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Literacy...

Teaching ESL *About the Language*

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A second step to being a successful ESL teacher is to become aware of the language and how it is used. Even though you have probably spoken English for years (maybe even all of your life) and have been taught the language formally in school, you may not be aware of many of its aspects that give non-native speakers a hard time. Very often the things that give your students the hardest time are things that come most naturally to a native speaker. There is not time nor space in this manual to teach everything about the language. But there are a few things that can become important issues in an ESL class.

What is correct English?

Most people believe that there is a very definite set of English rules which, when followed, will produce **correct** English. In reality, this is not true. A better question to ask is, "What is appropriate English?" The answer to that question depends on many things:

1. The relationship of the speakers (e.g., good friends speak to each other different than an employer speaks to employees).
2. The situation in which the communication takes place (e.g., people have to provide different kinds of information when talking over the telephone than when talking face-to-face).
3. The topic of the communication (e.g., you may speak differently in telling a joke than you would in discussing a math principle), etc.

You should aim at teaching your students language that will help them achieve their goals appropriately. For example, they may want to be able to request help in a store. You would teach them to do it in such a way that they would get the help and that the people helping them would not think that they were rude, stupid, nor snobbish. Overall, teachers have a tendency to try to teach styles of English that are too formal for most of the situations their students will encounter. Try to avoid this fault. Contractions (I'm, he's, they'll) are always used except in very formal situations.

What are some major problems that ESL learners have with vocabulary?

The problems that ESL learners have with vocabulary usually depend on the native language backgrounds. Many languages have words that are similar in sound and meaning to English words. These kinds of words are called cognates. They are some of the easiest words to learn, and you can use them initially to help students increase their English vocabulary rapidly.

To really understand words, students have to know:

1. What they mean
2. What other words they are used with
3. Which situations they are used in

What the social consequences of their use can be (e.g. saying "scram" has different social consequences from saying, "Please leave."). The best way to make sure that students know these things about vocabulary is to teach the vocabulary through use in realistic situations. If the situation is clear, the meaning and use of the vocabulary item also becomes clear. Teaching vocabulary through lists often results in students knowing how words are pronounced and what one meaning of a word is, but they really do not know how to use the words correctly.

What are some major problems that ESL learners have with grammar?

WORD ORDER -- In English, word order is more important than it is in many other languages. Very often ESL students produce sentences that sound strange to the native's ear because the order of the words in the sentences is wrong. The basic pattern for English statements is: SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT(S)-PLACE-TIME. Sentences do not have to have all of these parts, but if all of the parts do occur, they most likely will occur in this order. If a sentence has both a PLACE and a TIME, one of these is frequently moved to the front of the sentence.

A change in basic sentence order can make an English sentence nonsensical or make it mean something completely different. For example, if part of the verb is moved so it comes before the subject, we have a question. (e.g. "John will be home at eight" becomes "Will John be home at eight?") If you switch the time phrase with the place word you get an understandable sentence that no native speaker would ever say, "John will be at eight home." Word order is also important in English with phrases smaller than a sentence. For example, notice how natural phrase #1 sounds and how unnatural phrase #2 sounds:

1. . . . those first two big yellow climbing roses of yours that you planted . . .
2. . . . big those two first climbing yellow roses that you planted of yours . . .

VERBS -- There are several problems that ESL speakers have with English verbs. Basically, however, the English verb system is fairly simple (more simple than most Western European languages but a little more complicated than most Oriental languages). Here are some of the problems students have:

Present tense: The present tense in most language refers to actions that are taking place in the present. In English, this is not really true. We use present tense to refer to actions that are habitual, repeated, or always true. (e.g., The sun rises in the East; I get up every day at 6:00 a.m.; We celebrate Thanksgiving in November). English uses present progressive (present continuous) to express actions that are taking place in the present (e.g., I'm reading a teacher training manual; I'm teaching an ESL class; You're preparing to take your GED).

Future tense: The most common future tense in English does not use WILL as you may have been taught. The most common future tense is produced with the expression GOING TO (e.g., I'm going to eat . . . ; he's going to show us how . . . ; we're going to study . . .). You should remember also that in everyday speech this GOING TO expression is pronounced "gonna" and that it is not incorrect to say it that way as long as it is understood.

Two-Word Verbs: Some actions in English are expressed by phrases that consist of a verb and a preposition or adverb. The action is not expressed by the verb alone. For example, GET means 'to obtain, to acquire, to receive, etc.' while GET OVER means 'to recover from an illness,' and GET UP means 'to arise from a reclining position.' There are hundreds of such phrases in English. They are a problem for ESL students because they are often not listed in the dictionary in a separate form and their meaning is hard to find. A good textbook will probably teach many of these two-word verbs, but if yours does not, you should teach them to your students as they arise naturally in the classroom (for example, HAND IN your papers).

Besides not appearing as separate entries in the dictionary, these two-word verbs present one other problem. Some of them **must** have their two parts together in a sentence while others may have their parts separated by other things in the sentence.

Examples:

The teacher always **calls on** students who are prepared

She asked me to **call her up** after dinner.

The two-word verbs that can not have their parts separated are called "inseparable" and the others are called "separable." Look at the list below.

Examples:

They wanted to **look over** the car.

They wanted to **look** the car **over**.

They wanted to **look it over**.

but NOT: They wanted to **look over** it.

THE VERB DO -- In English, we use the verb DO (DO, DOES, DONE, DID, etc.) in at least four different ways:

1. As a verb like other verbs: Jennifer did the dishes
2. As a sign of emphasis: I **did** comb my hair.
3. As a verb that can be placed in front of the subject to form a question or to which can NOT be attached to form a negative statement: Do they want more bread? Mr. Jones doesn't know if the clock is correct.
4. As a substitute to save repetition of another verb or verb phrase: My sister needs a new coat and I do too. They didn't finish their tests, but I did. Your students will probably have difficulty with all of the uses of DO except the first example.

PREPOSITIONS -- English prepositions are a problem because different languages use different prepositions to express the same ideas. It will help your students if you do not teach too many prepositions at one time. Also, it will help if you are sure to put the prepositions in context (in a situation where the use is natural).

NOUNS -- In English, as in many other languages, we consider some things countable and some things non-countable. If something is countable, it can have a plural form. If it is non-countable, it can not have a plural form and the singular form is used to refer to any quantity. Some of the things that we consider non-countable in English are: abstractions, ideas, ideals, emotions, gasses, fluids, materials with particles too small to be conveniently counted, and fields of study. Many languages have the same concept of count and non-count but they do not always put items in the same category as we do in English. For example, in English, HOMEWORK and HOUSEWORK are generally non-countable. (We do not say HOUSEWORKS, for example.) In other languages, these nouns are countable and they do have plural forms. Students have to learn which nouns are which in English because it affects other grammar principles as well (e.g. whether to use A LITTLE or A FEW before the noun). There are other problems with English grammar but most good textbooks can guide you along. The pointers included here are mentioned only to make you aware that there are many aspects of English that are not problems at all for native speakers (even uneducated ones), but which might cause problems for your students.

What are some important things to know about pronunciation?

As a teacher, the most important thing for you to know is what factors influence whether the pronunciation is correct or not. You can use your own pronunciation as a model. When you want your students to produce the sounds correctly, sometimes you can give them more help if you are aware of what produces the differences. Here are some of those aspects:

VOICING -- One thing that distinguishes one sound from other sounds is voicing. When a sound is voiced, the air used to make the sound causes the vocal cords to vibrate. You can tell if a sound is voiced by placing your hand tightly on your throat and saying the sound in isolation. If the sound is voiced, you will feel vibrations. (Try saying "zzzzz" with your hand tightly on your throat. Now try saying "sssss." You should feel the vibrations with "zzz" but not with "sss.") When a student is saying a sound incorrectly one reason may be that he or she is voicing an unvoiced sound or is not voicing a voiced sound.

MOUTH, TONGUE, AND LIP POSITION -- Another thing that makes a difference in sound is the position of the mouth, tongue, lips, etc. (sometimes these are called articulators). For vowels, differences in sounds are produced by how far forward or back the tip of the tongue is in the mouth, by how high or low it is, by how much the jaw is dropped, and by whether the lips are rounded or not. For consonants, differences in sound are produced by where the tongue touches in the mouth, by which part of the tongue touches, and by whether the air is stopped completely or partially and then released. With some consonants the differences are created with articulators besides the tongue (e.g. 'b' is produced by the upper and lower lip) or by the shape of the tongue rather than the position (e.g. 'r' and 'l' are different because the tongue curls up towards the roof of the mouth with 'r'). If your students are producing a sound incorrectly, try to imitate them to feel where your tongue is and how your mouth is shaped; then, move your tongue to the correct position to make the sound. You ought to be able to help your students get their tongues and mouths into the correct position in this way.

STRESS AND RHYTHM -- English has a stress and rhythm pattern that is different from most other languages in the world. Most languages give equal amount of time to each syllable. In English, we give an equal amount of time between **stressed** syllables. This means that we say many unstressed syllables very quickly. This difference is one that most ESL speakers will benefit from learning through lots of practice and examples.

INTONATION -- In English, there are two basic intonation patterns. With one, the speaker raises his or her voice on the last stressed syllable of the sentence and keeps the tone higher to the end of the sentence (called rising intonation). This pattern is used to indicate that what he or she is saying or asking requires a YES or NO answer. With the other pattern, the speaker raises the tone on the last stressed syllable of the sentence and then drops the tone to a point that is even lower than the tone before the voice was raised (called rising-falling intonation). This pattern is used for regular sentences and for most questions requiring the giving of some information as an answer. There are other patterns, but they are basically variations of the two described. You need to help students be aware of the intonation as often it can completely change the meaning of a sentence (e.g. "You're a high school graduate" can either be a statement or a question depending on whether it is said with rising intonation or rising-falling intonation).

Many textbooks may also give you pointers about English pronunciation. However, if they do not, you can usually figure out what the problems are by looking at the four aspects of sounds that were discussed, namely, voicing, position, stress and rhythm, and intonation.

Some facts about how second languages are learned

The third step to being a successful ESL teacher is to be aware of some common myths about second language learning and teaching that can significantly reduce your effectiveness. They are:

1. That language can be learned much like other school subjects, i.e. learning facts or rules and applying those facts in a problem solving fashion.

This myth often results in the teacher spending a lot of time talking **about** the language being learned and not talking **in** that language. It results in testing the students' knowledge of grammar and not their ability to communicate.

Language is not learned primarily by learning the "rules" but rather by first listening to and understanding the spoken language and then practicing speaking. Occasionally, however, learning of rules can help many adults learn and use the language. Just do not make rules the focus of the course.

2. That language is learned primarily by memorization and repetition of sentence patterns.

While repetition and memorization can play an important role in language learning, they cannot by themselves insure that students will be able to use the language for any real purpose. Repetition and memorization, if used, must be accompanied by other activities requiring the application of the learned patterns in novel situations and with variation in vocabulary and even structure.

3. That language lessons should be centered around a particular grammatical pattern and that these should be sequenced from simple to complex.

This myth often leads to the teaching of sentences because of their simplicity rather than because of their usefulness to the learner. The first consideration in selecting material for teaching a second language should be to choose vocabulary and sentences that the learner **wants** and **needs** to learn. The grammatical simplicity of the sentence should be a secondary consideration.

4. That language is learned by first gaining mastery over one sentence pattern and then moving on to another.

This myth often leads to the overuse of mechanical structure drills and causes the teacher to place an inordinate amount of attention on the correction of grammatical errors. Research has shown that grammatical development takes place gradually and that the learner is developing many aspects of the grammar simultaneously. Learner errors are not all bad. They can show the teacher that the learner is progressing normally toward mastery of the whole language system.

The teacher's efforts should be focused on providing the student with lots of opportunities to hear and comprehend communicative language and to interact in as realistic a way as possible.

ESL Program Organization

There are some important practical considerations that all ESL teachers need to address. Three such topics are discussed below.

How are ESL programs organized?

There are two basic approaches to designing the overall ESL program. One is a system in which students enroll in classes and attend the classes at prearranged specified times. We shall refer to this as the **classroom model**. A second approach is the **center model**, in which the students are allowed to come into a learning center, work as long as they wish and leave when they want to. In this type of program, the students usually spent most of their time working individually or in small groups with the teacher. Given the fact that this type of program usually has a full-time trained ESL teacher, this manual will concentrate primarily on the first model.

Within the classroom model there are various types of classes. The most common type, and the one for which this manual is primarily designed, is the situation in which there is more than one class and the students are divided into classes according to proficiency levels. In this kind of class, even though the students are grouped according to proficiency, there will always be some students who are more advanced than others. In addition to these differences that exist at the beginning of the class, the program will usually have a policy called "open enrollment." This means that students can continue to enroll after the class begins. This makes it necessary to play the instruction so that lessons are as non-sequential as possible, that is, each lesson can be taught independently of the previous ones. While this is not entirely possible, it is desirable to have lessons that can accommodate new students as well as those who have attended previous lessons.

The differences in students mean that the teacher will need to plan activities that allow for different levels of performance in each thing being taught. The best way to do this is to break the class frequently into small groups for part of the class time and work with each group on their level. This is particularly true if the class has students who do not read in their native language.

What type of ESL class do you want?

Once you have decided what place your class is to have in the overall program, you are ready to begin the arrangements for the actual class. The following section is designed to help you make and carry out those arrangements as easily as possible.

ESL classes are taught in all kinds of classrooms under all kinds of conditions. However, there are some features of a classroom that are desirable and which can contribute to the learning of the students. For example, it is desirable to have a classroom that has **movable desks**. This is important so that you can use a variety of smaller size groups whenever you desire. Students can simply be told to pull their desks to a particular area of the room and into a particular arrangement. If individual movable desks are out of the question, the next best set-up is tables with movable chairs. If you have to use a room with chairs or desks attached to the floor or each other in long rows, your problems of getting students to interact will be greater.

Other desirable features for an ESL classroom include a large blackboard, a bulletin board at the front where you can tack things for all to see, a large table at the front of the room where you can place real objects to work with, good lighting (particularly if you have any elderly students), and a means for controlling the air and temperature. It is also desirable to have a room that is not penetrated by lots of outside noise. Learning a language under optimal circumstances can be trying; learning a language to the accompaniment of outside motors, traffic, and talking can be almost impossible.

How often should the class meet and how long should each class be?

Experiments have shown that little language learning takes place in classes that meet less than three times a week. The ideal situation for an adult education ESL class would probably be one that meets every day for an hour or an hour and a half. Second best would be a class that meets three times a week for two hours. Meeting less often, even for longer periods at a time, often becomes counterproductive because so much is forgotten between class meetings. If you have control over the length of the class term (semester, quarter, est.), you might try about an eight week course. Courses approximately this long allow students to feel a sense of accomplishment, and at the same time making it possible for new students to join and feel that they are not intruders.

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