

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR WORKING WITH ENGLISH AS SECOND-LANGUAGE STUDENTS**

The following are some suggestions for working with students whose second language is English (ESL students). You may already use many of these ideas as you work with your classes.

### **Structured Participation with Teams**

When planning discussions and exercises for the class, look for structured ways to have students respond orally and in writing. The student with limited English proficiency may be shy about voluntarily asking questions and participating in discussions, but will be willing to work as part of a small team in which each member has a task that leads to completion of an exercise.

### **Be Open to Questions**

Most instructors profess to be open to questions. However, our attitudes and behaviors may indicate otherwise – our body language, lack of time in and out of class, reluctance to spend time with one student at the expense of others – the possibilities are myriad. Lack of openness to questions may be shy or not understand when and how to ask questions appropriately. In some cultures, asking questions may mean exposing one's ignorance or may reflect on the teacher's ability to get the information across. Students might feel that if they ask for help, they will be considered lazy or stupid. Therefore, the instructor will need to make a special effort to encourage students to ask questions. Having a special time for questions will help more than asking the obligatory "Are there any questions?", since the shy ESL student will rarely respond to this query. The instructor may need to check specifically with the ESL student in a way that will not be embarrassing; for example, "Kim, is that clear for you?" Checking for comprehension early and making appropriate recommendations can prevent much anguish later. The instructor might set aside a specific time when ESL students can come to seek answers to questions, or express feelings or frustrations. Be ready to make the first move.

### **First Language Buddies**

Encourage the ESL student to pair with a native speaker of English who is willing to practice

conversation and pronunciation and answer questions about meanings and culture with the ESL student. It is ideal if the pair studies together. There is considerable benefit to the native speaker of English, as he/she has the opportunity to learn about another culture and become more comfortable listening to and working with someone with a different language.

### **Pocket Notebook**

Ask each student to buy a small alphabetized address book or notebook in which to list unfamiliar words in everyday speech and heard in class. For example, *blanch* can refer to skin color or to cooking vegetables, *void* can refer to urine or to checks, and a pillow *case* can also be called a pillow *slip*. Ask to see the notebooks periodically or have a time when the ESL student can share them with you, a buddy, or the class.

### **Restating**

Have students restate a concept or explanation in "plain English" during class to make sure they understand the concept and will be able to explain it to a patient, if necessary. Be suspect rather than satisfied when you hear the textbook phrases coming back to you. Ask, "Can you put that into your own words?" Have students practice telling each other acronyms to make sure they can pronounce the words and that they correctly understand the meanings.

### **Special Teaching Techniques**

#### **Role Playing**

During role playing, ESL students have the opportunity to practice English as well as nursing skills as they respond spontaneously to realistic situations. Pairing a native English speaker as the "patient" and an ESL student as the "nurse" elicits a natural-sounding dialogue because the native English speaker will know something of what the patient might say and ESL student has the opportunity to use English to communicate therapeutically. Role playing works best when guidelines are given as to what the interaction is meant to accomplish; for example, the patient is to ask the nurse about her special diet. The nurse's instructions are to respond by determining what the patient knows about the diet, give correct information about the reason for the diet, and to review foods allowed and not allowed. Roles can be scripted at first or briefly

worked out in advance with the players. The ESL student may find it easier to role play a part when familiar with both the role and what he/she should say. Lab coats, bathrobes, and other props help with getting into the role. If a student resists, he/she should not be forced to wear a costume. Early in the semester it may be advisable to have roles modeled initially by native English speakers. However, using as ESL student and a native English-speaking student has the advantage of allowing the ESL student to practice giving information in English and the native English speaker to become more attuned to accented speech. It is not unusual for cross-cultural learning to take place during role playing.

### Categorizing

Categorizing involves assigning lists of words, phrases situations, or actions to their correct groupings; generating the words for a given category; or discovering the categories contained within a list. The student is required to think about the meaning of the words, and at the same time, practice using and writing them. If done in a group of mixed language speakers, it also necessitates the use of good English skills to accomplish the task.

### Information Gap Reporting

In a team of two or three people, each person has some part of the total information needed to complete a task. The others may ask for the information and one must supply it. For example, to complete a patient's vital signs flow sheet, one person has the blood pressure; another, the temperature; and a third, the respiration data. Alternatively, each may have complete information on one of three patients. This requires interaction, negotiation, and use of language skills in real-life situations.

### Focused Grammar Exercises

Ask questions aimed at eliciting responses in which the student answers using the same tense or mode in which the question is asked. Here are some examples:

“When you went into the room, what was the patient doing?” *He was sleeping.*

“What is he doing?” *He is sleeping.*

“What just happened?” *He fell out of bed.*

“What was he doing when he fell out of bed?” *He was trying to get into his wheelchair.*

If the student uses the incorrect tense, such as “*He is trying to get into his wheelchair,*” respond by cueing, “That’s what he is doing now. What was he doing?”

Have students practice temporal phrases that indicate when something happens: a few minutes ago, since June, since 2 p.m., for 2 hours, in 15 minutes, already, just now, last week, etc. Try not to let an incorrect usage slip by just because you understand what the student means. In another context, it may not be so clear.

If tenses and time phrases are not understood and used correctly, it can become unclear whether a task has been done or is yet to be done. Also, a patient may not know if something has happened or is yet to happen. The importance of this aspect of language cannot be overstated. The frustration of the supervisor is nothing compared to the well-being of the patient.

### Culture

A good way to help students focus on issues and to involve them in class participation is to discuss issues and attitudes they know first-hand. In all matters concerning students' native cultures and countries, be careful to be nonjudgmental in the wording you use, the tone of your voice, and comments about responses. Constructing an “unloaded” question or topic is not easy. The purpose should be to focus on the issue, solicit information, and become aware of differences and attitudes, not to evaluate them.

When we are aware of our own attitudes and biases, it is easier to handle them appropriately. Point out to students that this skill is one that nurses need to use in working with patients; for instance, when taking histories and making assessments. It is useful to have the native English-speaking students examine the same issues in their own culture and families. Point out that all students are moving from thinking in a social context to thinking in a scientific context. Some attitudes will be supported, others will not. Because an instructor cannot know or teach everything about every culture, using students to foster learning about

one another's culture can serve to enhance cultural competence.

One particularly interesting discussion topic is home remedies that reflect typical treatments and attitudes about medicine in the native country. Ask students how their parents or grandparents treated certain maladies. This technique serves to point out that we are all products of our culture, whether foreign-born or not. It also shows how ideas change over time, gives newcomers insights into American culture, and provides a common ground for discussion. Another interesting topic to discuss is attitudes of individuals from various cultures toward such things as asking questions, relationships when working with the opposite sex, employer expectations of staff members, expected loyalties, family relationships, privacy expectations, touching, and caring for the sick and elderly. Body language is yet another topic that can be explored. One might demonstrate gestures and postures and promote discussion of how individuals of various cultures might interpret them. Include information on personal space and appropriate touching in each culture. Another interesting exercise is the exploration of personal feelings and attitudes about a variety of controversial issues such as abortion, DNR orders, etc.

## **Communication**

### **Dialogues**

Sometimes telling an ESL student to say something is not enough; for example, "Explain to the patient that he will be NPO." The speaker needs to know specifically what to say and how to say it. The instructor can supply or model sample phrases or actual dialogue. Problem-solving is an effective strategy to foster dialogues. Groups work together to solve a

problem, then write their own dialogues for the situation. Students can present their dialogues for the situation. Students can present their dialogues, generated alone, in pairs, or in a group to the class.

### **General Communication**

Offer examples of what to say in the following types of situations: asking for clarification and requesting help; reporting patient data, documenting, describing incidents, and accidents; apologizing or warning; negotiating, such as "not now, but later;" handling conflicts and complaints; making small-talk and using social language. Practicing problem-solving situations in a group comprised of native English speakers and ESL students is an excellent way to learn collaboratively.

### **Verbal and Nonverbal Communication**

Discuss types of nonverbal communication used in the United States and other cultures. Point out when and what types of topics Americans talk about; what we say and what we do not say; when we talk and when we do not talk. Explain how to interrupt politely and how to excuse oneself.

### **Pronunciation**

A good pronunciation exercise is to have students practice saying and listening to acronyms and abbreviations or similar-sounding word pairs with a partner. Have the listener write down what he/she hears and ask for repetition when he/she does not understand. Compare the lists to see if the words were pronounced and heard correctly. Follow this by discussing the meanings of the acronyms or words.