

Tips for Teaching ESL Beginners and Pre-literate Adults

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Introduction

ESL teaching professionals put into practice the theories of applied linguistics in a “real world” sense. I became familiar with real world ESL when I began teaching pre-literate adults the basics of English: how to communicate while they had a working knowledge of the alphabet that would eventually lead to literacy in their second language. This goal may appear straightforward; however, the process is anything but simple. In fact it can be daunting, even humbling, for the students and teacher alike. Below are some useful tips for new teachers.

Teaching Pre-literate and Beginning ESL Students

Make Sure Personal Connections Come First

Before teaching any aspect of language, get to know each student individually. Learners should want to communicate with you first before you can begin to help them learn to communicate in their L2. In the case of adult learners who are refugees, you must first attempt to step into their shoes and ask yourself why they would want to talk to you. They have encountered many people who have walked in and out of their lives and since their lives have been so transitory, you should seek to develop a sense of community in the classroom--which means they must see you as someone who they enjoy talking to. Delay the scripted lesson plan and make the class about people getting to know one another. For example, learn not only the students’ names, but also the names of their family members. In other words, talk about what matters to the students first.

Use Interruptions as Teaching Moments that Trump Whatever Lesson You Planned

If a student arrives late, use that as an opportunity to allow the class to discuss public transportation, numbers or as a review on telling time. If a student has a sick baby, use that as an opportunity to discuss medical issues, body parts or terms for various symptoms. If a student brings in photos of his or her family, use that to springboard into a discussion about family. The bottom line is to be spontaneous. The students will remember and learn real-life language as it unfolds naturally, far better than they will recall a pre-planned lesson that is more abstract.

Try to Minimize the Students’ Cognitive Burden

This tip is regarding teaching technique. When teaching pre-literate students it’s best not to write a lot of information on the white board and have students copy it down while you continue to explain concepts. We can easily forget that pre-literate students cannot multi-task with their current language proficiency level and it is important to break down tasks into smaller components. If students are busily copying down information from the board, they will not focus on what you are telling them because there are just too many things for them to focus their attention on.

Feed Their Stomachs Sometimes, Not Just Their Minds

Watch for cues that your students may be hungry and share snacks together as a class. Likewise, make sure students can see and hear the lessons. Some pre-literate students may never have had their eyesight or hearing checked. A student who appears resistant to learning may simply have needs that have not been expressed.

Try to Meet Students Half-way

Make an effort to learn words or phrases in the students’ L1. They will appreciate your effort to learn their language, and they will

see you more as a partner in the learning process rather than someone who has all the answers. For example, when teaching English to Afghani women I studied Farsi at the same time. My students enjoyed helping me learn a few new words each day, and I was able to gain more empathy for my students' struggles to learn English.

Communicate Slowly, Clearly and Directly

Students typically do not understand subtlety in the second language, and there may be times when you need to explain a sensitive issue such as personal etiquette or hygiene. In such cases, I have found it helpful to use role play to get the point across in a non-threatening yet direct way.

Avoid Using Books that Are Too Childish

Even though your students are at a beginning level, it's important to utilize or create material that is relevant to an adult. Every adult learner brings a wealth of life experience and sophistication to the learning process. For example, a book that is about a frog jumping over a lily pad may be interpreted sarcastically in the mind of an adult student as "the frog jumped over the 'blankety-blank' lily pad."

Review Constantly

Remember that with beginners you are your students' textbook and study guide as well as their teacher. Provide review sessions at the beginning of every class so students will practice what they've learned and acquire the language.

Be Animated

Don't be afraid to make sound effects, play music, and take walks around the neighborhood to reinforce concepts. Sometimes the best learning doesn't even take place in the classroom, and it doesn't have to be serious to be effective.

Don't Assume Students Know Why You Are Teaching Them

For instance, do a role play to demonstrate how bad it would be if they got lost and couldn't communicate. This will show students why they need to memorize their phone number. If they understand why a concept is important they will be more likely to remember it.

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