

On the Job: Teaching English in New Jersey

By Diana Kelly RC'04, SCILS'04

Sheila Miller DC'75, GSE'80 of Mount Laurel goes to work each morning to deliver a very special gift to immigrant children in Newark: She teaches them English.

Miller has been teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to Newark schoolchildren for nearly three decades in a district where 30-plus languages are spoken. She helps second- through fourth-graders at Mount Vernon Elementary better comprehend their surroundings and gives them the gift of interpreting language in their new environment.

When Miller is done educating America's youth, she travels back to South Jersey, where she is also an adjunct instructor at Camden County College in Blackwood and has been teaching ESL to adults for 14 years.

Not long after graduating from Rutgers' Graduate School of Education with a master's degree in elementary education, Miller learned about the ESL teaching program in Newark and heard that it was a good job, she says. She was hired and then went back to school to complete ESL certification at Kean University in Union.

In Newark, ESL teachers focus on the "natural" approach based on linguist Steven Krashen's method. Miller says: "When I first started teaching we used to have kids repeating a lot and practicing drills. But now, we use a natural approach in terms of integrating a lot of everyday language and needs into our curriculum." Miller says they try to develop oral communication skills first, then reading and writing.

"Our first concern is that the students are able to communicate in this environment," she explains. They learn basic language acquisition through pictures, models, visual examples, and developing vocabulary to communicate their needs and convey meaning.

In this diverse school system, students learning English are paired in classrooms with other students who speak the same language as them. According to the Newark Public Schools' [website](#), "Where possible, dual-language, two-way bilingual instruction is to be established to promote the most effective and enduring language learning to both English-language learners and general program students."

After day's end in Newark, Miller teaches adults at Camden County College twice weekly from 8 to 10:30 p.m. during the fall and spring. This semester she taught oral communication, level three. Miller says the days are long, but she loves her job.

Most of Miller's adult students begin their studies at 5:20 p.m. with two classes before her lesson even begins. "They study writing, reading, grammar, and oral communication, after working all day. These people are very determined to learn to speak English," she says.

"They are the most graceful and grateful people you can imagine. They work very hard and have difficult jobs and they come to class at night to learn English. Their attitudes are so different from many American students. They want so much to become a part of this society and to assimilate... their enthusiasm for learning the language is incredible. They'll ask me for CDs, extra materials, and where to go online so they can practice at home."

Miller says if a student is a dedicated learner who is taking courses and focusing especially on oral communication, he or she can reach a functional level of English in two years.



Sheila Miller (center) teaches English as a Second Language to Newark schoolchildren as well as Camden County College students (pictured).