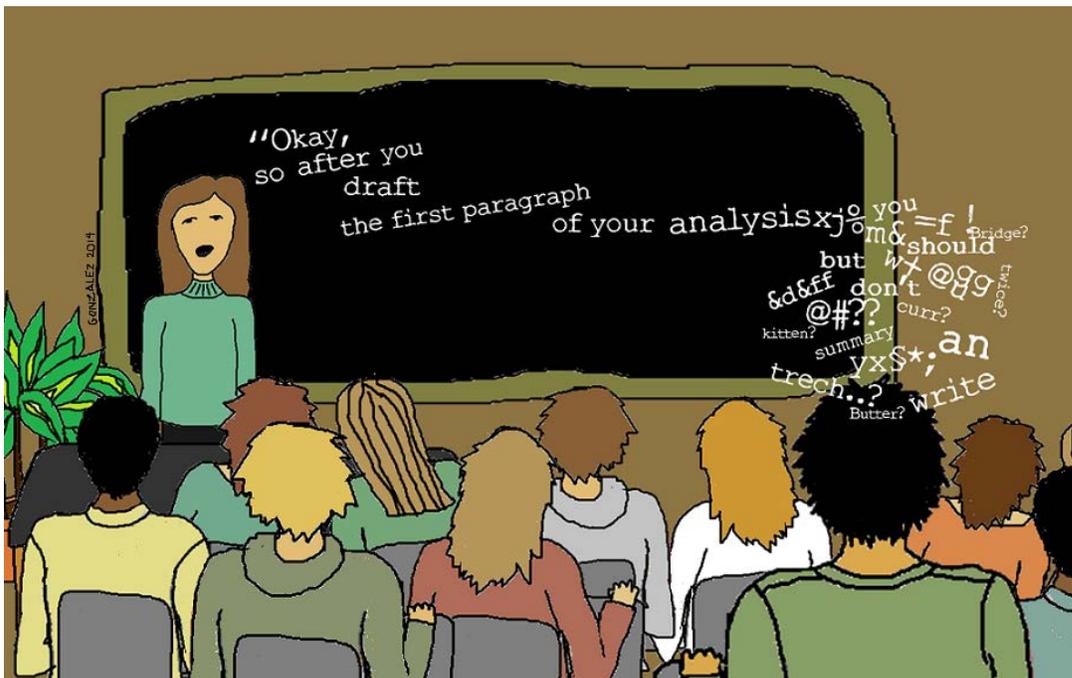


# 12 Ways to Support ESL Students in the Mainstream Classroom



Incorporate this stuff into your teaching and watch your English language learners thrive.

by Jennifer Gonzalez, [Cult of Pedagogy](#)

**You have a new student, and he speaks no English.** His family has just moved to your town from Japan, and though he receives English as a Second Language (ESL) support, he will also be sitting in your room every day to give him more exposure to his new language. How can you be a good teacher to someone who barely understands you?

According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), an average of 9 percent of students in U.S. public schools are English Language Learners (ELLs); that number is closer to 14 percent in cities. Although many of these students start off in high-intensity,

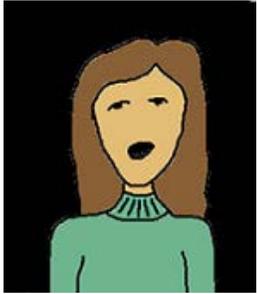
whole-day English programs, most are integrated into mainstream classrooms within a year, well before their English language skills would be considered proficient.

How prepared are you to teach these students? If you're like most classroom teachers, you have little to no training in the most effective methods for working with English language learners (Walker, Shafer, & liams, 2004). So that means we have a problem here: Lots of ELL kids in regular classrooms, and no teacher training to ensure the success of that placement.

**Below, three ESL teachers tell us what they know** about the things regular classroom teachers can do to improve instruction for ELL students. These 12 strategies are simple, they are not very time consuming, and best of all, they will help *everyone* in your class learn better:

## 1. Make it Visual

“Avoid giving instructions in the air,” says **Melissa Eddington**, an Ohio-based ESL teacher. “ELL kids have a harder time processing spoken language.” So



instructions – even basic directions for classroom procedures – should be written on the board whenever possible. Challenging concepts should be diagrammed or supported with pictures. And

modeling the steps of a process or showing students what a finished product should look like can go a long way toward helping students understand.

“Sometimes *showing* our students what to do is all they need in order to do it,” Eddington says. Not only will this kind of **nonlinguistic representation** improve comprehension for ELL students, it will help all of your students grasp concepts better.

## 2. Build in more group work.

“Kids aren’t just empty glasses that we pour stuff into and then at the end of the day they dump it back onto a test,” says Kim, an ESL teacher who was the subject of **my very first podcast interview**. “If you really want the kids to learn, they’ve got to be engaged.” That means less teacher-led, whole-class instruction, and more small groups, where students can practice language with their peers in a more personal, lower-risk setting. And if ELL students attend your class with a resource teacher, make use of that person: In most cases the resource teacher doesn’t have to work exclusively with the ESL students; they can work with smaller groups that happen to contain these students, helping to improve the teacher-student ratio and give kids more time to practice.

## 3. Communicate with the ESL teacher.

Mary Yurkosky, a former ESL teacher in Massachusetts, credits much of her students’ success to the strong relationship *she* had with the regular classroom teachers. “The classroom teachers were

always talking to me about what they were doing in their classes,” she says. “They made it so easy for me to support them: If a teacher was going to be doing a unit on plants, I could make sure we used some of that same vocabulary in the ESL class.”

Ideally, this could be systematized, where ESL teachers could regularly get copies of lesson plans or collaborate with regular classroom teachers to build solid back-and-forth support, but “it doesn’t have to be that much work,” Yurkosky insists. “Just talk to each other. Talk about what’s going on in your classrooms, invite each other to special presentations, share what your students are learning, and the words will naturally find their way into the ESL class.”

## 4. Honor the “silent period.”

Many new language learners go through a **silent period**, during which they will speak very little, if at all. “Don’t force them to talk if they don’t want to,” says Eddington, “A lot of students who come from cultures outside of America want to be perfect when they speak, so they will not share until they feel they are at a point where they’re perfect.” Just knowing that this is a normal stage in second language acquisition should help relieve any pressure you feel to move them toward talking too quickly.

## 5. Allow some scaffolding with the native language.

Although it has been a hotly debated topic in the language-learning community, allowing students some use of their first language (L1) in second-language (L2) classrooms is **gaining acceptance**. When a student is still very new to a language, it’s okay to pair him with other students who speak his native language. “Some students are afraid to open their mouths at all for fear of sounding stupid or just not knowing the words to use,” Yurkosky says. “Letting them explain things or ask questions in their first language gets them to relax and feel like a part of the class.”

And this doesn't only apply to spoken language. If you give students a written assignment, but the ELL student doesn't yet have the proficiency to handle writing his response in English, "Don't make them just sit there and do nothing," Eddington says. "Allow them to write in their first language if they're able. This allows them to still participate in journal writing or a math extended response, even if you can't read what they write." There has even been some evidence that allowing second-language learners to pre-write and brainstorm in L1 results in higher-quality writing in L2 in later stages of the writing process (Yigsaw, 2012).

## 6. Look out for culturally unique vocabulary.

"For most of these kids, their background knowledge is lacking, especially with things that are unique to American or westernized culture," says Eddington. It's important to directly teach certain vocabulary words:



"Show them videos of what it looks like to toss pizza dough, show pictures of a juke box or a clothing rack – things that are not common in their own language."

One way to **differentiate** for ELL students is to consider the whole list of terms you're going to teach for a unit, and if you think an ELL student may be overwhelmed by such a long list, omit those that are not essential to understanding the larger topic at hand.

## 7. Use sentence frames to give students practice with academic language.

All students, not just English language learners, need practice with academic conversations. Sentence frames – partially completed sentences like "I disagree with what \_\_\_\_\_ said because..." – show students how to structure language in a formal way. Keep

these posted in a highly visible spot in your classroom and require students to refer to them during discussions and while they write.

For this kind of language to really sink in, though, Kim says it has to become a regular part of class. "They won't do it if it's not the norm in the class, because they'll be embarrassed to use it among their peers," she says. "But if they can put it off on the teacher and say, *Oh, well, you know, Miss Kim makes me talk like this*, then they don't look as hoity-toity as they would otherwise."

## 8. Pre-teach whenever possible.

If you're going to be reading a certain article next week, give ESL students a copy of it now. If you plan to show a YouTube video tomorrow, send a link to your ESL students today. Any chance you can give these students to preview material will increase the odds that they'll understand it on the day you present it to everyone else. "That kind of thing is wonderful," Yurkosky says. "The kids feel so empowered if they've had a chance to look at the material ahead of time."

## 9. Learn about the cultural background of your students...

Our second-language populations grow more diverse every year. Taking the time to learn the basics of where a child comes from — *exactly*, not 'somewhere in the Middle East/South America/Asia/Africa' — tells the student that you respect her enough to bother. Kim remembers one time when she had to set the record straight about the diverse South American population at her school: "I was listening to the teachers talking about the 'Mexican' kids in our building," she says, "and I was like, 'We don't *have* any Mexicans.'" Not taking the time to at least correctly identify a child's country of origin, much like not bothering to pronounce their name correctly, is a kind of **microaggression**, a small, subtle insult that communicates hostility toward people of color. Make a commitment to be someone who bothers to get it right.

Once you have the country straight, take things up a notch by learning about students' religious and cultural practices. If he is a practicing Muslim, he should be told if one of the pizzas you ordered for the class party has sausage on it. If she comes from a culture where eye contact with adults is viewed as disrespectful, you'll know not to force her to look you in the eye when she's talking.

## 10. ...but don't make a child speak for his entire culture.

In her [podcast interview](#), Kim shared a story about watching a teacher ask a new Iraqi student how he felt about the war in his country, right in the middle of class. "That's not cultural inclusiveness," she explains. "I've seen teachers do this and then pat themselves on the back. The students' English is limited so they can't express themselves very well, and they don't want to 'represent'; they just want to be there." If you anticipate a theme coming up in your class that's going to be relevant to one of your students, have a conversation with them in advance, or check with your ESL teacher to see if they think it's appropriate for in-class discussion.

## 11. Show them how to take *themselves* less seriously...

By modeling the risk-taking that's required to learn a new language, you help students develop the courage to take their own risks, and to have a sense of humor about it. "I tried to say the word 'paint' (*pinta*) in Portuguese and instead I said the word for 'penis' (*pinto*). They all roared with laughter while I stood there with a *What??* look on my face," Yurkosky says. "When they explained what I'd said, I laughed so hard! I told them that laughing was fine because sometimes mistakes are really funny, but ridicule is never okay."

## 12. ...but always take *them* seriously.

One of Kim's pet peeves about how teachers interact with English language learners is the way they often see students' efforts as 'cute,' missing the whole point of what the student is trying to say. "A student will

be desperate to communicate, and the teacher will get distracted by the delivery and miss the message," she says. "That's painful for me to watch." It bothers her when teachers mistake a lack of language for a lack of intelligence or a maturity. When a child can't express themselves as well as they would in their native language, it's far too easy to assume the concepts just aren't in their heads.

"It breaks my heart when I hear teachers say (ELL kids) don't know anything," says Eddington. "These are brilliant kids and they know a lot. They just can't tell us in English yet." Make a conscious effort to see past the accent and the mispronunciations and treat every interaction — every student — with the respect they deserve.

"They're doing twice the job of everybody else in the class," Kim adds, "even though the result looks like half as much." ♦

### Further Reading

When I asked Melissa Eddington to recommend a book that would deepen teachers' understanding of these concepts, she immediately pointed me to the [ESL Manual for Mainstream Teachers: How to Help Limited-English-Speaking Students](#), by Janice Yearwood. "It breaks things down over different content areas, talks about new students, intermediate students, how to talk with ESL parents, how to welcome newcomers. It's a fabulous book," she says. "It really gets right to what a mainstream classroom teacher would need. Good stuff."

### References:

- Walker, A., Shafer, J., & Iiams, M. (2004). "Not in my classroom": Teacher attitudes towards English language learners in the mainstream classroom. *NABE Journal of Research and Practice*, 2(1), 130-160.
- Yigsaw, A. (2012). [Impact of L1 use in L2 English writing classes](#). *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Sciences*, 8(1), 11-27.