

What Do You Miss About ESL?: Insights from Former Students

by Lisa Rost Lewis and Sarah Elia

Summer has passed, and we look forward to a productive and inspiring new school year. At the beginning of each semester, we invariably encounter former students who tell us that they miss the ESL program. But what aspects of the program do students miss the most? Learning more about this question may provide a valuable guide for ESL teachers as we plan for the coming year.

To this end, former students from our Haggerty Intensive English Program at SUNY New Paltz were asked to answer this two-part question: Do you miss your time in ESL? Why or why not? Of the 30 students who replied, a resounding majority—28—answered yes, citing the three major themes described below.

Friends

Each respondent stated that he or she missed the friends made in ESL classes. Yui, from Japan, summarized what many students wrote: “Classmates were warm and kind. I could have such a funtastic time there because of them.” Even the two respondents who expressed some dissatisfaction with course content noted that they had developed close relationships with their classmates, and missed those connections.

Beyond the general benefits of friendship, these relationships have a valuable impact on language learning. For communicative language teaching to be effective, learners need to collaborate and to negotiate meaning (Savignon, 1991). When students truly enjoy being with their classmates—their friends—they interact naturally and frequently, leading to faster and deeper language acquisition.

Cross-Cultural Interaction

In addition to friendships, the respondents almost unanimously identified cultural awareness as something they gained in ESL and now miss. Students referred to experiencing “cultural differences” and “cultural exchange” through “sharing our experiences and culture with classmates from different countries.”

Interacting with people from many cultures can provide a rich source of comprehensible input in English, but even beyond that, it promotes cultural tolerance and appreciation for diversity (Goodman & Berdan, 2014). Nubia, from Brazil, reflected on this aspect of her time in ESL as “I could open my eyes and see the world in a different angle.”

Students pointed out that this interaction is something unique to ESL classes that they do not experience in other educational environments.

Support and Shelter

While the themes of friendship and cultural interaction were mentioned most frequently,

a third key theme to emerge was the idea of ESL classes as supportive, caring places. Students stated that the “mood of the class was very joyful,” that there was “no pressure,” and that they always found a “comfortable environment.”

Students were particularly appreciative that ESL faculty cared about them and understood the difficulties they were facing. Natalia, from Brazil, recalled that her ESL teachers were “very kind and helpful . . . and always [paid] attention to some culture shocks that can happen.” Similarly, Gulsah, from Turkey, felt that her teachers “were always ready to cheer us up and encourage us to reach our goals without any delay.”

Language acquisition theory has long held that the less anxiety learners feel, the more open they are to input and the more effective that input will be. In other words, when students feel comfortable with their learning environment, they will acquire language more successfully (Krashen, 1982, pp. 30–31).

Kojima, from Japan, explained it this way: “ESL was my shelter . . . the most important thing is learning a language in a delight way!”

Conclusion

Reflecting on these themes gleaned from the survey can help us as ESL teachers to meet student expectations and remind us of our special role as educators. Such insight can be an invaluable way to strengthen teaching practices and provide a positive lasting impression for the students.

Bolstered by this feedback, let’s face the new school year realizing what many of our ESL students feel—as Masako, from Japan, wrote: “You should be proud of your job!”

References

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