

Tips for Teaching Writing to ESL Learners

Deborah R. Yates

Yates {at} neo.tamu.edu

Texas A&M University (College Station, Texas, USA)

Introduction

The importance of ESL education is that of reaching students from different cultures and allowing new cultural connections. Barriers have to be broken down and interactions have to supersede cultural barriers. For example, in the concept of American Education, there is a lack of formality between student and teacher that does not exist in other parts of the world. For example, the Italian, “Lei,” (formal, “You,”) connotes distance and superiority. Yet, in America, while we have some titles, there is still more familiarity than in other cultures.

In order to teach the language of American English to the international learner, cultural breakthroughs have to occur. There has to be respect on the part of the teacher for that of the culture of the learner.

Fluency

The importance of developing fluent writing in ESL learners is central to understanding and helping ESL learners. For example, there are idioms or nuances in American English that have to be taught. One must impart expertise in this area. It is not enough to just teach writing, one must teach these nuances. Often, the student will struggle with how to say something. It is important to help the student by explaining how to say something and what it means in American usage.

As papers are corrected for these students, they often start to make the connections. They can start to understand their mistakes and begin to correct them for themselves. Another aspect of fluency is based on verbal ability. What one can speak about, one can write about. Practicing English conversation can be helpful for this.

Immediacy

Giving verbal and non-verbal encouragement to students is important. It is important to make positive as well as negative comments on papers. People need to feel appreciated. After teaching ESL for a while, I have learned that rapid feedback is the key to teaching the English learner. Sometimes this is not always possible, but it is a good goal. Usually, turning back papers the next class period with two class periods a week, works well. Another facet of immediacy is praise and constructive criticism.

People are looking for feedback, especially the English learner. For example, comments about how to improve the English level in the paper are appreciated. Also, what is necessary is praise. To give feedback is important, and that includes praise. One of my English learners always uses good questions as a preface and component in her papers, to introduce and develop the ideas she has. I commended her about this in class one time when one of the students asked about if this was a good technique for writing. What is important is positive as well as negative feedback. Everyone needs to find out how to improve and also to learn about what they are doing right.

Mediation of Text and Quest for Knowledge

The interpretation of the material by the teacher plays an important role in instruction. It is not enough for the instructor to teach the material, one must listen to the needs and input of the students and accommodate students with various learning needs and styles. For example, the personality of the teacher plays an important role for the learning environment. A teacher has to teach the material, but must remain open for comments and questions.

Class time has to be more than lecturing and testing. It has to consist of class participation by the students with the teacher. And the English of the students and teachers will vary. So, to make this better, the teacher has to have a persona that is open to receiving information from the students about how to best suit the curriculum to the needs of the class.

What the student gains from the material is the true curriculum, not just that of the assignment or textbook. The teacher can serve as a curriculum also, by serving as a resource or hindrance. Being unfriendly or difficult to deal with can complicate matters. It is important to understand differences in culture between the student and the teacher's culture. On rare occasions, a student can get angry at the teacher for assigning something that is difficult. And the teacher must patiently explain to the student how to do the assignment.

Conclusion

Immediacy, fluency, mediation of text and the quest for knowledge are important. Feedback is important and reinforcement of the positive is central to good teaching. Students need to hear that they are improving and also that they need the part of the teacher for that of the culture of the learner. As Immediacy, fluency, mediation of text and the quest for knowledge are valued, that shows up in the classroom.

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XIII, No. 11, November 2007

<http://iteslj.org/>

<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Yates-TeachingWriting.html>