

# Teaching Adult ESL Learners

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This is an article about the author's experience teaching a class of immigrants to the United States of America and a description of some of the techniques the author used.

## Introduction

According to the U.S. Census data, of the 26.4 million immigrants in the U.S., almost 80 percent are adults (Starr, 2001). Consequently, English as a Second Language (ESL) has become the fastest growing segment in federally funded adult education programs (Pugsley, 1998). Many of the adult ESL learners do not have much schooling in their home country, and therefore, lack appropriate study skills important for academic success. In addition, they tend to face tremendous financial distress and family responsibilities that oftentimes prevent them from concentrating on their studies. Teaching them can be a significant challenge for the teacher and curriculum developer.

## The Class

All the students had immigrated into the U.S. as adults and their highest educational attainment was high school. All had completed basic and intermediate ESL courses at a government-sponsored program. This course aimed to teach job-related skills as well as other essential everyday life skills. The following are some strategies that I found to be effective in teaching adult ESL learners.

## Listen to Students' Needs

Educators have long acknowledged the power of learners' voices in improving teaching and learning (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991). Since I had never taught this type of students before, I deemed it necessary to learn about their needs and preferences. I designed a simple questionnaire consisting of two parts.

The first part was about course content, where I asked the specific skills students wished to learn, for example, talking to a doctor, getting along with colleagues & supervisors, filling out job applications, etc.

The second part was concerned with teaching approaches, which explored students' opinions on some traditional Chinese as well as contemporary Western teaching methods such as reading aloud after the teacher, detailed grammar analysis, using some Chinese in the classroom, pair work and group work, etc.

For both parts, I left ample spaces for students to add more of their opinions.

During the first class, I administered the questionnaire to students and their answers provided good guideline for my plans for the course content and classroom pedagogy.

## Set Higher Expectations with Individual Support

These students all had families to support and were all holding blue-collar jobs such as waitress, cashier, and cook. Their previous teachers seldom assigned them any homework, due to the non-credit, voluntary nature of the course and the demanding lifestyle of the students. However, I believe that language acquisition for adults does not happen naturally and

effortlessly. Although all the students had lived in the U.S. for over seven years, I assessed their English proficiency to be still at the basic level based on our oral interactions and their written responses to my questionnaire. I decided it was time to give them some pressure and help them to achieve some breakthrough.

I announced during the second class that while I understood their busy schedules, I considered it was likely that everyone could squeeze in 15 minutes a day to study. I assigned homework for every class, and checked it at the beginning of next class. I found most students were willing, or even happy, to be pushed to learn. They had great motivation to improve their English, as they yearned for a better life in the U.S.

Of course, parallel to the higher expectations should be sufficient guidance and support. I arrived at school half an hour before every class to answer students' individual questions. I also encouraged them to approach me during the break or after class. When returning their homework assignments, I made sure to explain to the students in person about their individual problems and difficulties.

## **Teach Study Skills**

While these students were eager to learn, they complained of not knowing how to learn. For example, they said they tried to watch TV or listen to the radio, but found literally no improvements after some time. I think good study skills will help them to learn more effectively. Therefore, during the second class, I introduced to them some self-learning strategies, derived from my own experiences as an ESL learner, teacher, and researcher. These include:

- First, read aloud from a text slowly, preferably repeating after a recording. Reading aloud slowly forces the learner to pronounce every sound clearly, and thus develops the flexibility of the speech organs. Reading after a recording helps the learner to imitate correct pronunciation. In my previous ESL research, many Chinese learners said reading a text aloud repeatedly until they could memorize the text enabled them to develop a sense about the natural flow of the language and made many language structures handy for use in speaking or writing.
- Second, find materials conforming to the students' English level. Language input far beyond the learner's level (e.g., original movies, TV and radio programs) will result in no comprehension, and therefore, no persistence by the learner. Students should make good use of the textbooks used in their ESL courses, instead of throwing them away after finishing the course. In addition, they can find abundant ESL resources of various levels in the public library.
- Third, keep an English diary, which is a persistent, economical way of practicing in English. I told the students that I started to write English diaries after having taken English for just one semester in sixth grade in China. At that time, I had only learned some basic grammatical structures and had a very small vocabulary. In my diary, I had to use many Chinese expressions to substitute for the unknown English words, but I made a conscious effort to use words and structures newly learned in class. In a few years, I was able to write very long pieces exclusively in English. More important, I could think directly in English; therefore, writing much faster and more naturally than my classmates who seldom wrote.

Students seemed to be fascinated by these study strategies, which they said they would like to try themselves and even introduce to their children.

## **Promote Whole Language Development**

In the questionnaire as well as our informal conversations, students expressed the strong desire to improve every aspect of English proficiency, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. These needs conform to the growing movement toward whole language instruction in second language education, which refers to "the simultaneous, integrated teaching of listening, speaking, reading, and writing within a meaningful context" (Acuna-Reyes, 1993, p. 25).

I believe that developing the four language arts skills simultaneously is not only an ideal goal of ESL teaching, but also an effective means. Listening and reading are indispensable for inputting language information. But these are passive processes. If learners can actually use the language in their own speaking and/or writing, they will need to actively process the information and thus reinforce and activate the language input. The concurrent visual and auditory stimulations make retaining information

more effective and efficient.

The textbook we chose was excellent in incorporating academic and work skills with the four language arts skills. Each unit consists of an ice-breaking conversation that draws upon the students' prior experience, a dictation that summarizes the central topic and integrates the grammar focus of the unit, a passage taken from an authentic newspaper, vocabulary and grammar exercises, and a writing task.

Of course, I did experience some resistance at the very beginning. First, these students seemed very shy, and despite my repeated encouragement, they did not actively talk to each other in class. Many language teachers have observed such passivity and shyness in their Asian students (Scovel, 1983; Yen, 1987). My solution was to "force" them to leave their seats and stand in the open space of the classroom. I then paired them up, myself being one of the participants. I found the classroom immediately became noisy, and students seemed very happy to stretch their legs and talk to each other face to face.

Another problem I found at the beginning of the course was that almost every student brought with them an electronic dictionary. When they read the articles in class, they liked to look up every word in the dictionary, thus reading very slowly. I was not annoyed by the beeping sounds from the little machines, but I concurred with some ESL researchers that such word-for-word reading not only lowers learners' reading fluency, but also interferes with their understanding of the main ideas (Fan, 1991). Asking them to put the dictionary away did not work, as they seemed to feel very insecure without knowing the meaning of every word. Therefore, I decided to assign them a time limit (15-20 minutes), followed by a group discussion of the questions I raised on the chalkboard. I did not simply ask the main idea of each paragraph or the whole passage. Instead, I asked them to summarize the useful suggestions in the text as related to real-life skills (e.g., do's and don'ts for a job interview, effective ways in making small talk) with simple bullet points. I required each group to list at least one point on the chalkboard. Students found these tips extremely concise and practical. As soon as they realized that they could make good use of the text without knowing every word, they relied less on the dictionary and achieved noticeable improvements in reading speed and summary skills.

## Summary

During the course, I found students not only improved their language proficiency, but also became more conscientious about their study. Most students could finish homework on time; many of them arrived earlier before class to let me comment on their diaries; several developed the habit of rewriting to address their grammar problems. At the end of the course, most students said this was the most useful ESL course they had ever taken. This class was effective in addressing students' needs, setting higher expectations, providing individual support, introducing study skills, and promoting integrated language proficiency.

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