

In a Nutshell: Teaching Tips for New Teachers of Low-Level ESL Learners

by Bronwyn Bowen

Unfortunately, not all ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers have had the benefit of formal training in the field. Teachers new to teaching Beginning or Beginning Literacy levels can be overwhelmed with creating lesson plans that include necessary thematic units and that meet the state's standards and benchmarks in speaking, listening, reading and writing activities. New teachers feel particularly challenged when they can't speak French, Swahili or Chinese and their students have little or no English.

Based on my experience of teaching low-level beginners from many different countries, here is a simple list of teaching techniques that may seem obvious to long-time teachers, but these guidelines are very practical for new teachers of very low levels.

1. **Learn your students' names and try to pronounce them correctly.** Names are important to people. Learning their names and pronouncing them correctly are signs of respect.
2. **Know something about their countries and/or culture.** Know where they are on the map; know how to pronounce them.
3. **Have them teach you something in their language.** Being willing to learn their language shows that you respect their language and their culture. "Hello," "thank you," or "goodbye" are good phrases to learn.
4. **Go slowly.** Move through the material slowly. Let your students guide you on when to move on to something new. If you can, talk a little more slowly than you normally might.
5. **Units are theme-based.** Themes are practical (food, clothing, health, etc.) and vocabulary is easier to remember if the words relate to each other. Context is the key.
6. **Instruction is activity-based.** In my experience, the more you talk, the less they understand. The more they do something other than just listen, the more they understand.
7. **Try to find lots of supporting activities.** It is very helpful to teach the same point in several different ways, since these learners probably will not get it at first.
8. **Repetition is welcomed by most students.** This builds their confidence and makes the material begin to feel familiar, which leads to a feeling of mastery.
9. **The more concrete, the better.** Abstract ideas do not work well at this level. Pictures and real items ("realia") are visual. If you are teaching food, for example, use pictures, or even better, use plastic or real food. If you are teaching clothing, use the clothes people are wearing in class. If you are teaching health, bring in thermometers, band-aids, and prescription bottles.
10. **Use dictionaries.** Picture dictionaries should be a staple in every low-level classroom because a picture really is worth a thousand words. Since magazines are also a great source of real-life pictures, use them to build a picture file. English/foreign language dictionaries are very helpful for words you just cannot act out or draw. If learners are literate in their own languages, you can find the word in English and show them the word in their language, even if you cannot read or pronounce it.
11. **Revisit topics frequently.** Beginners usually do not get it the first, second or even the third time. Go back and review important points often.
12. **Working in pairs and small groups is better than individual effort.** Students help each other and if you can pair people with different languages, they will have to communicate in English. It also prevents learners who cannot work on their own from becoming discouraged. Pair people in different ways – by language, by ability, or randomly for some activity every day.

13. **Games reinforce learning.** Any form of Bingo, Concentration or another game is fun and students are often competitive. Games are also a break from the students' often very difficult and stressful lives.
14. **These learners need a lot of individual attention.** This is where volunteers and smaller classes are very helpful. If you have neither, plan smaller segments of material and build in work time when you can check students' progress.
15. **Be patient.** Both with your students and with yourself. It is frustrating when they do not learn the material you have worked really hard on. Remind yourself that a new language is difficult. Since students have unrealistic expectations about learning English in a very short time, they may get frustrated at their slow pace. Be patient.
16. **Don't let them call you "Teacher."** This is a matter of debate among teachers but I feel strongly that, while "Teacher" is a respectful title in most of their countries, it prevents them from seeing you as a person rather than a position. Their children use the standard form of address of using names in public school. By insisting my students call me by a name ("BB"), I have gotten a significantly better response in class. Teach them that in the U.S., it is respectful to use a person's name.
17. **These students are not children.** Although they have limited or no English and may seem to know as little about our language and culture as children, these students have a multitude of life experiences. Do not treat them like kids.
18. **Have fun!** If you have fun, they will have fun. And if the class is enjoyable and relaxed, they will keep coming. And if they keep coming, they will learn.

About the Author

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