

# WORKING WITH ESL STUDENTS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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*This guide is written for teachers without TEFL, TESL, or other formal training in instructing students who are learning English as adults. It assumes that the students they work with will be on an advanced level--having completed an ESL program, having a TOEFL score of 500 or above, or having placed into regular freshman composition classes on a college's own placement instruments (hopefully a reading test and writing sample). Since even advanced students will not be exactly like the native speakers that most composition teachers were trained to teach, some additional help for their teachers is necessary. However, this brief guide does not substitute for the training needed to teach true ESL classes below the freshman composition level. This training should consist (at a minimum) of a graduate TESL or TEFL Certificate including coursework in linguistics and language acquisition, as well as pedagogy (this is also not the same as K-12 certification that consists primarily of courses in teaching methods). We hope that this guide will help teachers integrate students from many diverse language backgrounds into one course, and also hope that they will discover, as we have, that this enriches the learning experience for both native speakers and speakers of other languages.*

A student from a different language background can add a new dimension to a class. Other students can learn much about other cultures by listening to international students react to texts and by seeing the writing they produce. However, most of us who teach English to native speakers feel uncertain of ourselves when an ESL (English as a Second Language) student appears in a class. We wonder if we know the special techniques needed to teach them, especially if we aren't fluent in their languages; we worry about their ability to interact with the other students; sometimes we wish our college had special freshman composition classes for ESL students.

Because community college ESL students intend to become part of our community and will probably stay and work in this country, we enroll them in classes with native speakers if they are ready for freshman composition. Mainstreaming ESL students can benefit both those students and the native speakers, if the instructors are willing to make a few adaptations that will serve both groups.

## I. Cultural Background

Students may enter your classes from a variety of different backgrounds.

- A. International students come to MTC for a variety of reasons; many plan to live in the United States, but many also plan to return to their own countries. The most common backgrounds represented here are Asian and Hispanic, though European, African, Polynesian, and Middle Eastern students may also appear. Although they must make a score of 500 on the TOEFL to be accepted, their writing may still require some special kinds of assistance.

- B. Young students may come to MTC after completing the English Program for Internationals (EPI) at USC; these students may find it easy to fit into our curriculum, because the most advanced EPI class covers some of the same ground as ENG 100 and even 101. Again, even though they are prepared for advanced English composition classes, they will not be perfect, any more than native speakers are.
- C. Students who have moved to this country in later childhood or even teens are sometimes called “Generation 1.5.” They may speak English as fluently as natives, yet their writing may show many characteristics of non-native speakers.
- D. Older students who have lived here for many years may speak very well and seem to fit in culturally, but may have problems in reading and writing very similar to those of our other mature students.

This range of diversity means that the teacher cannot make very many general assumptions about the characteristics of ESL students. You should try to get to know the ESL students as quickly as possible so that you can find the best way to work with each.

## II. The Role Of The Teacher

In many cultures, the teacher is regarded as an authority figure who must be shown the utmost respect and must never be bothered. This means that some international students will not realize that they should ask you for assistance if they are having difficulty. You may need to offer assistance, or even invite some students to your office hours if you can see that they have problems. In class, be willing to repeat difficult points and to give out assignments in writing whenever possible.

Make students feel welcome in class. Students may be afraid that they will not be understood if they ask questions in class, or may be embarrassed to speak in front of a group. Be extremely careful not to embarrass them, and help the rest of the class learn that they can learn to listen more carefully. Model good interactions with ESL speakers for your native speakers--this may be one of the most important things you can teach.

One problem is the very dependent student who wants to camp out in your office and is waiting with a question at the end of every class. You will probably want to try to help this kind of student work toward more confidence and independence. Make sure that the assignments are clear, and that you have explained any unclear points from class lecture or discussion, but give the student the responsibility of doing as much as possible on his or her own before you begin to intervene. For example, if the reading is difficult, tell the student to develop a list of questions which you will answer, rather than summarizing or paraphrasing every paragraph. If a composition assignment is a problem, ask the student to develop an outline or a draft for you to critique.

Some international students especially may seem too concerned about grades. Cultural expectations play a part in this, but so does the fact that they may have paid very high tuition fees and come long distances to study here. We try to be patient and understand their anxiety, but still to grade them realistically.

Students from cultures which traditionally separate women and men may find it difficult to work with a teacher of the opposite sex. Recognize that being alone with you in your office could be a problem for

them, and plan conferences in classrooms or libraries, etc. If male students find female authority difficult to accept, or if students are generally inclined to challenge your intellectual authority, be polite but firm.

However, realize that being unsure of the culture makes many personality traits stronger, and that people have many different reactions to being unsure of where they stand. Any student will be easier to work with if you are clear in your expectations and willing to communicate.

### III. Language Learning

Often we believe that ESL teachers know some special magical techniques that are very different from those used by teachers of native speakers. While there are some resources--books, exercises--that will help ESL students with the special problems discussed below, the fact is that students whose English is good enough for admission to MTC curriculum classes will basically benefit from the same kinds of instruction that help all student writers: reading, writing, revision.

Especially in ENG 100, however, ESL students often need much more exposure to the language than they receive. You may find that you have students who never use English except in class. You should encourage them to listen to TV, to read newspapers and magazines, to shop, go to church, social, or volunteer activities--anything that will require them to listen, speak, read, and write in English.

Time is important for ESL readers and writers; if at all possible, we should allow international students more time to read and to revise, and should be willing to look at a number of drafts. If this seems to give them an unfair advantage, consider giving extra time to ANY student who needs it. However, most students will not need hours and hours—just ten or fifteen minutes may make a good bit of difference.

### IV. Reading Essays And Other Literature

Because of placement procedures, ESL students theoretically will read as well as native speakers. In fact, they may read more carefully and may pay more attention to shades of meaning, so you should be prepared for some detailed questions. However, two areas are problems: speed and cultural references.

Speed: ESL students may take much longer to read an assignment. Usually this is not a problem for homework, but can definitely be a problem in class. If the material is very difficult, it would probably be better to assign most reading as homework, at least for the first reading. If you usually assign a number of long readings, you might want to get a sense of how much time this really takes for the ESL student.

Cultural References: Cultural background is by far the greatest problem in reading for international students. Both specific mention of people, places, events, etc., (in a short story like "A & P" or an essay like "Graceland") may make an apparently simple reading much more difficult for an ESL reader, but at least those specifics can be explained. Much more difficult is the implicit dependence on a set of attitudes. Writers like Flannery O'Connor can be especially obscure for students unfamiliar with the South (to say nothing of theology).

However, many world students at MTC are very interested in learning to understand the culture of the United States, and may be very happy to discuss texts that help them with cultural background. A mix

of types of texts is probably best, but be especially careful about requiring not requiring all students to write in response to a text or writing prompt that demands cultural knowledge.

## V. Writing Essays

Diagnostic: Our placement process should ensure that ESL students are in the appropriate classes, but a double check on the first-day diagnostic is important. Students' names do not always reveal their linguistic backgrounds, so you should probably ask them to tell you what language they spoke as children. Look at the diagnostic papers carefully, but realize that time is a much greater problem for an ESL writer than a native speaker. To assess the ESL writer accurately, you should look not only a brief timed writing but also at a revision done with much more time.

Rhetoric: The rhetoric that we teach and use ourselves is as much an aspect of our culture as food or dress. The idea of a thesis sentence may seem as natural as the law of gravity, but it is really very specific to our time and place. The same is true of our ideas of logic and evidence. Some cultures value indirectness, and believe that a direct statement of the thesis is an insult to the reader's intelligence (the same may hold true of clearly stated transitions and conclusions). In some rhetorical traditions, proof of a statement is accomplished by repetition or by citing proverbs; elaboration and decoration of ideas may be valued more highly than conciseness and specificity. ESL students' ways of thinking and of expressing themselves may be totally different from those of native speakers.

The Writing Placement test, the standardized reading test, the ESL courses, and ENG 100 should help us make sure that students are placed in classes where they will receive direct instruction in western rhetorical traditions. However, like our native speakers, ESL students will probably need reinforcement in continuing to use this way of writing in more advanced courses. Model student essays are extremely helpful in courses beyond ENG 100; even in the 200-level courses, sample papers and sample exam answers may help students learn to understand the kind of writing we want them to produce.

## VI. Sentence Level Problems

Some ESL students will have more understanding of the grammar of English than many native speakers; they may know what subjects and verbs are, and even the names of tenses, so that errors like subject-verb agreement can be explained. Indeed, many of the most common problems will be the same ones that native speakers have: verb and pronoun agreement, fragments and comma splices, spelling. However, in many areas there will continue to be errors that may look awkward or unnatural to teachers who are not used to ESL writing.

**Interference from first language**: Most sentence level problems do not result from transferring features from the students' original languages, but from problems inherent in learning English. However, some language backgrounds do result in certain areas of difficulty.

- Speakers of most Asian languages, for example, will find articles and word endings (-s, -ed) a source of great difficulty, because their languages do not inflect (especially for time).
- On the other hand, because European languages are similar to English but not exactly like it, speakers may use "false cognates" in vocabulary and false analogies in grammar.
- Many languages, like Spanish, do not require a stated subject for verbs("Came to town")

- Arabic, Chinese and others do not require a stated linking verb ("We busy").

**Vocabulary:** An ESL student may use words in ways that sound very strange to us, and yet we may not be able to explain why they seem strange. As native speakers acquiring the language, we learn not only the meaning of a word but also how it can be combined with other words. For example, we pay a bill but cash a check; an ESL writer might think it correct to pay a check. When students misuse words in these ways, it's probably simplest just to show them the correct collocation (combination of words), unless the explanation of the reason can be very simple and clear. Selecting synonyms and using phrasal verbs may cause special difficulties for ESL students, and may be treated the same way.

**Prepositions:** Although some prepositions have a very clear meaning (sleeping *on* the bed is different from sleeping *under* the bed), others may have very overlapping meanings and may in different dialects of English be used in different ways: "he is at the store" vs. "he is to the store"; even within one dialect, a slight change in the sentence can change the preposition: "I sympathize with her" vs. "I have sympathy for her." We should not be surprised to find even a fairly good writer of English writing "I sympathize for her." Prepositions are also used in many English idioms and phrasal verbs, e.g. *making out*, which is very different from *making up*.

**Verb forms:** ESL students have problems with choosing between simple present and progressive tenses (I study now vs. I am studying now), modals (can vs. could), and selection and sequence of tenses. Most of the verb rules are clear and learnable, but speakers of languages that do not show time by changing the verb (Chinese, Korean, etc.) may take longer to understand this, and speakers of languages similar to English may mistakenly transpose the rules of their language onto English.

**Complex Sentences:** All languages have ways of combining sentences, but usually the spoken version is much less complex. Students whose spoken English is good may still find subordination confusing because they practice it so little. Some examples of problems: students may attempt to use a clause as an object of a preposition ("I am late because of my car broke down"); they may not drop the original pronoun when substituting a relative pronoun ("This is the test which I took it last week"). Some advanced ESL students may write very long sentences in which many subordinate clauses occur in a long but awkward sentence.

**Punctuation:** Many languages use the same punctuation marks, even those that use very different systems of writing (Arabic and Chinese, for example). The problem for ESL students is that the marks are the same, but the rules for using them are very different. A comma may be used between two sentences in many languages, for example.

**Articles (A, An, The):** The rules governing the usage of articles in English are very complex and difficult to master; linguists still argue over what the rules are, exactly. Speakers of languages that do not have articles (e.g., Russian and Chinese) may never completely master article usage, but even speakers of Arabic, Spanish, or even some dialects of English may have such different rules for article usage that they will continue to write "we must protect the nature" (compared to "we must protect the environment").

## VII. Responding To Writing

ESL writers, even more than native speakers, will think of learning to write as primarily learning rules for correct grammar. While in some areas (verbs, for example) rule learning may be helpful, the greatest growth in correct English will probably result from the same processes that benefit all writers, with some modification.

Time: Probably the greatest difference between the ESL writer and the native speaker is the amount of time required. Be ready to give ESL students extra time to complete assignments out of class, but do require some evidence that they are making progress.

Beware of stereotypes! While many, even most ESL students are very hardworking and conscientious, immature or overly dependent people exist in every culture. We do not help students by allowing them to avoid work. Give assistance, time, and referral to resources, but be sure that you know that students are continuing to do as much as they can on their own. Ask your students how much time they are spending on each assignment.

Revision: ESL students will benefit strongly from being allowed to revise. Even if you do not use a portfolio grading system, you should be willing to look at drafts. Do not rewrite the paper for the students, however. Read over the paper and set revision goals. If organization is a problem, for example, you might look at a model of a well-organized paper, show the student how to make an outline or plan for writing, and help him/her generate a sample thesis and outline. Then the student should try to make a plan independently. Portfolio grading may cause some anxiety, so you may need to give students very clear indication of how well they are doing.

Editing: Give students as much responsibility as possible for editing their own papers. Try underlining or circling errors without explaining them and asking the student to try to correct them before you give the correction. If the student can't make the correction, show the correct form. Explain the form if you can, since ESL students often have good understanding of grammar, but realize that many of the problems your students have will result from idioms or exceptions to rules. Sometimes there really is no explanation; most students understand that language is like that.

Focus on selected features: Too much detailed input on every possible error will simply confuse your students. Tell your ESL students that you will focus first on the greatest problems and go on to others later.

Group work: Both native speakers and ESL students may feel hesitant about working in groups with each other, and yet this is an excellent opportunity for both to learn about each other and acquire better listening and speaking skills. Suggest that they listen carefully and be willing to repeat statements more slowly. Keep an eye on the group, and end the group work if it is clear that the students cannot communicate. Clear instructions for structured responses work better than free-floating discussion groups.

Peer editing: Working in pairs with native speakers may work well, since often the ESL student will be familiar with the rules and the native speaker with the idiomatic usage. Again, clear instructions (look for fragments, check documentation form, etc.) give the students more benefit than does simply telling them

to check each other's papers. See suggestions on communication above.

Writing Center: There are always ESL tutors in the Writing Center. If you have students with many sentence-level problems, you may want to require them to work in the Writing Center.

Grades: Students may seem very anxious about their grades, and teachers sometimes feel pressured by this concern. Try to focus as much as possible on formative responses in early drafts of papers but let students know clearly what your standards are for the final graded product, whether it is a single paper or a portfolio.