

Tutoring English as a Second Language

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As I am extremely interested in linguistics, the subject of learning language and all the processes which it entails fascinates me. I myself have studied French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Japanese. Learning these languages has been an enlightening experience. In this process, I have broadened my cultural literacy and developed a more profound understanding not only of grammar, language acquisition, and methods of learning, but also a better understanding of people. Recently, I began to teach French and to tutor reading and writing, particularly to students learning English as a second language. I find that my language background has helped tremendously to understand the process of language acquisition, as well as the personal concerns and issues which these students are dealing with. Moreover, through my experience in the tutoring practicum this semester, I have found that working with ESL students is fundamentally different than working with native speakers of English, and that these students have special needs, of which all tutors should make themselves aware.

While it remains equally important to establish an atmosphere of mutual respect between the tutor and the American learner, it requires even more effort on the tutor's part to establish and maintain this relationship with the ESL student. We must not forget the additional stress which foreign students may be experiencing, oftentimes living far from home, far away from friends, family, and everything familiar. The foreign student also incurs stress simply because of all the additional effort which he or she must make to express him- or herself in another language, unable to find the correct words, afraid of making mistakes, and afraid of offending. I was amazed to discover just how many foreign students are lacking self-confidence, even when their language skills are already quite advanced. The reading and writing tutor must be aware that all these additional factors play a role in student performance. For all these reasons, the tutor should make more effort to establish and maintain a comfortable atmosphere of mutual respect and trust.

Once the tutor has set the tone for the meeting and created a comfortable atmosphere, I would like to point out yet another difference which he or she must consider when working with a non-American learner. The overall experience is simply not the same. Certain aspects of tutoring, such as clarifying the assignment, take on a new and greater importance when working with a foreign student. We as tutors often take for granted that the learner understands what is expected of him or her, but in the case of a foreign student, with all the cultural differences and possible language difficulties--or even barriers--we no longer can make these assumptions.

After the assignment has been clarified and both parties have a good understanding of what is expected, the tutor will be better equipped to assist the learner with his or her assignment. At this point, tutors must keep in mind that just as assisting individual American students may require a variety of approaches, so does working with foreign students. However, in the latter case, the approaches may vary even more, based upon the home country of the student and the nature of his or her native language. Above all, I must emphasize concentrating on the student's ideas, and when those ideas are not immediately clear, to have the patience and take the time to help the student translate his or her thoughts coherently into our standardized English. It should be our goal to help foreign students translate their meaningful thoughts into words and sentences on paper. During the ESL presentation in our practicum class, we tutors saw that we could not take this ability for granted. We experienced great difficulty expressing our thoughts and ideas on paper when only a few, minor grammatical constraints were placed upon us. We saw how frustrating it must be for the foreign students we work with, knowing that you have worthy ideas, yet are unable not convey them to others. Moreover, if American students ever complain about

suffering from "writer's block," imagine what the foreign student must be going through. Just as we may become caught up in crafting our sentences and concentrating on grammar, the conventions of our language will only serve to further impede the flow of ideas for an ESL student. For these reasons, I suggest that foreign students work initially without a dictionary, skipping any words they do not know, so that they may achieve a true "stream of consciousness." Peter Elbow asserts in his book, "Writing with Power," that we take our focus off spelling, grammar, rules, and the errors we make when trying to get our ideas down on paper (1981, p. 15). I have found this to be most beneficial in my own experience with learning languages. I know how frustrating and crippling it can be to work with a dictionary in hand. I also support Frank O'Hare's (1995) idea that multiple drafts are needed when writing. In this way, the focus is taken off of grammar, at least initially, so that the student has a better chance of expressing his or her thoughts and ideas.

Once the tutor has a sufficient understanding of these ideas, I have few reservations about correcting the student's grammar. Again, the tutor must remember how fundamentally different the needs of ESL students are. This doesn't necessarily mean that I do all the work myself. I try to find recurring errors, perhaps subject-verb agreement, and call it to the student's attention. I may go over several errors that the student made, giving them some kind of meaningful explanation, and then ask them to take a closer look at the rest of their paper, checking for similar errors. The essential here is to achieve a level of understanding as to why this is incorrect and what the student must do to make it grammatically correct. Sometimes, I ask students about their native languages, and, when possible, make comparisons between their structure and that of English. This serves to heighten the student's understanding of English grammar and reinforces his or her memory. Of course, I do not expect all tutors to be linguists *par excellence*, speaking seven different languages fluently; all I ask is that they remain open-minded and do not take on a judgmental, or worse yet, condescending attitude, believing that other languages are simpler or less sophisticated than our own.

In my own studies of foreign languages, I learned how to "read like a writer," as Frank Smith describes in his essay (1983, p. 558). I experienced a heightened level of consciousness, such as making mental notes of new vocabulary or taking the time to truly understand how a certain word or expression was used. In addition, I found myself paying particular attention to grammatical structure, verb tenses, etc. I believe that many of the foreign students, with whom I have worked, also learned how to "read like writers" as they advanced in their studies of English. However, for those ESL students who haven't had quite as many years of formal English instruction, I suggest the strategies which have worked for me in my own studies so that they, *too*, may become "members of the club." Smith explains that "for these students, it's really a matter of acquiring enough knowledge about the English language to be able to write. This requires much time, effort, and practice. We as tutors should understand that we had to go through the same process as children, accumulating enough knowledge about how our language functions and developing sense of the language in order to write the reports, short stories, or even notes and messages, which we today oftentimes do with little effort. Now that we are in possession of these writing skills, we need to understand that the foreign students we tutor are still in the process of acquiring them. Perhaps the worst possible statement we could make to an ESL student, who hasn't developed an ear for the language, is that what they have written "just doesn't sound right."

Finally, Smith asserts in his essay that children will take an interest in writing and begin to "read like writers" when they feel that this activity is something of which they are capable (1983, p. 565). This is equally true for the foreign student. If we encourage them, give them support, show them how they can transform a sentence into the style of a native speaker, and assure them that developing language skills takes time and *effort*, then they will feel as though this is a level which they can attain--that they may one day become "members of the club." After all, we tutors are nothing but more experienced members of this club, and moreover, we should serve on the

welcoming committee.

Works Cited

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