

Back to Basics: ELT Techniques for 2016

by [Eleanor Henning](#)

To *motivate* an ELL is to *empower* an ELL. Why? An ELL is more likely to feel excited and empowered if there is motivation for the learning. As linguist Gardner hypothesized in his 1985 study, motivation and attitude are the primary sources contributing to individual language learning. Keeping this in mind, how do we best motivate and therefore empower our students?

As teachers, we should never stop learning and reminding ourselves of core ELT techniques. In an age of information overload in which a wealth of content and resources are readily available to support this learning, sometimes we may get “stuck in the weeds” and overlook fundamental language learning techniques that originally led us to success as teachers. As the dawn of a new year begins, let’s return to basics and revisit fundamental ELT techniques that best support and motivate a learner to feel empowered and in control of his or her English language learning experience, as well as concrete examples of how to implement the techniques.

Whether you’re a veteran or new to the field, combining these techniques in the classroom will motivate and empower your students to be successful language learners. Wishing you all a very happy 2016 and much teaching success!

1. Scaffold

To scaffold means to support an ELL during the stages of language acquisition, and to gradually withdraw that support as the learner acquires the target language and is able to perform a skill or task independently. Examples of support may include clues, verbal encouragement, reminders, or segmenting a task into more achievable parts. Scaffolding is key in the classroom as it allows learners to be presented with manageable language content and to slowly gain confidence and acquire that component of the L1 without feeling overwhelmed. Scaffolding also allows a learner the space to practice the target language before moving on to a more complex task.

Examples

- Scaffold target vocabulary with images such as drawings, photographs, maps, comics, magazines, Google images, commercial videos, and even students’ own photographs or art if they choose to share. For a unit on directions or community, use photographs or images from around the actual school where you teach.
- Have students group target vocabulary by category or by using the words in sentence strips.
- Preteach whenever possible. For example, email students a YouTube clip the day before it will be shown in class.

Resources

- [The GO TO Strategies: Scaffolding Options for Teachers of English Language Learners, K-12](#) (Center for Applied Linguistics)
- [5 Key Strategies for ELL Instruction](#) (Teaching Channel)

- [Scaffolding Instruction for English Language Learners: Resource Guides for English Language Arts and Mathematics](#) (Engage NY)
- [7 Ways to Scaffold Instruction for English Language Learners](#) (Northwest Evaluation Association)

2. Model

To model means to show students how to accomplish a language task by demonstrating and explaining it explicitly. Modeling can be described as one type of scaffolding or support for learners. Breaking the skill into manageable parts or steps and teaching those parts one by one is key to supporting learners' language acquisition. Give examples of how and when the target language should be used and examples of situations where you *wouldn't* use the target language.

Example

To show students the differences between the modals *could*, *should*, and *would*, have learners silently read a text and underline the words. Have the students watch and listen to a podcast or watch a video clip with the target language and how it is used in conversation. Be sure to always include authentic language in which the target language appears. For example:

- "I was wondering, could you buy those tickets tomorrow?"
- "Would you mind stopping by my office before you leave?"
- "I think you should accept that job."

Have students practice writing a true-life scenario in which they could use these types of target structures.

Resources

- [12 Ways to Support ESL Students in the Mainstream Classroom](#) (Cult of Pedagogy)
- [I Do, We Do, You Do](#) (Teaching Channel)
- [Fifty Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners](#), by A. L. Herrell and M. Jordan (Pearson Education)

3. Pronounce

To pronounce means to speak according to the phonemes of the language and thereby make oneself comprehensible to the listener, regardless of whether the grammar or vocabulary used is completely accurate. I love teaching pronunciation because learners often experience a "light-bulb" moment when learning an aspect of pronunciation and that correct pronunciation is often the key to listening comprehension. Learners are truly curious about sounds and are excited to improve their pronunciation. Teaching pronunciation can also easily involve a good deal of kinesthetic activity. Correct pronunciation gives ELLs the confidence to focus on other language challenges, such as grammar and vocabulary, when speaking to native speakers.

Example

To practice voiced and voiceless consonants (*bad* vs. *bat*, *robe* vs. *rope*) in the four skill areas (listening, reading, speaking, writing), list the target words on the board and then have the students stand in a circle and toss a ball while repeating the words around the circle. Learners can also listen to a dictation, write the correct voiced or voiceless word in their notebooks or on the board, or work in pairs to compare answers. Have students describe images they see which include voiced and voiceless vocabulary.

Resources

- [Sound Bites](#), by J. Kozyrev (National Geographic Learning/Cengage Learning)
- [The Color Vowel Chart](#) (American English)
- [Integrating Pronunciation Across the Curriculum](#) (pdf; American English)

4. Assess

To assess a learner means to collect and analyze his or her learning using a variety of measurements, such as tests, oral reading, writing samples, teacher observations, or self-evaluations. Student self-assessments are an important part of overall assessments because they allow the student to have a certain amount of control over his or her learning. As Snow writes in *More Than a Native Speaker* (1996), involving students in their own grades helps “remove you from the role of final judge...and forces students to take more responsibility for their own work” (p. 66).

Examples

- Consider creating a daily or weekly assessment form that asks students to rate in percentages, number, or grades the quality of their own work and effort overall or in a specific skill area. You could also use a sliding scale from “disagree” to “agree” and ask the student to rate themselves against that scale.
- For a preassessment of reading interests, ask students to respond to questions such as “Do you like to read? Why or why not?” “What do you need to be a better reader?” “What do you like to read?”
- Information gap tasks, oral interviews, text retellings, and roleplays are also great forms of assessment.

Resources

- [5 Reasons You Should Seek Your OWN Student Feedback](#) (Cult of Pedagogy)
- [53 Ways to Check for Understanding](#) (Edutopia)
- [Writing Instruction & Assessment for English Language Learners K-8](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners: Practical Approaches for Teachers](#), by J. M. O’Malley and L. Valdez Pierce (Longman)

5. Read

To read is to look at and comprehend the meaning of written or printed matter by mentally interpreting the characters or symbols of which it is composed. Truly, one of the greatest joys in life is reading, and specifically reading for pleasure. As an instructor, there is nothing more important than encouraging ELLs to read and to read often in order to acquire vocabulary and grammar structures, and learn new content.

Regarding classroom reading, Stoller, Anderson, Grabe, and Komiyama write that “the absence of actual silent reading time...is unfortunate because students become better readers by reading a lot and reading often” (p. 3). Encouraging silent reading in class, as well providing appropriate reading materials which most appeal to the student’s level and interest, is key to instilling a love for reading and for increased and improved reading comprehension and overall improved L2 acquisition.

Example

Create reading displays in your classroom so that students can see a variety of reading materials and choose from those materials. Depending on the learners’ reading levels, the materials can be written work from peers, newspaper articles, comics, movie reviews, or music lyrics. In addition, have students participate in choosing reading material from home or their personal lives to read silently in class. Even five minutes of silent reading per day can have an effect on reading levels.

Resources

- [Instructional Enhancements to Improve Students’ Reading Abilities](#) (*English Teaching Forum*)
- [Pre-Reading Activities for ELLs](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [Reading Logs: Integrating Extensive Reading with Writing Tasks](#) (pdf; American English)

References

Gardner, R. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London, England: Edward Arnold.

Stoller, F. L., Anderson, N. J., Grabe, W., & Komiyama, R. (2013). Instructional enhancements to improve students’ reading abilities. *English Teaching Forum*, 51(1), 2–11.

Snow, D. (1996). *More than a native speaker*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL Press.

Eleanor Henning is the manager of professional learning and research at TESOL. She received her MA-TESOL from American University and taught adult ELL immigrants in Washington, DC for several years. She has worked in volunteer management and teacher training, and she has

supported humanitarian assistance efforts at USAID. Hailing from Wellington, New Zealand, and Madison, Wisconsin, USA, and having traveled far and wide, she now considers DC home.