



How to
Teach EAL
Students
in the
Classroom
The Complete Guide

Mike Gershon

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Series Introduction

The ‘How to...’ series developed out of Mike Gershon’s desire to share great classroom practice with teachers around the world. He wanted to put together a collection of books which would help professionals no matter what age group or subject they were teaching.

Each volume focuses on a different element of classroom practice, and each is overflowing with brilliant, practical strategies, techniques, and activities – all of which are clearly explained and ready-to-use. In most cases, the ideas can be applied immediately, helping teachers not only to teach better but to save time as well.

All of the books have been designed to help teachers. Each one goes out of its way to make educators’ lives easier and their lessons even more engaging, inspiring, and successful than they already are.

In addition, the whole series is written from the perspective of a working teacher. It takes account of the realities of the classroom, blending theoretical insight with a relentlessly practical focus.

The ‘How to...’ series is great teaching made easy.

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Author Introduction

Mike Gershon is a teacher, trainer, and writer. He is the author of over forty books on teaching, learning, and education, including a number of bestsellers, as well as the coauthor of four others. Mike's online resources have been viewed and downloaded more than 3.5 million times by teachers in over 180 countries and territories. He writes for the *Times Educational Supplement* and has created over eighty guides to different areas of teaching and learning as well as two online courses covering outstanding teaching and growth mindsets. Find out more, get in touch, and download free resources at www.mikegershon.com or www.learning sciences.com/mikegershon.

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I have picked up many of the activities, strategies, and techniques in this book from the countless wonderful people I have worked with; however, any errors or omissions remain my own.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Book

Welcome to *How to Teach EAL Students in the Classroom*. This book is your one-stop reference point for working with English as an additional language (EAL) learners. It has been designed with whole-class teaching in mind, but it can be adapted to suit one-on-one and small-group teaching as well.

I have divided the book into four sections, each focussing on a certain theme. This means that strategies, activities, and techniques are grouped into smaller collections, making the book easier to navigate. I have provided a rationale and explanation for each section.

The book contains a wide range of classroom tools which you can take and use immediately with little or no alteration. That said, nothing in here is set in stone, and you can easily adapt the contents to suit your needs, the needs of your pupils, or your style of teaching.

Suffice to say though, if like many of us there is a high premium on your time, the resources contained in the following pages will allow you to support your EAL learners quickly and effectively, whatever the lesson. You could pick nearly any strategy in here, go into your classroom tomorrow morning, and start using it without any further ado.

Thinking Carefully about Learners and Language

When working with EAL learners it is worth remembering these three words: Eyes, Speech, Body. They provide a simple means by which to consider the experience of the EAL learner in the classroom. By keeping them in mind, you can continually check whether what is happening is helping students or hindering them.

Ask yourself whether what the EAL learner can *see* will help them access and understand what is going on.

Ask whether what they can *hear* is helping them understand what is going on and what is expected of them.

Ask if you are using *your body* to support your spoken communication. Are you mirroring or supplementing the meaning of the words you are using? Are you remaining open? Are you physically modelling ideas? And are you modelling what it is that you want students to do?

Referring to these key words – using them as lenses – also causes the teacher to sympathise with the position of the EAL learner. It encourages them to view what is going on in the classroom from the perspective of someone for whom the main mode of expression is not fully accessible. This may sound obvious, yet it is easy to lose sight of such an important point amid the clamour for attention made by students, colleagues, and parents.

The following section looks at language and the experience of EAL learners in more detail. It also reflects on the role of the teacher in the classroom and thinks about student-teacher relationships. General suggestions are offered which supplement the specific activities and strategies explained in the rest of the book.

Praise, Emotion, and Individual Differences

Students who have English as an additional language (EAL) are, in many ways, no different from the rest of your students. They are still young people, they still have feelings, they still desire to do well, and they still have family or carers whom they go home to every night. As such, like everyone else, they will respond well to sympathy and praise, although any hint of a patronising manner must be avoided.

Sympathy should be used to indicate the teacher's understanding of the game – the knowledge of what is at issue for the learner and how they

and the teacher are working together to try to overcome it: sympathy as shared understanding rather than tea and biscuits.

Praise must also be given out with care and thought. Never scrimp on it; do not treat it as a limited resource. Do be mindful, however, of the potential that exists for diluting its impact. There can be a temptation to praise a student who has English as an additional language for myriad minor things. The hope is that this will dissipate any anxiety or frustration they might be feeling due to their difficulties with communication. The learner may view this as patronising, though, or they may dislike the extra attention they are receiving.

Identify specific things for which to give praise, and make it clear to the learner (with gestures and modelling if necessary) precisely what it is you are praising. Such an approach smacks of honesty. It is difficult to see it as being anything other because it shows a clear thought process on behalf of the teacher. The approbation is directly tied to something the student has done, with an explanation as to why it is good. An argument is being advanced, with evidence to support it.

Emotion can play a significant role in any classroom. Managing it is a key part of ensuring good progress among learners and an atmosphere in which all feel safe and secure.

There are two things to say about emotion and EAL learners. The first is that one ought to expect periods of frustration, annoyance, or irritation. Anybody who finds themselves in a situation where the expectations are unclear or it is not apparent what one is supposed to be doing can feel awkward and ill at ease. If the situation continues, these feelings can grow. I can recall losing my cool when someone who I was interviewing continually evaded the questions: it was frustrating to feel my own language being disempowered. Whilst this situation is not identical to that of an EAL learner, it still points to how disruption or dissonance in communication can draw out negative feelings.

In addition to this, it is important to remember that learning an additional language is, for most people, hard. Consider that an EAL learner is doing it 'on-the-go' and may have few (if any) native speakers around them, and one can see a hard task getting harder and harder. What is more, frustration can be made worse by students' difficulties in communicating their feelings to peers or to the teacher.

One of the fundamental facets of language is that it allows us to make others aware of our internal states. Knowing how to do this in one's first language yet not being able to do it in an additional language can be deeply frustrating. It is as if a barrier has been erected and one's own self has had to withdraw from the surroundings. Sharing our internal states helps us say who we are and signal our existence to others, as well as our independence. So, after all that is temporarily taken away, do not be surprised if EAL learners display some negative emotions at times!

The second point regarding emotion concerns the teacher. We are all used to communicating seemingly at will with our classes. We modify our language so as to ensure everyone follows what is being taught, but we work from a premise that simple alterations are all that is required to guarantee understanding. This comes from the fact that we know our students are versed in the English language. We know as well that a major part of our job is to continually develop and refine that understanding, but this begins from a vast shared pool of vocabulary, syntax, and grammar.

Working with EAL learners can be frustrating for the teacher. It can cause them to feel inept or powerless in the face of what sometimes appear to be insurmountable barriers. If one is used to providing help and support for learners, the loss of this ability can be difficult to deal with. It is easy to feel disoriented or helpless when all the tools which we would usually use to assist a child are no longer any good (or, at least, not as good as they would usually be).

If you find yourself in such a situation, I advise taking a three-pronged approach. First, do not despair. The decreased efficacy of your usual tools and techniques is not a reflection on you or the student.

Second, use this knowledge to imaginatively draw yourself and the student together. Acknowledge that the issue (not the problem) is for both of you and that it exists separately to the pair of you. By doing this, one avoids tying emotions to the issue. Also, you will create an external focal point which you and the student can bond over. It is akin to saying: 'At present we cannot communicate that well with each other. Let's work as a team to overcome this.' Such a mind-set may be impossible to express explicitly to the student, but holding on to it and letting it inform your behaviour ought to be enough.

The third point is to build activities and strategies from this book (or elsewhere, or ones you think up yourself) into your teaching. Doing this means you are being positive and proactive. You are working from the premise that the issue is transitory and that it can and will be overcome. You are doing your duty as a professional and as a person. You are helping your student(s) and need not accept any feelings of frustration, powerlessness, or anxiety which may creep up on you.

It is worth remembering that learning a new language can take a while. Do not expect dramatic changes or overnight successes. In rare cases these may come, but in general the student's development will be gradual. They will be feeling their way into the language, testing out its possibilities, trialling the meanings of words and identifying how far they can be pushed and in what circumstances.

If, at some point in your life, you have learnt a new language, reflect on that experience. Ask yourself how you made progress and what sort of timescales accorded with your increasing mastery. It may be that you too found the process difficult. If this is the case, do not remember it and then stop. It may be useful for sympathising with an EAL learner, but what would be better would be for you to analyse why you found it difficult and to learn from this. You may find that your own experience provides you with pointers on how to adapt your classroom or your teaching.

Individual differences will play a part as well. As we said before, EAL learners are just like the rest of your students in many respects. This includes the varying cognitive abilities, prior schooling, and life experiences they bring with them. While the inability to communicate in a given language will most likely mask the true cognitive capabilities of a student, it can still be assumed that any population of EAL learners will include a range of abilities. This will have consequences for the speed at which pupils pick up English.

So too will the motivation students possess. It is often worth speaking to pastoral leaders (or, if your school has one, an EAL coordinator) to find out a little about the backgrounds of your EAL learners. There are many reasons why a family, or in some cases an individual child, may move to live in another country. These could range from the highly desirous – a parent is promoted to a prestigious head office position in an English-speaking city – to the truly awful – a family is forced to flee its country

of origin so as to escape persecution during a civil war. Even within these two situations there is room for variation. A child in the first case may have no interest in their parent's good fortune and wish only to stay with their friends. A child in the second case might be relieved to be living in a safe country, even if the uprooting was beyond their control.

Each EAL student who you encounter will be different. Try to find out a little about their backgrounds so you can understand where they are coming from (literally and metaphorically). This will help you to help them. Be sure to assimilate the information they provide during lessons: how they interact with others, the personality they project, the manner in which they respond to you, how they appear to apply themselves in an unfamiliar environment. Build up a picture of them and use it to aid your teaching. Do be prepared for it to alter though. As students become more confident in the language of the classroom, so their personalities might change. Your assumptions, whether made unwittingly or not, may well be challenged.

Much of what I have said so far has presumed that EAL learners are homogenous in their relationship to English, if not in other areas. They come to learn it as an additional language, their development progresses and, finally, they master it.

This is true in a general sense. It is logically sound to assume the following: First, a person comes into contact with something they did not previously know. Second, they spend a period of time engaging with and experiencing that thing. Third, providing they persist in the process, they eventually become capable of using the thing on their own terms. This is a rough, overarching model for learning.

Yet, when we are teaching, we will not by necessity encounter EAL learners in this way. They will arrive in our classrooms already at a point in the process. Consider the following shape: a long, thin, double-ended arrow; a continuum. At one end are learners who are encountering English for the first time, at the other end are learners who are highly skilled in every aspect of the language.

We could place all of our students, whether they are EAL learners or not, on this continuum. In fact, we could place everyone we know on it. We could stretch it further and include a whole range of criteria by which to determine where precisely different individuals fit.

Its use for us, though, is simpler. Conceive of your EAL students as being on the continuum. Once you have spent some time teaching them, look to place them in your mind roughly where you think they are at. The more experience you have, the more accurate these judgements will become.

Most schools will assess EAL learners and indicate to which of the EAL stages their present abilities correlate. These are nationally agreed criteria, each one of which tallies with certain skills and abilities. It will be useful for you to get hold of this information, but I would counsel against using it in favour of your own judgements. See it as a supplement instead.

The advantage of the continuum approach is that it provides you with a mental model that is continuous rather than discrete. The EAL stages are discrete because a continuum would be unwieldy at national level. It would also rely on subjective judgements and therefore lose its standardising capacity.

So, take note of the EAL stages and familiarise yourself with what each one refers to, but do not write off your own judgement in favour of them. Remember that you spend five days a week with students and are constantly assessing their abilities, including the extent to which they are able to manipulate language. Call on these skills when working with EAL learners.

Assume that when they first arrive in your lesson they will be at some point on the continuum. Find out what EAL stage they are at and any extra information which is available and may be of help. Make a judgement. Be prepared to alter this judgement as you spend more time with them. Your interactions will alter accordingly. Initially, you may judge student A to be further along the continuum than student B. As such, you will use more developed language when speaking to student A. Given a couple of months, student B might have caught up, while student A has plateaued. You will refine your judgements and adjust your use of language accordingly.

Thinking with the continuum model is also helpful because it allows you to see EAL learners in relation to native speakers. It encompasses all students in the class and so avoids putting EAL students to one side as a separate and distinct group. It promotes equality while recognising that learners have different needs. It also signals the potential for using

native speakers to help new language learners develop their communication skills.

The Four Elements of Language: Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing

Let us now think about the four elements which go to make up the English language: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

While all of these share similarities, including certain prerequisites that lead to success, they are nonetheless different. Here are some activities you might like to try which make this point clearer:

- ◆ Have a conversation with a friend. Go away afterwards and write a short piece about the same topic. Observe what is lost and what is gained through writing.
- ◆ Listen to a play on the radio. Get hold of the script and read it yourself. Consider how these two experiences differ.
- ◆ Hold a discussion with your class concerning an interesting question. After, ask them to write an answer to the same question. Compare these. (It would be fruitful to make an audio recording of the discussion and make a direct comparison.)
- ◆ Pick a topic at random from the dictionary and write about it, without stopping, for two minutes. Read what you have written. Ask yourself whether it makes sense, if someone else would understand it, and how the act of reading it compares to the act of writing it.

The four elements of language make different requirements and have different effects.

Listening

Listening comes first. Babies can listen before they can speak. It is through listening that they learn language. The same is true of older children and adults. Many of the most effective language training programmes are centred on listening to native speakers and trying to imitate the sounds which they make. This is because, of course, any language is initially *just* sounds. Meaning is attached to the sounds, but we must learn this meaning as well.

When children are developing speech, they can physically indicate things they want by, for example, pointing or grabbing. Therefore, they know in some sense that these things are there, and they believe they have the capacity to interact with them (a baby *could* reach for a rainbow). These things, and let us take an example of a toy bus, have no linguistic meaning for the child as yet though. The child does not think ‘I want the toy bus.’ It sees something, yes, and it wants that thing, yes, but beyond this there is nothing to say.

As the child grows it comes to be aware of the particular sounds which parents and carers attach to the toy bus. This happens through the child listening. The attachments are arbitrary – a bus could be called a boogly-gloop – and so must be learnt. They are not innate to either the object or to the human species.

Think back to the first time you heard a piece of music which you immediately fell in love with. The chances are that, having listened to it again and again, you now hear it with great acuity. You can pick out key changes, the arrival of new instruments, and the modulations in the singer’s voice (if there is a singer). It is unlikely you understood the song in this manner when you first heard it. Repeated listens have helped you to remember the song. This, in turn, has provided you with the capacity to analyse it. When you first heard it, it was all new. You were taking everything in. Your brain was immersed.

Listening, as such, can develop. The more familiar one becomes with sounds, the more one is able to deal actively with those sounds. This includes identifying the meaning which is attached to them. It also includes ‘reading’ the intonation with which they are said. ‘Stop!’ can carry many different meanings, all of which are dependent on the stress, pace, volume, and tone of the delivery.

Speaking

While listening comes first, it is not long followed by speaking, and, once that arrives, the two remain inseparable.

As you learn to speak a language you are able to communicate with others in an increasingly sophisticated way. The subject of this communication is either external or internal to the person in question. The former refers to things which exist beyond the individual, for example, a chair, a

curtain, or another person. The latter refers to things which are inherent to the individual. These include feelings, opinions, beliefs, and so forth.

Mastering the basics of speech is vital if one is to become part of the social world. This is not to say those who cannot speak are outside of society. Clearly people use sign language to communicate, and even those with severe disabilities are able to convey some or many of their thoughts through alternative systems (which could include technological assistance in the form of computers).

Speaking, though, is the primary means humans have to share what is inside their heads. It is closely linked to the formation and maintenance of relationships. ‘We don’t speak anymore.’ ‘I can’t communicate with him’. ‘There has been an irreparable breakdown in communications.’ These phrases apply in many situations involving two or more individuals. All indicate the absolute centrality of speech to human relationships.

The couple who ‘don’t speak anymore’ are unlikely to remain together. The mother who ‘can’t communicate with’ her teenage child is likely to feel like there is a gap developing between them. The warring factions who have ‘an irreparable breakdown in communications’ veer away from conciliation and mutual understanding and head towards animosity and suspicion.

Speaking, combined with listening, is the mainstay of language. It is the natural, nurtured component which provides for our innate need to bond with one another and the skill, however first developed, to learn and to pass on information about ourselves and the world.

Returning briefly to the issue of emotion, the temporary inability to make their thoughts understood can be deeply frustrating for EAL learners (so too for the teacher). Equally, the teacher’s knowledge that the efficacy of their own speech is limited (or, in some cases, nil) – because upon hearing it the learner does not understand it – is also frustrating. The learner may feel the same. They hear what seems to be an undifferentiated, meaningless mass of sounds, yet they know there must be some meaning hidden within, if only they had the means by which to access it.

Speaking and listening account for much of language. Both skills must be mastered by the EAL learner. The more adept they become at listening to spoken English and speaking it themselves, the easier it will be for

you and they to cement your professional relationship. This will include the academic part – where you are teaching them a subject – and the non-academic part – where you are teaching rules and morals as well as communicating with them in a non-didactic sense.

It is likely that EAL learners will develop their spoken English in advance of their written English and that they will be able to listen to English with acuity well before they can read it with ease. This can cause a discrepancy about which you should be mindful. It is not one exclusive to EAL learners.

An individual – be they a student or an adult, someone for whom English is a first language or someone for whom it is a second language – may well be able to convey their thoughts more clearly and accurately in speech than in writing.

Speech is practised for long periods, every day. It is attended by a range of supplementary means of communication: facial expressions, body language, gestures, intonation, and volume. It can be modified in response to the audience. One phrase which is ubiquitous reads: ‘Do you know what I mean?’ Despite its overuse, it can nonetheless elicit important information. If the response is ‘no’ then we can try saying our piece again. We may even choose to say the same thing differently, or to give an example, or to make an analogy. This is not possible when writing.

The writer can edit their work, but any feedback they receive will be limited and after the event. This leads us on to an important point by which we must distinguish writing from speech.

Writing

Writing is a technology. It extends the reach of human beings in time and in space. It has much in common with speech, but it also has much that differs. We have already considered the example of instant modification. Let us look at some more:

- ◆ Writing requires something beyond the human body. This could be a pen, a piece of chalk, a computer, or whatever.
- ◆ Speech is ephemeral, writing is not. You or I could go and read the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of texts believed to be around

two thousand years old. We can never know anything of the conversations those who wrote them might have had.

- ◆ Writing is linear, whereas speech need not necessarily be so. Take a look at this book. See how the writing begins at the top left hand corner of the page, works its way across, and finally finishes at the bottom right hand corner of the page. Now imagine a conversation with a friend. You might ‘go round in circles’. You might ‘come straight to the point’. You might ‘lose your point’. All these terms are metaphorical. Speech does not conform to geometry in the way writing must.
- ◆ Writing possesses fewer supplementary methods for specifying meaning. We have indicated how speech comes wrapped up in gesture, intonation, and so forth. Writing has punctuation. This is a much more limited system. Take the following sentence as an example: ‘How did you find it?’ On reading such a sentence, one is relying on the context being sufficiently accurate to convey the precise meaning (or for some additional text which explains, such as: ‘she said menacingly’). Yet, if we heard such a phrase we would almost instantly recognise the meaning, most likely as a result of noticing where the speaker placed the stress.
- ◆ This leads us into reading. The contextual world in which a reader operates is vastly different to that which they work in when listening to speech. And it cannot be made up for by asking questions of clarification or requesting further information.
- ◆ In order to write accurately, in a way that conveys the meaning intended, one needs to understand certain conventions and be able to recall (or look up) words and phrases. In speech, the same does not apply. While a high value is placed on precise speech and certain settings require one to follow formal conventions, writing makes much heavier demands on the individual to conform and to be consistent with accepted usage. Again, the option to adjust, edit, rephrase, and recalibrate in the face of information received from the audience is simply not available.

The technological nature of writing should not be overlooked. Disentangling writing and speech, and making this explicit to students, is important. Many learners – EAL and others – quickly become demotivated when they find themselves without the deftness of touch which

they have when speaking. The transfer of thought into visual language is taxing (remember, writing is visual), even more so if it is to be done accurately and precisely.

Reading

We come last to reading. Just as speaking and listening are joined, so are reading and writing. In each case we have a complementary pairing which covers the conveying of one's own thoughts and the reception of other people's.

Reading extends the cognitive capacity of humans well beyond that which writing on its own achieves. Possessing books equates to possessing a permanently accessible store of knowledge and ideas which exist independently of one's own mind. Libraries are the apotheosis of this fact; public or university collections offer thousands upon thousands of volumes, each one containing the thoughts of others made available through their having been written down.

A single example will suffice, one with which we are all familiar: the dictionary. Consider the absolute impossibility of an individual retaining the entirety of even a small version in their own mind. They may be able to use and explain most of the words such an edition would contain, but it is highly unlikely their recall would be comprehensive. What is more, they would almost certainly not be able to produce explanations as precise and specific for every word. Nor would they be able to ensure the consistency of these over time.

The dictionary provides each of us with an extension of our mental capacities. It allows us to check our understanding of words. It provides us with the meanings of new words we encounter. It gives examples of usage. It may point to synonyms or antonyms. Some versions will explain the origins of words and how their usage has altered over time.

The ability to read is like a key to an enormous stock of human knowledge. It allows us into the minds of others. In the case of fiction, we experience the imagination of people who we may never meet. Indeed, we can readily experience the imaginative landscapes of those who have been dead for centuries and more. The writings of Plato come from a civilisation eternally lost to us; the past is a place we cannot truly know. We can know *of* it, though, through reading those traces which remain.

Reading benefits from the logical structure of writing and its technical form. When reading we can revisit information at will, sure in the knowledge that it will remain identical to how it was when we first encountered it. This is not the case with speech, hence why it is always better to have a written contract than a verbal one.

We are also able to stop and return. Folding over the corner of a page or inserting a bookmark ensures we keep our place. We do not lose the moment as we might when speaking to someone. Nor do we run the risk of forgetting what was being conveyed; the information has already been written down and stored. The memory work is done for us by the fixing of the words in physical form.

When reading we have a greater expectation of sense and logic than when we are listening to someone. In the latter we do make these expectations, but they are caveated by the possibility of asking the speaker for clarification and relying upon the supplementary means of communication to disclose meaning. In addition, we will probably be more ready to fill in gaps in our understanding through (whether consciously or not) the use of assumptions or reference to prior experience.

Faced with a piece of text which is unclear, garbled, or seemingly nonsensical, we find ourselves without further immediate means by which to decode the writing. The means which *are* available – asking another person to read it and offer their opinion; writing to the author; researching, if possible, using other texts – are time-consuming, potentially indefinite (where *do* I look for the answer?), and do not presuppose the same likelihood of success as the methods employed to decode speech.

This is not to say that when we come to read a text we arrive as if from nowhere, without any prior knowledge or understanding. This is manifestly not the case. A reader seeks to contextualise the text in front of them by placing it within the mental maps they already have, by making connections to that which they already know, and by hypothesising interpretations which can be tested through further analysis.

The more one has read, the more one has thought about the written word and its relationship to reality, the more there is available to aid the development of understanding when encountering a new piece of writing. I say ‘development of understanding’ because it will often be the case that a reader will actively create meaning from a text rather than

unlocking some definite meaning which has been put there by the author. It will depend, in part, on the genre, the author's purpose, and so forth. Yet, your reading of a text is unlikely to be identical to the next person's reading. It is all a matter of interpretation.

EAL learners are at a disadvantage when it comes to reading. In learning the language they are coming into contact with it for the first time. Therefore, they will be far behind their peers in terms of what they have read. Once they master the art of reading in English, they may well still lack some (or much) of the contextual apparatus which other students take for granted.

This difference will diminish as the learners develop their English skills (and context comes from experience as well as reading). Nonetheless, it is an important point to consider when asking EAL learners to work with written texts. On a side note, if we return to a continuum model, we might choose to view all of our learners as possessing relative levels of contextual understanding. The ability to access written information successfully is thus something we should be mindful about for our whole class.

Clarity, Accuracy, and Precision

Specific strategies, activities, and techniques for working with EAL learners follow this introduction. We may think briefly about general principles first. These inform the practical measures which come later.

Based on what has been said and what I presume you already know about EAL students, it is evident that clarity, accuracy and precision are of great importance when you are communicating in the classroom.

Clarity of language aids understanding. If you do not say or write what it is you mean to say, as simply as possible, you are giving your students more work to do. Simplicity does not mean as few words as possible – such an approach can be terse and unfriendly. What it does mean is using the amount of words necessary, no more and no less. This is not a figure which can be arrived at mathematically. It is a judgement on your part. Ask yourself whether what you are saying to students is sufficiently clear. If it is not, you may need to alter what you are saying or how you are saying it.

Minimising ambiguity is central to good teaching. This includes teaching EAL students. The teacher is on the wrong side of the numbers game in the classroom. They are on their own with perhaps twenty to thirty pupils in front of them. Each one needs to know what they are supposed to be doing. Each one is looking and listening separately. You, meanwhile, are alone, single and unitary. The worst possible situation is to have twenty to thirty voices crying out in discord: ‘What do I do?’ ‘I don’t understand what we are supposed to be doing.’ ‘Is this what you meant?’

To avoid such situations and to aid your EAL learners, think carefully before you speak, and spend time paring down the language on your resources. When giving instructions, do not begin until you know what you are going to say. It sounds obvious, yet it is a rule easily ignored. Many people will have a notion of what they wish to say but then find themselves lost, indulging in repetition, or saying something different to that which they intended. This can be avoided by taking a couple of seconds to flesh out in your head the specifics of what you want to communicate. You may even rehearse sentences prior to speaking them.

There will be times when it feels like you and your students are on different wavelengths. Remember, however, that the only control you have is over yourself. Get things right here and the rest will follow. Focussing on clarity will make you a better teacher in general, as well as with EAL learners specifically.

Accuracy and precision are two of the key elements which go to make up clarity. Think of accuracy as correctness and precision as exactness. The former requires you to ensure similarity between what you are thinking and what your language conveys to students. If you fail to specify the format in which you want something done and then complain when you receive posters instead of essays, the fault can be traced back to a lack of accuracy on your part. If you tell students to answer a question in whatever format they feel most comfortable with and this accords with your intentions, you are being accurate.

Accuracy helps create a better relationship between teacher and students because it minimises misunderstandings and helps pupils to understand the expectations you have of them. Such an atmosphere also gives you more time to work with students you have identified as needing your support, including EAL learners. By being accurate you are more

in control of how you use your time during a lesson. You can therefore be more efficient.

Precision concerns your choice of words and the way in which you articulate them. You could accurately convey your meaning but do so in a long and unwieldy speech. Being precise means communicating your thoughts exactly as you intend them – and this means *as you intend them to be understood*. Excess language is the bane of good communication. It leads the listener astray and diminishes the impact of what you have said. You may still be able to communicate your meaning, but it will be less powerful and less persuasive because of your lack of precision.

Being precise means editing your speech and selecting the words which hold the exact meaning you intend them to hold. It means not repeating yourself unless it seems necessary and you consciously decide to do so. It may well be that with certain groups of students you will need to repeat yourself. This should be at your behest. Unconscious repetition is a sign that you are not really clear on what you are trying to say and have not considered what language will give the precise meaning you intend.

Being precise is vital if one wishes to minimise ambiguity. This is important for all learners, but especially for EAL students. They do not have the same means for filling in gaps or making assumptions about what you might be asking them to do. Look at the word ‘might’ in that last sentence. If your language leaves possibilities open that you have not intended, then you are making life harder for your students. An EAL learner is developing their understanding of English. The more precise and accurate is the language they see and hear in the classroom, the easier you are making it for them.

Clarity, precision, and accuracy: three words which should stay with you while you are teaching and creating resources. All your students will benefit, particularly those who are EAL learners. You may well find that it helps to minimise behaviour issues and increases motivation as well. There is a lot to be said for knowing where one stands and precisely what one is being asked for. It also makes it much easier to pull pupils up if they are not doing what they should be doing.

One final note on clarity and EAL learners, reinforcing the logic underpinning what has been stated. Our premises are as follows:

1. EAL learners are more likely to be positioned toward the ‘newly encountering English’ end of our continuum.
 2. Their knowledge and understanding of English is likely to be at an earlier stage of development than that of their peers.
 3. Their abilities in English in the four elements of language – speaking, writing, reading, and listening – will reflect point (2).
- Therefore, to assist them, it is only right that we:
- ◆ Make sure our language is clear and that it conveys exactly what we mean it to convey.
 - ◆ Model accurate and precise use of language so pupils are learning what is correct.
 - ◆ Minimise ambiguity so as to lower students’ workload. This will allow them to concentrate on developing their understanding of what is said and written (rather than guessing at what is not said and not written). It will also help them to achieve success because the task of decoding is simpler. Success invariably aids motivation.

Conclusion

We have thought carefully about EAL learners and some aspects of our relationships with them. We have also thought about the nature of language and how it relates to and affects the individual who uses it. In so doing we have developed a nuanced picture of EAL learners and of language.

In addition, by suggesting a continuum perspective, indicating the similarities between EAL and non-EAL learners, and noting how the elements of language have facets and uses which are universal, we have intimated toward a style of teaching which sees all students as being in the process of language development. The needs students have are distinguished by the stage of development they find themselves at.

This approach is, I think, equitable, practical, and philosophically sound. It does not deny that EAL learners may require distinct support and that they lack at present some (or many) of the skills, knowledge, and understanding their peers take for granted. However, nor does it cleave them off into some separate group who may be marginalised because of the communication difficulties they are working to overcome.

It aims to treat EAL learners as individuals while still seeing them as part of the whole class. In turn, it sees the whole class as being in the process of language development, thus neutralising any notion that they have somehow ‘done it’ and require no further input from the teacher at the level of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Thinking in such a way negates many of the concerns we may have about meeting the needs of EAL learners when teaching whole-class or mixed-ability groups. This is because the underlying premise is that we are thinking about language anyway – ensuring it is an integral part of our teaching – and therefore helping EAL learners will involve doing what we do already, with some adaptations to recognise where they are on the continuum (and there are plenty enough of these contained within this book).

Further, taking such an approach in your classroom will convey to all of your students the normality of thinking about language, as well as the myriad ways in which we can develop our understanding of it. This is a good end in itself. In addition though, it should also help to stress the equality of all learners – regardless of where their English language skills are currently at.

Unfortunately, there is the potential for children (and adults) to fasten on difference and to see it in a negative light. Ensuring this does not happen, and that everyone in the classroom feels safe and secure, is important. Communicating a message of equality through your method sets the moral tone. Students will want to follow. If they do not, you have clearly set your stall out in advance and can admonish them accordingly.

To sum up, here is a checklist to bear in mind when working with EAL learners:

- ◆ EAL learners are, in many ways, just the same as the rest of your students.
- ◆ All learners respond to genuine praise.
- ◆ Making it clear why praise has been given aids learning.
- ◆ Genuine sympathy can help build rapport.
- ◆ Expect that you and your EAL learners will feel frustrated at times. Deal with this.
- ◆ All students are individuals.
- ◆ All students are at a different stage of language development.

- ◆ EAL learners are, generally, at an earlier stage of language development. They will therefore need extra, or different, support.
- ◆ Language consists of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
- ◆ These four elements have similarities.
- ◆ They also differ in significant ways.
- ◆ Writing is a technology which has given rise to reading.
- ◆ Clarity, precision, and accuracy should be your watchwords in the classroom.
- ◆ Minimising ambiguity helps everybody.
- ◆ At all times your written and spoken language is a model for students.

And with all that in mind, on we go to the strategies, techniques, and activities.