

Guidelines for Culturally Competent ESL Teachers

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Abstract

The typical ESL classroom is a dynamic place full of energy, exploration, and experimentation. Teaching ESL is an exciting and rewarding career, mostly because of the students themselves, who bring a wealth of knowledge to the learning environment. Managing the cross-cultural interactions can be a challenge for the teacher, however, who may become overwhelmed by having to cope with the various cultural behaviors and values contained in one classroom. A few practical guidelines can help guide teachers through the process of developing rapport with all ESL students by avoiding cross-cultural mistakes. This list of fifteen Dos and Don'ts, developed by an ESL teacher and teacher-trainer over many years in the United States, is appropriate for use by pre-service teachers, teachers in the field, educational policy-makers, and administrators who serve second language learners.

Keywords: Cultural competence, ESL teacher training, ESOL, TESOL, English as a Second Language

Introduction

The classroom where students learn English as a Second Language is a very special place. It has a rich culture of its own that, when well managed, makes it a unique and welcoming place: a safe haven where students of all backgrounds can feel free to try out their new language without fear or shame. Involvement and active engagement are necessary to promote student learning (Wilson, 2004), and this is especially the case for second language learners. In order to for that involvement and engagement to develop, however, there must be respect and trust between teacher and students. Managing the lively dynamics and the rich diversity of the ESL classroom is a challenge more easily met when the ESL teacher establishes good rapport with each and every student. To that end, paying close attention to students' feelings is a skill that successful ESL teachers master quickly, usually with positive results.

According to the "affective filter" hypothesis of second language acquisition (Krashen, 1981), students use their emotions to sort out what they learn. Indeed, affect plays a pivotal role in motivation in all types of learning. When students are actively engaged in cooperative or interactive learning experiences, such as those that are usually found in the ESL classroom, their chances for success increase (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). "By anticipating and attending to the social forces that occur in the classroom, faculty better foster student learning and help students achieve their educational goals" (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002, p. 97). Language learning occurs best in a context that provides "opportunities for meaningful interaction with others in the target language" (Walqui, 2000, p. 3). It is vitally important for culturally competent teachers to pay close attention to students' feelings and comfort levels when they are learning a second language, since the better they feel about the learning environment, the faster they will master the target language.

Therefore, it is the ESL teacher's responsibility to create a classroom atmosphere wherein students feel comfortable, secure, accepted and validated. Only then can the well-trained ESL teacher's instructional strategies find fertile ground.

The following list is offered as a simple guide for new teachers and administrators, or a reminder for experienced ones, to assist them in their efforts to build rapport with second language learners by avoiding cross-cultural mistakes. These fifteen tips are organized around three key points that remind professionals of the importance of keeping the students' needs at the center of ESL instruction:

E = Empower your students with respect.

1. Learn your students' names.
2. Maintain high expectations for all students.
3. Be a good listener.
4. Look out for the quiet one.
5. Be sensitive in dual-language situations, and don't yell!

S = See yourself as a student advocate.

6. Recognize the individual within the culture: avoid stereotyping.
7. Never make someone the spokesperson for his/her group.
8. Be open about differences, but don't pry.
9. Learn the politically correct language, being especially careful when using humor.

10. Never ignore, excuse, or dismiss a racial incident.

11. Speak out and share your knowledge.

L = Learn to broaden your own horizons.

12. *Become the expert on your students.*
13. *Get to know the major holidays that are not celebrated by the majority.*
14. *Be mindful of dietary restrictions.*
15. *Trust your instincts to guide you.*

Fifteen Guidelines for Cross-Cultural Competence

E =Empower your students with respect.

1. *Learn your students' names.* Practice as much as you must, but do take the time to learn the proper pronunciation of names.

As basic as this rule may seem, many teachers do not follow it. Far too often, teachers who cannot pronounce a student's name on the first try simply give up and assign an Anglicized nickname for that student. This is not done in the interest of the student as much as it is done for the convenience of the teacher. One Malaysian girl named Puteri, for example, was quickly nicknamed "Patty" by her ESL teacher. To the Malaysian student, whose name means "princess," her nickname sounded like the Malay word *padi*, meaning rice grain—a far cry from her parents' original intention.

A name is an important part of a person's identity, and teachers who assign their students nicknames because of pronunciation difficulties are not showing respect for the meaning or the history behind the name. Culturally competent teachers will learn the student's name instead.

2. *Maintain high expectations for all students.*

Students in the second-language classroom are motivated and resourceful learners who show a willingness to master a new language and succeed in a new culture. These students bring special skills to their new classrooms and communities, along with hope, hard work, perseverance, and resilience (Cohen, 1990; Lopez, 2001; Topolnicki, 1995). They should not be undermined with pity or sympathy simply because they have not yet mastered their target language.

Sometimes, teachers and advocates who deal with English language learners foster dependence while trying to be helpful. It is true that some cultures value autonomy less than others (Yang, 2003), but being able to cope autonomously in a new culture is a skill that every second language learner should master to some degree.

One Ethiopian high school student grew very dependent on his ESL teacher, a helpful and kind-hearted person. Over several months, the ESL teacher became concerned that this student was far too dependent on her, asking for her intervention and help regarding small matters that she knew he was perfectly capable of handling himself, such as scheduling appointments with his advisor and choosing classes. Finally, the ESL teacher decided to discuss the issue of his lack of progress in autonomy. When the teacher explained her concern, the student was genuinely surprised, responding, "But I did not want to offend you, since you seem to enjoy doing these things for me!"

While it is important to be helpful and empathetic to second language learners, teachers must never forget that the first and most important goal of teaching: to get to the point where students no longer need their teacher. Maintaining high expectations for all students is a trait of teachers who strive to empower their students.

3. *Be a good listener.* Accept, reflect, and validate feelings, even though you might not share them. Often, it is the ESL teacher with whom the second language learner will bond. True, second language learners do go through a "silent period" (Fassinger, 1995) in which they

develop the receptive language skills (listening and reading) over the productive language skills (speaking and writing). But a teacher must be ready to listen, when the “silent period” is over.

One adult English language learner from Gambia was experiencing a difficult adjustment to the United States in many areas of his life, and his English grades reflected it. Sensing a problem, his ESL teacher made an appointment with the student to see if he could uncover the problem. The meeting between these two men started off well. Rapport was quickly established and the Gambian student felt safe enough to disclose the crux of his problems: his two wives were constantly quarreling, making it impossible for him to find any peace, let alone study time, in his personal life!

This disclosure caught the ESL teacher off-guard. As an American man only recently married himself, he found it unthinkable to be married to two women at the same time, a practice strictly forbidden in his own culture. Nothing in his Christian upbringing gave him a foundation for empathizing with the student’s point of view, and he certainly had no advice to offer. However, while listening to the student speak of his troubles, the American teacher sensed what a great relief it was for the student to be able to speak about this at last. The teacher realized what an honor it was that this student had trusted him enough to share his problem with him, and he tried his best to be a non-judgmental listener. He made honest comments that reflected the message and validated the student’s point of view, such as, “That must be very difficult for all of you.” At no time did he patronize the student; rather, he simply listened patiently while the student unburdened himself, and he concluded the meeting with a promise of confidentiality.

In such a diverse classroom, teachers will inevitably encounter beliefs and practices with which he or she disagrees. At these times, teachers need only ask themselves this question: *Since my main goal is to assist the student in learning a new language and culture, how much does it really matter what I think?* If it doesn’t matter very much, just listen.

4. *Look out for the quiet one;* don’t force the individual who is “different” from the group to join in, but don’t allow her/him to get lost in the shuffle.

Often, ESL teachers allow the shy or quiet students in their classes to become non-participants in the classroom out of misplaced sensitivity to their situation. Of course, every second language learner will transition through a “silent period” in which information is taken in—but it is not a passive stage. Rather, it is a stage of quiet internal activity that is part of the continuum of learning a language. It is the teacher’s responsibility to encourage these students to participate fully in class activities, coaxing them to stretch beyond their comfort level, rather than allowing them to totally withdraw.

As a young ESL teacher in the 1980s, this author had many students from Southeast Asia who had entered the United States with refugee status. Struck by the many stories of personal trauma she had heard, and wanting to be respectful of their adjustment process, she was at first hesitant to force the more reluctant students to join in the classroom activities. One particular young man—a quiet, brooding Cambodian who sat in the corner of the class up with his shoulder up against the side chalkboard—would not speak or write for several weeks. He would not answer when called upon and would not join in the choral reading sessions; however, he never came late to class. After a month of his silent resistance, the teacher decided that the time had come to coax him out of his shell.

One day, during an activity in which students were busy writing their sentences on the chalkboard, she approached this silent student and explained that it was time for him to put a sentence on the board, too. He shook his head “no.” Determined, she quietly handed him the piece of chalk and said, “Just write something on the board. Each student must try. You too.”

Finally, the young man took the piece of chalk from her and, immediately, scratched it against the chalkboard near his seat. Seeing that small gesture and watching him join the other students at the front of the classroom to write his sentence, the teacher realized that he had never written on a blackboard before! This small act—putting chalk to board—was the key that unlocked the language for him. After that day, he became an enthusiastic participant in class activities, a quick learner known and respected by the other students for his English mastery and sense of humor. In fact, he would often arrive early to write the date on the chalkboard or draw a picture with a message in English.

Indeed, students do need time to adjust to their new life and new language. But teachers must maintain high expectations for their second language learners; to lower expectations out of pity or sympathy is to cheat them of the full educational experience.

5. Be sensitive in dual-language situations; don't yell when speaking to a foreign-born person!

Teachers and administrators will often find themselves in meetings and conferences that include second language learners and their parents, other teachers, caseworkers, and interpreters. This is a complex situation that should be navigated carefully. Far too often, a well-meaning native English speaker will begin to speak loudly to the non-English speaker, as if shouting will get the message across better! Shouting only offends the listener, whereas slowing down speech, shortening sentences, and speaking with clarity will help intelligibility. Professionals who are experienced with this situation understand that a polite tone and appropriate eye-to-eye contact go much farther than shouting, and they will model this communication style for the others at the meeting.

Dual-language situations also require sensitivity when interpreters are not readily available. It is a good rule-of-thumb to avoid using children as the interpreters for their parents, as it places both the parents and the students in an awkward situation and compromises the integrity of the communications. A Pakistani student, now grown, tells of such a meeting that his teacher had called with his mother to discuss his refusal to hand in homework on time. The teacher made the mistake of using the young student as the interpreter. Whenever the teacher told the student, "Please tell your mother that I am concerned about your homework being late," the student said, in Urdu, "My teacher called you here today to tell you what a serious and capable student I am." Needless to say, the mother was surprised to see the low grade on his report card a few weeks later, and the teacher learned a valuable lesson about how to handle dual-language situations.

S = See yourself as a student advocate.

6. Recognize the individual within the culture: Avoid stereotyping. It is imperative for the ESL teacher to remember that no one is the stereotype of his or her culture. Each student is an individual; therefore, be cautious about making assumptions.

Of course, seasoned teachers use their knowledge of other cultures to "read" their students, but they do so with the understanding that there are many differences in the ways that cultural influences manifest themselves, especially when the individual student is learning amongst people who do not share the same culture. When in doubt, ask.

A case in point can be found in the author's well-meaning attempt to welcome the parents of her Cuban student to her local U.S. community. Meeting the parents at a community gathering, and eager to make a good impression, she attempted to establish rapport by striking up a conversation with them in Spanish. Assuming they were Roman Catholic, as most Cubans are,

she asked the family if they had yet found a church to join. To her surprise, they told her they were Jewish! Reminded of her own rule about stereotyping, she made a mental note to send them the list of synagogues in the community.

7. *Never make someone the spokesperson for his/her group.* Individuals within groups vary on opinions, mannerisms, customs, political views, language and religion. Unfortunately, many people do not recognize the inner-group diversity, particularly among members of minority groups. It is overwhelming and frustrating to be placed in a position of having to speak for your entire social or cultural group.

International students report that, sadly, even their college professors still single them out in the classroom. One young Indian woman, an MBA student, was attending a lecture on outsourcing and the impact it was having on American economics. “And can you share the Indian point of view on outsourcing?” the professor asked. Being the only foreign student in the class, and knowing the negative reactions of many Americans to outsourcing, she was very embarrassed to be put on the spot in that manner. Yet, because of her respect for teachers, she did not dare to let the question go unanswered. “I am sure I cannot speak for all of India, and I have not yet formed my own opinion on the matter. But I hope to be more informed after listening to your lecture.” The professor hesitated and then moved on to the next topic. However, it left the class wondering why she had skirted the issue, and it left the student feeling alienated from her peers.

Culturally competent teachers realize that the individual student should never be asked to represent his or her entire race, nation, gender, or linguistic group. Respect for the individuality of the student and diversity of any group will prohibit teachers from asking their students to be the spokespersons for their entire group.

8. *Be open about differences; don't ignore them. Encourage dialogue, but don't pry.*

Don't ignore the obvious. If you see a young English language learner in your class with a head covering, you would probably be safe in assuming that she is Muslim. Although American public school teachers are prohibited from asking about a student's religion, you might want to ask her, privately, if she has any special religious needs. This student might, for example, need help identifying non-halal items on the school cafeteria menu. If so, take a red pen and check near those items that contain pork. Or, she might need a clean, private place to pray. If so, find such a spot. These small gestures often make a big positive change in the student's life.

A word of caution, however: conversations about individual differences should always be held in private settings, where it is psychologically safe for potentially sensitive topics to be discussed. In this way, students do not risk losing face in front of their peers should the communication become awkward or embarrassing. The author of this paper had made it a standard practice to spend some time speaking privately with every student every few days—at least once a week. These informal, private conferences were built into the last ten minutes of class time, while students completed their classroom assignments independently. Students were called up to the desk in rotation, bringing their class work with them. During these short talks, the teacher would ask if the student had any questions about the assignments—or any other matter. While some of these short conversations focused on grammar and vocabulary, or a confusing idiom that the student was too shy to bring up in front of the general class, just as often the topic involved issues outside of class, such as a miscommunication with a friend or a failed exam. For this reason, a good rule of thumb is to end these private conversations with this

question: *Is there anything else you would like to ask?* The answers to that question will amaze the teacher and give the student a chance to be heard!

9. *Be tactful and careful with language.* Learn the politically correct language, being especially careful when using humor. Avoid culturally explosive words and steer clear of risky terminology laden with sensitive meanings. Never tell ethnic or sexual jokes, and speak out if someone else does.

Students regard their teachers, especially ESL teachers, as their role models. What they hear in class will be tested outside of class; therefore, culturally competent teachers use socially accepted terminology. Derogatory names have no place in the ESL classroom and should be avoided. Likewise, humor should be handled with care.

Anyone involved with regular cross-cultural interactions knows that humor often simply does not translate. What is funny in one culture is not necessarily funny in another. Therefore, ESL teachers should be very careful to choose light humor during instruction, making no one person the object of jokes. Also, when listening to students' attempts at humor, it is best to remember the differing roles that gender, race and ethnicity play in every culture, rather than judging the student's humor from the teacher's cultural perspective.

Furthermore, what is politically incorrect in one culture might be perfectly acceptable in another. In western cultures such as the United States, sensitivity to sexism and racial intolerance has led to lawsuits and litigation; as a result, it is becoming rare to hear such humor expressed openly. In many multicultural societies of the east, such as Malaysia and Singapore, however, jokes about ethnicity and sex roles are often heard. Teasing comments seem to be taken with good humor, and many relationships appear to not only withstand the strain of joking, many of them seem to solidify because of it. Nevertheless, humor can be a very touchy subject. In light of this, teachers should refrain from off-color jokes, particularly ethnic or sexual jokes. Furthermore, it is the duty of the ESL teacher to advise their students, with as much grace as possible, that certain jokes and words will only bring trouble.

10. *Never ignore, excuse, or dismiss a racial incident. Report, refer, or get help to handle it.*

People come with diverse backgrounds and personal histories that frame their current experiences and sensitize them to certain situations. It is particularly difficult for privileged people to understand what it is like *not* to have the privileges that they enjoy (McIntosh, 1995) and to understand current experiences through their frames of reference. A wise teacher will never trivialize any matter that is important to a student, even though it may appear insignificant to the teacher.

One example of a situation that might have easily slipped "under the radar" can be found in a college dormitory. A student affairs professional noticed the word "chinks" scrawled across the door of a room that she knew to be the room of two young women who were Chinese students. She mentioned this to the resident advisor on that hall, who admitted seeing the graffiti but had assumed it was no more than a harmless prank. But the student affairs staff felt otherwise and scheduled a meeting with the two Chinese women to investigate the matter.

At first, the Chinese students were hesitant to complain, when brought into the meeting. They admitted seeing the graffiti on their door, but said they did not know what it meant. The student affairs staff explained that it was a derogatory word for Asian people; therefore, she was wondering if that was an indication of any other things that had been going on in the dorm.

Then, the Chinese women explained that there had been a few things happening, but that they did not want to cause any trouble as foreigners in a strange land. They had been experiencing harassment by a young white man on that wing, who would phone them and knock on their door at all hours to wake them up. They suspected that he had written the message on the door, and that he was the one who had scattered also trash in front of it. The student affairs staff explained that it was not necessary to endure these insults, and that she would have the graffiti removed immediately. Furthermore, she asked their permission to bring the matter to the Resident Life Director, so that he might do a proper investigation, as this type of behavior was in strict violation of the university's code of conduct. Finally, they agreed and the matter was taken to the disciplinary board. In this case, the young man in question, a freshman, not only received a sanction from the university, but he also requested a chance to apologize to both women. Had the student affairs professional not realized that graffiti often signifies a deeper issue, the harassment might have continued. Luckily, the appropriate steps were taken to handle the matter, while including the students themselves in the process.

11. *Speak out and share your knowledge.* New ESL teachers are usually amazed at how much they are sought after by their peers, administrators, and community members for information and knowledge about the cultures of their second-language learners. ESL teachers are regarded as resources. Embrace that role in your stance as an advocate, and learn to speak out on behalf of your students.

Before taking any action or advocacy, however, it is best to keep in mind that in order for teachers to find their own voices as advocates, they must first learn to listen to the voices of their students. When confronted with a problem or issue, the teacher should involve the student as much as possible in the decision. Getting the student's buy-in or permission to address the issue is the best practice before going to the appropriate resource person or authority figure—respecting their decisions whenever possible.

Every time students find themselves in need of help or advocacy, they come from a position of diminished power. Informing them of options, discussing those options with them, and including them as the primary voice in the decision-making process will empower them to take charge of their lives, with the help of a trusted advocate, such as the ESL teacher.

L = Learn to broaden your own horizons

12. *Become the expert on your students.*

Not only should the ESL teacher get to know students as individuals, but also the culture, customs, and political situations of their students' homelands. Politics and economics are major reasons for the global shifts that are apparent in every level of society today. Teachers and administrators must educate themselves about the reasons that ESL students have come into their schools.

In the years following the U.S.-Viet Nam conflict, American ESL classrooms saw an influx of Southeast Asian students from Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos. At first, these students were grouped together under one misleading label: Indochinese. Being neither Indian nor Chinese, although influenced to varying degrees by their past connections to those cultures, the students who came to the U.S. from these countries were mistakenly thought to be of one monolithic culture, and they were often treated without regard to the vast cultural, linguistic, and religious differences among them.

One small school had so many Cambodian and Vietnamese students that they formed two opposing soccer teams! The administration began to understand the depth of the cultural differences after learning that these two teams refused to merge into one team. Finally, in those pre-internet days, teachers were able to educate themselves and their administrators about the cultural characteristics of each group and the school was able to understand and cope with the many issues that arise when children of political enemies are seated side by side in the classroom.

Eventually, the students grew to accept that they were now in a new land where the past conflicts did not carry as much weight as before, and the teams merged with the school's soccer team. Many lasting cross-cultural friendships also developed. Often, with the passage of time and with the help of educated professionals, a bridge of understanding can be built between previous enemies. Certainly, it is the ESL teacher's responsibility to take the lead in that process.

13. *Get to know the major holidays that are not celebrated by the majority of students in your institution.* Consider these holidays when planning your tests and classroom activities. Realize that they are significant times for your students, evoking strong emotions or memories, and that they may have obligations to meet or traditions to carry out during these times.

For example, Tet, or Vietnamese Lunar New Year, is a special occasion surrounded by ritual and tradition. It does not always fall on the same date; rather, it varies each year, arriving sometime in late January or early February. A novice American ESL teacher with many Vietnamese students in her classes began to notice a change in her students upon returning to school after the long Christmas break: they appeared depressed and lethargic. Although she did know that Tet was coming, she was not really informed about the holiday traditions associated with it. She mistakenly equated Tet to her own New Year, one simple day of partying with family and friends. She did not realize that in Viet Nam Tet was a holiday consisting of many days shopping and preparation, visiting and traveling, enjoying special meals with extended family members, and symbolic gift giving. These newly arrived students were not simply remembering a one-day party; they were longing to be involved in the same series of meaningful activities that had shaped their personal histories.

A culturally competent teacher will not only mark important dates on the calendar, he or she will get to know the customs and traditions associated with it. An excellent teacher will incorporate content about the holiday into class lessons, giving the students themselves opportunities to share their background with others

14. *Be mindful of the dietary restrictions of various religious groups.*

Students of all kinds enjoy participating in school parties, cultural holidays, and special occasions. Awkward situations surrounding food and diet, particularly on special occasions and holidays, stifle interpersonal rapport among students and diminish their chances from learning from each other. It is a simple thing to find out the dietary restrictions of any cultural group or religion. In addition, it is the responsibility of any teacher who wishes to be culturally competent.

One young ESL teacher in the United States, for example, was unaware of the fact that she had scheduled her Halloween party during the month of Ramadan. Having lived in a predominantly Christian society all her life, she was only vaguely familiar with Muslim customs. Her Muslim English language learners, middle school students trying as best they could to fit into their new culture, never explained to her that they were not allowed to eat the cupcakes and candy that this well-meaning teacher had brought into school. They simply sat quietly while

their classmates enjoyed the holiday party, their smiling but steadfast refusal to participate in fun activities dampening the joy for everyone. The result was a tangible divide between the Muslims and the non-Muslims in this young teacher's class—a tension that might easily have been avoided with some pro-active research on her part.

15. *Trust your instincts to guide you in your cross-cultural interactions. And remember: mistakes happen.* Apologize when you make a mistake; forgive yourself and others when mistakes occur.

Like students, teachers also have an “affective filter” that can be used for learning. In the case of ESL teachers, it is a very important tool that you can use in connecting to your students. Allow your intuition to alert you to those issues that lack clarity or relevance in your own culture, but which you feel are relevant with your students. Effective teachers develop a “sixth sense” that transcends the constraints of language.

It is only natural to expect that all teachers will make plenty of mistakes navigating among the many different languages, cultures, and expectations that confront them in the classroom. When confronted with the fact that a mistake has been made, a sincere but professional apology does wonders to restore a relationship. Students easily forgive and forget a teacher's mistake when it is understood that the teacher meant well. Then, teachers need to take their own advice and simply “turn the page.” Teachers are human beings engaged in an intimate learning journey with their students, and human beings make mistakes. ESL students understand that better than anyone.

Conclusion

Keeping a few practical guidelines in mind can help teachers negotiate the process of developing rapport with all ESL students by avoiding cross-cultural mistakes. A learning environment in which cultural differences are examined, explored and respected allows language to emerge in a safe and comfortable setting.

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