

TUTORS' COLUMN

A guide to your first session with an ESL student

As tutors we deal daily with different languages, different perspectives, different cultures, and different styles of writing. But mix all of these factors together at one time and they can make for a frustrating tutorial session. Learning how to work with ESL students can be a challenge for even the most skilled reading and writing tutor.

It was not a conscious choice on my part to begin tutoring ESL students. I just happened to be tutoring during the busiest times of the day when many walk-ins came. I tutored one ESL student and then another, and before I knew it I was tutoring them every day. I thought that I would be a competent ESL reading and writing tutor since I had studied a foreign language for five years and since I had been traveling to foreign countries for four years. I had experienced what most ESL students probably experience every day, the feelings of not understanding what people are saying and the feelings of helplessness that come along with not understanding. These experiences help me to better understand where ESL students were coming from. During each of my trips, I gained new respect for the ESL students at the University who immersed themselves in a foreign culture in order to facilitate learning. But my trips didn't prepare me for the tutorial setting. I ended countless sessions frustrated and overwhelmed. It took continuous work and patience to figure out the best way to deal with combining different languages, different perspectives, different cultures, and different styles of writing in order to advance as a tutor. Now I spend most of my tutoring hours working with ESL students. I'm going to share with you the strategies that I use when tutor-

ing ESL students. Hopefully they will help make your first ESL tutorial session less frustrating.

Difficulties of learning English

Since most ESL students come to the United States to study and improve their English, there will be a language barrier between the student and the tutor. Years of studying English in a school setting, like studying any foreign language, does not make anyone bilingual or even comfortable with speaking and writing that language. In fact, English can be one of the most difficult languages to learn and speak. The language barrier can make both you and the learner feel uncomfortable and intimidated. It is the job of tutors to make the learner, and themselves, feel comfortable. Try to keep in mind ESL learners are most likely frustrated with the amount of time they have to spend writing papers in English. They have to write papers with a dictionary constantly in one hand, and many will become frustrated with not being able to find the right words. This could prove to be exasperating for anyone.

Getting comfortable: Talking and listening

The best way to make ESL learners feel more comfortable is to talk to them. I find most foreign students to be interesting, and sometimes it is nice to get to know more about them. Many of them have unique stories about why they came to the United States and how they got here. Within minutes, both you and the learner will be more relaxed. Idle talk will also give you an idea of how well the learner can speak English, and it will give you time to adjust to his or her accent while he or she adjusts to yours. I have tutored

many ESL students who have had thick accents. I had to have them repeat themselves three or four times before I could understand what they were saying. By the time we were done with the paper, I had no troubles understanding because it just took time to get used to how the learner spoke.

Understanding the assignment

Many ESL students have problems understanding the assignment and what they are supposed to write about. This is a good place to start before you actually begin assessing any papers. Ask about the assignment and what kind of paper he or she is writing. There have been various times this year when a learner has handed me the textbook and the class handout explaining the assignment, wondering exactly what it meant. Other times, ESL students have made appointments just to talk about particular assignments. Not only do they not understand the assignment, but many may not understand the type of paper they are supposed to write. For example, they might not understand what a classification paper should cover or what they should do for an observation paper.

Assessing the paper

Once both you and the learner fully understand the assignment, you can assess the paper. It might be a good idea to look at some old papers first so you can find out what writing level the ESL student is at or to find out what his or her recurring problems may be—grammar, organization, punctuation. Don't read the whole paper, but only look at the professor's comments. If the learner doesn't bring another paper along, take the opportunity to talk to

him/her again and simply ask. Most ESL students know the areas of the English language where they do not excel. Ask them what *they* would like *you* to look for.

Correcting the paper

When reading papers, there are certain things you should keep in mind. There are basically two types of ESL learners: those who want you to correct everything, not caring about why the corrections are being made, and those who want you to explain in detail why every miniscule change is made. Either extreme can become intimidating and stressful. It is not your job to correct the mistakes that are in the paper because if you do, ESL students will not learn anything and will continue to make the same mistakes. In my experience, the best way to get inactive learners involved is to "turn the tables" on them. Most of the time it doesn't work to just ask them if they understand. Inactive learners will just nod and say, "Yes." Try first having them read the part in question and then ask them if they can see anything wrong with it. If that doesn't work, write the correct way and ask them if they can see a difference. Then ask if they can tell you why one is correct and why one is wrong. This process will get the learners involved, and before you know it, they will be asking more questions without the prompting.

Working with over-active ESL learn-

ers can be just as frustrating. Many times, the frustrations stem from not being *able* to or *knowing* how to explain why the changes are being made. If you don't know how to explain a change, try using examples. I rely on examples in all of my tutorial sessions to show why I think a change needs to be made. Sometimes an example will teach learners more just because you can show them where and how the principle is used in the real world specifically rather than generally.

Culture clashes

Not only is the language barrier a factor but culture clashes can also arise. Every culture has different views that can conflict with the way you have grown up. That doesn't mean that they are wrong. There have been many times when I have experienced a culture clash with one of my ESL learners. I have become upset when reading papers written by ESL students that talk about women as if they should not have the same rights as men or that assume the role of a woman is to get married and make her husband happy. This has happened more than once, and each time I have wanted to stop reading the paper to discuss the students' ideas. It can be hard not to challenge views that conflict with your own. But as a tutor, you must remember that you are there to help learners write their ideas down, not to change their ideas. It can be a tough task to concentrate on a paper that you do not agree with. If

you keep in mind that all cultures are different and that all cultures have varying views about world issues, you might be able to separate yourself from the issue.

Try to keep these ideas in mind as you tutor ESL students. Hopefully they will make tutoring ESL students easier for you. But remember, what works for me may not work for you. You need to experiment with different tutoring strategies to find the best for you. Use these ideas only as a foundation and build from them with each new tutorial session:

Tips for tutoring ESL students

- Use small talk to get comfortable.
- Get a full understanding of the assignment.
- Make sure both of you understand the format of the paper that is supposed to be used.
- Look at previously written papers to get an idea of the writing level of the ESL student.
- Know what the ESL student wants you to do.
- Get the ESL student involved by asking questions and by giving examples.
- Separate yourself from the issue and main ideas of the paper.

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