



# Tips for Teachers

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## Tips for New Nonnative English-speaking Teachers

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Teaching for the first time is a nerve-racking experience for anyone, but it can be especially difficult for nonnative English speaking (NNS) language teachers in a second language setting. These teachers worry that language or cultural mistakes could have a negative effect on their careers. Some suffer from insomnia or other stress related problems. I speak from experience as a nonnative ESL teacher who taught in an academic English program in Hawaii soon after graduating with my B.A. in TESOL. As a new NNS teacher, I had many interesting experiences both positive and negative. Below I share what I learned by making mistakes in my first year, hoping that other NNS teachers might avoid some of the difficulties that I had and might be better prepared for some of the dilemmas that they will probably face.

*What should I do if I find out that I have accidentally given inaccurate information?*

Several times I realized that I had taught something wrong. My mistakes ranged from minor misspellings, to misunderstanding grammatical points or word meanings, to misreading articles. Fortunately, I was able to confer with experienced teachers after class, and it was during this time that I found most of my mistakes. At first, I was afraid that students would find my mistakes and conclude that they could not believe in me. Saying nothing, hoping that they would not catch my mistakes might have been the easiest way out, but I could not assume it would work. Instead, I tried to apologize and correct my mistakes as soon as possible, via e-mail or at the beginning of the next class. This usually worked; however, I gradually learned that the manner in which I reacted to my mistakes was also important. When I over-reacted or panicked, students also panicked, thinking that they were paying dearly for someone who was under-qualified. When I simply apologized, corrected my mistakes (sometimes with humor), and moved on, students reacted well. Some even thanked me for being honest and sincere. I learned

that I can earn their respect as long as I show that I am committed to teaching them as well as I can, no matter what.

*What should I do if I do not know the answers to my students' questions?*

During my first week of my teaching, I realized that my English was far from what it should be. No matter how careful I was in previewing the lesson, students somehow found my weaknesses by asking questions that I did not know how to answer. I felt caught between being a liar if I guessed, and losing their trust and confidence if I answered, "I don't know." I thought about not taking questions, but I had had teachers like that, and I did not want to be that kind of teacher. What finally worked for me was similar to the solution described above for when I made accidental mistakes. I simply apologized, made a promise to find the answer by the next class, and kept that promise. An alternative solution was to give students extra credit for finding the answers on their own. I believe both strategies worked well because my students saw me as honest and sincere and felt that I had treated their questions with respect.

*What should I do if my students do not trust my knowledge of English?*

As a NNS teacher from Asia, I faced this problem several times, most often with speakers of European languages, which are more closely related to English than Asian languages are. Initially, some students had the impression that I might not know English well enough to teach them. Although I was not a confident teacher, I was confident about my knowledge of English, and this helped me. Generally, when students challenged me about English, I stopped class and took a little time to discuss the issue with them. Other students who knew that I was right usually jumped in to support. When this happened, the outcome was a frank and interesting classroom discussion. Sometimes, however, students were too impatient to listen to my explanations. When it seemed that taking class time would not solve the problem, I suggested that they do an extra credit task of talking to another teacher or someone they trusted more than they did me. Generally this worked in my favor. These students ended up trusting me by the end of the semester.

*What should I do if I don't know words or expressions that my students use?*

I was amazed by how many English words and phrases some of my students knew. Sometimes they were mistaken about their use of words, but more often they were correct. I wanted to recognize their knowledge and learn from them as well without drawing attention to my lack of vocabulary. I complimented them for their rich vocabulary and, when I could verify that they had used words or expressions correctly, I gave them extra credit. Doing this took the focus away from my weaknesses and put

in on their strengths. It encouraged students to remain positively engaged in their course work and helped establish a positive relationship between them and me.

*What should I do if some students try to talk to me in my native language?*

Even though my classes consist of students from many countries, some low-level Japanese students tried to talk to me in Japanese as a way to avoid using English. I immediately answered them in English and, addressing the entire class, explained that I would speak only English in class and expected them to do the same. They understood the rationale behind it, and supported my decision. However, there were times when they and other students just slipped into their native language in class. To encourage all students, regardless of nationality, to consciously try to speak English at all times, I established a rule saying that they would have to share a secret or tell about an embarrassing moment in their lives if they were caught speaking their native language three times. No one wanted to talk about such experiences, so everyone tried to speak English during my class, including the lower-level Japanese students. These students still speak to me in English even though I am not their teacher any more. I am sure there are other better rules than the one that I chose; however, I believe setting up a course goal, a class rule, or even a class game, can help NNS teachers establish a comfortable target language environment.

### **Conclusion**

I have acquired some more experience now, and I realize that first-year mistakes are not unique to NNS teachers. All novice teachers face similar rites of passage. I benefited greatly from the wise advice I received from my fellow teachers and would advise all novice teachers to learn as much as possible from their colleagues, too. It is also helpful to realize that we are not alone. In many places of the world, most language teachers are nonnative speakers of the languages they are teaching. We nonnative speakers can exploit the advantages that we have and increase our professionalism. For example, we can see the target language from the point of view of our students and can serve as powerful role models for them. Thus, I would encourage all nonnative speakers who are perhaps questioning their choice of career as ESL or EFL teachers to continue to improve their English and teaching skills and to not be afraid to follow their dreams.

### **About the Author**

*Tomoko Asao received her B.A. in TESOL from Brigham Young University-Hawaii. This article was written in response to a request from many NNS teachers who heard her speak about her first year experiences at the annual Hawaii TESOL Conference in 2004.*



## Enhancing Student Writing Through Tree Methodology

**Robert Raymer**, Science University of Malaysia

“A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees,” William Blake once wrote. My creative writing students are not fools, but they do need to learn to see trees in a new way if they are going to write well about them. After marking ESL student papers for nearly a decade, I have concluded that my students need fewer discussions about how to write and more opportunities to see the possibilities in what they might write. Put another way, I give a great deal of attention to the first stage in the writing process—preparing my students to write. The payoff is immense. To illustrate what I mean, I will draw on a series of lessons that I use with my students. While the examples below relate to the general topic of trees, the strategies that I use can be effectively applied to any number of other topics.

Early in the semester, I introduce my topic by asking my students to write a sentence about a tree. They scratch their heads and look at me funny, but they do come up with a sentence. Then I read their sentences aloud to share them with the class, anonymously, of course. I could also copy them onto a sheet of paper that could be studied by everyone. Immediately they see the wide variety of ways in which their classmates approached this task. They also see, for example, that some “sentences” are not sentences at all, but rather fragments and that other sentences feel more or less interesting than their own. Even with a one-sentence assignment, I can create mini lessons on word choice, general and specific ideas, or sentence structure.

Some time later, preferably after they have had time to forget about the tree sentences, I tell my students to write a descriptive paragraph about a tree. They groan and complain that the topic is boring, and in a way, it is true. If I insisted that they write at this point, their writing would lack focus because they are thinking about trees in general. I have to help them see trees in a new way. This is when I take my students outside for a little “tree methodology” to help them realize that getting ready to write involves making choices about their subject, their purpose, and their approach.

First we examine a vine-covered tree. When I ask what they see, they simply say, “a tree.” I point out that the tree has decayed and that the leaves they see actually belong to the intruding vine. We examine hollow spots in the tree and find both life and decay there. They also notice the unpleasant presence of mosquitoes. Then, we examine a healthy specimen of the same tree, noting how it is similar to and different from the dying one. Sometimes students share stories. For example, a student from Sarawak explained that the Bidayuh people consider strangled trees to be haunted.

Gradually, students begin to realize that they might have something interesting to write about a tree although I'm not quite ready to let them begin yet. We think of various ways in which a tree might be described, from an accurate photographic description to an impressionistic one. We explore the possibilities for describing the whole tree or a particular part of it, like the branches, leaves, trunk, or roots. We imagine how the tree can be used to play games, to hang a swing, and to support a tree house. We consider the ambiance around the tree noticing the shade, the breeze, and the view.

Back in the classroom, I give my students still more options. One is to write a narrative about a tree experience they have had. They might have fallen out of a tree or seen a tree fall during a storm. They can also write a report about the history of an unusual tree or an essay about the significance for a particular tree or species of tree. They can even write poetry, and some of them have been moved to do so.

In a later lesson, we go back outside for a lesson on using sensory details to make writing come more alive for a reader. I ask my students to close their eyes and concentrate on sounds, odors, taste, and feelings, both what they feel and how they feel. I ask them to quickly list their observations, close their eyes again, and continue this pattern for about 15 minutes. Then we talk. If someone mentions traffic, I say, "Traffic is vague. Can you be more specific?" They learn to notice whether the traffic is steady or intermittent, near or far, and what types of vehicles they can distinguish. They smell perspiration, perfume, dirt, dried grass, and leaves. They notice the leftover taste of lunch and feel the breeze on their faces and in their hair. They notice ants crawling on their arms, mosquitoes biting their legs, and leaves falling on their heads. I conclude by saying that we cannot always go outside to the actual location of what we are writing about, but we can learn to use our minds' eye and other senses to concentrate and bring sensory details to life.

By now, the topic of writing about a tree is no longer boring. Students' personal interest in a topic improves their writing dramatically. When they explore a topic from many angles, they are better able to see, understand, and appreciate not just trees, but all of life and the world in which they live. They can see a tree as Blake's wise man does. What I do with a topic like trees, any teacher can do with any topic.

### **About the Author**

*Robert Raymer graduated from Miami (Ohio) University in 1978 and teaches creative writing at the Science University of Malaysia. He has published a collection of short stories, *Lovers and Strangers* (Heinemann Asia, 1993), and is editor of *Silverfish New Writings 4* (Silverfishbooks, 2004).*