

Fieldnotes **for ABLÉ Staff** 2004 Edition

ABSTRACT

Issues in using EFF in the ESL classroom

by *Amanda Harrison-Perez*

Equipped for the Future (EFF) has many characteristics that appeal to teachers of English as a Second Language. Its emphasis on helping adults develop the skills they need to fulfill their roles as workers, community members, and family members fits nicely with ESL programs' missions of helping our students learn how to live in our country. This article examines some common questions that staff have as they consider implementing an EFF-based ESL program.

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Issues in using EFF in the ESL classroom

by Amanda Harrison-Perez

Many adult educators are attracted to the principles and tools of Equipped for the Future (EFF), an instructional content framework for adults developed by the National Institute for Literacy. EFF's emphasis on developing the skills that adults need to fulfill our roles in our society is especially attractive to ESL programs that want to empower their students. When using EFF with English language learners, some common questions have been raised. In this article, I will address some of the more frequently raised issues.

1. My students already have many of the skills identified in the EFF standards. How can using EFF help?

ESL students do, in fact, have many of these skills. The fact that they're living here in the United States and attending English class is an indication of that. The skills identified by the EFF standards are skills that all adults (including adult educators) need and can improve upon in their daily lives. All English language learners come with needs that are easily identified by the EFF standards, particularly the communications skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English. Importantly, EFF is designed to address adult learners' purposes for learning and to build on what our students already know and can do. Thus, we can help our ESL students develop their ability to apply their skills here, in English and in culturally appropriate ways. For example, a student who was a confident advocate of employee rights in his own country might, because of his limited English skills, feel unsure making the smallest of requests at his workplace here.

In regard to communications skills, we can design lessons to help students develop, adapt, and improve their strategies, especially those particularly useful when communicating in a second language. For example, a component of the standard "Speak so others can understand" is "us[ing] multiple strategies to monitor the effectiveness of the communication." Yet, these strategies often rely on facial expressions, body language, and listening cues that are culturally determined.

Finally, EFF reflects much of what we, as a nation, value. We can use the tools of EFF, the purposes, roles, standards, and common activities, to teach important aspects of U.S. culture. For example, in the United States, we place great importance on an individual's right to have an opinion and express it. That value is reflected throughout the EFF framework. One of the four purposes for learning is "to be able to express ideas and opinions with the confidence they will be heard and taken into account." One of the four broad areas of responsibility in the citizen/community member role map is to "form and express opinions and ideas." A common activity is to "develop and express sense of self." While our students might not easily identify with all of our values, an understanding of what makes Americans tick can help them function in our society with greater ease and comfort.

2. Is it culturally insensitive to teach adult English language learners our way of doing things?

This question is often a follow-up to the first point. The answer is that it depends on how the material is presented. If the teacher says or implies that the students' cultural norms are wrong or bad and that "our way of doing things" is right and good, that is clearly culturally insensitive. If, however, the information is presented as "this is how we do it here," it can be informative without being arrogant. ESL students are often painfully aware of cultural differences and are eager to learn how and why Americans do the things we do. Inviting students to talk about their cultural background and experiences is an important part of any ESL class and can provide a good foundation for learning English and understanding U.S. cultural norms. In addition, these conversations help teachers learn about their students' native cultures. Such cross-cultural awareness is an important aspect of teaching adult language learners.

3. When I ask my students why they come to class, they just say "to learn English." How can EFF help learners to express specific goals for learning English?

First, the question "Why do you want to come to class?" is a general one. Therefore, the general answer "to learn English" isn't surprising. Second, some students might not have specific language goals; they come for the social aspect or simply to learn. However, the majority of ESL students do have specific goals; they simply might not have thought them out or might be unable to articulate them on their own. Our role as instructors is to help them do so. Ask specific questions: Who do you need to speak English to? Where do you need to use English? What do you want to be able to do in English? If you ask specific questions, they can often give specific answers.

4. How am I supposed to do goal-setting with my beginning-level students if I don't speak their language? Can EFF help with this?

The simplest solution, of course, is to have an interpreter. However, in many circumstances this is not possible. Furthermore, our program has found that interpreters sometimes insert their own ideas and opinions into the translation. Therefore, the information you receive might not be exactly what the student expressed.

If the students can understand some basic English, you can explain the goal-setting in simple English. Write some simple, specific questions on the board. Then, allow the students to work in their native language. If there are two or more students with the same native language, they can work together. Allowing students to use their native language to complete an activity in an ESL class might seem counterintuitive. However, the purpose of goal-setting is to find out what our students want to learn, not to practice English. Therefore, the use of the native language is legitimate. Once the students have been able to generate ideas in their native languages, there are several options for getting them into English for you, the teacher, to understand. First, many students have bilingual dictionaries and can look up key words to report to you. Second, in a class setting, students often help each other with vocabulary. Thus, if one student is having difficulty expressing an idea, other students can often help that student find the correct words. Third, keep asking those simple, specific questions: Who? What? When? Where?

Goal setting with students who have few or no English skills is more difficult, but not impossible. Use pictures. Create manipulatives using pictures from the EFF role maps, magazines, ESL textbooks, picture dictionaries, or computer clip art. Show the pictures to the students and

observe which ones generate responses. While this technique might not allow you to determine a student's precise goals, you can discover the areas of importance to that student.

5. What about grammar? Is there room for it in an EFF-based program?

The field of ESL has been moving away from a grammar-based approach to instruction. This does not mean that grammar instruction is unimportant, nor is it incompatible with EFF. Above all, EFF is about structuring learning that is meaningful and relevant to adults in their everyday lives. Adults need to learn the grammar required in their daily interactions. Research has shown that it is important to teach that grammar in a meaningful context. It is also important to make sure the students understand the connection between the grammar and the context. Take time to discuss with the students why the grammar point being covered is so important in that context. For example, the simple past is often taught in the context of talking about one's work experience. Learners can understand the importance of differentiating between the work they did in the past and the work they are doing at the present time. The past tense also is essential to their ability to talk about their life experiences.

6. My ESL program uses textbooks. How can I incorporate EFF into a class that follows a textbook?

Once again, the key is to make the information relevant to the students' lives. Teachers routinely adapt and supplement textbooks based on what they believe their students need. It is just one more step to find out, as is recommended in an EFF approach to instruction, what the students themselves think they need. One teacher in our program has found that conducting goal-setting sessions centered on the topic of the unit about halfway through the unit is very effective, especially at the beginning level. She teaches the first few lessons within the unit. Then, once the students have been introduced to the topic and some basic related vocabulary, she asks them what else they would like to learn related to that topic. This teacher's approach illustrates that goal setting is an ongoing process, rather than a once-and-done activity. Sometimes, the students' requests are included in the textbook; sometimes their requests are items rarely included in textbooks. For example, in a goal-setting session in a unit on health and visiting the doctor, the teacher in our program learned that her students weren't particularly worried about talking to the receptionist to make an appointment or to the doctor to explain their medical problems, both of which were included in textbook exercises. Nor did they want to practice reading medicine labels. Their main concern was understanding and correctly navigating the automated answering systems in use in most doctors' offices. These systems are a very real part of American life, and yet they are rarely included in textbooks.

When an ESL program begins using EFF, it is important for all staff involved to remember that it is a process. Many ESL students are accustomed to class content guided by a curriculum or a textbook with supplemental activities created by the teacher. They are not used to being asked what they want to do, nor are they used to participating in the development of class activities. Initial attempts to set class goals or to involve students in the planning process might create some confusion, uncertainty, and resistance in the students. Instructors will likely have to guide their students through the process step-by-step several times. They might also need to offer suggestions at each step along the way. The key is to be persistent. Our instructors have found that, as learners repeat the process, they become increasingly involved and are eager to offer their ideas.