

# Teaching English as a Second Language

## *A Challenge and a Privilege*

"In six months, I am going to score 550 points on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). If not, I will crawl on my hands and knees along the length of the cafeteria," I overheard one of my students say confidently. That was a personal challenge for me, so I intensified my emotional support. He did it! This same student, four months earlier, was balking at taking my class, crying, "I can't do it."

Students enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) at the college level come to the United States to learn English with certain fixed expectations, as well as definite ideas regarding how these expectations will or should be met and in what time frame. During the first several class periods, they assess the learning situation and the teacher's academic preparation, interpersonal skills, and teaching methods.

Depending on their conclusions, ESL students will either settle down to learn or ride a roller-coaster between depression and exhilaration. The intensity of the roller-coaster experience depends on a variety of factors: parental expectations, financial pressure, time constraints, and homesickness—any one of which can impede learning.

### **Varying Challenges**

The mix of new and returning students makes the early days of every ESL class atmosphere different. New students exhibit high levels of energy, anxiety, and expectation. The

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body language of repeating students, however, exudes a sense of ennui that suggests: "I'm tired of trying to learn English. If something doesn't change, I may quit. I doubt you can help me." Yet one plea echoes from the heart of each student: "Teach me English, and do it quickly." The everyday challenge to ESL teachers is tremendous, but it is also a privilege and an opportunity.

ESL teachers are expected to embrace the challenge and to perform miracles. For ESL students, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is being able to enroll in Freshman English. For ESL teachers, the miracle is for students to begin to think in English. To experience the joy of seeing students achieve this miracle, ESL teachers plunge into the initial uncertainty of each quarter, coping as best they can with the pivotal confluence of strong emotions and high expectations. They welcome the expectations, make use of the strong emotions, and empower the students to attain their goal: to learn English well enough to enroll in regular classes and compete successfully with native speakers of English.

### **Motivate, Inspire—and Teach English**

Besides teaching English, the ESL teacher must motivate and inspire. Establishing the climate for learning begins with a friendly smile from the teacher that radiates both calm assurance and confidence that says: "You can do it!" Take, for example, bright-eyed Claire (her American name), who

BY JUANITA SINGH

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walked into my Advanced Reading class. She looked straight into my eyes, something I did not expect from an Oriental girl new to the U.S. Smilingly, I made eye contact and welcomed her to class. From then on, it was easy to get her involved. I found her mind alert and her observations provocative.

However, her fertile mind, so used to thinking complex thoughts in Chinese, refused to function in English or to be bound by her limited English vocabulary. But through many tears, she persevered as I provided English expressions that matched the logic she had thought out in Chinese. Then she would memorize the English version. It worked!

Most ESL students are highly motivated to learn English. Their commitment is so strong that it uproots them from the comfortable ambiance of their homes and native lands and transports them thousands of miles to the United States. Gardner and Lambert<sup>1</sup> identified two types of motivation at work in adult second-language learners: instrumental and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation is the desire to learn a second language for economic gain or social advantage, while integrative motivation centers on the desire to know more about the people and the culture of the target language group in order to gain acceptance and to integrate with them.

Either type of motivation, integrative or instrumental, can drive ESL students to master English and can help brace them against the inevitable culture shock. However, it is not uncommon for ESL students to arrive at an American campus with borrowed motivation: that of a parent or sponsoring agent. In such cases, student motivation may be low, but it nonetheless exists and can be increased.

Another motivating factor is the strong family support most ESL students receive.

Students with family ties have greater stability because they want to make their loved ones proud. So, ESL students will study into the wee hours of the morning, faithfully complete long assignments, write the required compositions, and memorize English textbooks. They work hard to show their parents that the financial sacrifice is worth it.

### Motivation and Frustration

What teacher would not welcome such highly motivated students with long attention spans? But too much motivation and pressure from family often breed frustration. The higher the expectations, the greater the chance of failure and frustration. The stronger the emotional support from home, the greater the likelihood of homesickness. Frustration with the English language, cul-

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One of the author's ESL classes holds an informal get-together.

ture shock, and long hours with books are not a fun combination, so it is normal for ESL students to feel overwhelmed.

Another concern for many ESL students is the high cost of education, especially in private institutions. Those with a limited budget set a time limit for learning English. Such students watch both the money and the time spent. Financial worries exacerbate their frustration. Oftentimes, for budgetary reasons, ESL students seek to enroll in regular classes before they have become proficient enough in English to compete successfully with regular students. As a result, these students may suffer severe anxiety.

ESL students function in an emotionally charged situation. If their motivation plummets, they may lose hope and act indifferent, irresponsible, or disengaged. If their motivation soars to unrealistic levels, their self-expectations may also rise disproportionately. They may plunge into depression because their performance cannot match their expectations.

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**As ESL teachers minister to their students' basic needs for acceptance and self-esteem, they lay the groundwork for effective language acquisition. Above: Juanita Singh, the author of this article, with Jeung Hwa Lee, one of her ESL students.**

### Varying the Approach

Since ESL teachers function in a fluid situation, they must be able to think on their feet. If they use an unfamiliar teaching method, students may suspect that no meaningful instruction is taking place and that the teacher is wasting the students' precious time and money. If teachers use the traditional grammar power-learning approach familiar to students (one idea at a time, one page at a time, and a predictable set of vocabulary words), they may actually waste the students' time, but the students may feel more comfortable. So teachers must combine innovative and traditional methods.

The teacher must also know how much to push and when to back off a bit. Occasionally, it pays off to take a break from academics and play. One day, I asked the students in my advanced writing class to bring only themselves and their brains to class—no books, no pens, no paper. I brought a calendar picture of a high

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desert, with a mountain near a lake, a sandy path around the mountain, and a lone man nearby. Using this picture, we brainstormed to create metaphors. One student described a man seeing a mountain kissing a lake. Another saw the mountain falling in love with

the lake, flattered by its reflection of the mountains. That day, the students discovered they could think in pictures, and they began to do picture writing.

ESL teachers need to create a favorable, accepting atmosphere for their students. The volatile ESL situation provides an opportunity to minister to student needs. According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy, human beings have several ascending levels of need: survival, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.<sup>2</sup> The more basic needs must be met before ESL students can seek self-actualization, which for them means achieving their dream of speaking and writing English fluently. For ESL students, this dream may seem elusive and impossible.

### Ministering to Students' Emotional Needs

ESL teachers can help their students to achieve this dream. But first, they must attend to the students' basic needs. Not many

## ESL at Adventist Colleges in North America

A number of Adventist colleges and universities in North America offer ESL programs for students who lack proficiency in English. Because of the recent terrorist activities in America, several schools anticipate that fewer overseas students will enroll in their institutions due to problems in getting visas, concerns about safety by potential students and their parents, and fluctuations in financial markets.

Schools wishing to recruit ESL students can adopt many approaches, including establishing bonds with Adventist colleges overseas, designing a recruitment program that reaches out to both students overseas and recent immigrants who have not mastered English, and offering flexible programs for students with varying levels of language proficiency. One- to six-week modules offered during the summer have proved to be especially popular.

There is a great need for Adventist universities to develop programs to train Teachers of a Second Language (TESOL) so that more of our institutions can offer such programs.

young people would say directly, "I'm lonely" or "I don't feel safe." But they may say, "I'm not learning anything" or "I'm wasting my money and time." When students make disparaging statements about their academic or financial concerns, they may mean, "I'm not feeling good about myself," "I feel stupid," "I'm frustrated," "I don't feel safe," or "I'm homesick." The discerning teacher sees such statements as an opportunity to empathize with the students. "Feeling" statements may suggest frustration, anger, fear, or dying hope. If the teacher does not listen with the heart, he or she may miss connecting with students at these vulnerable but special moments.

During spring quarter 2000, one of my ESL students experienced the miracle of thinking in English. Although he had begun to think in English when speaking, when writing, he thought in Portuguese, then translated his thoughts to English. He dreaded seeing his returned composition papers covered with red correction marks.

My understanding of his plight, however, gave him the freedom to describe his frustration with English and my new method of teaching. Writing out of intense emotions, he actually bypassed the translation mode! When I pointed out that it was his best composition yet, almost free of red correction marks, he beamed and said: "I did it, Teacher." From then on, his interest in writing intensified as he welcomed my innovations. At the close of the spring quarter, he joked that he had to watch out not to translate his thoughts from English to Portuguese.

### An Opportunity to Share Christ

Oftentimes, when I connect with students at such crucial moments, a friendship is formed. With friendship comes the privilege of sharing, including an opportunity for me to share Christ. I often ask my students if it is OK for me to pray for them. Insofar as I can remember, no student has refused to allow me to pray for him or her after a friendship has been formed. So, times that allow expression of emotions are special moments because they give me the opportunity to tell my students about my own struggles and how Christ comes through for me. I share with them my two power texts: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," and "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:13, 19, NKJV).

### Conclusion

As ESL teachers in a Seventh-day Adventist setting, we must seek to find the opportunity to use innovative and effective teaching methods to show we really care about our students and their aspiration to learn English quickly. We must be sensitive to our students' need to experience English language success at different stages, as well as their need for emotional safety. And we have a wonderful opportunity to share Christ with them. Students welcome genuine interest shown by teachers, and this often opens doors to their hearts. The golden time to reach out to ESL students is during the initial uncomfortable stage(s), especially at the time

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**As ESL students begin to feel comfortable with the language and the teaching style of their professor, they can achieve great progress in a short time. Above: Juanita Singh at a Christmas party with Carol Lau, one of her ESL students.**

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when they feel threatened by the new environment and are overwhelmed by English.

At each stage, as students progress to higher levels of English, both teacher and students can be winners. The students succeed in their quest to master English, and the teacher earns their trust and friendship as he or she rejoices with them in their programs. For Christian teachers, helping ESL students learn English provides wonderful opportunities to share Christ with them. What a challenge and a privilege! ✍

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