

Working with ESL Students

Students whose first language is not English are part of an interesting and rapidly growing population. These students are often referred to as students of English as a Second Language (ESL) or English language learners (ELL). No matter which designation a teacher uses when you learn about a student you will work with, students in this population often present a rewarding challenge.

First, it is important to understand that ESL students are a diverse group, from many different language and culture backgrounds. They often experience some culture shock when attending school because there is so much that differs from their native culture. Often, volunteers who work with ESL students can make a big difference in how these students adjust to school. Using kind words and a lot of patience is a good rule of thumb to remember when you are volunteering with ELLs.

A common misconception that sometimes makes volunteers nervous is thinking that they need to be able to speak Spanish or another language to work with these students. You should only consider that necessary if you were specifically recruited because of your special language skills! Otherwise, ESL students are learning English and can benefit from the help of volunteers like you who use some specific strategies and give them a chance to try out their English without pressure.

Speaking slowly can make a huge difference in how much an ESL student understands when you talk. You can practice slowing your speech by reading a text and timing yourself, then reading it again while focusing on slowing your speed. Continue doing this regularly, and you should see the time it takes you to read the passage increase over time. It helps to relax yourself before you practice this as well as before you try to apply the strategy with students.

In addition to speaking slowly, giving ELLs a longer time to respond when you ask a question can help them have time to formulate an answer. For students who are in the more beginning stages of learning English, they often hear the question in English, translate it mentally to their first language, think of an answer in their first language, and then translate that answer the best they can into English to tell the volunteer. That's a lot of work! Try counting to 10 in your head while you are waiting for an answer. While you're counting, try to remain relaxed so that the student does not feel more pressured. It can be difficult to wait, but the extra time can increase the interactions of the student dramatically.

Building background knowledge is very important when you are reading with ESL students because many topics they encounter in a text will be new; even things we take for granted as part of our everyday lives. You can help students be prepared to read by taking a picture walk through the story together. To do this, you simply move through the story before reading, looking at the pictures together and commenting on what you see. Give the student the opportunity to comment on the pictures. You may be surprised by some of the interesting comments ESL students give if they encounter something new!

Vocabulary can be overwhelming for any student who is challenged by reading. ELLs are learning a LOT of new vocabulary every time they read in English. It is easy for volunteers to feel that they must discuss every word that students don't know. Avoid falling into this habit because it will slow the reading

process drastically. Students should be reading texts that are appropriate for their level of English proficiency or very close to that level. This doesn't mean that they'll know every word, but you can help them develop good habits for learning new vocabulary. Help students highlight words they do not know or write them down as they read. Words that appear frequently in the text or may be seen in other stories are the ones you will want to talk about with the student because they will be the most valuable.

Finally, as you check for understanding while reading with an ESL student, it is best to avoid asking, "Do you understand?" or other yes/no questions. Instead, try to ask questions that require the student to show understanding of the text that was read. This process can vary based on the level of the student. For example, you might ask a beginning student to point to the main character in the story in a picture, while you would ask a more advanced student to tell you why the main character is important in a specific event in the story.

If you have been asked to volunteer with an ELL, you have a great opportunity to make a difference in the life of a student who has additional challenges to reading in English. These strategies will help you to have a more optimal experience with the student. So, are you ready to work with ESL students?