

How Can a General Classroom Teacher Accommodate ESL Students?

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Abstract

ESL students are one of the largest growing student groups in America. This paper examines how the general education teacher can make accommodations for ESL students who are mainstreamed with little or no additional English support from an ESL specialist teacher outside of the classroom. The areas examined are how the teacher, environment, approaches and activities, and assessment can be used to aid ESL students in English language proficiency. Ultimately, all teachers need to be trained in how to teach ESL students and find a way to become a language learner at least once in order to empathize with students. Creating a safe environment, varying activities, and have a student-centered approach should be the goal for every classroom. Each student has different needs, so it is important to avoid one change for all students and learn about and accommodate based on the specific needs of each student.

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The ethnic makeup of America is drastically different than only a couple decades ago. In 2006, the National Clearing House for English Language Acquisition reported that 5 million, or 10%, of students are English as a Second Language (ESL) students (de Oliveira, 2011, p. 59). The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) also reported that less than 13% of teachers have been trained to teach ESL students, which poses a huge problem for schools trying to meet ESL students' needs (Youb, 2010, p. 110). ESL students need authentic, contextual opportunities to practice language, but can grow and participate with native English speaking classmates with appropriate supports given by the classroom teacher.

How Can Teachers Affect ESL Students' Learning?

In 2004, the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force found that 90% of teachers have a white, middle class, non-urban background (de Oliveira, 2011, p. 59). It becomes much more difficult to teach ESL students without the ability to understand their struggles. It is important for teachers to not only study how ESL students feel in the classroom, but to actually experience what they feel in order to empathize (de Oliveira, 2011, p. 59). de Oliveira (2011) reported on five years of research she did about a program that turned teachers in language learners. Teachers were taught a math lesson in Portuguese Spanish in two methods. The first was a normal lesson with no accommodations. The second was the same lesson, but used a slower pace of speech, visuals, and pausing for clarification, among many other strategies to help the teachers learn in a foreign language. The first time the lesson was taught, the teachers reflections could all be summed up in one word: frustrated (de Oliveira, 2011, p. 60). One teacher stated that she wanted to ask the instructor to slow down, but realized she still would not understand, so she gave up and did not listen (de Oliveira, 2011, p. 61).

Going through the lesson a second time with accommodations taught the teachers what activities and strategies they could use to help their students. One teacher's reflection pointed out a caution, however. She said that she felt embarrassed when other teachers responded well to the adjustments, but she still was unable to understand (de Oliveira, 2011, p. 61). This thought reminds teachers that one strategy will not help all students, but rather, multiple approaches must be taken to find what works best for each student.

Teacher talk is one of the most important factors in an ESL student's success. Appropriate teacher talk would include a pace, direction giving, questions, transitions, feedback, checking for understanding, and wait time (Parrish, 2004, p.175). Teachers need to speak at a slower than normal rate in as concise a manner as possible so as to not overwhelm students. This is key when giving directions or orchestrating transitions; steps need to be given to students one at a time, or they will not understand, or forget (de Oliveira, 2011, p. 61). A great tip to check the rate of teacher talk is to video tape and watch a lesson to evaluate how much teacher talk is occurring (Williams, 2001, p. 754).

Silence and wait time need to be used more often in the classroom so that students have time to think and the students are talking more than the teacher. Most teachers only give one second for wait time, but waiting at least three seconds drastically increases the number and quality of responses (Williams, 2001, p. 752). This is effective not only for ESL students, but for all students.

Teachers can improve how they check for understanding. It is easy to say, "Do you understand?" to a student, but how does one know if he has actually learned? The student may say yes to not offend the teacher, he may feel embarrassed to share what he understands, or he may understand something completely different than what the teacher was expecting (Parrish,

2004, p. 179). Use checking questions in order to get the student talking in a way that assures he understood. For example: “I have lived here for 12 years. When did I move here? Do I still live here (Parrish, 2004, p.180)?” Students from some cultures may not volunteer an answer, but directly asking or using a technique to call on students that is not intimidating, such as randomly drawing a popsicle stick, will increase the likelihood of the student answering (Parrish, 2004, p. 181).

Finally, the questions teachers used can increase students’ English language proficiency when used to scaffold thinking (Youb, 2010, p. 110). Youb (2010) asserts that teacher questions are the most important part of a lesson because they can be appropriately used to guide and conceptualize students’ thoughts (p. 112). A good question is one that allows students to practice English in a meaningful context in order to promote linguistic and conceptual knowledge (Youb, 2010, p. 113).

Youb (2010) classifies questions into three types: coaching, facilitating, and collaborating. Coaching questions are very vital in the beginning of the year and as reminders throughout the year because they help to teach expectations (Youb, 2010, p. 118). Facilitating questions are open-ended and usually try to elicit opinions from students (Youb, 2010, p. 118). Students could be on their own with a discussion with the teacher facilitating from the side of the room with little or no verbal interaction. The final type of questions, collaborating, is used to create a dialogue with students about personal experiences (Youb, 2010, p. 119). This type is very meaningful and makes authentic connections to learners’ lives.

What Classroom Environment Aids ESL Students’ Achievement?

It is important that ESL students feel comfortable, safe, and respected in the classroom. They need to feel like their input matters. Williams (2001) suggests that this can be done by

allowing students to share their language and culture with students, allowing students to create projects using their native language and English, and substituting unknown English words with their native language so that they feel more confident (p. 752).

Students need to have an environment where English language is explicitly taught. Unfortunately, students will not just “pick up” a language by sitting in a classroom (de Oliveira, 2011, p. 59). Teachers tend to assume that conversational fluency means that a student knows English well enough to perform as well on assignments as their classmates (Cheng & Milnes, 2008 p. 52). However, there are two types of English language acquisition. The first is Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, which is the conversational part of language. This takes about two years to learn (Parrish, 2004, p. 16). The other type of English is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, which is what is necessary to perform in school. This takes from seven-fifteen years to acquire, so it is not correct to evaluate a student’s potential academic performance based on conversational skill (Parrish, 2004, p. 16). In order to meet the academic English needs of ESL students, teachers should be writing a content and a language objective for each lesson (Williams, 2001, p. 754)

A student-centered, collaborative environment is the best for learning English because students are able to take charge of their learning and practice their language in a meaningful context. Williams (2001) stated that most teachers do what Mehan (1979) labeled as IRE, or initiate, response, and evaluate (p. 753). This is when the teacher asks a question to a student, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates the answer. This causes students to become passive and not pay attention to what is happening.

Teachers have been successful in creating collaborative climates. Truscott and Watts-Taffe (1998) observed it occurring 75% of the time, however, the majority of the tasks were not

purposeful so students did not get to extensively use their language (as cited in Williams, 2001, p. 754). In order to have students actively engaged in a collaborative environment, teachers need to become facilitators of student language rather than controllers of it (Williams, 2001, p. 754).

What Approaches and Activities Help ESL Students to Grow?

Youb (2008) researched using an oral-only approach and an integrated language approach to teaching English to ESL students. He concluded that using an integrated approach greatly increased the English ability of students (p. 431). Learning English is not just being able to speak, but rather, there are four modalities that students need to learn, and each one is acquired at different rates: reading, speaking, listening, and writing (Williams, 2001, p. 751). The students who only learn English orally are only able to construct the same few simple patterns of speaking but lack complex forms unless they are explicitly taught grammar functions (Youb, 2008 p. 432-433).

The most engaging activities for ESL students are ones that use a student's own words and writing to focus on a topic or grammar point (Youb, 2008 p. 444). Also using their interests will increase their attention and desire to learn. This can be done by using television, internet sources, cd's, and radio, along with many other resources that can be brought into the classroom to connect students to authentic uses of language (Lee, 2006 A Teacher Discovers the Value of Television section, para. 1). Using videos can be a great, easy access resource, especially if the teacher manipulates it by pausing to ask probing questions, have students predict, and using captions. (Lee, 2006 A Teacher Discovers the Value of Television section, para. 1).

Varied activities can be great, as long as students are able to understand what is going on. If a teacher has a student with little to no English ability, she can still include the student in engaging activities. Using many visuals, gestures, modeling, graphic organizers, and props are

great ways to aid student learning when they don't have much experience with English (Williams, 2001, p. 753). A teacher can also use choral reading to keep all students participating and feeling safe (Williams, 2001, p. 755). Students who are not confident in their speaking ability will feel comfortable talking as a group because there is not a spotlight on them.

How Should ESL Students Be Assessed?

Should ESL students be assessed in the same way as native English speakers? This question plagues educators who want to be fair to students, but also know that many ESL students cannot meet the same standards as native English speakers. Cheng and Milnes (2008) interviewed teachers about how they treated assessment for ESL students. Teachers used both formal and informal ways of grading, which resulted in teacher's "pulling for" students and bumping up participation and effort grades for the ESL students who were trying, but not passing (p. 50). This poses a problem because the informal, subjective part of the grade can make a significant difference in scores.

The teachers submitted samples of work they would grade as good writing. None of the ESL students' work met the standard. Teachers were struggling, however, because they noted that the ESL students are the hardest workers. Should they grade the process or the product (Cheng & Milnes, 2008, p. 55)? One teacher was quoted, saying, "Do I assess them based on what I think they're trying to say or what they've actually written (Cheng & Milnes, 2008, p. 55)?" One main problem is that many content teachers in middle and high school, where writing assignments are prevalent, are not trained or knowledgeable enough to teach English linguistics (Cheng & Milnes, 2008, p. 52).

Despite teachers efforts to accommodate through giving more time, lowering expectations of written work, making participating and effort part of the grade, and interpreting

test answers, ESL students were at a huge disadvantage and did worse than native English speaking classmates (Cheng and Milnes, 2008, p. 57). Instead, teachers need to be trained in how to teach ESL students in lessons, rather than making ineffective accommodations to grading. During lessons, teachers should be constantly checking learner understanding, for example, by asking probing questions such as, “What makes you say that (Williams, 2001, p. 754)?” It is most effective for a school to come up with a school-wide plan for grading ESL work so that it is consistent from teacher to teacher in order to ensure success with grading accommodations (Cheng & Milnes, 2008, p. 62).

Conclusion

ESL students have become so prevalent in American schools, it is nearly impossible for a teacher to go through a career without working with them. It is important for the success of these students that teachers become trained in teaching ESL. This could be done through workshops, research, or formal schooling. It is especially important that teachers learn to empathize with students by somehow immersing themselves in a foreign language and trying to learn. It will take much planning and extra effort to include ESL students in mainstream classrooms, but they are necessary steps in order to provide the best education for all students.

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