



Providing Feedback for ESL Students: Considerations

It is the human element which makes teaching complex. Every student has different motivations, learning styles, abilities, experiences, vulnerabilities, and so on. Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) students multiplies this complexity by adding not one, but two extra layers of variables: language and culture.

Below you will find some aspects to keep in mind when providing feedback to your ESL students.

Simplify Your Language

The first step to giving good feedback to your ESL students is making sure they can understand the language of the feedback itself.

Avoid Phrases/Slang

Native speaker communication is littered with phrases and slang. These are difficult to learn because they rapidly change with the culture. Your ESL students will understand you better if you use simple nouns and verbs whose standard definitions are the meaning you would like to express.

Original

It *struck me* that you could *spruce up* this story by adding details of the *get-together*.

Improvement

I *realized* that you could make the story *more interesting* by adding details of the *party*.

Respect Students' Voice

Do not overcorrect students' mistakes by suggesting synonyms or rephrasing of ideas just to meet your ideals of what "better" English language usage entails. The idea of a standard English has been challenged, giving room to English as a lingua franca (Walker, 2019). Instead, try to respect the voice your student has and focus on empowering them to communicate confidently and clearly.

Add an Action Item

The primary question a student needs feedback to answer is, "What must I do?" Teachers will often incorporate feedback that is general, abstract, or even expects the student to know what they need to change to 'fix' it. Therefore, open or close with the action that needs to be taken, then provide explanations as needed.

Original

This is *confusing*.



(For an ESL student, this comment may be frustrating. They would be left to ask, why is it confusing? To me, it makes sense. This happens often when educators write ‘grammar mistake’ in a comment, as for ESL students, if they knew why it was wrong, they would have fixed it themselves).

Improvement

The word *‘it’* is confusing here as I am not sure what ‘it’ refers to. Can you use the *noun* here instead?

Hyperlink Writing Center Resources

The Writing Center has a variety of resources that can be used to provide clear and practical examples to students to supplement your feedback.

Original

A hanging indent is needed for APA 7th edition.

Improvement

For APA 7th, we need to use a [hanging indent](#)

Fixing Grammar

Grammar issues come up with native speakers, but it is different with ESL students. The frequency of grammar issues is often higher, and the types of grammar mistakes are often different. Two common issues that ESL students contend with are **interference** and **transference**. **Interference** has to do with the aspects of the first learner’s first language that interfere with their use of the English language. **Transference** refers to the ability of the English language learner to transfer what they know in their native language to the language in which they are now working. Depending on how similar or different the student’s first language is, the English language learner might have more or less experience with interference. The same goes with the amount of transference the student might be able to accomplish.

Be Patient

You will need to repeat yourself many times when correcting grammar. Language is a skill, not a set of knowledge. It is not something where you can tell someone the right answer and then they will know it forever. Instead, they will need to see the correct answer and practice, then see correction and practice, and repeat that loop many times. Therefore, do not see repeated grammar mistakes as a sign of student rebellion. Instead, just point out the mistake every time and carry on.

To highlight this, you may eventually notice that different language groups struggle with different grammatical rules. East Asians may struggle with articles like a/an/the. Latin Americans may struggle with run-on sentences.



They struggle with these aspects because there are differences between English and their own languages. They have used language one way their entire lives, and now, they are trying to learn how to use it in a new way. That takes time, so be patient.

Choose Your Battles

When correcting a paper riddled with grammatical mistakes, it is not worth it to correct every mistake. In fact, it might even be harmful to do so. The sheer quantity of correction could be overwhelming for the student.

Instead, focus on the major grammatical issues and the errors (opposed to the mistakes).

What defines major and minor will vary from student to student. In general, a major mistake is something that impedes reader comprehension, while a minor mistake is incorrect but still clearly understandable. However, this could change for a higher level student who has no mistakes which are incomprehensible. In that case, a major mistake might simply be mistakes repeated regularly, while minor mistakes might be one-time errors.

A mistake is essentially an accident. You know the rule and what you should do, but you just make a mistake when writing it out. However, an error is that which you do not know the rule for, so if you were asked to revise it, you would not know how.

You can spot an **error** when you see a student breaking a particular grammar rule repeatedly. These are the aspects worth focusing on. Explain the rule and add an action item. .

Brush Up on Grammar

It is normal for a native educator to feel embarrassed by their own lack of technical grammatical knowledge when first interacting with ESL students. However, no native speaker of any language knows how to explain their grammar unless they have gone back and studied it.

As a native speaker, you know how to use the grammar, but you might not know how to explain the grammar. Therefore, it would be useful to go back and learn the rules of grammar just like an ESL student so that you can explain it to them in terms they will understand. You can also use grading as an opportunity to look up a certain rule so you can explain it to the student in your comments.

There are many resources you can find online which are helpful. EF is an ESL network which has an excellent [online resource](#). In particular, we advise you brush up on verb tenses as this is the most common struggle for ESL students.



Cultural Values on Writing

Be aware that the concept of “good writing” is a value statement, and that value changes in other cultures. Your ESL students might come from a background where they see things as good which we see as bad. They may come from backgrounds which do not even practice writing papers at all.

Your goal should not be to force them to believe in your ideas of good writing. Instead, your goal should be to provide instruction that helps them understand how to succeed in the American education and business environment.

Subjective Importance of Writing

The American education system places comparatively high value on writing. Every student from the arts to the sciences writes papers. We expect that by the university level students will understand how to structure an essay, but this is not true everywhere in the world.

Keep this perspective in mind when editing a mess of an essay from an ESL student. On top of struggling to learn the language, they may also be struggling to complete an assignment structure which they have rarely ever encountered before.

Writing Styles

Different cultures tend to favor different writing styles and approaches. In Western culture, writing is considered to be “owned” by its author (intellectual property), so citing sources properly is an important concept in this culture. Western cultures often favor the use of facts, figures, and logic. However, a student from Russia, for example, might inject emotions and spontaneous storytelling into their writing. They may use personal stories and use a more flexible writing style and favor “the human touch” over logical approaches to writing. A student from China, however, might employ the use of group consensus, value other peoples’ opinions over their own, circle around the subject and not address it directly, and rather than utilize facts and opinions, might prefer to use diplomacy and favor a collective approach to their writing.

Plagiarism and Culture

Be aware that the very concept of plagiarism can be viewed differently in different cultures. Some students may even come from cultures where they are taught that it is a good thing to use the exact words of subject authorities. Some students come from a culture that is collaborative in nature, and might view what we would call “cheating” or “plagiarism” as a collective effort to complete a task. It is important to understand that proper citation and giving credit to sources used in a paper or project must be explicitly taught to all students, so that they understand how the process works.



Different cultures view getting a task done in different ways. For example, Western cultures, as mentioned above, tend to value ownership of intellectual property. Individual accomplishment and competency is important, as is the ability for an individual to prove their competency in a particular subject or situation. “Giving credit where credit is due” is an important concept in Western culture, and a native English speaker likely will prefer to use academic research and facts in their writing. Hispanic/LatinX cultures in general value more of a collaborative effort, and the emphasis on the individual is not as prevalent as in Western cultures. What one who is familiar with Western work ethic might see as “cheating” may not be viewed as such by one who works within the Hispanic mindset, which sees working together as a valuable tool with which to accomplish a task. Asian cultures tend to be even more collaborative than Hispanic/Latinx cultures in their approach to writing and sharing observations, and tend to look to others in a collective manner to express their findings. To favor a more collective approach and to use a more circular and less direct approach is an appropriate approach to expressing oneself in this culture, and this student might tend to avoid using direct references and instead focus on the reader’s personal opinions and how they may feel towards the subject being discussed.

This can be a complex issue to navigate because while it can be a cultural issue, there will still be students plagiarizing when they know fully well that it is wrong. Telling the two apart is difficult.

Ultimately, the best course of action is to clearly educate students on what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, and then enforce [university rules](#) on plagiarism after that. Bear in mind that part of the education process should be to explain why we write essays.

Build Confidence

A piece of oneself goes into every written work, even in academic essays. Thus, it is important to see the vulnerability embedded in sharing one’s work. This can make receiving feedback particularly stressful for some students. On top of this, ESL students can experience stress-compounding factors such as language barriers, educational theory differences, culture shock, loneliness, confusion, and exhaustion.

Our goal should be to provide feedback to improve the writing, but also to build confidence so that the student sees academic writing as a reasonable goal worth pursuing.

Further Research

Should you wish to continue your research on this topic, we have compiled a few resources for you. Some of them are addressed to different education levels but are transferable and applicable to university English language learners.

E-books

[Giving feedback to language learners](#)



Principles of Language Acquisition

Online Articles

Williams - Providing Feedback on ESL Students' Written Assignments (TESL/TEFL)

4 tips for giving useful feedback to English language learners

Larry Ferlazzo - four ways to give ELL students feedback on their writing

How to Use Corrective Feedback with English Language Learners

A Strategy for Giving Corrective Feedback to English Language Learners

Journal Articles

- Ahmadian, M., Yazdani, H., & Mehri, E. (2019). The effectiveness of learners' preferred and nonpreferred written corrective feedback: A think-aloud study. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 16(2), 448-467.
- Cárcamo, B. (2020). Classifying written corrective feedback for research and educational purposes: A typology proposal. *Profile*, 22(2), 211-222. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/profile.v22n2.79924>
- Fithriani, R. (2018). Cultural influences on students' perceptions of written feedback in L2 writing. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, 3(1), 1-13. <https://journal.umy.ac.id/index.php/FTL/article/view/3811>
- Lee, I. (2019). Teacher written corrective feedback: Less is more. *Language Teaching*, 52(4), 524-536. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000247>
- McCord, M. B. (2012). Exploring effective feedback techniques in the ESL classroom. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 27(2), 40-45. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1905&context=lajm>
- Nemati, M., Alavi, S. M., & Mohebbi, H. (2019). Assessing the effect of focused direct and focused indirect written corrective feedback on explicit and implicit knowledge of language learners. *Language Testing in Asia*, 9(1), 1-18. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1186/s40468-019-0084-9.pdf>
- Williams, J. G. (2003). Providing feedback on ESL students' written assignments. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 9(10), 1-5. <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Williams-Feedback.html>