

Tips for Working with ESL Students in Seminar in Composition

Course Sequence

Approximately 800 international undergraduates are enrolled at the Oakland campus (more than half enrolled in Arts & Sciences), and 200-300 or more arrive each fall with varying levels of English fluency. More than 50% come from Mainland China, 2% from South Korea, and a small percentage from India, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and other countries. Unless they have completed four years of U.S. high school, they must take a language proficiency test through the English Language Institute (ELI) upon arriving, and a passing score places them into one of three classes:

- LINGUISTICS (0007) → Students work on grammar, vocabulary, summarizing, and reacting to brief informational, thematically focused texts, documenting sources, and composing a short research paper.
- ESL WORKSHOP IN COMPOSITION (0152) → Students compose critical inquiry essays, reflecting on lived experience and on texts that are challenging for ESL students in terms of their structures, styles, cultural references, nuanced meanings, vocabulary, and syntax, yet are significantly shorter than those in *Ways of Reading*. Fewer writing assignments give students more time to compose and opportunities for multiple revisions.
- SEMINAR IN COMPOSITION (0200) → If you discover an ESL student has been placed directly into your SC class without having taken ESLWC (0152), and you think that the student will struggle to keep up in SC, strongly suggest ESLWC to the student.

Something you should know

- In general, when the student is immersed, language acquisition requires two years for proficiency, and it takes seven years to acquire fluent academic language.
- Instructors need to modify their teaching for ESL students; embracing that pedagogical challenge makes us more effective teachers.

Suggested Support for ESL Students

Composition Tutorial at the Writing Center <http://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu/> or (412) 624-6556.

- CT is a one-credit elective, in which the student meets weekly for 30 minutes with a Writing Center faculty consultant to work on assignments for SC.
- Recommend that your ESL students take CT alongside SC.
- CT tutors work closely with each student's writing and guide students on reading comprehension, vocabulary, and cultural translation.
- Your student might object: "But I'm already taking the maximum credit hours!" Never fear—CT is only an *official* way of getting outside help. ESL students can pursue a non-credit bearing, standing appointment at the Writing Center, pending availability.
- CT consultants working with your students will email you; be in touch to communicate assignments.

Questions about ESL students? Contact Marylou Gramm, Coordinator of ESL Composition mag20@pitt.edu.

Please Note: You do NOT need to do ALL of the following course modifications. Suggestions:

Writing

- Read ESL writing for content as much as possible. You may have to address grammar that obscures meaning, but remember that grammar acquisition comes through practice. You are giving them practice, so look past grammar deviations to the arrangement and ideas.
- When commenting on student work, focus on errors that impede your comprehension and that open up possibilities for the student's thinking, rather than distractions such as omitted articles, inconsistent verb tense, or inappropriate prepositions. Look for common error patterns in the essay and point out only one or two patterns per essay. You will waste time if you correct every grammar error because second language writers cannot absorb a wide variety of edits.
- Keep in mind that the rhetoric and structures of essays vary in different languages, so ESL writers may need guidance with rhetorical and structural conventions of academic English.

Reading

- If you notice a student has particular trouble with the assigned reading, consider giving the student a reading aid in advance so they don't flounder in complex prose. This aid can be as comprehensive or simple as time allows: an outline of the essay, a theme or key passages to focus on, or key words.

Participation

- ESL students are frequently quiet in class. Encourage them to talk, but consider alternative requirements because it might be all they can do to follow the conversation. Participation might entail writing a paragraph about what they thought about class discussion after class. Or it might involve taking notes in class and engaging with the tasks at hand. Use their discussion board, blogs, or other responses to help them enter the conversation.
- Email ESL students your discussion questions in advance so they have time to comprehend the questions and formulate responses.
- Consider assigning grammar presentations. Pair students and ask them to give a 5-minute presentation on a grammar concern or an unusual sentence structure.
- For group work, prepare your group/partner configurations before class. Pair ESL students with classmates who are articulate and on-task. Be attentive to whether ESL students are engaging with their native partners. They may feel marginalized; both cultures may need prompting.

Teaching

- Give important information via multiple modes: speech, paper, chalkboard. Important info might include due dates, expectations, etc. Never just say it. Not only will your written communication clarify what you just said for your ESL students, but it will also engage both visual and aural learners.
- If you do find yourself saying something profound or important in class, or if you alter due dates, follow-up with the whole class via email or a handout to clarify your speech.

Conferences

- Invite the student to office hours, or schedule conferences. Individual instruction is powerful.