Is Idaho doing all it can to help children who don't speak English?

Imagine you are a sixth-grader, newly arrived from a far-off land. Nervous about the first day of school, you stand alone on the playground watching a couple of kids kick a soccer ball around. You want to join them but you're afraid.

The bell rings and you follow the other kids your age into a classroom. Standing at the front of the room, the teacher begins to speak. Suddenly the other kids stand; you do, too. Frantically, you look around wondering what to do next. The other students put their right hands to their hearts and begin to recite, in unison, "I pledge allegiance ..." You watch, uncomprehending. You don't understand because you don't speak English.

Every year, thousands of children face just such puzzling scenes in Idaho schools. According to the Idaho Department of Education, in 1990 8,199 children — 3.8 percent of the state's students — were from non-English speaking backgrounds. Of those, the largest home-language group was Spanish with 6,685.

To succeed in school, experts say these children need English as a Second Language (ESL) classes taught by trained teachers. Can Idaho, a state trying to stretch already taut resources, provide the language training they need to learn English, keep up with their classmates and remain proud of their own cultural traditions?

Those children who live in Boise are lucky. They can participate in a unique program at Franklin Elementary.
School where they receive special instruction daily from ESL teacher Jean Ray. Seventy-three children from throughout Boise are bused to Franklin to participate in the program.

Ray's students are from Laos, Mexico, Afghanistan, China, Uganda and nine other countries, and her classroom reflects the ethnic diversity of each child. The room is decorated with Unicef posters and a world map, with string pinned to the home country of each student.

Ray starts at the beginning with her students. "Each student is accepted at the level at which he's working and we go from there," she says.

During the first week of school, each student is paired up with an English-speaking "friend" who takes the ESL student to the cafeteria and otherwise shows him or her the ropes. While this instant friendship is beneficial for the English-speaking volunteers, it is crucial for the non-English speakers trying to integrate into the school, Ray says.

The ESL students, who are "mainstreamed" into a regular classroom, spend an hour each day in small-group sessions with Ray and an aide. The younger children and new arrivals learn basics such as simple words, identifying objects and classroom rules. With time, the classes get more sophisticated and can include oral presentations and written reports.

Ray stresses that her classes correspond with the subjects being covered in the students' regular classroom. She talks with the other teachers every other week, then adjusts her curriculum accordingly. "The curriculum has to be content-based and not the children would lose a lot by being pulled out of their classrooms," she says.

Recently, some of the classes were studying geography, so Ray and her students did, too. But these international students have a slightly more global perspective than their Idaho counterparts.

Ray asks a group of six students: How many of you have seen the Pacific Ocean? Ching and Ning Choy, 14-year-old twins who came to the United States from China in 1989, raise their hands, straining to answer her question. Yes, they've seen the Pacific, they say, then reel off the names of four other oceans they flew over on their multi-legged trip to the West.

The success of her students, some of whom learn to speak English in months, attests to Ray's skills, which she acquired through years of experience and continuing education. Ray has taught English at Boise State's Adult Learning Center, Micron Technology and the Idaho Refugee Center, and is a master's-level student in BSU's bilingual education program.

Unfortunately, there just aren't enough experienced ESL teachers like Ray to go around in Idaho. And more training is needed as teachers face increasing numbers of non-English speaking children in their classrooms.

"There are more and more teachers who find themselves not well-equipped to deal with these children," says Jay Fuhriman, a professor of teacher education and director of BSU's bilingual education program. "The attitude of so many educators is that the best way to deal with non-English speaking children is to throw them in the middle of the stream and let them swim out."

Fuhriman thinks the bilingual education program offers a better solution. The federally funded program provides training in Spanish, so that graduates can teach students basic skills in their native language as the children improve their proficiency in English.

More than 70 BSU undergraduate students are enrolled in the four-part program, which includes instruction in language and ESL, multicultural studies, science and professional development. An additional 40 students are enrolled in BSU's master's-level bilingual program emphasizing language, culture, methodology and curriculum development.

The goal of the program is simple, Fuhriman says, "It is to get [children] proficient in English at the earliest possible time."

In the meantime, let's teach them as best we can," he believes public school systems suffer from phobias about the importance of teaching children to read in English. When the children fail, "it ends up being a 'blame the kids' syndrome."

The bilingual program also is designed to help teachers value their students' backgrounds. "We need to match the teachers to the culture of our students," he says. "And we need to help the children come into our culture to help them learn what they need to know."

Twenty-year-old Liliana Angeles knows firsthand how challenging it can be for non-English-speaking children in Idaho's schools. The BSU bilingual education major came from Mexico as a 10-year-old to live with her uncle's family in Wilder. When she arrived Angeles says she "didn't speak a word of English." But she had been a good student in Mexico, and especially enjoyed her Spanish reading and writing class.

In her first few years in the United States,
Angeles and a few other students studied English in the morning with an aide in a portable classroom behind the school. In the afternoons, they would memorize flash cards at a table in the back of their regular classroom. The result? Her English is good but Angeles fell behind in other subjects because she couldn’t follow the text or understand the teacher. “It was hard not knowing what was in the book,” she says. “And I don’t remember what I did in sixth, seventh and eighth grade because I was memorizing things.”

Ultimately, she caught up with her class but Angeles’ English improved her Spanish reading and writing skills declined. She was too busy improving her English to focus on her native tongue.

Angeles didn’t take any Spanish classes until college, and then she struggled with her writing. “I could read and speak and listen. And I could write, but not as well as I used to,” she admits.

Jesus DeLeon, principal of Van Buren Elementary School in Caldwell, says Angeles’ experience is not unusual. Idaho’s schools focus first on teaching children to speak English.

Van Buren has been called one of the more progressive schools in Idaho for its ESL program. About 75 of the school’s 572 students have limited proficiency in English. The school is aggressive about finding those students, and enrolling them in a “pull out” ESL program like Franklin’s that helps them learn usable phrases and develop their vocabulary.

DeLeon would like to help his Hispanic students progress in Spanish, too. He says, “Given enough input and demand it could be a priority. For us right now the priority is to make the children proficient in English.”

Sometimes ESL students who learn to speak English learn too well. After a while, their native languages and cultures take a backseat to English and American customs. As they become Americanized, the ties to their homelands start to unravel and they can become alienated from their families. The result can be a loss of cultural identity and, in some cases, self-esteem.

“When you lose respect for your own culture and your language, you lose communication at home,” says Anita Brunner, a consultant on ESL and bilingual education for the Idaho Department of Education. “To build a strong basis in a second language you should build a strong basis in a first.”

Brunner says that some Idaho school districts like Boise, Mauing and Caldwell are making headway in providing quality instruction for their non-English speaking students.

Innovative ideas are catching on throughout the state. Last year, Glenns Ferry introduced a bilingual kindergarten program that received a prestigious national grant. Students in the class, which was made up of Anglo and Hispanic children, received instruction in the morning in Spanish and English in the afternoon.

Despite widespread support among parents, the popular program was discontinued by the Glenns Ferry School Board in a disagreement over perceived restrictions posed by federal funding.

Although it was “a tragedy” the program ended, Brunner says perhaps it can be duplicated by other progressive districts around the state. The need is greatest along the Snake River Plain and in Boundary County, the areas with the largest populations of migrant workers and other non-English speaking people.

Brunner would like to see more state funding and ESL training provided for all Idaho teachers. Additional foreign language instruction for children also is needed.

The governor’s Task Force on Hispanic Education is among the groups urging Idaho to expand its foreign language instruction for young children. The group says it would like to see foreign-language instruction begin in kindergarten.

Other states have adopted such proposals, Brunner says. New Mexico, for example, requires that children study a second language in elementary school and be bilingual by high school graduation.

Maybe it’s unrealistic to expect students in a rural state like Idaho to become proficient in a second language. Brunner doesn’t think so. She says it’s simply a matter of cultural understanding.

“The fact that someone speaks another language — I want them to be valued,” Brunner says. □