eyes on English activity. At both grade levels, teachers emphasized the use of English and the students attended the special assemblies. In Pre-Kinder, students placed marbles in jars when lots of English was spoken. They later had fun counting the marbles. In Kinder I, teachers were given a supply of Eyes on English award decals to be awarded to the classes as appropriate.

### **Challenges along the way**

The Eyes on English campaign ran smoothly during the six weeks; however, we did encounter some challenges to watch out for:

1. The person in charge of choosing inspectors must know staff members well and be aware of any personality clashes among teachers to ensure accurate inspection reports.
2. Some critics felt that it was not appropriate to reward students for speaking English, something that they should be doing anyway. This critique is legitimate; however, companies around the world have incentive programs to reward their staff for sales and other achievements, and Eyes on English is based on a similar premise. Everyone likes to be recognized for doing a great job.
3. Some teachers felt threatened by the idea of inspectors visiting their classrooms. Therefore, from the start of the activity, it is important to emphasize to teachers that this is just a game—not an administrative witch-hunt.
4. Unfortunately, two award decals disappeared from classroom windows. To prevent the transfer of awards from one classroom to another, the room number of each classroom should be clearly marked on award decals with a permanent marker before they are distributed.

### **Measures of success**

In addition to the very obvious increase in English usage at our school, there were other concrete gauges of success from the Eyes on English campaign:

1. At the end of the campaign, many teachers were so fascinated by the mys-

tery aspect that they contacted me for very specific details regarding how things had been arranged. Students also kept asking when and if we could play Eyes on English again.

2. The Eyes on English posters were so popular that almost every one of them disappeared the day after the campaign ended. During the campaign, I learned that many students were so enthusiastic about the activity that they made Eyes on English posters for their homes.
3. Months after the activity ended, our “Eyes on English, Eyes on You” banners were still displayed on the walls of the school buildings, not only as a reminder to students to speak in English, but also as an indication to all of the great time that we had had during the campaign.
4. The “Eyes on English, Eyes on You” banner design has become a logo for the ESL Committee. We have recently used it on the cover of a brochure that we created for parents with helpful information regarding language learning.
5. During the campaign, English usage greatly increased during lunch and recess, which are times when the English-only rule at our school is not enforced.

## Conclusion

Now it's your turn. Be bold and innovative! Surprise your students by implementing Eyes on English at your school. It not only increases English usage; it also lifts spirits and encourages team building at both the staff and student levels.

“Eyes on English, Eyes on YOU!”

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