Introduction

Think about it

Imagine that you're at a job interview for your ideal ESL teaching job. The interview is going well, when the interviewer asks you a key question—"What is your philosophy of teaching?" How do you respond?

The Introduction includes these topics:

- ☑ Using this book
- ☑ Re-imagining what it means to be a language teacher
- ☑ Solving common teaching problems
- ☑ Setting aside distractions to language teaching

Using This Book

If you are reading this book, you are interested in maximizing the effectiveness of your teaching. You've probably looked at at least a few other books on ESL teaching or full of ESL activities: there are many such books out there, some with excellent suggestions for discussion starters, shorter or longer communicative activities, role-plays, etc. This book is not a collection of activities or ready-made lesson plans for you to add to your teaching repertoire. Instead, this book is meant to empower you as a teacher and help you create a principled framework or philosophy for your own teaching—a framework that will shape the varied activities of the ESL classroom into a coherent teaching and learning partnership for you and your students. When you finish reading this book, you should be able to articulate your own individual teaching philosophy.

This book shows you how to use any item of English language materials—an assigned text, a random newspaper article, or an ESL activity from a website—to teach your students *something about language*. The book walks you through the process of reflecting on your role in diagnosing what that "something" is—what your students really need—and planning how you will get them there and how you will know when they got there in a goal-driven, principled manner.

This book is meant to empower you as a teacher. Language motivates, and language empowers. When you set specific language goals and enable students to achieve them, you empower your students and give them the tools for real success in English. When you set aside the many perceived problems and distractions to the task of teaching and focus instead on setting specific language goals and following through on them, you empower yourself as a teacher to bring about real change in your students' language production.

How Is This Book Organized?

Chapter 1 addresses the theory of setting specific language goals for students and offers examples of these in action. Chapter 2 relates this idea of specific language goals to actual learner needs and gives examples of an initial diagnostic and needs-analysis. Chapter 3 redefines lesson planning and offers walk-throughs and templates to use when planning goal-driven language lessons. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss explicit language instruction, grammar lessons, and treatment of error, while Chapter 6 addresses recognizing and assessing student progress. Chapters 7 and 8 tackle the mechanics and logistics that facilitate the goal-driven language classroom, demystifying the transition from a goal-driven lesson plan to the real-time, in-class delivery of the plan.

The Eye-Opener sections highlight surprising facts about language instruction while the Spotlight on Research sections introduce relevant and useful information from TESOL literature.

This book does not separately discuss business English, academic English, conversational English, or English for Specific Purposes. Although these divisions are certainly useful for defining content, specifying sets of vocabulary, and teaching situation-specific pragmatic knowledge, they are beyond the scope and goals of this book. The classroom is primarily a language classroom, and *language-focused goals* for your students should underlie every ESL class, whether it's business English or not.

Some sections refer you to other books or materials. Some teachers find that their curriculum is set, and they cannot introduce additional materials into the classroom; others find that they have no curriculum at all and are in effect responsible for creating their own. In both cases, we believe that effective, efficient teaching can occur: the teaching framework is more than just the materials, which are really secondary to it. However, teachers creating their own curriculum or supplementing one will find useful suggestions here.

A few sections of this book are flagged with a tutoring icon to address the particulars of working one-on-one (or in very small groups) with students.

Re-Imagining What It Means to Be a Language Teacher

Reflections on Teaching: Creating and Using a Teaching Journal

Regardless of your classroom situation, we encourage you to keep a separate notebook for the journal activities you'll find in this book. Each chapter contains at least one reflective journal item, in which you'll need to think and write thoughtfully about your role as a teacher and the other topics. Each chapter also may contain short question-and-answer activities, designed to prompt further thinking. Stop and think through each activity, exploring possible answers to the journal questions, before continuing to read each chapter.

WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS AS A TEACHER?
WHAT DO YOU DO WELL IN THE CLASSROOM?

If you don't yet have classroom experience, think about your interactions in business, social activities, and your personal life because many of these strengths transfer into teaching.

A few examples are:

- thinking on your feet and improvising
- organizing, planning ahead, and making lists
- empathizing with students
- quickly evaluating a problem and resolving it
- setting goals and keeping them clearly in mind
- creating a warm classroom environment
- offering good models of English grammar and pronunciation
- being sensitive to cultural differences
- managing time efficiently and covering material as planned
- choosing interesting topics and materials

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

This requires you to think about and actually list your goals.

1. What desires or frustrations prompted you to pick up this book? What goals do you have for yourself as a teacher?

2. What goals do you have for your students? How would you describe your current or prospective English class?

What do you think is important to focus on before a class? Use a check mark to indicate what is most important. Explain why.

1. **_____ interpersonal aspects:** enjoying/creating a bond with students

2. _____ **organizational aspects:** using organized systems for teaching and keeping track of the class (attendance book, handouts organized, etc.)

3. _____ **content aspects:** providing good content (interesting topics for discussion, etc.)

4. _____ **activity level:** relying on a good list of activities

5. _____ **goal level:** establishing clearly set goals for students and knowing how students will reach these goals and how you'll know when they have reached them
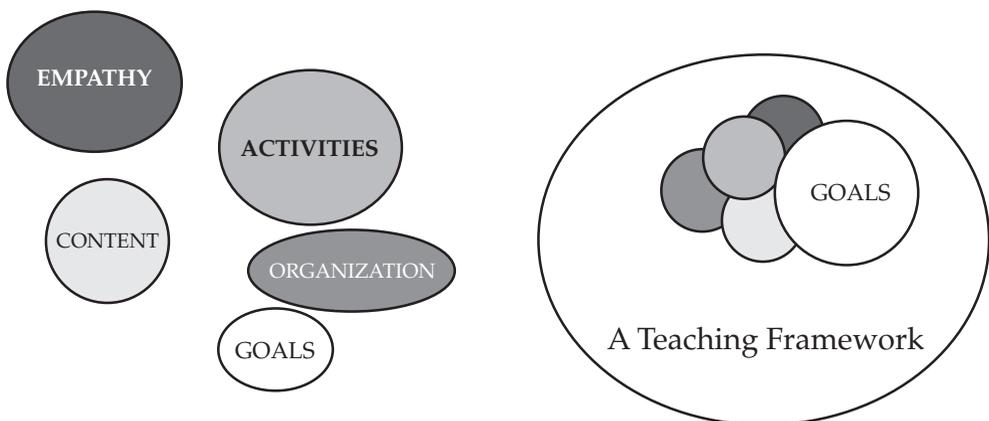
Eye-Opener

> While all of these aspects—interpersonal, organizational, content, activity, goal—are important considerations for the classroom, many teachers think of them separately, without giving enough importance to what we think should be the most important aspect—the level of goal-setting.

This book focuses mainly on goal-setting and organization for the classroom; you supply the empathy with your students, the interpersonal aspects, without which you probably wouldn't be teaching or tutoring to begin with. The content of the class can come from you, your students, your textbooks, or your program, but it should not be the driving force in the classroom. Similarly, while it's good to explore a variety of types of activities, and while teachers are always on the lookout for engaging activities that genuinely work in the classroom, the activity should not be an end in itself.

This book provides a framework to take these separate aspects and integrate them into a coherent approach to teaching.

In Figure 1, the items on the left depict how some teachers may approach teaching: everything is separate, compartmentalized, but empathy and activities receive the bulk of the teachers' attention. On the right, an integrated teaching framework is shown, with more attention paid to classroom goals and organization.

FIGURE 1

Two Views of Teaching

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

The idea of metacognition is a very important one in educational research and pedagogy. Its benefits have long been recognized in philosophy and psychology, dating back to the ancient Greeks' dictum to "Know thyself." So, here and throughout the book, we challenge you to get to know yourself better as a teacher and to re-examine your experiences, inspirations, and goals through these reflective sections.

Some of the ideas in this introduction may be new to you. At the end of this introduction, flip back through these pages and take specific note of any sections that raised new questions in your mind.

The box on page 4 asked you to consider your strengths as a teacher. This exercise can be a difficult one. It's worthwhile to think about what you do well as a teacher because these strengths are often the reason you turned to teaching in the first place. For example, a teacher who knows he or she relates well to people from other cultures may have turned to teaching ESL (as an avocation or profession) for this reason.

This book will help you address the areas of your teaching that you may feel overwhelmed by at the moment but will also help you build on your known strengths to create an individual teaching style within a principled framework.

The next section is meant to be completed in writing in your journal so that you will be able to look back at your initial responses later. However, use pages 7–9 for your notes; you may also want to talk through these questions with a fellow teacher or a mentor. The two main benefits of this conversation are to create an audience for your thoughts to force yourself to be more specific and articulate in your responses and to create a teaching support network for yourself.

1. Describe your teaching situation if you have one. If you don't have one yet, go to #2.

2. Teachers tend to teach the way they have been taught. Who were some of your best or most memorable teachers, and why do you value them? What do you recall about your experiences learning to read in your first language, learning to speak another language, or living or traveling abroad?

3. Many teachers think that student motivation is an essential component of the classroom and that their job as teachers is to motivate their students. In fact, however, people tend to be motivated most by real outcomes, which vary widely by individual (some learners focus on a high grade in a class, or the possibility of a better job, for instance). Your students' particular motivations are secondary and largely irrelevant to the classroom and to your job. To help realize this, think about a time when you were "motivated" to do something by a focus on goals. Describe the experience.

4.   Complete this sentence:

My job as a teacher is to

Possible responses to this include:

a.   *My job is to convey knowledge—for example, teaching the difference between past tense and present perfect.*

This idea forces teachers into the role of a reference book or library, a position that can paralyze teachers and distract them from their goals if they don't immediately know the answer to a given question. Instead, you as the teacher do not have to be the repository of all knowledge on English.

b.   *My job is to be my students' friend. I need to be supportive and make the learning experience enjoyable for students.*

This view misses the point of having a teacher in the classroom—you should be more of a facilitator than a friend, and the new abilities that students walk away from your classroom with are what make the learning experience truly valuable to them. Furthermore, offering students the language they really need is in fact a measurable way to be their friend and advocate.

c.   *My job is to motivate students and make them work harder.*

This idea misunderstands the role of motivation in the classroom: whatever motivation brought students into your classroom, it's their progress and success that will actually motivate them to return.

d.   *My job is to create an environment for students to maximize their potential.*

This view is just too vague to be useful: if you *do* succeed in reaching this goal, at best all you have is the environment. You don't actually have any measurable achievements or learning.

Eye-Opener

> Your job as a teacher of ESL is to enable students to reach the language goals that you have set.

This formulation of your job as a teacher is useful because it's

1. student-focused
2. language-based (not based on content, atmosphere, or motivation)
3. observable, measurable, and achievable.

Solving Common Teaching Problems

Although there are lots of things to think about before setting foot in the classroom, there are certain things you don't need to worry about. The "problems" listed on pages 11–14 are often part of the realities of teaching; if your overall focus is on yourself as a language teacher and goal-setter for your students, you should be able to work within the framework of any institution.

Problem 1:

Restricted Content/Materials: *The curriculum/book is chosen for me, and I'm locked in to using it.*

It doesn't matter what content you use to teach language. Use any content you have, but set goals for students for language skills. Use the content to help them reach these goals.

CASE STUDY: THE FOOD PYRAMID

A teacher working in a community center was assigned to teach a lesson on the food pyramid and government dietary guidelines to a group of adult learners. The teacher was very unhappy about the required content of this part of his course, and he felt that it was offensive for him to be telling other adults how to eat.

He wasn't focusing, however, on the many language goals that could arise from this required content. Aside from the fact that his learners should be familiar with the content because they will also encounter it in other contexts (doctors' offices, children's schools, etc.), this content lends itself to a grammatical focus on

- numbers
- count/noncount nouns: *milk, rice, bread*
- partitives and plurals: *a glass of milk, a bunch of bananas, a loaf of bread*
- modals: *I should eat more. . .*
- *wh-* questions: *How many vegetables do you eat a day?*

Problem 2:

Specialization*: I'm supposed to teach business English (or another specialized field), and I don't have extensive experience in that field.*

It doesn't matter—you're teaching language. The content is set, so just fill in some vocabulary items. If students are already taking business or technological English, they may be good informants about what kinds of vocabulary they need to know. You as teachers can predict the language students will ultimately need in this context; work backward from your mental script of what students will need to say.

Problem 3:

Open-Ended Content/Materials: *There is no set curriculum. How am I going to find materials to fill every session?*

Find something you like and your students don't hate—newspapers, current events, holidays/cultural items—and use these things as the content of your class. Remember that you're teaching language *through* the content; you're not teaching content.

Problem 4:

Administrative Pressures: *My school/department is very rigid in its guidelines for teachers. I've been asked to speak more slowly or simply.*

Many language programs are run with very specific and inflexible guidelines for teachers. For example, if the main focus of a program is to get students to stay in class and re-enroll for another semester, then allowing students to reply only in a few words or with very inaccurate grammar may be tolerated. While you probably can't change the system at an entire institution, you often *can* work within the system to use meaningful language, set specific language goals for students, and achieve higher levels of student accuracy within your classroom. In every case, be sure you understand the political climate of your institution.

Problem 5:

Class Size: *My classes are too big. I have 20–30 students in a room. OR I'm nervous about being one-on-one with a student as a tutor*

In general, teachers and tutors have no control over the number of students in their class. If you're lucky enough to have the ideal class size (8–15 or so), that's great. If not, this is one of the realities that you have to accept.

Problem 6:

Affective Factors: *I don't want to make students feel bad about their accent or their mistakes.*

Remember that your job as teacher or tutor is not to be the students' friend. It's possible to set up a classroom climate that doesn't stigmatize students' accents or mistakes, and that also doesn't tolerate inaccuracy on targeted grammar/pronunciation points. Students come to class wanting—and often needing—to improve, which usually means changing their accents or grammar. As teachers, we are not serving students well if we don't call attention to inaccuracies and provide the means for them to change their language patterns to reach the language goals.

Problem 7:

Multiple Levels of Students in One Class: *I'm worried that students will be at multiple levels in my classroom. How can I keep the advanced students entertained?*

Varying levels within one classroom is a fact of life, and not one that you should spend a great time of time worrying about. In general, identify the error patterns your students have in common—almost all learners will share problems with noun and verb endings, for example, or with word- and sentence-level stress. In addition, you can often use the different ability levels in your classroom to your advantage. Sometimes you may want to group students by ability levels for a specific activity, and sometimes you may want to pair a more advanced student with a less-proficient one.

Problem 8:

Unstable Enrollment: *My class enrollment is always changing, with some new students coming in every few weeks. I'm worried about continuity.*

Don't worry about this! New students mean opportunities to recycle old classroom expectations and recycle your teaching points. Use your continuing students as informants for the new ones: students genuinely like being able to show off what they've learned, and you'll be able to assess exactly where your continuing students are. You can even use this strategy if your enrollment doesn't change over the course of the semester, but your students have spotty attendance.

Problem 9:

Feeling Overwhelmed: *My students have so many needs. How will I ever be able to help them make the progress they need? OR I don't know anything about my students' native language(s), and I'm worried I won't be able to help them as well as I could if I did.*

Remember that your job as a teacher is to set specific language goals and give learners what they need to achieve them. You don't need to know everything about English or about your students' language(s) in order to do this. Calm down, figure out what your students need (i.e., what errors are they making?), and prioritize a set of goals for them.

In addition, resources like *Learner English* can help you anticipate errors, as will experience, but you should get your students focused on analyzing the difference between their native languages and English. You don't need to have all the answers; this process of analysis actually helps the students.

Problem 10:

Motivation: *What if my students aren't motivated to work hard at their language? What if different students in the class have different motivations?*

Teachers tend to think that student motivation is the first and necessary step toward language success. However, our goal-driven approach to teaching can lead your students directly toward language success—which in turn may result in increasing students' motivation. Furthermore, we can find out students' stated reasons for attending a class, but we never really know what's going on in their heads, and even if we did, students' stated motivation is largely irrelevant to what goes on in the classroom. You can't control who ended up in your room or for what reason, but you *can* control what you do in the classroom. If you set specific language goals and enable students to reach those goals, students will become motivated. It's students' own choice whether or not to use the new pattern they've learned in their everyday speech or writing, but if they are able to do it (i.e., they've reached the goal), you have done your job. Tell students explicitly why they're doing specific things; focus students on the payoff. Your goal should not be to "get students motivated" or even to have them motivate themselves; if you have specific language goals for your students, that's all you need to focus on.

These "problems" are not obstacles to classroom success. They are, however, distractions from the real work of teaching and learning language. As teachers, we need to set aside these concerns and focus on the real work of the classroom—goal-driven lesson planning and delivery.

Setting Aside Distractions to Language Teaching

Some teachers distract themselves from the real work of the classroom by allowing and elaborating on all possible tangents in a discussion or by resisting giving closure through simple, discussion-ending answers.

Based on our years of training and supervising pre-service and in-service teachers, we present this list of things teachers hate to say:

1. *That's beyond the scope of our lesson.* Don't be afraid to say this to students. If you've got specific language goals and steps to get students to those goals, you'll know instantly whether something is or is not outside the scope of the lesson, and you will not need to debate with yourself in the classroom about whether or not a particular tangent is or is not relevant. Once you've decided that a particular question is irrelevant, you will need to shut down discussion on it firmly and re-direct students back to the goal at hand.

2. *That's just the way it is (in English / in this case).* There are times when this is in fact the right answer to a student's question. Teachers are often comfortable giving this response about something fairly simple, such as irregular forms of nouns or verbs. However, with more advanced and non-systematic grammar points (such as which verbs take gerunds vs. infinitives, which verbs take which prepositions, and which verbs are transitive vs. intransitive), teachers often unnecessarily second-guess themselves and are reluctant to simply state the reality that some aspects of language are not predictable. On the other hand, students often welcome this kind of straightforward response.

3. *You'll have to memorize it.* Since some aspects of language are not predictable or rule-governed, there are words, forms, and patterns that students simply must memorize, just as native speakers do (whether or not they recall doing so). Teachers are often reluctant to say this because it makes them feel that they are inadequate to explaining the task at hand or may bring to mind associations with out-of-vogue teaching styles (such as pattern-practice drills). Students, on the other hand, are used to memorization: academic-level ESL students typically memorize dates, facts, formulas, etc., in their other subjects, while community or literary-level ESL learners will have already had to memorize the basic elements of literacy and language. In fact, most teachers will remember that they had to memorize to do well in school themselves.

4. *No, that's wrong.* This may be one of the most difficult things for teachers to bring themselves to say, but it is sometimes necessary and helpful. (Chapter 2 discusses how and under what circumstances to respond to student errors in the classroom.) Beyond direct language errors, however, this situation sometimes arises when students have firm but mistaken convictions. For example, one student we know was insistent that contractions, which characterize American English, are "lazy" English and are not used by speakers of British English. The reality is, of course, that both British and American speakers do contract; it would not serve anyone for a teacher to argue back and forth with an insistent student on this point, nor would it be helpful to allow the misperception to persist in the classroom. Teachers need to feel comfortable, in such situations, saying, "No, that's not the case," and re-directing the class as a whole back to the goals at hand. (As a side note, you may want to ask an individual student—as the teacher in this case did—to check his or her facts and discuss it with you later, but the point is to control the discourse of the classroom in a clear, goal-focused way because you know where students need to be.)

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Do you have an overall approach to teaching? Can you articulate it? Would an observer in your classroom on any random day see things that match that approach?

What do you hope to gain from this book? How do you think it might affect your approach to teaching?