

Principles and Practices of Teaching English Language Learners

Abha Gupta¹

¹ College of Education and Professional Studies, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA

Correspondence: Abha Gupta, College of Education and Professional Studies, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia 23529, USA. E-mail: agupta@odu.edu

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Abstract

This conceptual paper presents diverse approaches and strategies for preparing competent teachers who work with either English Language Learners (ELLs) or students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL). The pedagogical approaches discussed herein include practical and hands-on activities for teachers at any level. Bilingual learning improves ELL's cognitive development as well as their self-esteem. The paper outlines underlying principles for the best practices with an emphasis on ESL students and also to other learning situations and students. Teachers can modify their instructional methods to adjust ELL's learning needs. Specifically, even though the discussion is framed in the context of ESL students in U.S. classrooms, it is applicable to TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) environments in schools and other centers of learning.

Keywords: English as Second Language (ESL), English Language Learner (ELL), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), bilingual learners, teaching strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 Issues in Teaching English as a Second Language

The increasingly diverse environment of today's classrooms provides a rich opportunity for teachers and students to engage in effective learning. With a growing number of English Language Learners worldwide, there is a critical need for general education and resource teachers to know how to effectively build and implement literacy programs that are inclusive of students' language and culture. Understanding that culture goes beyond the knowledge of ethnic attire, music, food, and language; it includes the total being, comprised of the totality of the student's background, heritage, ancestry, educational, political, and life. The importance of teaching ESL students is critical in the current climate with increasing accountability by way of student performance on standardized tests. ESL students are expected to be on grade level proficiency within three years and teachers are held accountable for their learning (Curtin, 2005).

There are a variety of terms that have been used for non-native English speakers, ranging from LEP (Limited English Proficient), ESL students (English as a Second Language), Bilingual students and English Language Learners (ELL). For practical purposes, we use the term ESL students for a student whose mother tongue is not English. As educators, we understand that ESL students have to double their efforts in school, to not only learn new information but also learn the academic language of the school. Freeman and Freeman (2011, p.19) state, "ESLs face double the work of native English speakers. They must learn English, and they must learn academic content through English. In addition, they often live in neighborhoods where the schools are underfunded and are staffed by inexperienced teachers." On the same note, teachers of ESL students face double work of teaching core competencies enlisted in the curriculum to meet the benchmarks and teach English to non-native speakers. It is a double-whammy. While we realize that no two students are alike and that no two students have the same needs, there are commonalities among learners that help us approach our teaching in a more informed way. The paper proposes foundational principles and practices for teachers who work with ESL students in their classrooms.

1.2 School Culture and Educational Environment

It is important to consider how the culture of the school eases when a new ESL student enters into the classroom to create a sense of belonging. Using a framework of compare and contrast can be instructional and useful in learning about two cultures. There are commonalities and differences in comparing different cultures. Reaching out to parents by using a few phrases in their native language while greeting them can instantly break down the social barriers between the teachers and the parents. Now with Google Translate, it can be easily done. Creating a

welcoming climate for students new to the country and culture provides the first step in easing into a learning situation. Seating students next to another student who has a similar background can ease the jitters caused by an alien culture and language.

2. Method

This conceptual paper focuses on the description of pedagogical strategies stemming from a theoretical framework that has evolved out of second language learning research. Research on ESL/ELL strategies is based on the findings that building on learners' background by providing comprehensible input and multiple opportunities for interaction is the key to second language proficiency. These findings lead to the development of a set of strategies built on the framework of principles of learning the second language outlined below.

Seven principles of second language learning have been identified as critical to successfully teaching ESL students.

- 1) Know your student and motivation to learn the second language
- 2) Create a welcoming classroom environment
- 3) Build Background Knowledge
- 4) Provide Comprehensible Input by building vocabulary
- 5) Include frequent opportunities for Interaction and Discussion
- 6) Use Multiple Modalities during instruction
- 7) Conduct ongoing review and assessment

These principles provide a basis for developing a broader theory for second language learning.

Cummins (1980) discusses the context-embedded language and its effectiveness with ESL learners. For instance, repetition of classroom routines provides non-English speakers with meaningful language learning opportunities because the words and phrases that accompany such routines are constantly repeated within a concrete context. For instance, a word like 'lavatory' will become a part of their lexicon, if used by a teacher on a routine basis every time for a bathroom break. Using synonyms or rephrasing keywords differently reinforces meaning. Creating a low-stress environment necessary for students to feel ready to participate in a larger group setting provides a less threatening environment for a student to take a risk. Established routines facilitate learning as students know what to expect and begin to thrive in that environment.

2.1 *Know Your Student and Motivation to Learn the Second Language*

One of the most important things to do is to get to know your student you are sharing your classroom space and time with. Getting to know your student will go a long way in building a strong relationship and bonding with them. This knowledge will greatly help educators respond in an informed way as they work with their English language learners. It is one thing to read about English language learners and discuss theoretical models in the setting of a university classroom; it is another to work with the students directly and apply what teachers know. However, when teachers take the time to study each student carefully, they gain a new perspective on all their English learners. Knowing your student not only makes you a better teacher but makes the student a better learner. By knowing one learner, teachers can gain insight into commonalities among other learners that helps with effective teaching and learning.

Using the Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2013) framework is a great place to start this process. Funds of knowledge are created by the out-of-school daily living experiences that students have in their families and communities. For instance, an ESL student may not be aware of the terminology used in mathematics in the classroom or textbook, such as 'fractions' or division but is aware of the concept in real-life. A teacher will incorporate real-life examples to incorporate such concepts in classroom instruction. Building connections with your students and their families aren't always at the top of a teacher's "to do" list, but it must be. Children with a strong home to school connections thrive at school and as preschool teachers; we can lay the foundation for a positive school experience for our students by making this a priority.

Instead of a subject-centered, a student-centered classroom is more productive. Subject-oriented teachers tend to focus on learning the subject content, passing tests, doing worksheets rather than tuning in to their students. They usually engage in individual work rather than encouraging group work. Generally, novice teachers are unable to attempt more student-centered approaches because of discipline management issues (Curtin, 2005). However, with prior instructional planning, one can overcome this issue. Differentiating instruction, by allowing students to choose how to display their own learning or how they want to address the tasks based on ability, provides for a

student-centered approach.

Research shows that motivation directly influences the proficiency levels of students in the target language (Wen, 1997). Motivation is considered one of the main determining factors in picking up a second language.

When a teacher tries to know and learn about a student's background, it makes a big difference. Student and family members come to see that they are valued by the school system when a teacher makes an attempt to say a phrase or just one word in the home language of the learner; it helps to break the ice. Just being able to say hello in another language is enough to make someone smile. A teacher's attempt to make an effort to use your student's language and a desire to connect with the other's culture pays huge dividends for student learning and student achievement. Now with technology and Google translate, it has been made significantly easier to learn how to pronounce a word or a phrase in another language. A teacher is not expected to know multiple languages that various ESL learners speak. However, using a single word or a phrase in another language indicates teacher's sensitivity and attitude towards speakers of other languages and that alone can make a huge difference in creating a student-friendly environment.

2.2 Create a Welcoming Classroom Environment

An important step in helping ESL students succeed is building their confidence and comfort level by making them feel welcome in the classroom. This pays great dividends in terms of academic success as they build positive relationships with their academic community, teacher, peer, paraprofessionals, resource teacher, and other classroom volunteers.

Making the instructional classroom environment, welcoming and comfortable to students is critical in learning as it helps to build a relationship with ESL students. Let there be a sense of openness, students should perceive the teacher as caring and thoughtful that you care about them and want to be there for them. Some ways are to bring a student's culture into the classroom by using visuals and pictures of student's cultural tradition or festivals or foods with labels in both languages is a good start. Labeling items in the classroom in two or three languages benefits them visually. They come to see that their language, heritage, and culture is valued. It also allows for opportunities for them to share about their culture. Always be consistent and fair with all students.

Grouping students with a respectable and trustworthy partner can help guide when the teacher is not available. This is beneficial not only for ESL student but also for the partner, as both are learning about each other's culture and vocabulary, or when feasible, inviting a staff member from the school who speaks the student's language to work with the student. Grouping or pairing students with friends that speak the same language greatly helps the ESL student in case they are not getting what the teacher says. Other students chime in to translate the assignment in the native language to assist them with directions. Technologies like Remind and ClassDojo all have the ability to translate material for teachers, and teachers can print, email, or text the information they need to send to their parents as necessary.

Keeping instructions simple and clear is helpful. Posting the visual colorful class schedule in a prominent place in the room is helpful. Also, reviewing it daily as a set routine will reinforce it.

Learn to say their name correctly. It makes a monumental difference. Students see that you not only respect their ideas, thoughts and knowledge but most of all their identity, who they are, represented by their name. Teachers can relate to their students by playing the music from the student's culture during center time or transitional times or by displaying books from the country/culture of students in the classroom. Remember, students follow the tone set by the teacher in the classroom. Students observe not only the verbal directives and interactions but the non-verbal cues from the teacher.

Finally, during formal or informal oral presentations or conversations, teachers may correct the content of what ESL students say, if necessary rather than how they say in terms of pronunciation or grammar. Constant interruptions or corrections will deter students from speaking up and sharing their ideas (Gupta 1999).

2.3 Building Background Knowledge

There is a virtual consensus that background knowledge is essential for reading comprehension. Effective teaching takes students from where they are and leads them to a higher level of understanding (Krashen, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978). All learners have prior knowledge, gained from schooling and life experiences and teachers can build on those experiences. Reading becomes especially difficult when children are not able to comprehend because they are not familiar with a topic or theme that is being taught. Activating prior knowledge and building new background knowledge for ESL students is a crucial component of literacy development. The more readers know about a topic, the easier it is to read a text, understand it, and retain the information. Previous studies (Alexander, Kulikowich, & Schulze, 1994; Shapiro, 2004) have shown that background knowledge plays an enormous role in

reading comprehension.

When introducing a topic or new subject to students, research shows that if we discuss the topic and concepts prior to teaching it, students are better able to relate to the topic (Cain & Oakhill, 2011; Gupta and Lee, 2015)). Sometimes it is called, domain-specific knowledge or topical knowledge. Without such prior knowledge, it becomes more difficult to construct meaning from the text for ESL.

Since children come from varied backgrounds and cultures, through oral and written activities, teachers can draw out from students what they already know about the subject. Their understanding is tinted by a cultural filter they come from.

Neuman et al. (n.d.) online mention that, “Even the most immediate oral language exchanges, like “What do you say?” to a young child who just received some Halloween candy, require some level of inferencing. From infancy on, oral language comprehension requires children to actively construct meaning by supplying missing knowledge and making inferences. This is an example of cultural specific usage of language requiring familiarity with Halloween and the distribution of candies to children. If you have a specific set of vocabulary words that you plan to teach, you can pre-assess students’ familiarity with the words prior to teaching the lesson. Neuman et al. (n.d.) have used a basic chart that lists the word and options on a knowledge continuum. Students can fill it in prior to the lesson and after the lesson has been taught to check where they fall on the continuum.

Table 1. Vocabulary awareness screening

Vocabulary Word	Never heard of it	Think I’ve heard of it	I’ve heard of it	I’ve heard of it and I can tell you about it	I’ve heard of it, I can explain it, and I’ve used it
Navel					
Goggles					
Orbit					

- 1) Prepare students with the upcoming topic by relating it to their current experiences. For instance, while introducing a topic on photosynthesis, talk about how the food is made for us to eat. Discuss how food is prepared in different cultures represented by students in the class. Then connect it to how do plants make their own food to survive. They do it through a process of photosynthesis, where ‘photo’ means light and synthesis means to bring together. Thus, photosynthesis is the process by which plants prepare their own food using carbon dioxide and water in the presence of sunlight. Breaking the word into smaller units of meaning assists ESL learners with the understanding meaning of root words.
- 2) Use anticipation guides: An Anticipation Guide is a strategy that is used before reading to activate students’ prior knowledge and build curiosity about a new topic. Before reading a selection, students respond to several statements that challenge or support their preconceived ideas about key concepts in the text. Then check for their understanding, after the topic has been presented in terms of how their thinking has been changed or confirmed based on the new information. For instance, for teaching a concept like photosynthesis to younger students, one can generate statements such as do plants need food? Can plants cook their own food without cooking pots and pans? Can plants make food without air? Will plants need sunlight to make their food?

2.4 Provide Comprehensible Input by Building Vocabulary

An effective teacher considers the unique characteristics and cultural aspects of the ESL students. The teacher is aware of the student’s needs and makes an effort to make her verbal communication more understandable based on the student’s linguistic needs. Making the message understandable for students is referred to as Comprehensible Input (Krashen 1985). ESL students need to work on making meaning of what they are doing all the time. Increasing participation and engagement rates of ESL students is done by increasing comprehensible input.

Clear enunciation and repetition, as well as, rephrasing concepts and words help tremendously if the communication is at students’ proficiency level. If teachers find that the instructional text that they are using in the classroom is difficult for ESL students to follow, then they can use technologies like ‘Rewordify.com’, which provide free online service that improves reading, learning, and teaching by simplifying the complexity of the text.

Insufficient background knowledge of the target culture may also hinder students in getting the meaning of the text. For instance, a text-passage on “Groundhog Day” will mean little to a student from another country and culture in the US without the appropriate background knowledge. It is a popular tradition celebrated in the U.S. on February 2nd, based on the Pennsylvania Dutch superstition that if a groundhog emerging from its burrow on this

day sees its shadow, then winter will persist for 6 more weeks. This is part of cultural literacy and building prior knowledge before introducing the topic.

Before reading or introducing a specific text to ESL students in the content areas, one needs to provide time and space to acclimate to the learning that they are expected to partake in. Primarily, students need to understand the vocabulary that will be utilized to comprehend and respond to the material found in the text, passage, book, or even just conversations that occur during their partner or group work. Further, students need to understand where they are expected to be going with the work, in other words, students need to understand the structure of the material presented, and how they can access the learning during the upcoming lesson. ESL students need goals that are tailored to them, and they need to be able to understand those goals. In summation, the lesson's foundations must be built in order to create a significant enough scaffold to support interactions and learning during the assignments.

Some teachers pre-teach their students specific words that they think students will struggle with on the test, for instance, [navel]. A prior discussion on body parts with formal and informal labels promotes student understanding of the target anticipated text. Thus, letting students know that a 'belly button' is also called a 'navel' will help with vocabulary development.

The best ways to assist students during informal classroom tests is by reading test questions aloud, explaining definitions of words, or even acting out the text. This provides additional meaning to the learners and helps with the comprehension of the task. Some instructors give students a visual to go with the text, and they usually know the correct answer when they can see it.

Cognates are very helpful. Cognates are words in the English language (target language) that look and mean the same as a word in a student's first language. Usually, they sound similar in the two languages. For example, [gratitude] in English means the same as [gratitud] in Spanish. In a similar fashion, one can also bring students' awareness to false-cognates, such as [exit] and [exito]; in Spanish 'exito' means 'success'. Similarly, for the English word [soap], the Spanish word is [sopa] which means 'soup', thus the two words look and sound very close but they are semantically very different. These are classed as 'false friends' or false cognates. Students could compile a list of words in their reading journals that they believe to be cognates and false cognates. At the end of each reading session after a given week, they could spend five minutes checking with a partner in a Spanish language dictionary (if the focus is on Spanish cognates) to check meanings. Selected words can then be placed on a board in the classroom.

Word wall is another effective strategy for building vocabulary as it encompasses speaking, listening, and reading skills, in order to further students' comprehension of the target vocabulary. A Word Wall is an interactive, ongoing display on the wall that shows words and/or parts of words, used to teach concepts, spelling, reading, writing skills. These words provide support and references for students during learning. One could begin by creating multiple word walls. At the beginning of the year, the classroom could simply have a cognates board, which students would fill in as a group during the first week. This activity promotes a learning community by helping students tap into their background knowledge around their current language mastery and can feel proud of their accomplishment. Over the course of the time, students could add many more cognates that they find, expanding further the list of words that they have in their growing receptive vocabularies. As teachers introduce content during their core subject classes, they could begin to add word walls for each of their subject areas, social studies, science, math, geography, as academic vocabulary wall.

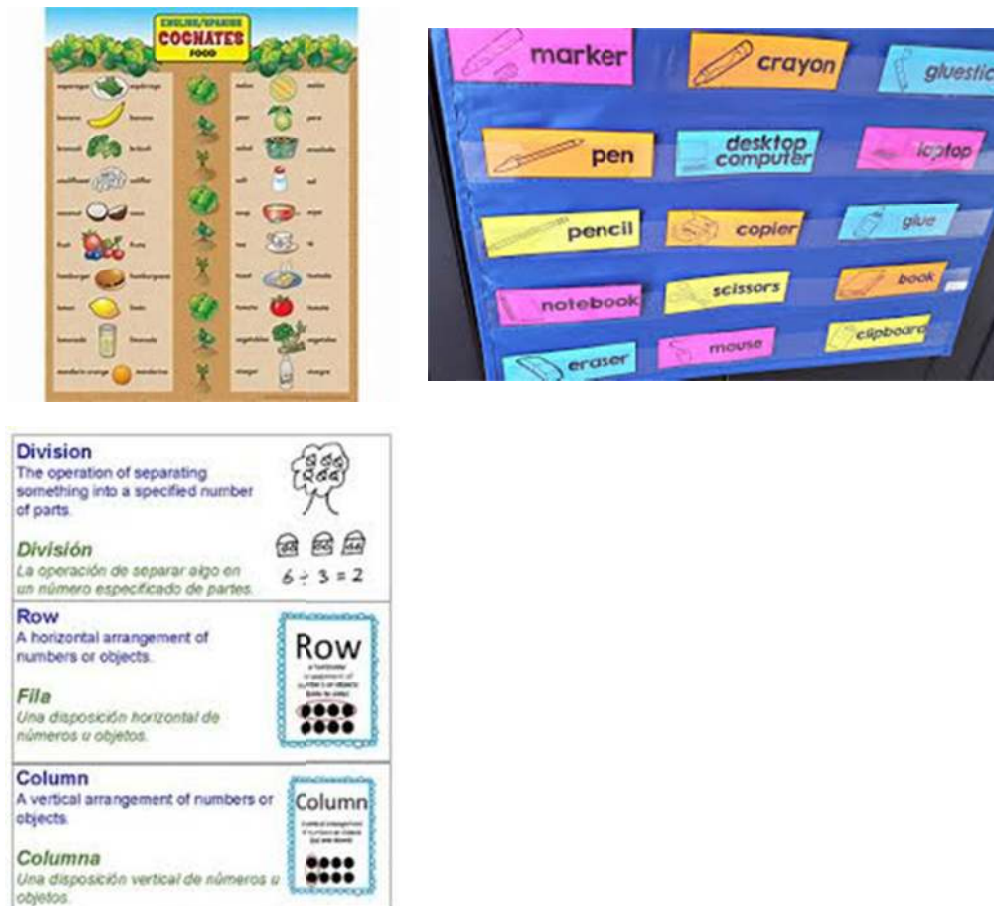


Figure 1. Mathematics vocabulary word wall samples in English and Spanish

For vocabulary growth, teachers can display words that have been selected from each leveled group in the classroom. For the young elementary ESL students, teachers can build high-frequency word walls that are slightly more complex than the words they currently know, and slowly progress throughout the year towards more complex, academic language. The weekly words from the wall can be read, acted out, if possible, defined with an illustration or diagram (in a picture or first language-English dictionary, as necessary), or used in multiple sentences.

Vocabulary Journals is another engaging strategy, which is an extension of word cards (flash cards) in a spiral notebook that depicts the word on one side and a picture/illustration related to the word on the other side of the page. Students can add new vocabulary words alongside the definition and provide a sentence using the word or a visual that will assist the student in remembering the word. This strategy can be used at elementary as well as secondary level. Students can be assigned new words every week which they can add to their journal. These journals can be separated by the subject since every content area has its own subject-specific vocabulary. Teachers can also assign a “Word for the Day”, each day a new word becomes the focus of learning. Using the word orally and frequently in conversation is the key to acquiring new vocabulary.

2.5 Include Frequent Opportunities for Interaction and Discussion

The literature on effective culturally responsive instructional practices supports the teaching style that is highly interactive as well as the use of cooperative groups, and individualized testing and assessment procedures (Garcia, 1992). For ESL students it is imperative that they practice target language with others in an oral language format. The interaction maintains student attention and allows students to apply what they have learned in a real context. In small groups or in a pair, students who feel hesitant or are shy to speak up in a large group, tend to open-up easily. These opportunities assist in overcoming students’ anxieties and fears to speak orally in front of others.

There are a number of strategies that provide a platform for interaction. These strategies range from, ‘turn-pair and

share' to book circle, jigsaw reading, story scripts. Teachers can easily tweak them to suit their subject, focus, or task. Turn-Pair-Share can be conducted after a class has read a specific book or a specific content area topic. Each student turns to his or her partner to discuss thoughts, ideas, and feelings. This format is less threatening for reluctant learners or students with anxiety, compared to presenting to a large classroom where all the eyes are on the student. The small group prepares the student to eventually share in a large group or in front of the class. Book Circles are powerful formats where students sit in a circle and face one another to share their thoughts or comments on the book/chapter that has been read by everyone in the group. There is no right or wrong answer in this setting, instead, students share their feelings, thoughts evoked as a result of reading the text or any connections to their prior knowledge that they were able to make based on the text. Jigsaw Reading is where students are each given a part of a text or story. Each student reads his or her part then they meet in small groups to discuss what their part was about. Story Scripts strategy allows students to take a story or poem and turn it into a dialogue where students take turns to speak their part. These are some ways to involve students during instruction in class. Students enjoy them as it keeps them on their toes as they take the responsibility to share their part. Each student is accounted for. It is an effective way for a classroom teacher to assess student understanding of the subject matter or their comprehension skills.

2.6 Use Multiple Modalities During Instruction

A teacher who can “purposefully exhibit a wide range of teaching styles is potentially able to accomplish more than a teacher whose repertoire is relatively limited” (Smith & Renzulli, 1984, p. 49). Due to the availability of multiple platforms of communication and learning, innovative ways to deliver instruction are evolving. Dunn and Dunn (1979) found that only 20-30% of school-age children appear to be auditory learners, that 40% are visual, and that the remaining 30-40% are tactile/kinesthetic, visual/tactile, or some other combination. Researchers have found that early on children tend to be mostly tactile/kinesthetic and gradually they develop other strengths such as visual and auditory (Price, Dunn, and Sanders (1980). Multiple learning modalities (such as read it, write, do it, and talk it, see it, hear it, interact with it) are used in the integrated approach. Teachers can use multimedia and other technologies in lessons incorporating websites to enrich visual support for the learners. Teachers use interactive teaching style and various learning modalities to meet the needs of their ESL students. New modalities have changed multimodal digital platforms that present educators with the possibility of providing meaningful opportunities for engagement and creativity employing different cognitive, audio-visual senses and ability to interact.

Teachers can now provide audio feedback to students which is shown to provide more elaborate detailed responses where teachers provide not only more information but the richer language and greater elaboration of concepts (Swan-Dagen, et al., 2008). Technologies like *ClassDojo* have the ability to translate material for teachers, and teachers can print, email, or text the information they need to send to students' parents as necessary. *Rewordify.com* is free and child safe online software that improves reading and learning. One can enter difficult or complex sentences or text passages in the highlighted box, and the program rewords the text into simpler text and voila! One can even click on a phrase or a difficult word to hear it, thus addressing the pronunciation aspect as well.

Students can create scripts and manage illustrations to go with the scripts. Engagement level in the students goes up as they work on media projects. Students can use Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, blog posts as social media to share thoughts and ideas or create digital stories. Online forums for discussion provide an opportunity for a wider range of responses than a traditional discussion where the first respondents set the tone for an entire group. ESL students may feel more comfortable as they post their views in online forums. It provides space for the development of unique learner's voices, ideas, thoughts, and opinions.

2.7 Conduct Ongoing Review and Assessment

Assessment is an essential component of any instructional practice to evaluate its effectiveness. It has to be formative, ongoing rather than a summative, one-shot evaluation. It is a two-pronged process by which teachers can do self-assessment, deliberately reflecting on what they are teaching as well as do students' assessment, to find out what they are learning in turn. It provides an effective way to monitor students' progress and what changes need to be made. It could be a formal or informal evaluation to track a student's progress and understanding. Learning should be assessed on a regular basis. Teachers should keep their own written record of student interactions and abilities. Students should be assessed on what they have taught and what is relevant to the grade level content. Use multiple modalities to assess students – using diagrams, visuals, oral and written components – aids the overall accessibility of student work. Multiple assessments should be used. For instance, teachers can use students' scores from the previous years, current test scores from reading and writing, as well as classwork, observations to determine where a student is academically. At the same time, teachers can follow any legal

accommodations and use professional judgments based on the outcomes of assessment and their own developing knowledge of students to provide quality instruction. Teachers can also teach students to self-monitor by using teacher provided rubrics. Students can become better learners and improve their knowledge and skills when they reflect on what they are learning. By taking a step back from the learning process, both teachers and students can objectively view the progress.

3. Results and Discussion

With an ever-increasing number of ESL students, it is imperative that teachers and instructional leaders become aware of effective ESL teaching strategies to help this population in their classrooms. We have discussed strategies that address different learning styles (audio, visual, kinesthetic, tactile) via various modalities. First, modeling what students are expected to do when given a new task or a skill is greatly helpful to them. Modeling, rather than simply telling the students what to do, promotes stronger learning and higher self-confidence. Similarly, speaking slowly and clearly assists student comprehension. Providing wait time affords them an opportunity to think and to process before responding. Use of visuals, gestures, PowerPoint slides, podcasts, voice inflection, intonation, and body language as non-verbal cues enables a better understanding of the directions and the content. An additional strategy involves reinforcing student comprehension by following up verbal instructions with written instructions. All instructions must be explicit and clear. Creating a low-stress environment is necessary for students to feel ready to participate in a larger group setting; it also provides a less threatening environment that facilitates risk-taking by the students. Established routines facilitate learning, as students know what to expect and begin to thrive in that environment. In classroom settings involving a peer who speaks a similar first language and is also competent in the second language, can be a morale and motivation booster for other learners. ESL students are full members of the classroom community. It is important to let them know that they are expected to learn and work just like everyone else in the classroom. Learning another language is a need, not a disability. With these principles in mind, a teacher can play a huge role in the success of the ESL students.

4. Conclusion

As our classrooms become more diverse, educators need to consider the needs of ESL students by providing them the opportunities to learn and creating a shared learning environment. Taking small steps based on the framework of seven principles discussed in this paper will yield effective results in classrooms. As one teacher stated, “if you focus on the *who*, the *what* will start to care of itself”.

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