

# TIP SHEET

## Working Effectively with ESL Students in the Mainstream 111/151 Classroom

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**A GENTLE OPENING NOTE:** Though intended as a few tips for working effectively with ESL students, the strategies herein have also proven to be effective for many students who are not ESL. Do note that this Tip Sheet is not exhaustive; it is a mere representation of suggestions to help instructors in the classroom.

### Introduction

The CSI Department of English offers ESL sections of both English 111 and English 151; however, ESL students do have the opportunity to self-place into either an ESL or a mainstream section. There are many reasons that an ESL student may choose to self-place in a mainstream 111/151 class:

1. Although in reality there is no stigma in taking an ESL section (and the ESL designation is not recorded on the student's transcript), ESL students may sometimes believe that a stigma exists;
2. None of the ESL sections fit into the student's class schedule; and/or
3. There are more ESL students than ESL sections offered; thus, the ESL sections may be closed.

ESL students are usually better accommodated in an ESL section. However, if an ESL student who has opted to take a mainstream section quickly realizes that the pedagogy may be too difficult or if the professor recognizes that the ESL student is quietly struggling, there are strategies that the instructor may utilize or ways that the instructor may "tweak" just a bit in his or her approach, lessons, and assignment instructions to help meet the needs of an ESL student (as well as possibly enhancing the overall classroom experience for all students).

### In General

One of the most important overall approaches is to foster a spirit of an appreciation for CUNY's diversity and acceptance of all cultures, languages so that the ESL student will experience an environment that welcomes and values the ESL student and celebrates the ESL student's culture as important. Consider opening the semester with the opportunity for students to share about themselves, their culture, and their English language journey.

In class, do not merely lecture and/or rely on the text as the only visual aid. Reinforce what you state with your visual aid, and vice versa. When you speak, do so clearly and slowly (but not too slowly as it might cause you to unintentionally raise your voice volume and/or to make your speech unnatural). Insert more pauses as you speak. Avoid slang (unless it is relevant to the topic at hand and you plan to define the term[s]). It is important to use non-verbal cues (e.g., visuals, gestures, intonation) to make the concepts clear. Although it might be difficult initially for the ESL student to understand your normal speech pattern, the student will become familiar with it with practice; further, in the long run, your speech pattern will actually help ESL students understand other native English speakers.

Be cognizant of learning styles (e.g., VARK—Visual, Auditory, Reading/Writing, and Kinesthetic modalities). Although VARK is one theory (there are other learning styles theories out there), it is a good starting point as a reminder that as you teach, you should work to incorporate a variety of instructional techniques such as:

- *Cooperative learning:* An ESL student can benefit tremendously, for example, from in-class group work (NOTE: It is often best that you assign the groups to ensure that the ESL student is in a group with at least two proficient and disciplined students);
- *Learning circles:* It is often to all students' advantage when you encourage them to make friends with colleagues in the classroom and to spend time communicating, if possible, outside of class; however, these relationships most especially can help improve an ESL student's English. It is thus helpful to assign groups of six or seven students to stay in touch outside of the classroom and discuss classroom activities/assignments); and

- Reciprocal teaching: It is helpful when students become the “teacher” through guided activities in small groups; as Albert Einstein stated, “If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.” Provide positive feedback (and gentle guidance if needed) when the ESL student may take longer than usual to find the right words to articulate. You may want to ask the student outside of class if he or she would ever like guidance in pronunciation if the time arises.

During classroom discussion, remember to provide students enough time to hear, process, and formulate a response to the questions and comments in progress by using the “seven to ten second rule” (wait seven to ten seconds before calling on someone to respond). Oftentimes, we are not aware how long seven to ten seconds can be; thus, you may want to acclimate students to this concept by taking a moment to have a quiet seven to ten seconds so that they—especially the most talkative ones—can understand how lengthy that quiet space can seem. Also, remember that even when some ESL students no longer have an accent, there can be instances where these students may still misunderstand common words and phrases. Giving ESL students (in fact ALL students) some “breathing room” to hear, understand, think, and formulate a response *before* responding is a great practice for them.

### **Sharing the Day’s Lesson**

You may want to consider to pre-teach by:

1. Advising ESL students to look ahead on the syllabus and consider the fact that they have plenty of opportunity to read ahead;
2. Sharing the link to a video that will be watched in class so that ESL students may preview and review the video;
3. Taking a minute or two at the beginning of class to write in a corner of the chalkboard/whiteboard and clearly state the day’s objectives. You may also want to put everything into context and review the day’s objectives at the end of class to illustrate what was accomplished; and
4. Encouraging ESL students to create a running vocabulary list of words/concepts used in your class. You may want to model by creating the “starter list” of a few terms.

### **Giving Instructions**

When you give instructions, please consider:

1. Not being surprised if ESL students are still lost although you feel that you have clearly written and explained step-by-step directions. Sometimes, a few different iterations are needed; and
2. Giving an example. For some assignments, you may want to provide actual example answers to help students see how the assignment outcome should look. If you are concerned about “giving away” the answer to the original assignment, there is the possibility of presenting a parallel assignment with an answer that reflects what you are looking for.

### **Modeling and Practice**

It is very helpful when instructors model outcomes. Consider sharing model student texts to illustrate expectations for assignments and make a point to analyze with students why these texts are effective. Throughout the semester, model thesis statements, paraphrases, short summaries, and other textual elements and offer students low-stakes, scaffolded opportunities to try these techniques for themselves or in groups. (Remember that students from other cultures may have learned these practices in a different way with different expectations.) You may want to have a “bank” of these models. (You are welcomed to utilize the bank that our department has; just send an email to [Sloane.vonWertz@csi.cuny.edu](mailto:Sloane.vonWertz@csi.cuny.edu). Also, you are most welcomed to contribute to this bank. The more resources that we have, the better!) Not only will students be able to learn what to do, they also will have more exposure to implicit reading comprehension activities.

It is also helpful to teach students to “read as writers.” Rhetorical reading allows students to notice not just what a writer says, but how the writer is saying it. This approach allows class readings to become mentor texts

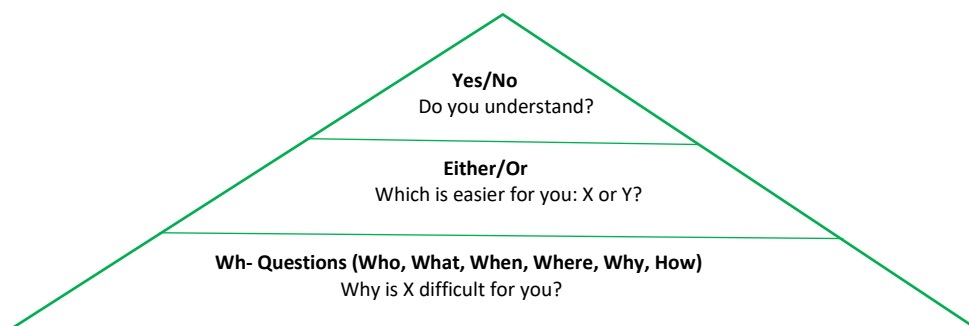
from which students identify and discuss rhetorical strategies. Consider having students notice sentence structures and develop sentence frames for challenging concepts to be addressed in their formal essays. For instance, when reading personal narrative, you may want to consider encouraging students to notice how writers move between telling a story and reflecting on it. ESL students can benefit from developing sentence frames or models based on those readings to try in their own writing. For example, students might observe a writer who says, “Looking back at that experience, I see that \_\_\_\_\_” and identify that introductory strategy as a potentially valuable frame to use in their own writing. In some cases, instructors may want to develop some sentence frames in advance for students, rather than with them through an organic process. If you pursue this approach, give attention to what the frame accomplishes rhetorically and offer opportunities for modifications. This approach will help prevent the suggested structure from being misunderstood as a mere formula for correctness.

### Checking for Understanding

Checking regularly to see to see if students are understanding the lesson is good practice for your information as well as for the students becoming aware of checking and taking responsibility for their own understanding. Beware, however, that in some cultures, students are not allowed to query the instructor. In fact, as a general rule, oftentimes students will smile and nod their heads in agreement to be polite when an instructor asks if they understand when they really do not, so do not merely ask, “Are there any questions?” Do not take for granted that your students understand a concept that appears to be very simple to you. You may want to consider asking a student to explain in his or her own words the instructions or concept that was just covered. There may be room to “boil” ideas, instructions, etcetera down to simpler language (especially at the beginning of the semester) until students have a “feel” for your expectations.

Other steps that you can take include:

1. Asking any student (ESL or native English speaker) to repeat what you have said or assigned (or what another student has said if there is class discussion).
2. Asking ESL students questions with different approaches based on the question hierarchy:



### THE QUESTION HIERARCHY

If you do not understand what an ESL student is saying, be honest and ask the student to repeat himself or herself. Next, restate the student’s point by stating “I think that you said/are saying...” and ask the student to provide an example. However, if you still do not understand, you may want to have the student write the intended point. Sometimes, even other students may be willing to share their understanding of what the original student was saying.

Finally, a student may sometimes sit in a class and believe that he or she understands everything; however, as a reinforcement tool (not the only technique since waiting until the end of class can be somewhat counterproductive), giving students the chance to leave an anonymous note on your desk at the end of class if they did not understand something in the day’s lesson can give you a chance for additional feedback and (once again) provide students with the opportunity to take the chance to review understanding.

## Providing Feedback on English Usage and Grammar for English Language Learners

As writing instructors, we all understand the importance of overall rhetorical feedback to help guide the writer in understanding how well a piece is succeeding in meeting tasks such as achieving its purposes, maintaining voice, using evidence, and abiding by rules of academic integrity. Sometimes, it may feel overwhelming to provide this feedback along with the necessary feedback on English usage and grammar (these concerns in particular can indeed cause confusion in the message that the student is trying to convey). Remember that ESL students most often *want* the usage and grammar correction and feedback. Therefore, consider the following techniques:

1. Correct repeated patterns or mistakes (not every single mistake) once students are comfortable in the classroom environment. (You should “take the temperature” of the student and the situation and determine if correction is best one-to-one or in open forum. Do not be afraid to correct the student but do not over-correct);
2. Admit it if there is a communication problem; do not be afraid to state, "I don't understand" or “Help me understand”; and
3. Thank the student for questions. Some students are terribly afraid to ask a question, so praising a question is a good way to encourage that student (as well as more students) to ask additional questions.

### *Regarding Essay Feedback<sup>1</sup>:*

- Consider beginning with a positive note; remind the ESL student that all writers (including native speakers and even English teachers) make errors which are a natural part of language learning as well as the beginning stages of writing; in fact, even seasoned writers make mistakes (Students love this point!);
- Recognize that there is a difference between mistakes that can be easily treated by referring the student to a grammar book (the student can self-correct once the mistake is pointed out) and errors that are idiosyncratic and cannot be easily treated until a student has acquired a certain level of reading, writing, speaking English. A student may not be able to overcome all of his or her untreatable errors in one semester. Encourage students who need significant help to sign-up for weekly tutoring in the Writing Center; and
- Remember that there is a difference between global errors (errors that impede meaning) and local errors (sentence level—grammar, spelling, punctuation that do not impede understanding of text).

	Global Errors	Local Errors
Example 1	These students are boring These students are bored (The writer’s intention is to describe students who are uninspired by a lecture)	Those student are bored.
Example 2	She bought the car tomorrow. (This sentence could be a global error due to interpretation if the context is unclear. What is the intended meaning? She will buy the car tomorrow OR She bought the car yesterday?)	She buyed the car all ready.

<sup>1</sup>There is no consensus amongst language instructors about the most effective forms of error correction. The points are suggestions.

Instructors should try to refrain from correcting local errors on the first draft. However, if there is a clear trend in the local errors that impacts readability, consider marking two or three examples (if possible, provide a variation of correction so that an ESL student may observe the different possibilities) and advising the writer of the need to go to the Writing Center to work on how to recognize and correct that type of error.

On the final draft, an instructor may be tempted to mark every issue; however, it is important to consider the Order of Error Importance (since a writer does not benefit from receiving a paper filled with grammar corrections). The most important errors are global errors which significantly impair communication. The second most important errors are stigmatizing errors that reveal the writer is ESL, (e.g., incorrect/lack of article use, word order issues). The least important errors are high-frequency local errors which the student frequently makes. Please recognize that high frequency local errors and stigmatizing errors can be problematic and distracting in writing, but do not usually impede understanding as global errors do.

While some instructors may mark every major/minor item, feedback may be best spent on pointing out the *major* problems for the student. Providing selective feedback can build students' awareness and knowledge of their most serious and frequent grammar problems while also not completely discouraging the writer.

### *Direct and Indirect Feedback*

Direct feedback, or explicit written correction in response to errors, can be quite effective when the correct form is also provided. However, there can be some issues with direct feedback. For example, direct feedback can be problematic and ineffective in reducing frequency of an error type in subsequent essays (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Leki, 1990). Further, direct feedback may even have negative side effects on the quality of subsequent compositions and student attitude towards writing, especially in English (Semke 1984). Robb, Ross, & Shortreed (1986) found that writers can assimilate only a small proportion of corrective feedback into their grammatical system. Hence, an instructor should temper the use of direct feedback.

Indirect feedback, or giving general comments (alerting student to the problem) and requiring the student to fix the error himself or herself has a more positive effect (Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986; Fathmas & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1997). With indirect feedback, the student is actively involved in the error correction procedure; students learn more from correcting their own errors than from the instructor correcting the errors. Thus, instead of putting the paper away and shrugging his or her shoulders at the overwhelming "sea of red," the student is challenged to work actively on correcting and subsequently applying what he or she has learned.

Some suggested ways that an instructor may provide indirect feedback are:

1. Making general comments about the *types* of errors commonly found in the paper;
2. Underlining errors with or without use of an error correction code.
3. Indicating an error by marking a cross or code symbol in the margin of the line in which the error is located.

In each of the given instances of indirect feedback the student must self-correct since you have not given the "answer." Students should always be welcomed to sit down with you or a tutor in the Writing Center to work out the corrections. Of course, the amount of indirect feedback must be contingent on the level of English language proficiency.

### *The Error Awareness Sheet*

Based on Lalande (1982), the Error Awareness Sheet (EAS) is a tracking device that a student is required to use to record the types of errors that have occurred the most in the student's writing. The EAS helps students become aware of which types of errors they are making most frequently and on a recurring basis. Students should be encouraged to refer to their personal EAS before writing the next composition. It is a great idea for

you to keep a copy and the student to keep a copy of the EAS; a periodic “check-in” can help encourage students to stay on track with working to overcome the error type(s). Most importantly, the EAS can help in individualized instruction as well as in developing the class hierarchy of priorities. (For a sample EAS, please see the Appendix.)

### *Feedback Timing*

Ferris (1995) found that students pay more attention to teacher feedback provided on early (usually the first two) drafts rather than the final drafts of their essays. Consider focusing only on content for the first draft or two with primarily indirect feedback regarding grammar/mechanics. If there is a trend of a grammar/mechanics error type for the class, you may want to have a mini-workshop and ask students to use examples from their papers for discussion.

### **Classroom and Culture**

ESL students will exhibit a wide range of language abilities as well as cultural responses. Hence, for example, there may be an instance that what the instructor may perceive as a student being disruptive, non-responsive, or disrespectful (based on a mannerism that appears unusual or what may be deemed as unacceptable) may be due to other factors that could very well be cultural. Patterns of behavior based on body language, eye contact, lack of participation, or unwillingness to ask questions, for example, may possibly be linked to other factors (e.g., cultural differences, expectations, previous schooling, and/or the impact of Americanization). If you have a situation in which an ESL student’s behavior is confounding, take an opportunity to chat with the student outside of class and gain an understanding. You may also want to explore whether the student would be willing to sit towards the middle or front of the class; this seating will give you more opportunity to assess the student’s understanding of the class’s activities/assignments in real time as well as help give the student more opportunity to begin to become more comfortable with the tacit “rules” of the American classroom.

### **A Note about Generation 1.5**

There is a category of ESL student that can be somewhat “invisible” since sometimes they can appear to be native English speakers. Generation 1.5 is a body of students who are American citizens or residents but who do not speak English at home. Some of these students may speak English quite well, but they are still acquiring the English language, especially when it comes to writing; therefore, their writing challenges can differ tremendously from those of the ESL speaker and of native speaker of English. For example, Ritter and Sandvik note the following common errors of the Generation 1.5. writer: errors due to oral English (e.g., *think on* instead of *think of*), phonetically-based spelling mistakes (e.g., *would of*), run-on sentences (not all languages have end marks), and other non-oral punctuation and/or features of written academic English (94).

### **In conclusion...**

This Tip Sheet is a mere list of a few suggestions. As a living document, this Tip Sheet has much room for more suggestions and comments. As we all work to help our students successfully hone their English language proficiency and progress through their academic careers and beyond, let us work together in providing tips and techniques that can help our endeavor.

If you have some tips and techniques that you would like to share, please send an email to [Sloane.vonWertz@csi.cuny.edu](mailto:Sloane.vonWertz@csi.cuny.edu).

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