5 Non-Native Speakers in the English Classroom

It's difficult enough trying to strengthen the language skills of students who have spoken English all their lives. The suggestions in this book have made sense to you, perhaps, and have opened up some new possibilities for teaching grammar to students who have been chattering away in English for years. But what about your students who are still trying to learn English? These students range from those who enter our schools with no English at all to those whose speech is proficient but whose writing lacks the fluency of a native speaker's. Some of these students may be able to read and write in their own language, but many cannot. Unless you have been trained in TESL (teaching English as a second language), you probably don't know much about how to address the needs of these students. You may not be sure at all if direct instruction in English grammar will be helpful to them, or if it is, how to go about it, or if you knew how to go about it, how to find the time to focus on what seem to be unusual English problems.

This chapter considers four questions. At the end, you will find a list of sources that address the topics more fully.

1. What do you need to know about your ESL students?
2. How are other languages different from English?
3. What general strategies are helpful with ESL students?
4. What are some specific ways you can help?

What Do You Need to Know about Your ESL Students?

To work with students who are learning the English language, you first need to consider some questions about them that pertain to the rudiments of second language learning:

1. *How closely is the student's native language related to English?* English is a Germanic language with Latinate and Greek influences. It is cousin to the Romance languages: Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and Romanian. The ESL student whose native tongue is a Romance language will find many cognates (related, similar words, such as *library* in English and *el libro*, "book," in Spanish) that open doors to English words. On the other hand, East Asian languages (as well as African and Na-

tive American languages, among others) have much less common ground in terms of sentence structure, word order, formation of plurals, and the sounds themselves. For most of our students from Asia, their native languages have very few English cognates for them to hang their hats on.

2. *What is the student's functional level as a speaker of English?* In the best of circumstances, your school will have an ESL specialist who will evaluate the English proficiency of your students and give you an accurate report.

3. *How old is the student?* Psycholinguistic research indicates that the older one is, the harder it is to assimilate a new language. Before puberty, language is learned intuitively, in the left hemisphere of the brain. After puberty, we lose the ability to learn language intuitively, and language learning becomes a right hemisphere function, more difficult to keep in long-term memory.

4. *Is the student socializing with English speakers?* Anything you can do to encourage socialization in English would be helpful. If you've ever been in a country where you don't speak the language, you know how lonely and frustrating it can feel. Schools that care about their ESL students arrange for social opportunities such as clubs, buddy systems, breakfasts, and invitations to events. They see to it that their community welcomes newcomers, has a place for them. Teachers who care about their ESL students express an active interest in their cultures and languages, offering opportunities for them to communicate and make friends and making sure everyone in the class knows how to pronounce their names—in general, presiding over an atmosphere of invitation and inclusion.

5. *Can the student read and write in his or her own language? How well?* Students will learn the conventions of writing in English more easily if they have basic writing skills in their home language. But don't assume this is the case, even for older students.

6. *Is the student happy to be here?* Affective factors play an important role in second language learning. Aversion to a culture, not wanting to be here, and longing for home and family can impede learning English. These students need adults in the school to look after them. Sad to say, sometimes our ESL students are exploited as laborers and not given time and opportunity to study.

The first and best way to differentiate instruction for your ESL students is to be a gracious host to them in your classroom. The other students will follow your example. Help the ESL students feel they are part of the classroom, that they have much to share about their culture

and language, and that you and the other students look forward to learning from them. Don't just say all this to sound polite. Create authentic opportunities in which the students can actively contribute their unique knowledge and points of view; you will find suggestions on the pages that follow.

Finally, a word about the word *foreign*. If you lived in a place and went to school there, would you want to be considered a foreigner? *Foreign* and *foreigner* are words that should be consigned to the list of archaic and misguided epithets we don't use anymore in polite society. Spanish, for example, is hardly "foreign" in the United States. It and the languages from East Asia are growing steadily as common languages spoken in a society where English is the predominant language.

How Are Other Languages Different from English?

The purpose of this section is to show you some basic differences in structure between English and several other languages: Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese (the Chinese spoken in the area of Hong Kong), and just a dash of Japanese and Korean. Some of the information may be too specific for your needs, and some of it may not be specific enough, depending on your students. *This information is not meant as a crash course in five languages.* It is intended to provide you with basic information and also to show you some of the ways in which your ESL student is struggling to make sense of English.

Spanish

Perhaps the most glaring difference between English and Spanish, along with the other Romance languages, is that all the nouns in the Romance languages have gender. A door in Spanish is a feminine noun, *la puerta*, while a desk is masculine, *el escritorio*. So it is understandable that a Spanish-speaking student may take a while to get the hang of using the neutral pronoun *it* for inanimate objects. In addition, English nouns don't necessarily take an article *(a, an, the,* none of which appears in, for example, *Trees are part of nature)*, whereas Spanish nouns usually do. So Spanish speakers may want to insert an article before nouns that don't take articles in English, and this may sound odd to us, as in *The mister Gonzales isn't here.* Spanish speakers will include an article before a general noun in Spanish, so they might say in English that *The skiing is fun.*

Here are some other common issues for Spanish speakers learning English:

- Learning which prepositions to use poses problems for learners of many languages. In Spanish, *a* is closest to the English prepositions *at* and *to*, and *en* is used where English speakers would say *in, on,* or *at*. So your Spanish speakers might say *He is not in home.*

- You'll hear your Spanish speakers use *that* or *which* when you expect *who: The woman which just came in the room.* The reason is that in Spanish the word *que* is equivalent to *that, which,* and *who.*

- English places the indirect object between the verb and the direct object: *Jack sent Jill a pail of water.* Spanish places the indirect object between the subject and the verb: *Jack Jill sent a pail of water.*

- Spanish places its negative particle before the verb and routinely uses double negatives, leading to such sentences as *She no like the movie* and *He don't like nothing.*

- In English, when we refer to a person, we use the same words whether that person is present or absent. But Spanish speakers use the article to refer to an absent person. In English, that would sound like this: *I saw the Mrs. Benjamin in the grocery store.*

- You may hear Spanish speakers refer to the word *people* in the singular rather than the plural: *The people is angry,* instead of *People are angry.* The reason is that *la gente* is singular in Spanish.

- In English we express possession in one of two ways: we use the possessive apostrophe or the *of* phrase, depending on the kind of thing and the kind of possession we are talking about, as in *the man's beard; the bravery of the people.* The Romance languages use only the *of* phrase: *el libro del nino (the book of the boy).* Considering how much trouble native speakers have with the possessive apostrophe, you can imagine how much trouble a Spanish or French speaker would have with it.

Vietnamese

- The Vietnamese do not place an article before the word for a profession and might say in English, *She is student.*

- Vietnamese does not have the *be* verb. You can expect your Vietnamese students to need help inserting the correct form of *be* in statements and questions.

- A writer of a sentence in Vietnamese will usually place a transitional word between the introductory clause and the main clause. In English, this sounds awkward: *Because she likes to sing, therefore she joined the choir.*

- Vietnamese, like English, uses the subject-verb-object order. Vietnamese, however, omits *it* when referring to weather, distance, and time: *Is raining*. There are no neuter pronouns in Vietnamese.

- In English we express comparison by adding *-er* to the adjective *(bigger)*. In Vietnamese the concept of more is expressed by adding the word for more after the adjective: *The truck big more than the bus*.

- The vowel sounds in the words *hit, bad, shower,* and *hire* are not heard in the Vietnamese language, so a Vietnamese speaker may confuse words with those sounds.

- Expect your Vietnamese students to have some trouble with tense. Vietnamese does not use the same system of expressing events in time. You might hear and read: *We take a trip to Sacramento last summer.* This speaker is using context clues in the sentence to convey the tense, rather than changing the verb as we do in English.

Cantonese

- Cantonese speakers are not accustomed to using helping verbs for questions or negatives. They may be particularly baffled by the English use of *do* in questions and negatives. You may hear this: *How much money this cost?* English speakers don't usually stress that helping verb—*How much does this cost?*—so it is hard for a native Cantonese speaker to hear it. You might need to emphasize the use of the helping verb *do* in questions and negatives.

- Cantonese speakers are likely to be confused by the use of prepositions in English because Cantonese does not use many prepositions. Prepositional use in English is so idiomatic that it may even seem to be random. Why, for example, do we ride *in* a car but *on* a train? Why do we park *in* the parking lot? Why do we hang a picture *on* a wall rather than *against* a wall? Your Cantonese speakers may need to hear you emphasize prepositions in your speech to help them hear the conventions.

- You'll hear your Cantonese speakers placing all of their modifiers up front in the sentence, before the verb: *For her mother on her birthday on Saturday, we gave her a surprise party.*

- Cantonese speakers tend to leave off plurals in English. In Cantonese, Japanese, and Korean, there are no plural forms of nouns: *Many good book.* The difficulty in pronouncing the final *s* is an additional difficulty.

- Cantonese speakers may have trouble with pronouns. They are used to a language with fewer pronouns, many of which are dropped. Because they don't distinguish between subjective and objective forms of pronouns, they may say, *I will give it to they.*

- Parallels of *a, an,* and *the* are not used in Cantonese. That is why Cantonese students may erroneously omit the article, as in *I have dog.* They may also insert the article erroneously, as in *I have the pets.*

Korean

- In Korean, pronouns don't have gender, so you might hear Korean-speaking students referring to males and females using the gender-neutral pronoun *it.*
- Korean has no indefinite article but uses *one* for *a*, depending on the context: *He dropped one cup of coffee.*
- Korean, as well as Japanese, places the verb after the subject and object instead of between them as English does. The different order might lead a student to say, *The man the car drove.*

Japanese

- In Japanese, pronouns don't have to match their nouns in terms of singular or plural, so you might have to show the student how to use *we, us, they,* and *them.*
- Japanese, like Cantonese, has no articles and no inflections for person and number: *Teacher give two assignment.*

Summary

To summarize some of the ways that languages can differ from English:

1. The nouns might take gender.
2. Other languages may use articles differently, or no articles at all.
3. Plurals may be formed by adding words or syllables to the sentence, or by giving context clues in the sentence to indicate that there is more than one.
4. The word order may not follow the familiar subject-verb-object pattern.
5. The pronoun may not have to agree in gender or number with its antecedent.
6. Other languages may have fewer prepositions, making it confusing for the novice to know which preposition to use in English. Also, the preposition may not precede its object.
7. There are differences in inflection and pacing.
8. There are differences in written conventions, such as punctuation and capitalization.
9. Nonverbal communications, such as gesture, eye contact, silences, and what people do to indicate that they understand, differ from culture to culture.

What General Strategies Are Helpful with ESL Students?

We teach grammar to help all our students understand language patterns regardless of which language they speak or are trying to speak. Earlier, we described the contrastive approach to helping students with so-called dialect errors, which involves understanding and helping students understand the contrasts in the language patterns of home language and Standard English. Similarly, the teacher confronted by "ESL errors" can try to think about a student's language patterns instead of the individual mistakes. A speaker learning English is almost always testing out a "ground rule" of English. With a little conversation and perhaps some research, you can often discover the intention and the pattern in the student's mind.

Second language students may, for example, say or write *It was happened yesterday* and *He was died.* These sentences—so unlike any that a native speaker would write—are not the result of a sloppy use of the past tense, as they may appear. With some research and discussion with the student, the teacher will realize that the student is adding the *was* out of a mistaken notion that the sentences are in the passive voice; the event seems to be happening to the sentence subject. (Such students would not write *He was kicked the ball,* because the sentence subject is more clearly an active agent.) Once the teacher realizes that the student thinks such sentences require the passive voice, discussing the mistake with the student becomes manageable.

Similarly, ESL students need time to learn the collocations of English, the way that certain words must be accompanied by other words. The collocations of English verbs are especially complex. Some verbs require a direct object and an indirect object (*Give Chris the ball*), some just a direct object (*hit the ball*), and others no object at all (*Chris ran; John walked*). Errors with verb collocations are, in a sense, vocabulary errors, but they lead to grammatical problems. A student might write *Please send tomorrow* and not see it as a sentence fragment because it contains the understood subject of the imperative (*you*) and a tensed verb (*send*). To the student, the sentence is complete, perhaps because in his or her native language the word for *send* does not require a direct object with it. The teacher can explain that in English (except in telegraphic or shorthand prose), it does.

Students whose native language is not English don't automatically realize how much English depends on word order for meaning. Although you take for granted that *The dog bit the man* conveys a different meaning from *The man bit the dog,* an English language learner might

not think the difference is so obvious. English is a subject-verb-object language (SVO, for short). Japanese and Korean are subject-object-verb, or SOV, languages. Arabic is a verb-subject-object, or VSO, language. Knowing this difference may help you decipher your students' intended meanings as they learn English.

In English we expect the subject to be stated (except in the case of commands, where the subject "you" is understood, as in *Stop that*). Many other languages do not require the subject to be stated outright; it is expressed by the verb ending. If your English language learners often leave out the subject, you may want to require them to stick to simple SVO sentences, with the subject always stated explicitly.

One more thing about verbs: the most common verbs in English are the irregular ones, those that *don't* follow the usual pattern of adding *-ed* to form the past tense *(walk, walked)*. Be patient with learners who must master *to be, is, am, was, were, are; do, does, did; go, goes, went; buy, bought;* and so on.

Talking about transportation is often a puzzlement for English language learners because of the prepositions *in* and *on*. When the vehicle can carry only one person, or when it carries more than a handful of people, we use *on*: *on* a bicycle, *on* an ocean liner, *on* a train. When a small number of people can ride in a conveyance, we use *in*: *in* a rowboat, *in* a car.

In English the conjunctions *and* and *but* are so common that native speakers take them for granted, but you may need to explain the difference between them for English language learners.

English is rich in metaphors, idioms, and figurative language. You can imagine how these nonliteral expressions would bewilder the novice. An idiom such as *used to (Our library used to be open on Sundays)* is famous for mystifying newcomers to English.

Remember that conventions for capitalization differ from language to language. German capitalizes all nouns. Nationalities are not capitalized in Spanish, Romanian, Russian, or Portuguese. The second word of a geographical place name *(Hudson River)* is not capitalized in Serbo-Croatian and Vietnamese. Not all languages capitalize days of the week or months of the year. And Cantonese, Hindi, and Arabic are among the languages that don't use any capital letters at all.

Not all punctuation looks like English punctuation. Some languages use inverted questions marks, circles, vertical lines, a series of dots, and other markings. Commas don't always appear the way they do in English. In some languages, the comma is inverted, raised, or reversed.

English uses what we call the Roman script. Not all languages use the same script; Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Tamil are among many hundreds of languages that use different scripts and graphic symbols.

Not all languages have the same rules that English does regarding the joining of independent clauses. Whereas English does not permit two independent clauses to be joined by a comma *(The economy slowly spiraled downward, many people were out of work)*, such joinings are permissible in Persian, Arabic, Russian, and Turkish.

English spelling drives native speakers crazy. Imagine what it must be like for speakers of languages such as Spanish and Vietnamese, which have much more consistency. Your ESL students will run into difficulties that you don't expect because their pronunciation conventions differ from those of English speakers. In some languages, for example, the final consonant of a word is not pronounced. If a speaker of such a language carries that practice into English, she or he will be likely to drop the final consonant in spelling as well as in speech in English words. Some languages—Spanish, German, Hindi, for example—are much more phonetic than English, meaning that once you know some basic pronunciation rules, you can usually pronounce a word correctly. In English, think of the challenge the ESL student faces in learning how to pronounce *ough* in *rough, bough, thorough, cough*, and *through*.

In English we have lots of affixes. Other languages, such as many Asian languages, seldom add affixes to words. The notion of a word root such as *tele* (far off) in *telephone,* which has meaning although it does not function as a complete word, is unfamiliar.

Your non-native speakers will have problems enough with the irregularities of English spelling. You can help them learn spelling by working with them on their pronunciation. Doing this doesn't always necessitate correcting them. Simply clarifying or slightly exaggerating your own pronunciation of tricky words will be helpful.

Chinese and Vietnamese do not pluralize words. These languages convey the plural through the context of the sentence. Romance languages do have plurals, but the plurals are formed according to rules which are much more consistent than the rules in English. Be aware that ESL students may find English plurals difficult.

Homonyms (words that sound alike but that have different and often unrelated meanings, such as *the bear in the woods* and *to bear a burden*) don't exist in all languages.

The second-language student may have difficulty adjusting to the rhetorical patterns of composition that English teachers take for granted.

This difficulty occurs not only when the student has learned to read or write in another language but also as the result of absorbing ways of talking and thinking that are organized differently in other cultures. Compared to American rhetorical patterns, for instance, Asian cultures tend to use fewer explicit thesis statements throughout a piece of writing, while Spanish writing allows for more changes in the direction of the discussion. Such patterns that vary from traditional English ones are, in their respective countries, regarded as sensible and prestigious, and from these other points of view the English expository pattern of main idea followed by supporting details appears rigid and limiting. Try to learn about such contrastive rhetoric so that you can help students through this aspect of their cultural reorientation.

Finally, we need to keep in mind that the nonverbal cues of communication differ from culture to culture. Most Americans expect the person to whom they are speaking to make eye contact; not to do so is considered a sign of disrespect. In some cultures, making eye contact is a sign of confrontation; casting one's eyes downward when an authority is speaking signifies proper deference.

What Are Some Specific Ways You Can Help?

- To help ESL students learn how to use nouns and adjectives, have them write descriptions.

- To help ESL students learn how to use pronouns, have them write narratives about themselves and their friends.

- On the student's perspective: Ask the student to write about writing. Depending on the student's age and mastery of English, the student can write about those sentence structures that she or he finds difficult. The student can write in English or in the native language or in both. Ask the student to explain whether the mistakes are caused by the influence of the native language or by a misunderstanding of an English pattern. Also, students can keep a running list of English words they look up in the dictionary.

- On the editing of writing: Don't succumb to the attitude that just because an English language learner is making more or different errors compared to native speakers, the student needs you as the ultimate proofreader and he or she will not benefit from working on writing with classmates. Peer editing partnerships and groups can work well for students from other cultures, many of which encourage young people to help one another with schoolwork. Similarly, just because a student makes ESL errors, don't focus any less on the content and meaning in the writing of ESL students than on the same aspects of

the writing of native speakers. And, for the same reason, don't neglect extended writing assignments for ESL writers; it's not true that they have to write the perfect sentence before the paragraph and the perfect paragraph before the story or essay.

- Keep your explanations brief and simple. Illustrate with clear, unambiguous examples. Do not get yourself (and students) tied up in knots over exceptions to rules. Use visuals, but explain them verbally.

- If a student asks you about a point of English grammar and you aren't sure what the answer is or how to explain it simply and clearly, don't rush. Tell the student you will bring back an answer at the next class period.

- Be aware of the effects of your speech. Be aware of those occasions with beginning speakers when they will understand you better if you speak a little slowly and emphasize your meaning with gestures or facial expressions (although you don't want to appear to be talking down to them). Similarly, they may understand you more easily when you speak in short sentences and when you use the active instead of the passive voice.

- Include definitions of unfamiliar terms within your sentences.

- To help all students become more sophisticated about language variations, avoid using terms such as *substandard, wrong, broken English, illiterate,* and other pejorative terms that discount the value of linguistic variation. Instead, use terms such as *colloquial, informal, regional, vernacular,* and *inappropriate for this context.* Stress the importance of using the language tone geared toward a particular audience and situation.

- To help all students learn more about languages, point out cognates and Latin roots. This will also help native English speakers learn and remember new words.

- Talk about words borrowed from other languages. Help ESL students find words in English borrowed from their languages: *bazaar, café, caribou, macho, mantra, safari, smorgasbord, sabotage, shogun, wok,* etc.

- On tapping ESL students as a classroom grammar resource: Are you discussing verb number with your class? Noun endings? Punctuation? Invite a student with a different language background to speak about his or her own language. Very often, such students can respond with clear and interesting comments because they may know grammatical terminology (as a result of their ESL studies) better than most native speakers do.

- Be aware that the English language is full of idioms that baffle the novice.

- Model a positive, open-minded attitude about language variation. Doing so is one of the most powerful ways that you can teach for social justice.

Conclusion

One of the goals of education should be to make every high school graduate bidialectical. What this means is that everyone should have two language varieties, the informal, more private speech they use with family and friends, and the public, formal language of the business world and formal occasions. For ESL students, their private speech at home is an entirely different language from public English, and so their challenge in mastering two sets of language skills is more complex than it is for native English speakers.

For us as teachers, this goal makes our task more complex as well. On the one hand, it is incumbent upon us as educators to help our students communicate in a way that will not put them at risk of being thought ignorant or unsophisticated when they travel from place to place or from level to level in the professional world. On the other hand, nothing is more personal to our students, and to us, than our language and the language of our family, loved ones, ethnic group, and community. So this is a sensitive area. It is imperative that we feel and show a genuine respect for other languages and language dialects and for the difficult process of learning English as a new language. We suppress language variety at our peril, as our suppression feeds a sense of alienation from education and public discourse, the last thing any educator wants.

VIGNETTE: TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN ELEMENTARY GRADES

In helping young children whose native language is not English, it is difficult to figure out—among the other challenges—whether to include direct instruction in grammar and if so, how. Here, a third-grade teacher decides that grammar will be only a small piece of her larger strategy, and her approach conflicts with that of another teacher. Have you thought through your own beliefs about the place of grammar instruction in such situations?

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Kathleen J., a young third-grade teacher in a suburban school, is a perfectionist by nature. When a problem comes along, she uses every resource available to solve it. When state budget cuts knocked

the wind out of her district, instruction time for English language learners (ELL) was reduced to just two forty-minute sessions per week for children whose native language was not English. So Katherine decided she had no choice but to become a second ELL teacher for Nhan, the Chinese-speaking girl new to the district.

Kathleen consulted with the ELL specialist and gave herself a crash course in teaching English as a second language, knowing that she would have many children like Nhan in her teaching career. She even tried to learn a few words in Chinese, but they flew right out of her head almost as soon as she pronounced them. Kathleen settled on three practical teaching strategies to maximize Nhan's learning of English: patience, socialization, and reading aloud.

Fluency takes time. Nhan was quiet. Kathleen was patient. Children learning English are likely to absorb language for a long time without saying much. But, like a toddler who understands much more of what is said than she can express herself, Nhan was constructing meaning from the social relationships that Kathleen encouraged. Kathleen explained this to the other children, some of whom were beginning to interpret Nhan's reticence as unfriendliness. "She likes you," Kathleen explained. "She just needs to be ready to talk."

Kathleen's research and observation convinced her that Nhan would learn English just fine, given the time and the social context. Then she ran into a new problem. The ELL specialist left the district to find a full-time position elsewhere. The new ELL teacher believed in workbooks, fill-ins, drills, and the traditional rules of English grammar. She insisted that her program was a tried-and-true means of teaching "correct" grammar. Kathleen tried to help Nhan with her workbook exercises. Nhan was correctly filling in the blanks, but the work didn't seem to transfer to her conversational speech, which is what Nhan really needed help with. Kathleen was patient, but she had more faith that the modeling Nhan was getting from her peers in social conversation would eventually find its way into Nhan's speech.

Meanwhile, Kathleen read aloud to Nhan and had peers read aloud to her as well. The reading aloud had several benefits. Nhan heard and emulated the rhythms of speech, something the workbooks didn't give her. Instruction about basic grammar (how the English language works) sometimes became part of the discussion of the story as Kathleen pointed to the -s endings on certain nouns and verbs.

Nhan developed confidence in using English as she memorized parts of the stories and recited them, first along with the reader's voice and then on her own.

Kathleen began to elicit English from Nhan by asking her questions about the pictures in her books. Nhan responded with single nouns at first, then with phrases and sentences about the stories she knew. She was using known information in the stories to learn new information as she began to talk about the stories on her own. To Kathleen, the process felt much like the ritual of reading aloud to toddlers, asking them questions, and using their familiarity with the language and objects of the story to introduce new vocabulary and grammatical structures in the course of natural conversation.

Nhan's classmates were delighted when she began to participate in reading groups as a "reader." (She recited from memory.) Kathleen advised them to accept Nhan's mispronunciations, modeling for them how to "show" standard pronunciation through their own speech rather than "tell" Nhan how to pronounce a word.

As the year progressed, Kathleen was satisfied with what Nhan was able to understand, say, and read. In her teaching journal, she noted the following positive strategies:

1. Use language experiences with rhythm and rhyme; read aloud a lot.
2. Use dramatics: skits, puppets, dolls, and action figures.
3. Don't be discouraged by silences and backsliding.
4. Correct grammatical errors by modeling, not direct teaching.
5. Teach the child the polite conventions that English speakers use to ask for help: "Could you repeat that, please?"; "Please explain what you mean"; "Excuse me, what do you mean by that?"
6. Focus on the three Rs: repetition, rewording, reinforcement.

Kathleen's experience with Nhan and subsequent experience with other English language learners taught her an amazing amount about the English language and the human brain: the many grammatical ways there are to manipulate a sentence; the importance of inflection; how much of conversational English is idiomatic; the confusing nature of phrasal verbs; how hard it is to explain certain prepositions. Whereas the ELL specialist addressed the English language part by part and topic by topic, Kathleen used immersion theory.

Learning a language, acclimating to a new culture, making new friends, and learning a curriculum is a lot to do all at once for an eight-year-old child. But with friendly support from her peers and teacher, Nhan learned each new task, which helped her learn others.

—Amy Benjamin

VIGNETTE: HELPING A NINTH-GRADE STUDENT USE *THE*

Working from a student's paper, a ninth-grade teacher tries to strike a balance between direct instruction and student discovery to help a boy from Costa Rica master a challenging piece of English usage. English, like all languages, includes usage patterns that native speakers never have to think about but that non-native speakers must sometimes study explicitly. Which everyday usage patterns do the non-native speakers in your class have difficulty with in writing or speaking? Of these, are there any whose rules you think you yourself should find out more about so you can explain to the student exactly what to do?

Ms. Sabo is meeting with her ninth grader Raphael, a student from Costa Rica who has been attending U.S. schools for the last five years. Raphael, like many students who grew up with languages other than English, is still struggling with some aspects of the English article system. Ms. Sabo goes over the opening paragraph of his paper with him.

> In Costa Rica I had a friend in our town. We talked about the nature. The farms were all around our town. We talked about how the coffee grows, and we saw that the nature has a lot of secrets. We became the best friends. He told me many proverbs and I remember them. They help me to understand more about the life.

Raphael is putting the definite article *the* in front of nouns that normally don't take it. The general principle in English is that *the* is omitted before nouns that are uncountable (*coffee* and many other food names, for example), plural countable nouns when their meaning is

generalized *(Elephants are large*, in contrast to *The elephants are large)*, and many but not all singular proper nouns *(Italy*, but *the Nile)*. Ms. Sabo has looked up the principles of article use so that she can help students like Raphael. Moreover, she thinks Raphael himself has probably heard these rules in the past in his ESL courses. But she knows that the patterns of English usage take time to absorb.

"Raphael, you're putting *the* in some places where you don't need it. In English we don't use *the* before certain kinds of words that are very general. Let's look at *nature.* You've written *We talked about the nature* and *the nature has a lot of secrets.* Let me ask you, if you are walking in the woods, where is nature?"

"It's in the trees. It's kind of . . . everywhere," Raphael replies.

"Right. It's everywhere. So *nature* is a very general noun. We talk about nature but we are not talking about a specific place or specific trees. It is not possible, really, to go and point to a nature here and a nature there. You can't count how many natures there are. We don't say 'two natures' or 'three natures' in English. There is just 'nature.'"

Raphael listens but doesn't say anything. Ms. Sabo thinks about another example.

"Let's take the word *poetry.* I know you have liked the poetry we've read in class. You enjoyed the poems and you said once that poems were like puzzles. So you might say to me, 'I like . . . ' what? How would you say that sentence using the word *poetry?*"

"'I like poetry.' Can I say 'I like poetry in our book'"?

"You would say 'I like *the* poetry in our book' because that's a few specific poems. But your first answer was right. You would say 'I like poetry' if you want to say that you think you like poetry in general, as a whole."

"Okay."

"In your paper, you wrote *They help me to understand more about the life.* Can you tell me if you think you should take out the *the* before *life,* or not?"

Raphael replies, "I think I should keep it in because I am talking about my life."

"Are you talking about just your life by yourself or about what life is like for other people as well as you?"

"Oh, okay, I see, it's life in a big way." Raphael nods, and Ms. Sabo nods with him.

"Yes, that's it. *They help me to understand more about life.* Now let's look at one more example for today. You wrote *We became the best friends.* This example is more complicated. Sometimes you *can* say 'the best friends.' For instance, it's good English to say or write, 'They were the best friends that I ever had.' But when you say 'We became the best friends,' you're being more general again. It's the same when you say 'We became friends.' Or 'We became buddies' or 'We became teammates.'

"What about 'We became family'?" Raphael asks.

Ms. Sabo is stumped for a moment. She's not sure if he is thinking of the informal use of that phrase, as in the song "We Are Family," or if he is making an error in the sentence *We became a family.* She decides to keep the focus on the most standard usage and not get sidetracked by exceptions.

"Usually, when a specific event has happened, like a man and woman having a baby, they say 'We have become a family.'"

"Okay."

"Raphael, for tomorrow, I would like you to go through your paper and look at the other nouns with *the* in front of them. Put a circle around those nouns and think about whether they are general or not. It's a complicated part of English, so don't get discouraged. Most of your other English grammar is very good. I'll see you tomorrow."

Ms. Sabo isn't sure how much of the explanation Raphael has absorbed or how he is hearing certain sentences. But she's encouraged by some of his answers. She will know more tomorrow. She'll bring up the terms *countable* and *uncountable* if all goes well—the words *general* and *specific* work well enough for simple explanations, but they can be difficult to explain with precision. And once Raphael has had some time to think about using *the*, she will encourage him to talk more about how he is understanding the nouns and to come up with examples of different types of nouns on his own.

—Brock Haussamen, with Christine Herron

ESL Resources

Burt, Marina K., and Carol Kiparsky. *The Gooficon: A Repair Manual for English.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1972. A listing of grammar mistakes and a guide to understanding and addressing them.

Celce-Murcia, Marianne, and Dianne Larsen-Freeman, with Howard Williams. *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course.* 2nd ed. Boston:

Heinle & Heinle, 1999. This comprehensive guide to grammar for the ESL teacher is more than the language arts teacher needs, but it includes two valuable resources. The first is an index of English words and phrases discussed in the text; an English teacher can use this index to find information about the language issues involved in a particular construction that a second-language student may be using. Second, at the end of each chapter are teaching suggestions on the chapter's grammar topic.

Friedlander, Alexander. "Composing in English: Effects of a First Language on Writing in English as a Second Language." *Second Language Writing: Research Insights for the Classroom*. Ed. Barbara Kroll. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990. A study showing that, depending on the assignment, ESL students sometimes generate better English compositions when they plan their papers using their first language than when they try to do so in English.

Leki, Ilona. *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1992. Highly recommended.

Martin, James E. *Towards a Theory of Text for Contrastive Rhetoric: An Introduction to Issues of Text for Students and Practitioners of Contrastive Rhetoric*. New York: Peter Lang, 1992. This book describes the field of contrastive rhetoric, the study of the differences in how people in different cultures use text and organize their discourse.

Raimes, Ann. "Anguish as a Second Language? Remedies for Composition Teachers." *Composing in a Second Language*. Ed. Sandra McKay. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1984. Process-approach strategies for writing teachers helping second language learners.

Richard-Amato, Patricia A., and Marguerite Ann Snow, eds. *The Multicultural Classroom: Readings for Content-Area Teachers*. White Plains, NY: Longman, 1992. Many essays in this collection will be just as useful to the language arts teacher as to the content-area teacher. See especially "Coaching the Developing Second Language Writer" by Faye Peitzman and "Providing Culturally Sensitive Feedback" by Robin Scarcella.

Rigg, Pat, and Virginia G. Allen, eds. *When They Don't All Speak English: Integrating the ESL Student into the Regular Classroom*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989. A collection of ten essays.

Finally, the Web site www.stanford.edu/~kenro/LAU/ ICLangLit/NaturalApproach.htm#Monitor is a useful introduction to the work of Stephen Krashen, an influential and controversial figure in ESL who advocates a "natural approach" to teaching grammar. The Web site offers a good summary of the issue, a strong critique, and a bibliography. The section on the Monitor hypothesis describes the potential usefulness for ESL students of grammar rules as monitors for editing their work under certain conditions.