

# Creating Successful Strategies for ESL Instruction

**T**his article is designed to offer ideas that will aid teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in crafting the strategies that will ensure success in a variety of situations. Its recommendations are based on personal experiences and the observations of many individuals in more than 30 programs throughout the U.S.A. and abroad.

While using a single lesson plan to teach a homogeneous class might work, there is no “one size fits all” book or a lesson plan that fits the multicultural and multi-level ability of students in 21st-century classrooms. Therefore, the teacher must craft a strategy that is inclusive, yet flexible and fluid so that over time it will continue to meet the students’ needs, since their knowledge will grow at different rates in the areas of language learning (*taught language*) and language acquisition (*language obtained from life experiences*).

For an individual to successfully teach English as a second language (ESL), he or she needs to carefully consider four areas: (1) the teacher, (2) the student, (3) the material, and (4) the activities. These components are involved in teaching any class. Successful ESL teachers must create an efficient educational mix of these components to address the vastly differing needs within the same class, to ensure that their students progress toward second-language proficiency.

## Time and Educational Community Engagement

Time constraints make strategizing for success extremely important in teaching ESL. Since

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the educational and societal community expects results on a time line, which they informally “assess” on an almost daily basis, the ESL teacher and the ELL (English Language Learner) are often under a great deal of pressure to produce timely results. Example: No one, when passing the math teacher in the hall, says “Paolo still doesn’t know how to solve equations.” However, administrators and staff feel free to say to the ESL teacher, “Pablo still doesn’t understand the posted signs,” or “I can’t understand what Paulina says.” Statements like these suggest an ongoing evaluation of the teacher, the student, the material taught, and the rate of language learning and acquisition.

To achieve positive results, everyone involved in educating ELL students should be on the same page as to the topics, time line, and sequence of instruction. Example: After determining the content, sequence, and timeline of ELL instruction, post each week the subject and vocabulary on a bulletin board so that others can use the information when speaking to, or writing messages for, the students. This helps ensure greater interaction between the staff, English-speaking students, and the ELL students.

## A Four-Part Plan for Action

Start by creating four *Fact Sheets* labeled: (1) Teacher, (2) Students, (3) Materials, and (4) Activities. The fourth component, Activities, should be chosen after you assess the content of the first three. As the teacher, students, and materials interact through carefully chosen activities, this creates the environment in which learning takes place.

BY EVELIN HARPER GILKESON



**Playing musical chairs gives ESL students practice in conjugating verbs (*run, walk, stop, sit*); expressing their opinions (*not fair, I'm faster, it's my chair*); and issuing commands (*hurry, don't stop, keep going, don't sit, move on*).**

These four *Fact Sheets* can be used for one term or until you feel the need to reassess. The student page is the one that changes the most frequently. It is helpful to reassess the other three at set intervals during the term. The following events commonly alter the teacher's ESL plans:

1. Changes in the teacher's personal life, attitudes, knowledge base, or life experiences. Example: Taking a class in Socio-cultural Linguistics will have a different effect on the teacher than a class in ELL Materials.
2. Changes in the students' lives and achievement (i.e., frustration over a bad grade could cause the student to progress at a different rate).
3. Changes in the material resources available to the students and teacher.
4. Changes in school leadership, administrative goals, student population, structures, or supply channels.

When things change, you will need to re-evaluate and update the single *Fact Sheet* with your conclusions. This may necessitate a change in class activities or dynamics, such as class groupings, materials, language level re-structuring, or other aspects of classroom instruction.

### **The Teacher**

Students "read" the teacher long before they read the first words in their assignments. When they don't know the lan-

guage being spoken in the classroom, they read the teacher even more carefully. Since they don't know, or are not sure, about what the teacher is saying, the non-verbal cues are what the student will understand. Therefore, before a teacher steps into a classroom to teach ELL students, he or she must do some mind- and soul-searching about attitudes and biases that might come through in his or her non-verbal communication. As King Solomon said, "As he thinks within himself, so he is" (Proverbs 23:7, NASB).<sup>1</sup>

### **Fact Sheet—The Teacher's Page**

In the play *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare said: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them."<sup>2</sup> ESL teachers also fall into those three categories: (1) some were born to teach ESL, (2) some acquire the skills to teach ESL, and (3) others have ESL teaching thrust upon them. Knowing to which group you belong, and your attitudes toward the three categories, will help you identify feelings about ELLs in general, and more specifically, how to create a personal strategy that will ensure success in your situation. Example: How you teach ELLs in Chicago may differ greatly from how you teach them in China.

The information that you gather for your personal *Fact Sheet* will help you identify points of connection with administrators, fellow teachers, and students. It will also identify areas for

personal growth, and reveal the natural assets that will aid you in planning and delivery of instruction.

### Getting Started

Here are some questions that can serve as starting points as you journal about your personal learning, teaching experiences, and attitudes:

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't understand what was happening? How did you feel? What made the situation more manageable for you? Would you like to go back to that situation again? What factors would make you want to be where you didn't know what was going on?

2. Do you enjoy teaching? Do you like your present teaching situation? What would make it better? Can you do something about it? What have been the highlights of your teaching experience? What has brought you the most joy? The best results? The most recognition?

3. Do you like international students? Do you look forward to interacting with them? What can you do to better understand them? What proportion of your time do you spend preparing to teach ELL students? How many times a day do you spend one-on-one time with an international student?

Note: The teacher is the one who connects the student and

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the new language, so it is important to establish this connection carefully. Know yourself, and if you feel you need to make changes, use David's approach—pray that God would create a clean heart and a right spirit within you (Psalm 51:10).

### The Student

One of the exciting aspects of being an ESL teacher is the variety of students each new term. Regardless of the groupings, getting the information about each student on the first day makes it possible to quickly create tasks and scenarios in which each one is engaged, comfortable, and achieving his or her potential. Here are some examples of this diversity, and how it affects teaching strategies:

1. *A homogeneous group of 42 Asian English education majors.* They are meticulous about homework but reticent to speak; they do not submit original written material or properly quoted sources. Approach: Have them work in groups of three for speaking, or paired with a friend for writing.

2. *A class of 12 students from as many countries and cultures.* All seem sure that their perspective is the correct one. Approach: Plan for a quiet exercise to use as a breather when the discussion becomes too heated.

3. *An intermediate ESL class with people from different countries*



Atlantic Union College (Massachusetts) ESL students receive on-site instruction at Walden Pond where Henry David Thoreau lived and wrote from 1845-1847. His replicated cabin and contents surprised the students by its sparseness. Walking around the pond stimulated a variety of questions and lively conversation, and the woods provided a quiet environment for writing.



and careers: a Hispanic admiral, a professional skateboarder from Germany, two Nordic bankers, two Asian musicians, three Middle Eastern men, plus three students from various locations whose goal is to find a spouse. Finding common ground is difficult. They don't like the textbook and are vocal about their opinions. Approach: Use journals and magazines relating to their interests as textbooks. These will generate vocabulary, presentations, discussion, note taking, outline development, and writing.

**Fact Sheet—The Student Pages**

Keep your *Student Fact Sheet* pages in a three-ring binder that contains class plans, your grade book, and other materials. This makes it easy to personalize the materials for both preparation and presentation. These *Fact Sheets* are easily kept up to date if you insert daily notes with helpful information, which will generate ideas and lesson plans for future assignments.

Divide the *Fact Sheet* into two sections:

**Part A** – Top half or front: information given to you by the student.

Have the students fill out questionnaires about themselves that include what they like to read, what they need to learn and why, and what they hope to achieve in the class. Use the questionnaire, or an in-class activity, to discover more about their background, work, hobbies, and other interests. Add this information to the student info sheet, and use it to create connections between each student's interests and the assigned lessons.

**Part B** – Bottom half of the page (or the back): Information from assessments and personal observations. Include test scores, educational background, previous ESL courses, and other factual information that can be used to better tailor the assignments to each student's needs.

**The Materials**

Most educational programs provide the teacher with the curriculum materials, or a list of the texts and materials that may be used. Along with this, there is usually a list of alternate materials. However, you will sometimes need to go a step further to locate missing books and resources, or additional materials. Or worse, the teaching material may not arrive until partway through the term. Buy a few resource books to draw upon, and determine the location of other materials that can be used in an emergency.

**Fact Sheet—The Materials Page**

Inventory everything that is available. Begin with a general list such as this: books or notes from the previous teacher, materials available at the local library, the content of on-site bookcases, availability of computers or audio equipment and materials, etc. As your list grows and becomes more specific, it will become easier to tap into a variety of resources to keep students engaged in learning. Referring to the list, along with

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**Making Valentine cards helps ESL students increase their vocabulary as they research and use words relating to friendship and love.**



**Organizing a class party enhances ESL students' social skills in an English-speaking environment and expands their food-related vocabulary.**

the syllabus and lesson plans, can suggest new or different activities for classes that connect students and curriculum.

### The Activities

Include in the list of activities all of the things that you and the students do in the classroom for the purpose of learning and assessment. Choose the activities on the basis of educational approaches, methods, techniques, learning styles, interests, temperaments, tradition, materials available, and on what the local educational system considers “best practices.” Optimal outcomes will result when the activities suit the students in their individual situations and help them achieve their individual goals. This is why keeping the student page current is so important. These pages suggest which activities are needed and those that will work best.

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### Fact Sheet—The Activities Pages (Planning Book)

#### Planning

1. Start with what has been given to you. Ask your supervisor or department head exactly what is expected of you. Watch the teachers who have had long-standing success at the school, or visit other ESL classrooms.

2. Write out a detailed calendar of the activities that will occur at the school and in the community during the current term. These events, whether major sports events, city parades, or church programs, will relate to your students’ interests, as will the seasonal and national holidays.

3. Insert the events into the plan before choosing activities for the class. This will simplify your work of choosing appropriate activities to teach, while helping the students learn English using upcoming events. *(Continued on page 25)*

## RESOURCES

### Websites

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/parents-help-how-children-learn-languages.htm>. Basic information about language learning to download and distribute as needed for students, parents, and coworkers. It is available in several languages.

<http://www.tesol.org>. The official Website for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages includes information about materials, events, and conventions. The events offer lots of helpful ideas, as well as the opportunity to examine new materials and meet fellow ESL teachers. TESOL’s quarterly, *Essential Teacher*, is practical and a good read. The organization has recently begun to offer free Internet seminars for TESOL Global and student members. Website: <http://www.tesol.org/virtualeminars>.

<http://www.eslcafe.com/> “Dave’s ESL Café,” the oldest and most-visited English as a Second Language (ESL) site—a great place to chat with other ESL teachers and students. Includes links to other sites, as well as great ideas for lessons and books.

<http://jc-schools.net/tutorials/interact-read.htm>. A good source for fun, interactive games for English Language Learners (ELLs). The games range in ability levels so that students K-8 can play and develop skills.

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslstudent.html>. A great place to find quick handouts and advice from the experts. It includes opportunities for students to exchange e-mails with a pen pal.

<http://www.tolearnenglish.com/>. This site offers a placement test that students can complete under non-stressful conditions, as well as games, crossword puzzles, plays, and books appropriate for ELLs.

<http://www.yourdictionary.com/esl/How-to-Teach-an-ESL-Class.html>. A good resource for beginning teachers. Includes general tips for teaching ELLs.

<http://www.nelliemuller.com/>. A remarkably rich Website, created by a veteran ESL teacher, that offers a host of links to support teaching and learning. The site is especially useful for implementing collaborative projects. It includes Web-Quests for ages 5-8; 9-12; 13-15; and adults as well as ones specifically intended for ELLs.

<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/>. Lists of instructional techniques on topics such as how to become a better teacher, autonomy, classroom management, ESL teaching ideas, motivating students, and using music and songs to enhance learning.

<http://members.EnchantedLearning.com/books/spanish/animalesynumeros/>. Lots of bilingual stories about subjects like animals and numbers; some of which will help students learn to count in Spanish and English.

[http://members.EnchantedLearning.com/books/spanish/picturedictionaryspeng/SpanishEnglishABCsBook\\_EnchantedLearning.pdf](http://members.EnchantedLearning.com/books/spanish/picturedictionaryspeng/SpanishEnglishABCsBook_EnchantedLearning.pdf). Offers a variety of activities for teachers such as bilingual dictionaries, stories, and many good handouts.

## RESOURCES *Continued*

<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/bestbooks.html>. Suggestions about helpful books to use with ELLs and English-speaking students.

<http://literacyconnections.com/SecondLanguage.php>. Bilingual, Spanish, and ESL literacy resources such as online bilingual dictionaries, bilingual books, ELL activities, professional resources for teaching ESL, and links to organizations supporting bilingual literacy.

[http://www.mes-english.com/worksheets/images/talking\\_1.gif](http://www.mes-english.com/worksheets/images/talking_1.gif). Many resources for teaching Spanish or helping students learn English, including materials to print and hand out to students or to use as overheads. Subjects include likes and dislikes, comparisons, body parts, the alphabet, holiday color sheets, and much more.

<http://lessonplanet.com/>. Contains many lesson plans correlated to state standards and themes, a lesson maker, and 57 lesson plans for ESL learners. K-8 lesson plans on a variety of topics, from narratives to the Vietnam War.

<http://www.eslreadingsmart.com/default.aspx>. An online ESL/ELL program that supports classroom instruction, and state-adopted objectives. It provides instructional materials for beginner, intermediate, and advanced English learners in grades 4-12, as well as college-level students and adults. Its 135 content-based lessons, placement tests, printable lesson plans, reading program, and class management materials allow for individualized instruction and tracking of student progress.

<http://www.englishclub.com/teachingtips/teaching-multi-level-classes.htm>. A one-page introduction to the topic with definitions, structure, organizational information, and sample activities.

[http://www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/digests/shank.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/shank.html). A one-page introduction to the multi-level classroom, produced by the U.S. Department of Education. Includes an excellent reference list.

### BOOKS

#### K-12

Eileen N. Whelan Ariza, *Not for ESOL Teachers: What Every Classroom Teacher Needs to Know About the Linguistically, Culturally, and Ethnically Diverse Student*. 2nd edition. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Inc., 2009. ISBN: 9780137154555.

#### Theory

Jo Ann Aebersold and Mary Lee Field, *From Reader to Reading Teacher: Issues and Strategies for Second Language Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. ISBN 052149785X.

Barbara M. Birch, *English L2 Reading, Getting to the Bottom*. ESL and Applied Linguistics. Professional Series. Mahway, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007. ISBN 0-8058-5929-2.

#### Practical

Adrienne L. Herrell and Michael Jordan, *50 Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners* (the enclosed DVD shows strategies in action). 3rd edition. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Merrill/Prentice Hall Teaching Strategies Series, 2007. ISBN: 978-0-13-2199266-5.

#### Good Class Activities

Nikhat Shameem and Makhan Tickoo, eds., *New Ways of Using Communicative Games in Language Teaching*. Alexandria, Va.: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Inc., 1999. ISBN 0-939791-78-1.

Richard R. Day, ed., *New Ways of Teaching Reading*. TESOL, Inc., 1993. ISBN 0-939791-45-5.

Paul Nation, ed., *New Ways of Teaching Vocabulary*, TESOL, Inc., 1994. ISBN 0-939791-51-4.

Laurel Pollard and Natalie Hess, *Zero Prep: Ready-to-Go Activities for the Language Classroom* (ALTAESL@aol.com). Provo, Utah: Alta Books Center, 1997. ISBN: 978-1-882483-64-8. Laurel Pollard, Natalie Hess, and Jan Herron, *Zero Prep: For Beginners*. Provo: Alta Books, 2001.

#### ESL in the Multilevel Classroom

Jill Bell, *Teaching Multilevel Classes in ESL*, Markham, Ontario: Dominic Press, 1991. ISBN 56270-032-4.

Natalie Hess, *Teaching Large Multilevel Classes*, Cambridge Handbook for Language Teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. ISBN: 9780521667852.

#### Teaching Abroad

Don Snow, *More Than a Native Speaker, An Introduction to Teaching English Abroad*. TESOL, Inc., 2006. ISBN 978-193118532-5.

#### Case Studies of Schools With Mainstreamed ELL Students

Effie Papatzikou Cochran, ed., *Mainstreaming, Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series* (Primary, Secondary, and Postsecondary). TESOL, Inc., 2002. ISBN 0923979197-8.

#### Higher Education

Nicholas Dimmitt and Maria Dantas-Whitney, eds., *Intensive English Programs in Postsecondary Settings*. TESOL, Inc., 2002. ISBN 0-939791-96-X.



Start building your list of activities for teaching. The plans will, over time, become second nature to you. Just a word on the planner page will elicit the entire procedure. This treasure box of routines and activities will help you develop and enhance your personal teaching style.

### Teaching Is Learning

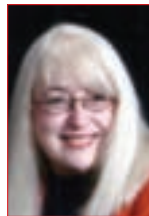
If you are alert to opportunities for growth, you will gain insights into how to be more effective. These personal “Aha” experiences will suggest ideas for future assignments. Although these concepts may have been researched and published somewhere, they need to be experienced. Let me share with you my top 10 “Aha” discoveries. (You may have already experienced some of them!)

### Eve’s Top Ten “Aha” Discoveries Teaching ESL

1. *The more students read, talk, and listen, the better they read, talk, and listen.* People get better at what they repeat, and they do again what they enjoy. Find out what that is. Incorporate it into their educational experience.
2. *Pictures, moving or still, are helpful for everyone.* Pictures say a lot in a little time, set the mood, and focus thought. Use students’ pictures, or yours, creatively in every subject.
3. *The teacher’s job is to teach the student, not language or a book.* Get to know each student. Plan ways of connecting and instructing that make them shine. Then they will learn the language, understand the assignments, and participate in class activities.
4. *Reading aloud is good practice for everyone.* Clear, well-paced oral delivery is important.
5. *Time management is easier with a daily routine.* Use five to eight activities as a core cycle. Each activity should be about 10 to 15 minutes in length. Pace the work to meet the students’ needs.
6. *After a few weeks, break the routine with new activities and subjects to retain student interest.* TV writers know how to elicit interest—copy their techniques. Give previews of upcoming classes to build expectancy.
7. *Pace the material to the ability of the student.* Pushing and trying to speed up a process can cause a crash. It is harder to recover from a crash than to prevent one.
8. *From childhood, everyone wants to know “Why?” So tell your students the “Why” of each activity, or at the end, ask them to tell you the reason for it.* If you can’t explain how the assignment helps their learning, don’t waste time on it.
9. *For each lesson, present an overview and help students make personal connections to it.*
10. *Activities that teach specific skills and can be easily retold to a friend or parent are memorable for ESL students.*

### Conclusion

Finally, if in the midst of the term you feel a little overwhelmed, remember you control the lights and the sounds, you hold the motivational and academic safety net, you set the mood and the pace, you set the bar, you are the director, they are the show. Keep it happy, smile, and enjoy! ☺



**Evelin Harper Gilkeson** holds an M.A. in Teaching a Second Language and a B.A. in Spanish. Cuban born, she has been a teacher and consultant for English as a Second Language for 22 years. Most of her work has been in university intensive-language programs for graduate and undergraduate students. She specializes in vocabulary, reading, American life, and creating on-site learning experiences. Her other teaching experience includes preschool, high school, and adult community programs with migrant workers and conservative Islamic women in the U.S.A. She is founder of Language and Service International with accredited programs to Spanish-speaking countries. Presently she is developing a program that will take students and teachers to China.

### REFERENCES

1. Scripture texts credited to NASB are from The New American Standard Bible, copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 19973, 1975, 1977.
2. <http://quotationsbook.com/quote/17933/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.

### Terminology for Teaching/Learning English

1. English as a Second Language Reading can be referred to as ESL Reading, ESLR, or EL2R.
2. Reading in any second language, not the student’s first language: L2Reading or L2R.
3. English Language Learners (ELL) is more commonly used in K-12 programs.
4. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is English being taught in a non-English-speaking country. However, in some English-speaking countries there are communities where the language of origin is so prevalent that the ESLR teacher may want to look into using methods, materials, and activities of EFL language instruction.
5. English as Another Language (EAL) is a rather new term that is used predominantly in Europe and the United Kingdom. It has come about because many students know more than one language and English may be their 3rd, 4th, or more language.
6. The 1.5 Generation or 1.5 Students: This is a relatively new term, used more frequently in higher education. It is used in reference to students who came as small children, or were born in this country, who have remedial language needs that should be addressed before they can advance in their studies. These students are not referred to as true immigrants as they don’t know another country very well, and they have spent most of their young life where they are. And yet they are not a second generation, because they remain in an environment where all their social contacts, cultural expectations, and home language are of the parental country of origin. The student may have limited personal contact with modeled standard English discourse. The student may not have ready access to a large variety of English reading materials, and his or her environment may not be conducive to language development or study.