

## **Five Keys to Success in the ESL Classroom**

*by Scott B. Freiberger*

Nearly every educator strives to make best practices in education a top priority while honing her or his craft. After earning the requisite credentials, teachers collaborate in teams and strive for the highest levels of professional development. In the classroom, they are expected to sharpen academic conversations by delving into relevant student data, improve upon best educational practices, and use top technology to fine-tune modern teaching materials. With overwhelming numbers of English language learners (ELLs) enrolling in our nation's public schools, understanding students' diverse needs to enhance learning becomes paramount. In addition to remaining sensitive to our students' various religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, here are five keys to establishing a successful English as a second language (ESL) classroom.

### **Know Your Students' Home Environment**

More than important, it is imperative for teachers to understand each student's home language, cultural background, and degree of family support. Setting a positive tone at initial parent meetings and engaging in subsequent follow-through using bilingual or multilingual communications to diverse families helps establish a team-based, reciprocal environment and a cooperative approach. These conferences demonstrate that children's academic success can be enhanced by parental vigilance and family involvement. Well-planned conversations between teachers and parents could also contain important school and class-related messages translated into more than one language; convincing conversations and multilingual school materials are needed to help lay the groundwork for a successful school year. Relatively new Scholastic applications such as Class Messenger (<https://www.classmessenger.com>) and Remind101 (<https://www.remind.com>) also enable teachers to communicate with parents rapidly without sacrificing privacy.

### **Benchmark Your Students' Proficiency Levels**

A reality of the new millennia is that many students are not proficient in the English language upon enrolling, and may therefore not meet grade-level standards in English and other pertinent subjects. Determining how to identify and repair sometimes gaping "learning gaps" becomes an ongoing goal-setting and constant revision process. Using established standards to benchmark students' proficiency levels at quarterly intervals enables teachers to record student learning, map their curricula, and better understand how to help their students progress.

### **Incorporate a Vital Vocabulary and Student Collaboration**

The American instructional model of yesteryear, in which teachers lectured to a class by reciting famous names, historic events, and their corresponding dates for students to "rote repeat," is long gone. Best educational practices now call for interactive learning, in which students turn and talk with a partner or small group about relevant topics and subsequently share ideas aloud with the class. Careful consideration of establishing working pairs and small groups

based on language support, unique personality traits, and proficiency levels is useful in promoting interaction and ongoing scaffolding.

Peer collaboration and group cooperation are desired skills sought both in academia and in the workplace, and today's teachers are entrusted to equip students with enough practice so that they may become college- and career-ready. In addition, using "equity sticks" may simultaneously hold children's decreasing attention spans while providing more opportunities for usually reticent students to participate (Tanner, 2013). Finally, since many of our public school students may not be familiar with either academic or social vocabulary, using realia as well as visual imagery to enrich literacy learning can increase rigor and enhance the learning process, not only for ELLs but also for all students. Does incorporating visual imagery to correspond to key vocabulary require additional work? Perhaps. Current research shows, however, that doing so can help learners to succeed (Hutton, 2013).

### **Develop Classroom Management Skills**

Want your ESL students to strive and thrive? Review your classroom management skills. Noted education author and researcher Robert Marzano advises, "Well-managed classrooms provide an environment in which teaching and learning can flourish [ . . . yet] it takes a good deal of effort to create" (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003, p. 1). And, according to Chris Holley, an experienced educator at P.S. 20Q John Bowne Elementary School in New York City, anticipating problems and establishing a methodical approach at the outset can set up a classroom for long-term success. In a recently published manual, Holley (2014) explains that planning for student engagement should not be taken lightly; he suggests that educators take special note of seemingly inappropriate student behaviors, visual or other impairments, and students' various learning abilities, as well as English or other-language capabilities for pairing students and creating purposeful seating arrangements (p. 6). According to Holley, providing students with a variety of assigned tasks throughout the year also teaches "accountability and responsibility" (p. 7).

### **Diversify Classroom Activities**

Varying teaching activities and differentiating instruction based on ESL students' proficiency levels can help ensure that students are engaged in developmentally appropriate academic tasks. Research indicates that students tire after approximately 15 minutes (Khan, 2012). Spending an inordinate amount of time discussing deters students from actually doing. Well-planned, pithy, engaging lessons may thus motivate ESL students to participate and achieve. As a possibility, for one of your small-group activities, try turning your iPad into an interactive whiteboard (<https://www.educrations.com>). Or, augment classroom reality and enhance language development with Aurasma (<http://www.aurasma.com>), a relatively new app that allows educators and students to creatively add visual layers to posters or other visual displays.

### **Try These!**

As educators, we are ultimately responsible for ensuring that our students are able to meet desired learning outcomes. Planning for multicultural, multilingual family engagement, offering lessons that accommodate a variety of proficiency levels and learning styles, and providing

effective classroom management may not only help ease the teaching burden, but also help achieve success in the ESL classroom.

### References

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