



# *language works:*

reflections and critiques  
by language/literacy tutors and coordinators  
at the Swearer Center for Public Service, Brown University

Spring 2001

Welcome to the second edition of *language works*. This newsletter is a way for us to share with one another, as tutors and as coordinators. Help us continue the dialogue by contacting the writers of the following pieces, as well as Alison Simmons, to offer your own take on the issues expressed below.

Sarah Wells '01, Editor, *language works*

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## **Questioning our Methodology: the definition of learner-centered**

Becky Taylor, tutor, Met ESOL

A paradigm that emphasizes giving learners greater control over their learning cannot espouse to trust and support student's desires and goals in one breath and then tell them what is best for them in the next.

This semester I have greatly enjoyed the opportunity to teach an ESOL class to parents from all over Latin America at the MET school. While our class developed a strong community atmosphere and I felt a great deal of learning take place amongst both tutors and learners, I was surprised by some of the challenges and questions I was forced to confront as a first time tutor. At times I have found myself in a bit of a quandary, trained first and foremost to be learner-centered, but also given certain suggestions such as not to correct errors in some situations. It is easy to be learner-centered when the desires of the learners are the same as the desires of the teacher; however, the difficulty arises when learners are telling you they want to be taught in a different way than you want to teach them.

Key questions have come up during the semester. Is it empowering not to correct student's errors, even if they have explicitly requested that you do so? Are we disempowering students by not taking into account their wishes? Who should decide the best way for a learner to be taught--the teacher or the student? I have found it difficult to balance a desire to do what I may think is best for students, and the belief that in the end students really know how they would like to be taught and what will help them learn. I have struggled with this and will most likely continue to do so, for these questions have no real easy answers.

**To consider:** *Becky asks some provocative questions about what 'learner-centered' means. On the one hand, learners who request traditional methodology in the classroom (e.g., strict, constant error correction) might be doing so out of the feeling that education is 'supposed' to look like that. In this sense, tutors can encourage an expansion of that definition by adopting more creative, flexible, and non-traditional activities. On the other hand, as Becky suggests, how do tutors ensure that they are not imposing their own model upon learners? For a compelling critique of this 'imposing' model, as it relates to K-12 work, see Lisa Delpit's "Power, Pedagogy, and Other People's Children" in her Other people's children: cultural conflict in the classroom (1995).*

## **Introducing the Student-Worker Partnership Program**

Nora Rosenberg, co-Coordinator, Student-Worker Partnership Program

It took me six hours a day, 180 days a year, for twelve years to earn my high school diploma. That's nearly 13,000 hours. There's no way around it--learning is a long process. It requires practice, patience and reinforcement. For people with families and full-time jobs, time is always scarce. This prevents many capable adults from earning their GED (high school equivalency) and pursuing other educational goals.

As I initiated and co-coordinated an adult education program for Brown employees, I began thinking about adult education and the many complications that accompany it. The Student-Worker Learning Partnership started small. We currently work with eight employees who had initially expressed interest in furthering their education by participating in a Brown Adult Secondary Education (ASE) class. The Partnership is structured to give individual attention to workers at different skill levels with a variety of educational goals. Classes range from basic math and writing to email, internet and typing training.

The strength of the program has been its flexibility and ability to work around workers' tight schedules. Many of the tutors work with learners during their half-hour lunch breaks. Some have had to work around erratic schedules. Despite the successes of our program and the measurable achievements of our learners, there is a need for the University to offer these dedicated employees a few more hours each week for them to pursue their GEDs. It is ironic (at best) that Brown, an institution that places such a high value on learning, offers few opportunities for many of its own employees to achieve their educational goals.

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## Expanding Brown's Borders: Inviting Learners into Our Community

Zandra Kambysellis, Coordinator, Swearer ABE

Much of the rhetoric surrounding our volunteer work concerns issues of privilege, "hierarchies of power," or "charity-work". I think that one way to address this would be to strive for a more balanced interaction with the communities with whom we work. In this sense, we can learn as much as we teach, and we can share as much as is shared with us.

What I envision is more of an equal mixing, or a meeting at an imaginary cross-roads, as opposed to the more one-sided movement by the members of one community (ours) into another (theirs). In addition to Brown students going out into the communities where our learners live and work and learn (Olneyville, South Providence, etc.), I'd like to see those same learners welcomed into *our* "community"

**To consider:** *Consider scheduling a fieldtrip with learners to the RISD museum, which is free on Thursdays. Minimal text and loads of visuals and can be great discussion pieces for later on in the tutoring session.*

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## Incorporating Discussions on Diversity into our Programs

Sara Whetstone, Coordinator, Partners in Education (PIE)  
Program

*Sara recently led our language and literacy learning community with a discussion on white privilege and how it relates to the work we do in our programs. First, we individually filled out a questionnaire which asked us to rate numerically our experiences regarding race in a variety of context. (See an adapted excerpt, below.) These questions were drawn from Peggy McIntosh's article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Then we had a discussion about our scores and how they might effect our work as coordinators and as tutors.*

I came across the McIntosh piece while taking a course at Brown, ED 101, 'The Craft of Teaching.' I wanted to bring it to our learning community because of the lack of discussion on issues of diversity in our programs. In our meetings, we tend to focus on logistical concerns and sometimes overlook the much greater implications. I think that to ignore these issues is to ignore part of what we do.

(libraries, dorms, fields, lecture halls, etc.). For all the things that stop a university from being considered a "real" community (transient populations, restricted admittance to certain buildings), there are just as many that make us into a very unique neighborhood. Through interaction between communities, I think the truest exchanges can take place. In addition to our time, energy and knowledge of grammar or geometry, I think the most valuable thing we have to offer is simply something that has been offered to us: access to some of Brown's vast resources. It would not be difficult to make much of what goes on here--- lectures, concerts, workshops, readings, presentations -- open and accessible to the wider community.

So I encourage all tutors to invite their learners to hear a lecture by a guest speaker from the UN, or for ESOL teachers to bring a class of their students to see a multi-cultural arts show in Sayles. By whatever creative means possible, we can find original ways to incorporate the best parts of our own little Brown community into their lesson plans.

As our learners are adults, I feel the issue of diversity is particularly salient. For social, political, and economic reasons, the people with whom we work have often had fewer opportunities than our volunteers. And, given the history of oppression in this country, our learners are mostly people of color. In contrast, most of our tutors are white women. Learners see the differences between them and the volunteers, even if we don't talk about them.

I am not quite sure of how to approach these issues of difference with the learners themselves, but I feel that as coordinators and volunteers we can raise awareness about the importance of diversity in the work we do. On the pragmatic level, it would be useful to reconsider, for example, the materials we bring in, the concepts/ideas that we present in our lessons, and the way in which we view our learners. In addition, we should use our meetings to have discussions about the underlying assumptions about our learners and our work. Challenging our assumptions and preconceived notions is important because we often forget that we are bringing them to the program with us.

In order to more easily address issues of diversity within our programs, I think our application process needs to be more upfront about the role of diversity in our

work. Accordingly, we should include questions such as what does it mean to do the work we do, and what are our thoughts about the relationship between issues of diversity and our programs. I also think we need to recruit a more diverse group of volunteers. It's important for adult learners to see that people of color have been successful in educational endeavors. Finally, if coordinators and tutors are interested in incorporating issues of diversity into their meetings but are unsure of how to go about it, they can contact groups on campus (such as the MPC Program) devoted to raising awareness about social justice, equality, and diversity.

**To consider:** *In addition to race, discussions of class and gender might be equally compelling in the work we do. Class differences, for example, are often particularly difficult to talk about because for people who consider the U.S. a meritocracy, class tends to be a naturalized (rather than problematized) category. Finally, it might also be useful to recognize that learners themselves might conceive of all three categories--race, class, and gender--differently, especially if they are from other countries.*



**Adapted excerpt from the McIntosh questionnaire on white privilege**

(See <http://www.spokanehumanrights.org/ccrr/packet/article.htm> for full article.)

Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with these statements. Use the scale below to help you determine your answers.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1	2	3	4	5

1. I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
2. I see people of my race widely represented in the media.
3. When I am told about our national heritage or about 'civilization,' I am shown people of my race in positive, influential roles.
4. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without having to defend my race.
5. I am never asked to "represent" my skin color.
6. If I need legal or medical help, my race will never be a detriment to the quality of the help I receive.



**English for Action: an interview with Adriana Young**

*Adriana Young '01 began English for Action two years ago with another Brown student, Spring Miller '00. The program moved from CHISPA (Center for Hispanic Policy and Advocacy) to the Church of the Messiah and is currently held at Perry Middle School (both in Olneyville). Sarah Wells '01 interviewed Adriana to learn more about the program.*

**Sarah:** *First of all, what is English for Action? How did it begin?*

**Adriana:** *English for Action is an ESOL and community development class which runs twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7:00-9:00 p.m., at Perry Middle School. We have two levels, Beginners (approximately 20 learners) and advanced (around 5). We originally intended the courses to be geared towards advanced speakers of English who needed conversational practice, with a community focus. But more basic English was needed. Our intentions and goals have evolved from the program's initial stages. For example, it's been more challenging to incorporate discussion topics in the beginner level class.*

We began the program in Olneyville Square by going around to businesses and asking people what they knew about Olneyville. Our priority is to facilitate communication between outside social organizations and Olneyville and South Providence, and to begin dialogue about social issues.

S: *Can you tell me what your curriculum looks like?*

A: We've divided up the *English for Action* curriculum into units. We integrate current community issues and local organizing campaigns into the curriculum. For example, we recently wrote testimonies in favor of the Interpreter's Bill, to get mandatory translators in Rhode Island Hospitals. We talk about Olneyville development and the Greenway Project, which is the Providence Plan project to make a parks complex and bike path along the Woonasquatucket River. We also deal with topics such as César Chavez and organizing in the U.S., and Black History Month.

There's a focus on problem-solving, and we punctuate our overarching goals with mini grammar lessons, because that's what people want. We also have a child component, providing child care while having kids work on projects related to their parents, such as doing histories of their families. This summer, we want to make our curriculum more learner-centered, having them design it themselves. Finally, we have a radio show that airs on Monday nights, where we focus on a different native country every week, looking at its relationship to the U.S. We have learners in our program from Guatemala, Mexico, Columbia, Bolivia, Honduras, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic.

S: *How did you establish these units? What resources do you draw from?*

A: Have you heard of the Workplace Project, on Long Island? They work with immigrants and teach a course on Workers' Rights and a history of labor rights. When I went to visit them this past winter, I observed how they incorporate simple ways to engage people with talking about social problems. Undocumented workers then organize to prevent workplace exploitation, especially (in their case) by landscape contractors. They work on establishing informal unions. From the Workplace Project I got activities like the 'Sick Tree Exercise' [see below] and ways to catalyze discussion about workers' rights, such as through understanding how the Nike company works in Indonesia, relating it to companies here, and strategizing about how to change workers' conditions and advocate for them. I also like Elsa Auerbach's *ESOL for Action* and the National Council of La Raza's *Learning English for Social Action*.

S: *What's next for English for Action?*

A: I'm graduating in May, but I am trying to secure funding to continue the program and further develop it into a non-profit organization. We are currently working with students and faculty from the Brown and RISD communities as well as with the city Parks and Development Department to renovate a space for education, arts, and activism in Olneyville. Ultimately, we'd like to have a learner board, consisting of groups targeting particular issues. We need people to be working on fundraising, legal and accounting issues (several learners are trained as accountants), community relations, and the media. I plan to live in Providence for as many years as it takes to make *English for Action* a well-established education and activism organization in Olneyville.

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### **The Sick Tree Exercise**

1. Give each learner a blank leaf (you can use the sample leaf on page 13). Ask them to write down a problem (any problem) they are facing in their lives. Responses may include "I don't have time to study English," or "I did not have enough education in my home country."
  2. Have learners place their leaf on the 'tree' (this could be a large piece of butcher paper.) Ask them to group their leaf with other leaves that express similar concerns.
  3. Begin a discussion on what constitutes the *branches* of the leaves. What about the *trunk*? *The roots*? The idea is to keep 'zooming out' in order to see the bigger picture sources of learners' daily problems. (This is the strategy the Workplace Project uses to begin relating the situation of workers in Indonesia to undocumented workers here in the U.S.)
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Listen to learners from *ESOL for Action* on the program's radio show, Mondays at 7:30 pm on WBSR (88.1).  
To learn more about *English for Action*, contact Adriana at  
[Adriana.Young@moore-mail.com](mailto:Adriana.Young@moore-mail.com)

## ***Empowering Learners through the Language Experience Approach***

Ernest Nino-Murcia, tutor, Pawtucket ESOL

When I first learned about the Language Experience Approach last year, I was apprehensive. My class seemed to be going well enough, with students diligently copying what I wrote on the board or silently filling in blanks on grammar exercises. Looking back on it, I can't really pinpoint what it was that worried me about it. Maybe it was relinquishing control of the class, letting the learners determine its content. Or perhaps it was concern about whether learners would respond to such a nontraditional exercise.

The Language Experience Approach, or **LEA**, describes an activity where learners collectively produce a written response to or description of a stimulus. This is most often a picture, although I have seen some LEAs work well with objects, such as a small statue depicting an action. The images may be tied to that week's unit. For example, during a unit on Health, the tutor could present a picture of a patient talking to his or her doctor. Learners then respond to the picture in writing or by speaking. The tutor can suggest that learners describe the picture using new vocabulary, phrases or grammar points. Some questions can be provided to "prime the pump," such as *What's wrong with the patient?*, *What are these people saying?*, or simply *Who are these people?* Each learner usually presents a sentence, which is copied onto the board or butcher paper, *as is*.

In the next step, the passage is re-written correctly next to or below the original, but without taking a red pen to the original to correct it. This way of approaching errors is similar to the one used in Dialogue Journals. A more subtle approach, it seeks to fix errors without discouraging learners from contributing text. Next, the revised version of the passage is compared to the original, allowing for group discussion of the differences between the two (i.e., errors). The passage may be read aloud to practice pronunciation or used at a later date as a dictation.

I was thrilled to see that the learners were forthcoming with great descriptions, quotes and insights. The LEAs proved to be a great outlet for creativity, a dynamic activity that made learning grammar a little less tedious. LEAs tap into our larger purpose as facilitators: to help learners find a *voice* in English. In the end, learners saw *their* words on the board. The description of such an encounter, when I was taught about LEAs, made sense to me once I saw it myself. It was, simply, *empowering*.

*See the tip sheet on LEAs in the 'Methods' drawer in the Swearer Center's Resource Library for how to tailor the approach to your learners' level. Also see Janet Isserlis' piece, "Using Learner Generated Materials Everyday," in the 'Methods' drawer.*



## Literacy Beyond Brown: Two Guest Speakers on their Community Work

Jeffrey Austin, Coordinator, Central High ESOL

Two people working in the field of adult language and literacy spoke recently to a group of Swearer Center volunteers, coordinators, and staff about their experiences working with literacy projects in New York City. John Gordon of the Open Book explained briefly the work he has done in Adult Basic Education (ABE), teaching literacy both to native and newer English speakers. In the sixteen years he has been doing this work, the Open Book has increasingly worked with learners whose first language is not English. In discussion with the group, he addressed issues such as power dynamics in the classroom, the motivations volunteers have for teaching, and the conflict a teacher or tutor faces between knowing when to try to facilitate learning and when to simply teach.

Klaudia Rivera, who has worked with El Barrio Popular Education Program, now works at the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University, teaching future language and literacy teachers. She showed a short film made by participants of El Barrio, in which a variety of students told their stories as parents, workers, wives, and children, as well as El Barrio students in New York. Common motivations for joining the program included the desire to obtain a GED to go to college, to get a better job, and to be able to help their children with homework. Klaudia also

talked a little bit about native language literacy programs, which target literacy in learners' first languages as well as in English, in order to increase facility in both languages or out of the belief that native language literacy increases one's proficiency in English. Klaudia explained that the program was successful but unfortunately short-lived, as issues arose with funders who wanted to steer the program into more job-oriented avenues.

Both speakers gave an interesting glimpse into some of the programs in adult language and literacy that exist outside of the Swearer Center and the issues they face.

*Check out what John and Klaudia have produced in community-based literacy programs. John has edited two anthologies: I See a Part of Myself, with extensive learner essays (see the 'Learner Generated Materials' Shelf in the Resource Library), and More than a Job, an anthology of poetry, quotes, and essays on the work experience (see the 'Workplace Literacy' shelf in the Library). You can find an essay by Klaudia, "Popular Research and Social Transformation: A Community-Based Approach to Critical Pedagogy" in the 'Methods' drawer of the Library.*



## Tutors and Coordinators Share their Favorite Resources

These and other resources can be found in the Swearer Center's Literacy Resource Library.

*Under the Bridge*: photographs to spark conversations about social justice. On Picture shelf.

*Bridge Across the Americas*: Latin-American stories with guided reading questions. On Reading shelf.

*More than a Job*: an anthology of work-related expression. On Workplace Literacy shelf.

*101 American English Idioms* by Harry Collins. On Vocabulary shelf.

*Family Math*. On Math shelf.

*Oxford English Picture Dictionary*: monolingual, Spanish, Cambodian; beginner level. On Dictionary shelf.

*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros.

*The Civic Participation and Civil Action Sourcebook*. Civil/Social Action! shelf.

*Literacy for Life*. Teaching Theory shelf.

*The Well Being*: a newsletter on health targeted at beginning-intermediate readers. Health shelf.

*The Change Agent*: a newsletter for progressive language/literacy teachers.

# The Challenges of Learning Disabilities

suggested activities for tutors and coordinators

Chris Marashlian, Coordinator, Developmentally Disabled Literacy Program (DDLDP)

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## I. Processing Time Activity

**objective:** To demonstrate that the LD learner typically needs more processing time.

**materials:** Photocopied handout of an advanced, technical article.

**directions:** Go around in a circle and have each coordinator read a sentence from the article. Maintain a fast pace. Do not define new vocabulary. Ask questions about the article (no one should have a clue what's going on; confusion is the idea).

*Follow up with a discussion about why these instructions were confusing and disorienting to the participants.*

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## II. Dyslexia Activity

**objective:** To model the way dyslexic students see the world.

**materials:** Photocopied handout with orientations shuffled to model the way dyslexic readers encounter text. [See the 'Methods' drawer, LD folder, for a sample of the handout that Chris designed.]

**directions:** Go around the table and have each participant try to read a sentence from the handout. The handout will contain a story containing words with a high frequency of the letters b, d, p, and q.

*Follow up with a discussion on the difficulty of the task.*

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**To consider:** *Chris coordinates the DDLDP Program, but his activities are applicable to other populations as well. For example, adult learners might have struggled with traditional (K-12) educational models because of an undiagnosed learning disability. For more information on learning disabilities, check out the tip sheet in the 'Methods' drawer of the Resource Library.*

## Moving Beyond Logistics: Thoughts on Trainings and Meetings

Zandra Kambysellis, Swearer ABE

In addition to some initial training on the practical aspects of tutoring (creating a lesson plan, strategies for teaching grammar, pitfalls to avoid, etc.), I think it is just as important for our volunteers to get an introduction to the communities with whom we work. Because teaching literacy is so people-oriented, I think it is crucial for our volunteers to know some of the essential background information of where our learners are coming from.

In terms of how to get this information across, future coordinators can go crazy with creative ideas on methodology. Some initial thoughts: field trips, guest speakers, Q & A teach-ins, crash-course seminars, mini-research projects. Most important is to get our tutors informed about what makes up these various communities – in terms of their individual histories, demographics, educational systems, etc. At the very least, I think that densely-packed statistic sheets – with data on employment, income, school matriculation/dropout rates, etc. – could prove a useful starting place. At the risk of asking our tutors to give up even more of their time, another suggestion would be for everyone to keep a journal throughout the year, in which they could record their struggles or frustrations, chart instances of personal progress, figure out puzzling problems or contradictions, and generally reflect upon on the meaning of their tutoring/teaching work.

Sharing passages from these journals throughout the year, and especially at the end of the semester, would be one way to spark this type of discussion.

I think that a deeper understanding of the wider social context of our work (from the beginning of the year and continuously throughout) would help all of us to do three things: perform better work, take home longer-lasting lessons, and feel a true sense of achievement at the end.

*Tutors and coordinators might consider writing individual mission statements in order to frame the big picture goals for the semester, and to have something to look back on at the semester's end.*



## **Tutor Reflections**

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### **Tips for Beginner Level ESOL Classes**

Catherine Oswald, tutor, Olneyville ESOL

As a new tutor, I truly did not realize how hard it is to explain all the crazy rules and spellings that the English language contains. Yet, even though our classes were plagued by snow days, I still feel that the learners came away with a basic understand of important words and phrases.

I found that learners seemed to retain more if hands-on activities and pictures were integrated into the teaching. Games such as BINGO and Pictionary are great ways to teach vocabulary words and encourage group participation. Small group discussions (especially if you have a group of at least 20 on any given night) were also an effective way to encourage communication in English. Focusing on one theme per class was very helpful. For example, one night we were teaching food vocabulary, and my co-tutor and I brought in plastic play food. We had each learner prepare a “meal” for us, describing his or her favorite foods. *Learning by seeing and doing* has always been something that has helped me, and I found this was the most effective way for my learners

to grasp some knowledge of the English language in a short amount of time.

My biggest fear, and one which I have discussed with other tutors, is that there is really no way of knowing if all of this work has paid off. It appears that you will teach one thing one week, and then two weeks later you must reteach this again. In this respect, *writing personal stories* for the newsletter turned out to be a great way to assess learner progress.

#### **To consider:**

*Catherine's strategy to incorporate activities for different learning styles (including visual learners) is a smart idea. For more information on incorporating her “learning-by-doing” strategy, see the tip sheet on the Total Physical Response method ('Methods' drawer, Swearer Center Resource Library.)*

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## Erika Litvin, tutor, Olneyville ESOL

I taught Beginner 1 for Olneyville ESOL in both the fall of 2000 and the spring of 2001. The difference between the fall and spring was tremendous and I want to share my story of how my teaching evolved over the two semesters to where it is now.

When I started in the fall, I had never taught before. Before my first class, I was very nervous, and I was glad to have a co-tutor. I wasn't sure how to make a lesson plan, what types of lessons would work, or what to expect from our learners. It seemed that all of my training sessions had assumed that the learners knew at least some English, but I was faced with a class who knew only a few isolated words. We had difficulty explaining even basic information, such as the class schedule. During the first few weeks, we also ran into problems that I had not expected. Our class attendance was very erratic and we had different learners at each class. No lesson planning guide tells you what to do when you do not have the same students every week! Usually, we had at least one new learner who had never attended class before. Any lesson that we had planned would be rendered useless and we would have to improvise for the entire class, sometimes with disappointing results. It seemed that week after week, we tried to teach the same few concepts, such as basic questions and how to conjugate "to be." At the end of the semester, I was frustrated and I felt like I had not accomplished much.

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The bright spot for me was the one class that I consider our most successful. During this class we arranged the tables in the room so that they formed one big table. Helen and I and the learners gathered around the table. We gave each learner a plate, fork, spoon, and knife and placed a variety of food items in the center of the table. In this informal and fun context, we engaged the learners in a dialogue that included such diverse vocabulary as "please pass me the...", "I like to eat..." and other parts of meal conversation. The learners enjoyed the class thoroughly and definitely learned something that night.

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When the spring semester arrived, I was determined to have a more successful experience as an ESOL teacher and use what I had learned during the previous semester in designing better lesson plans. During this semester, my new co-teacher and I have tried to structure our lessons in a format that allows for more interaction with students. We now have a

review session at the beginning of each class to help the learners who attend regularly retain their new knowledge. We have introduced more visual aids and games that have made learning English much more fun. We have also stayed away from complex grammatical concepts and have stuck with simple sentences and vocabulary. Finally, at the learners' request, I have started assigning homework.

My goals now are to encourage more interaction among the learners and to have them produce more spoken and written English themselves. I still think that I spend too much time talking to them and do not give them enough opportunities to participate. I also realize that I need to rely less on Spanish. I hope to improve in these areas in the future. In general, tutoring ESOL has continuously challenged me to devise new and innovate ways to communicate.

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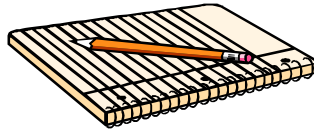
**To consider:** *Incorporating recurrent events is a good method to maintain continuity in the face of erratic attendance. (As the tutor, you are the constant in the classroom.) For example, dialogue journals and learner-generated class news, scheduled regularly, provide predictability.*

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## Keally Dewitt, tutor, Olneyville ESOL

While I believe it is possible to nurture all the differing facets of college life through compromise and recognition of priorities, many of us have a tendency to more readily ignore the components that, in the final analysis, may be most important. Tutoring ESOL, while stressful and work-intensive at times, has energized and inspired me throughout the months, reminding me of the value of both education and interpersonal connection.

Our first class of the year was an incredible rush. Everything ran more or less smoothly, and, more importantly, we had so much fun. Afterwards, I thought to myself, wow I really love this. The learners in my class were motivated and inquisitive, and very committed. I have also found them to be very forgiving and receptive, even if a lesson is not going exceedingly well. Tutoring is most rewarding when I can clearly see the improvements the learners are making: they start to make broader connections, use terms and grammar in their own sentences, and begin to explain concepts enthusiastically to one other in Spanish and in English. Smiles abound and a sense of ease pervades the classroom.



## Coordinator Reflections

### ***Words of Wisdom for Future Coordinators: Don't Forget to Organize!***

Marielena Gutierrez, Coordinator, Pawtucket ESOL

Organization is totally key: especially for coordinators. We are all dependent on one another, and when we don't do something it affects more than just one person; it eventually affects us all. So, looking back on everything, I think I've been a terrible coordinator in some ways by virtue of not being organized. I must say that I have tried. And that I have improved a bit. (Hey I'm writing this: better late than never.) There were other attributes which I brought that I thought could supercede the importance of organization. Like my high-flying ideas: wanting to emphasize that we are all teachers and all learners in these programs. Trying to eliminate a rigid "us" and "them" line. Working on *not* creating lesson plans an hour before class starts but instead thinking about the big picture...and figuring out just what that big picture is.

I still think these are strong ideas, but as Thoreau said: "If you have tried to build castles in the air, your work need not be lost - that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." I think part of the foundation needs a blueprint...organization.

### ***On Flexibility as a Coordinator and Tutor***

Alysson Oakley, Coordinator, Gilbert Stuart ESOL

One thing about coordinating that I didn't realize before I started was that it takes a lot of energy to get people excited and enthusiastic about things. I have goals about my program, but I always have to remind myself that some of my volunteers probably won't be volunteering again, others only want to focus on tutoring and not the greater issues, and still others are tutoring because they have to for some class. While meetings are always fun, they are also difficult because tutors come to the program with different motivations. Integrating articles that deal with larger social issues has been particularly challenging.

Similarly, as a tutor, I have also learned to be flexible. I might spend hours and hours on a lesson plan, ironing out all the potential questions and problems that might arise and making sure to make it fun and interesting, only to decide last minute not to do it. This has happened more than a few times: I walk into class with a bundle of handouts in my hands, talk a bit with my students, and start teaching something completely different. It definitely keeps me on my toes, and I do end up using those handouts at some later class when I am stuck for things to do, but it so much more satisfying to teach to students' immediate needs.

#### ***To consider:***

*Alysson points out a key challenge of our programs. How do other tutors negotiate between long- term planning and immediate concerns in planning their lessons?*

## ***Bringing Process Writing to the Tutoring Session***

Jeffrey Austin, Central High ESOL

This semester, I worked with my two learners a lot on writing. In the past, they had written pieces but not revisited them. This semester, we worked on revising, reviewing, and correcting initial drafts of their writing. One of my learners remarked that he never wrote more than one draft, even for schoolwork, and that he liked doing so. Our ultimate goal was to polish a piece to a quality that would make them proud. The piece would then be published in a collection of material generated by learners in the program.

The writing process began when I gave them a question about their life experience and asked them to brainstorm and then to outline a short paper on the topic. Over the course of our meetings, they each rewrote the resulting piece five or six times. Because the first draft had many different kinds of mistakes, I knew that they could learn a lot by focusing in on this particular writing sample. I did not emphasize the hurried production of an error-free end product, and I tried to discourage anxiety about finishing it in a hurry by alternating lessons that focused on the writing piece with other lessons that emphasized other activities, which also kept them from getting too bored with the same topic.

I used many different strategies to work on error correction. I found that what worked best was when I gave a small explanation of how to write correctly a particular type of phrase or construction and then either pointed to a few places where that error had been made or asked them to find their errors of that kind on their own. I always asked them to correct their own errors without being overly prescriptive.

The ultimate lesson I took from these sessions, and one that is applicable to all levels of learners, is one of patience. Although we were working towards a polished product, I refrained from simply correcting their errors and gave them plenty of time and space to revise their own work at their own pace. It is worth it to emphasize self-correction and reflection even though the piece may require two, three, or four drafts. Hopefully, it will become something learners can be proud of by the fifth---and they will have had lots of time to think about their own text.

***To consider:*** *When offering suggestions for revision, it is often a good idea to create a hierarchy of suggested changes. For example, if the main idea of the piece is unclear, and there are incomplete sentences and non-standard punctuation, you might consider emphasizing the latter parts only after the first part has been tackled. Too many suggestions at once can be overwhelming and therefore ineffective, as Jeff suggests above. Process-writing exercises can also be a good way to incorporate peer revisions. This can work well in a large classroom; one-on-one programs might consider having two tutor-learner groups pairing up for a session or two. See the Peer Revisions folder in the 'Methods' drawer in the Resource Library.*

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