

Advice about teaching ESL Students

What's the most important thing I should know about the ESL students I teach?

Who they are! It is essential to know which of the non-native students in your class are ESL students and what level of ESL they are in. This will give you some idea how much English they know and will help you to have realistic expectations of what they will be able to understand and do in your lessons.

Marking the names of the ESL students in your grade book, e.g. using an asterisk and a number for their level, is a good way to identify these students. Many teachers also note down the name of the ESL teacher of each ESL student. This can facilitate the liaison that is a very important aspect of our joint efforts to support ESL children as effectively as possible.

Should I correct an ESL student's grammar mistakes?

Generally not. Students who answer questions in class are working hard to show what they know or have understood and so they are usually not receptive to any feedback on the grammatical accuracy of their message. Moreover, it would probably embarrass them to have their mistakes corrected in front of the rest of the class. There are occasions however when the content of their message is unclear because the grammar is faulty. For example, a student who says: I am here for one year may mean I have been here for one year, or I will stay here for one more year. In these circumstances, it is acceptable to ask for elucidation and to help them if they do not know the correct way to express their idea.

An indirect way to give corrective feedback is to provide the student with a model answer. So, for example, if he says: Columbus find America in 1492, you could reply: Yes, you're right. That's when he discovered America. There is conflicting research evidence as to whether this kind of feedback is effective, so it's best not to overdo it.

As for written work, once again it is important that feedback is concentrated on the content quality of the answer rather than on its grammatical accuracy. It is discouraging for students who have worked hard to give a good answer to have their work covered in red ink for mistakes that are peripheral to the main purpose of the assignment. There is also the danger that they may get the message that surface accuracy is more important than conveying ideas or showing understanding.

However, written work can generally be corrected without causing the student embarrassment in front of his or her peers, and you may well wish to draw attention to one or two of the grammatical mistakes that could interfere with understanding. It is also not unreasonable, for example, to expect the verbs in a piece of writing about a historical event to be in the past tense.