

It Takes a Village

Doug Evans advocates building community in the ESL classroom

ESL teachers are familiar with new insecure students who come into a classroom unsure as to how they are going to be able to function in their new school environment. As ESL teachers, we use a variety of strategies to try to build their confidence in a way that is effective and expedient. ESL teachers know that the sooner we can give our students the proper tools they need to function in their new surroundings, the sooner they will be able to take advantage of the language opportunities that will naturally occur outside of the classroom when they are in native language contexts. One of the most effective, yet overlooked strategies for facilitating this transition is to develop and cultivate the concept of community both in and out of the classroom.

Many effective teachers as a matter of course bring in aspects of community to their teaching. They may encourage or even at times insist that their students share their thoughts and ideas about the new culture with each other. Their students may be required to visit libraries, museums, or local businesses. An assignment may be to make and bring to class certain dishes from their home country. Individually, these are all excellent means of creating a supportive environment, which can have a powerful and positive impact on student success. However, when this idea of community is taken and developed further to the point where it pervades and is an everyday integral part of the classroom ethos, then the likelihood that the students will develop the confidence to take the necessary risks to progress and evolve into true communicators and critical thinkers in the target language increases significantly.

Community in the Classroom

The first and natural place for a teacher to start to progress a community-based structure is in the classroom. A teacher can advance this in a number of ways. Regardless as to how a teacher begins, one of the most vital factors for this is to create an environment where all students and in particular the teacher start the class as equals. The

teacher is clear about classroom procedures, rules, and expectations, but also should be clear that the students are free to question, suggest, and hold different opinions from those of their classmates and of the teacher. One strategy to initiate this idea of equality is to ask the students to think of appropriate consequences for when rules are broken or procedures not followed. This immediately creates a sense of ownership and empowerment. In the ESL classroom, depending on the language level of the students, this may not be immediately feasible, so other strategies can be employed.

From the start, it must be made very clear that the classroom is a safe environment. Differing opinions are valid and mistakes are a natural part of the learning process, however never, in any situation, should the teacher be sarcastic or make jokes at the expense of a student. This is not acceptable to do to a native-speaking child, but in particular a negative joke or remark directed at someone who is struggling to learn how to communicate her thoughts in another language can have a disastrous effect on her willingness to take risks and her trust of the teacher to maintain a safe and low-stress learning environment. Even when there is already a high amount of trust between student and teacher, in the end, the students know, even if they don't communicate it as such, that a teacher, in an unequal position of authority and language advantage, has in a sense bullied someone younger and with less power to respond on equal footing. Along the same lines, the classroom teacher must make sure that students know that the classroom is a supportive environment and that negative behavior, such as laughing at mistakes or insulting someone, will never be tolerated. The teacher must be willing to follow through with consequences if necessary.

Another way to develop classroom community is to design lessons around the context of school. This can be particularly effective for new students who feel as if they don't yet belong. If they learn about the people, locations, and rules of a school from the beginning, they are going to function better in that setting and at a faster pace. Classes targeting community from this direction might involve the direct teaching of names of school locations, dialogues about daily school activi-

ties such as assemblies, or role-plays involving class schedules.

Lessons should involve pairwork or group activities as soon as possible. Typically, ESL students arrive at a new school with no friends or acquaintances at all. The sooner they can meet with other students, the sooner they can make friends and develop a sense of belonging while at the same time lessening the ever-present sense of anxiety that accompanies the start of attending a new school. For ESL learners, this transition time can be even more anxious due to the inability to communicate effectively in English. Ideally, very early in the year, ESL students should have the chance to engage their classmates in activities through which they learn some personal information about each other. Questions such as, "What sports do you like?" "What kind of test questions do you prefer — multiple choice, T/F, or essay?" or "Tell me about your pet," will help students learn about each other and themselves and, as a result, will be more likely to develop the personal relationships that can help them more quickly acclimate to their new school environment.

Another very powerful tool for facilitating the idea of community in the classroom is the direct teaching of the concepts and values important for maintaining a supportive community-based classroom. Some of these values might be bravery, kindness, empathy, love, loyalty, and compassion. A teacher might have the students translate a list of seven of these words and then ask them to rank the words in order of importance. They might be required to comment on a movie or a time in their lives when they experienced some of these values. A teacher could put these words in an exercise whereby the students have to decide whether they thought certain statements were true or false such as, "Love conquers everything," or "It is brave to walk away from a fight." Ultimately, it is very important for the students to be given time to reflect on how they can be better members of their community and to have opportunities to effect their ideas into positive change.

Using community as an agent of change in the ESL classroom is most effective when the teacher does not lecture from a dogmatic point of view but is willing to listen and learn from the students. The effective teacher realizes that there is not necessarily a correct answer to issues of value, but simply different perspectives, and that, although young and emerging and at times naive, the students' opinions can be equally as valid as her own. This is particularly important when discussing the various aspects of culture that may be encountered in a classroom setting. Depending on the circumstance, in the context of culture, the student may know as much or more about the topic being discussed as the teacher does. In this case, the teacher should welcome the student's expertise and eagerly allow the student to offer insight and perhaps even lead the class with the teacher being very willing to allow the student this measure of attention and control.

Community at Home

Home for many immigrant students is a very important part of their identities. With the proper planning and sensitivity of the teacher, students should be encouraged to use and share this resource with their classmates. Students can interview their parents and grandparents about various topics, such as what school was like when they were children, later reporting their findings to the class, or categorizing the information into a graphic organizer. When there is a heterogeneous

student population, reporting on family customs can be especially interesting. Holiday traditions can be a very rich source for engaging student interest in their own and one another's traditions. Students might want to prepare a presentation on New Year's traditions. They could have questions prepared ahead of time for their classmates to listen for during the presentation. They may want to prepare and share recipes on how to prepare traditional foods or their favorite food they eat at home on a regular basis. A unit on fashion may be an opportunity to present information on traditional clothing.

Students can also be encouraged to interview each other's families. Siblings, parents, and grandparents of a classmate can be an incredibly rich source of cultural information. It is often quite interesting for students to learn about how their own family members used to live when they were young. It can be even more fascinating to learn about the lives, customs, and traditions of someone who is from a completely different background, who has lived through different challenges, and who is willing to share the wealth of experience and knowledge acquired from being raised in such a culturally different environment. At the same time, students may find that, in spite of their differences, they may have much more in common with their classmate from a different country than previously thought. Often teachers will find that the process of researching and exchanging family and cultural information to be a very powerful tool for enhancing a student's interest in learning, particularly for international students.

Local Community

For ESL students, being in a new environment can be very daunting and frustrating, as anyone who has travelled to a country in which they don't speak the language can attest. Since they can't read the paper or phone book, they can struggle with knowing what services are available in their local communities. Because they may not be able to understand the radio or read the signs on a building, they might not know where the library is or when local festivals are. Life at times can become a string of random encounters and, if lucky, they run into an event or place that in which they are interested. Teachers with students in this situation can help them kill two birds with one stone. They can design lessons that both improve a student's English as well as provide valuable information for daily life. Teachers may ask students to look at maps of the area, research key landmarks, or plot public transportation routes. Resourceful teachers may be able to locate free newspapers, find websites, or subscribe to mailings that provide community information and resources to be shared and studied with students.

EFL students still living in their home country can be asked to attend festivals or exhibitions showcasing the target culture and language. Embassies and international centers are good sources of this kind of information and often provide free materials about cultural events both at home and away. **II**

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