

Practical, comprehensible ESL workshops centered on the adult ELL learner.

The ESL Teachers' Workshop Modules

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Background Info
The Successful Teaching of the Adult English Language Learner (ELL)
The Adult ELL Module

What countries are your students from?
What language(s) do they speak?
What are their educational backgrounds?

Who are your students?
Why are they taking your class? What are their immediate goals?

The first step to the successful teaching of the adult ESL student is to find out some basic information about your students and their motives for attending your class. Teaching ESL to adults is not like teaching ESL to children.

I'm sure you've heard that the teacher is in the classroom to facilitate the process of language learning, not to teach. What does this mean? Well, facilitate means "to make something easy or easier to do", whereas teach means "to give lessons in or provide information about a subject". We can teach someone how to drive, how to bake bread and how to change a light bulb, but can we really teach someone to speak English? Let's break this down into its smallest parts:

If we stand in front of the classroom and drill the alphabet, have students read aloud from a text, or explain the present tense and have students complete grammar exercise blanks then yes, we're teaching. However, if students compose a sample dialog to introduce themselves to their peers and others, write dialogs about making a doctor's appointment while you point out the forms and uses of the present tense, and then have students ultimately role play their dialogs, then we are facilitating not teaching. Students are using the language meaningfully and essentially. And they'll come back time and again to our classroom to learn more.

What are the differences?

One major difference is life experience. Adult students come to the classroom with diverse cultures, knowledge, and frequently an extensive

vocabulary because they have more life experiences than children. Thus, adults should be assisted in drawing upon their backgrounds as they practice literacy skills. Building on what already is known makes the tasks of reading, writing, listening, and speaking more consequential and less threatening than a curriculum that does not take into account what the student brings to the learning setting.

We've talked about life experience. **Can you think of another difference between teaching a child and an adult?**

Motivation. Adult students are goal oriented and highly motivated. They attend class of their own free will and at some personal and financial sacrifice. Absences are due to family and economic obligation rather than a lack of motivation.

Do children have immediate life goals that need to be satisfied?

Adult students usually have very specific and immediate goals. Many are not looking to some long-range academic achievement. They need English today, to get a job tomorrow.

Children are naturally curious, but...*Do they see themselves as students?*
Does the adult ESL student?

Many adult ESL students have a poor self-concept. They do not see themselves as students. The undereducated adult is especially convinced they cannot or do not know how to learn.

Two questions for you, Teacher:

1. What is your role in the community?

Are you...?

Parent

Relative

Friend

Employee

Customer

Patient

Client

Parishioner

2. Do you have many and varied life responsibilities and roles?

If you yes to this question, then you can relate to your adult student. You can understand that as parents, workers, friends, and relatives we have many roles that must be fulfilled. We have busy schedules. When we take a class, our schedules would naturally prevent us from going to class at certain hours due to time or distance.

Outside the classroom, our students have many diverse interests. Therefore it is important to bring these interests to class in the form of relevant class activities. The experiences of our students can serve as fodder for our lessons and make our activities more applicable.

Who is the typical adult ESL student?

You will be disappointed to learn that there is no typical adult ESL student. Every student in class will have a wide range of backgrounds, skills, and interests. Listed below are some of the more important differences:

Literacy or the Low Level Student - one of the most important differences among adult students is whether they can read or write in their native language. If students are literate in their native language, learning another language is much easier than for the non-literate or low-literate student. Why? Because (most) literate students already understand the sound/symbol correlation, have a grammar base and many other skills that are essential to learning a language.

Formal Education - you will more than likely have students whose educational backgrounds range from those with advanced degrees from a foreign university to students with little or no formal education. One important thing for you to remember is not to underestimate the intelligence of your students. Most are smarter than their ability to speak English would seem to indicate.

Give students **ample** opportunities to practice:

- Provide materials visuals, realia, worksheets, etc.
- Have students practice in different groupings (pairs, small groups, whole groups, individually)
- Design practice for more than one learning style if possible

Teacher Materials

A good CD/cassette player with better than adequate sound (it's a business expense!) is required. You won't need a Bose system, just something you can carry from class to class without breaking the bank - or your back. Students should be able to hear the recording without straining.

You'll also need a supply of blank tapes or recordable CDs. It wouldn't hurt to invest in index cards of all sizes (and colors) which are priceless for language activities. Index cards make wonderful flash cards, dialogue cards, concentration games, matching games, word order practice, pair work, information-gap activities, and on and on and on.

Listening Strategies

Before the listening task begins, preview any titles, pictures, or vocabulary words. Try to have the tape player set up prior to the beginning of the lesson and if possible, set it to the exact place you want to begin. Make certain that all students can hear the tape clearly. Set the scene, speakers and location, and provide students with motivation so they will understand the recording better. Learning is enhanced when there is background knowledge (e.g., going to the doctor or dentist, renting an apartment, ordering a meal). The key to the success of any learning is to create a relaxed atmosphere where students are invited to take risks.

As you play the recording, have students listen to get used to the speaker's voice, then pause to discuss what was heard. Ask questions about the speakers, the scene and the environment. Do not distribute any written handout. Why? While the strategy of visualization is best for adult students, they may be distracted from the **form** of the words and miss hearing the **sound** of the words. When your students are ready to hear the tape a second time, distribute the handout, telling students to listen for the general idea. Answer comprehension questions given before the recording is played for a third time. Depending on the recording and students' comprehension, you may need to play it a fourth or fifth time.

Ordering Groups

As previously mentioned, give students lots of opportunities to practice and have them practice in whole groups, small groups or pairs. When working with small groups, each student within the group is assigned a role, determined by the members of the group. The Group Leader's function is to restate the task and encourage each group member to participate. S/He makes sure the task is discussed thoroughly and the task is successfully completed. The Writer/Note-taker writes the responses and checks grammar. The Timekeeper makes certain everyone completes the task within the required time. The Presenter affirms the group findings or opinions to the class. Assigning roles in this manner allows all students to fully participate.

Mention should be made of students who won't participate in groups. Some are afraid they'll acquire bad habits from other students; some just prefer to work alone. Classroom practice in groups may also be perceived as impeding one's progress. You can overcome this quandary by reminding these students that getting used to different accents is part of the learning process. Do not, by any means, force a student who doesn't want to join a group, to join one.

Problem #1

Your intermediate students have told you of their difficulties when they talk to native speakers on the telephone. In your next class, you bring a recording of a secretary answering her boss's busy calls. You also bring message forms which will require students to write down the message. The recording does not use slow speech, but natural, fast speech. How would you present this activity?

First, prepare students for the context. Students need to know what they're listening to before they listen to it. It's important to know the relationship between the people and the general topic. In the case of this listening task, provide clues for students so they may visualize the scene, i.e., a motivation for listening. Motivation keeps students focused on goals. As you play the recording, ask students about what they heard.

What follow up activities would you provide for the telephone activity?

Follow up this activity with a role play exercise that would require students to telephone for directions to someone's house, a store, movie theater showings, or place a takeout order. The role play is written on an index card with directions similar to those that follow:

Example:

A: You're on vacation with your friend in Atlantic City. You have just spent all your money. Your friend is upstairs in the hotel

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