

# Using English in the ESL Classroom

**A handbook for teachers  
developing the  
oral interaction competency**



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### Annex 1

Teacher self-evaluation form,  
“Teacher’s use of English in class”



## Introduction

Authentic communication is a constant back and forth - from listening to speaking and from speaking to listening - between people who have something to share. Listening or speaking cannot be one-way in a communicative setting. For real communication to take place, there must be interaction between people. Given this premise, the elementary English as a Second Language program of study advances the dynamics of oral interaction rather than the static nature of oral production.

The Key Features of the first competency describe the process of oral interaction. The components of the process the student practises and develops are:

- The student reacts to messages using strategies;
- The student takes the initiative to transmit oral messages using strategies;
- The student maintains oral interaction using strategies.

These three features are essential to the development of the competency. They are not developed in an isolated or a linear fashion. The Key Features are interrelated and constantly activated through the dynamic process of the competency.



## The Challenge of Oral Interaction in the Classroom

**The goal of the oral interaction competency is to help students become functional in English or, in other words, to use spontaneous, natural and effective English in day to day class life.**

How is oral interaction fostered for beginner-level students? How can teachers and students communicate exclusively in English at all times?

Developing oral interaction in English with beginners represents a considerable challenge; it has to be carefully planned and not improvised.

To ensure that a high degree of oral interaction takes place in the classroom, certain conditions are necessary.

They include:

- a commitment on the part of the teacher that English be the sole language used in class;
- careful preparation;
- access to resources for students (especially visuals).





## Teacher Commitment

**The competency To Interact Orally in English constitutes the foundation of the elementary ESL program. Teachers have a responsibility to ensure that their classes take place in English from day one.**

The role of the teacher in an interactive classroom is demanding. The teacher is the driving force behind students' interaction, especially in the early stages of learning.

Teachers have to create a climate in which students feel at ease. The class becomes a comfortable and stimulating environment where teacher-student and student-student interaction happens spontaneously and naturally.

The role of the teacher is multifaceted - language model, guide, helper, ally,... The teacher provides support by filling in gaps in knowledge as needs arise, by helping create links with previous learning and by supplying the appropriate vocabulary and expressions. The role of the teacher is indeed paramount in the early phases of oral interaction.

It is the teacher who puts the wind in the sails of interaction and who promotes and nourishes it constantly.

In other words, the teacher enables students to take control of their own learning and interact in English.

*O.K. Let's do it!*





## Careful Preparation

**Careful class preparation is a determinant factor in the development of oral interaction with beginners.**

**If teachers want students to experience interaction in English during class, they must pay close attention to the preparation of teaching/learning activities.**

Preparation should always make provision for the inclusion of previously learned functional language before, during and after planned activities. The language to be learned should be conspicuous during both the presentation/demonstration and student participation phases.

It is critical to anticipate how to compensate for students' gaps in knowledge so that classroom activities remain possible in the second language. Insufficient preparation can lead to a proliferation of otherwise unnecessary "time out's" for explanations in French.

During the presentation phase of activities, teachers are well advised to limit explanations and provide explicit examples and demonstrations (modelling) instead.



Restricting explanations to a few statements and following up with an interactive demonstration have the effect of clarifying the activity and stimulating students' imaginations. The final activity of the task "My First English Class in English" proposes such a demonstration followed by contextualized practice by the students.

## ...Careful Preparation

Consequently, thorough preparation should include:

- the focus of the task (i.e.: key features and essential knowledge of the first competency);
- how to present, supervise and participate in learning activities in English;
- students' language needs that may arise;
  - the selection of the resources for the activity: posters in clear view and expression banks made available, ...;
- previously learned functional language that can be reinvested;
- the strategies which need to be presented, explained and modelled accompanied by contextualized practice and reflection;
- short, concise explanations;
- explicit demonstrations;
- other aspects which may require reflection (e.g.: compensatory expressions, problems encountered, successes);
- other material (e.g.: books, self-evaluation/peer evaluation instruments);
- the teacher's adjustment of input (cf. Adjusting Input for ESL Beginners).



While being specific, preparation should also be sufficiently flexible so as to take advantage of the “present moment”, even to yield to it for it becomes an opportunity to use authentic language. There is nothing more significant, more authentic than the “present moment”.

Accordingly, it is important to be able to seize the moment and let it be lived fully in class, to take advantage of it and allow students to use and reinvest the language they know.



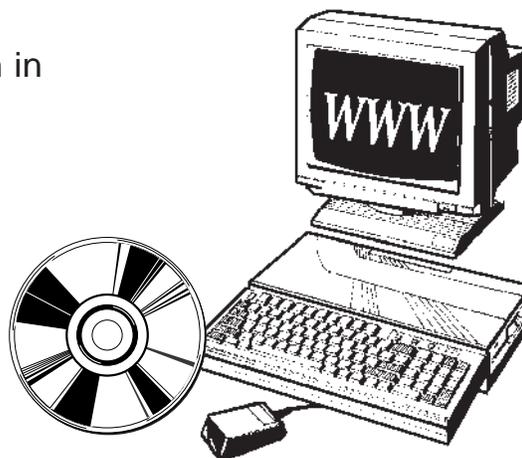
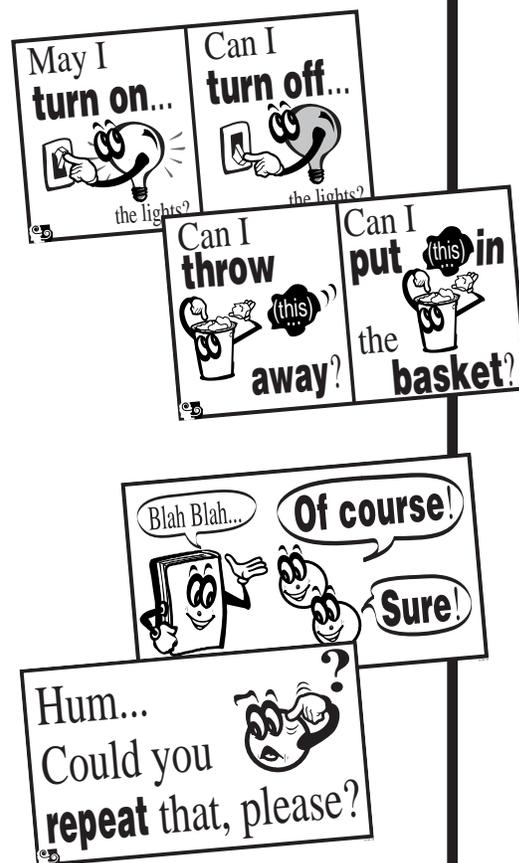
## Resources for Students

To express themselves in English right from the start, students must have access to a variety of resources, such as word and expression banks, posters, computer programs, the teacher and peers.

These resources are helpful to the student throughout learning but at the beginning they serve as “lifelines”. When readily available (word and expression banks) or in clear view (posters), students can refer to the functional language when needed. Hence, the student does not have to rely solely on memory to function in the ESL classroom.

By having access to and managing resources, students take control of their own learning and become more autonomous.

An environment equipped with the proper resources facilitates everyday classroom interaction in English.





## The First Steps: Acquiring Functional Language

**Students do not need an enormous amount of language to begin interacting, but they do need “a bit of everything”. And they can accomplish a lot using a little.**

This early stage of learning is particularly apt for the development of functional language related to daily life in the class.

Since beginner students require “a bit of everything” to interact orally, it is important to allow students to acquire early on and in context the useful expressions they will need most often. The Essential Knowledge section of the program offers several suggestions of formulaic expressions that nurture interaction right from the onset of ESL instruction and can be used frequently and authentically. The expressions are related to the following areas:

- *expressing needs*  
(e.g.: I’m not finished., I forgot my pencil., I don’t have an eraser., I need a paper.);
- *asking for permission*  
(e.g.: May I sharpen my pencil?, May I go to the washroom?, May I borrow an eraser?, ...);
- *agreeing/disagreeing/giving an opinion*  
(e.g.: I agree./disagree., I want/don’t want, That’s correct./incorrect, ...);
- *offering assistance*  
(e.g.: May I turn on/off the lights?, May I hand out/collect the sheets?, Can I open/close the door/window?, ...);
- *inviting/suggesting*  
(e.g.: Do you want to work with me?, Please, come here., let’s\_\_\_\_., ...);

Once developed, functional language stays with students and provides a language store which forms the basis of future learning.

- *compensatory strategies and expressions*: students should be able to delay speaking when they are not ready to interact on the spot, and be able to ask for help or clarification (e.g.: Wait a minute., I have a problem., Can you repeat, please?, I don’t understand., Can you help me, please?, How do you say...?, ...);



## ... The First Steps: Acquiring Functional Language

Students base their understanding to a great extent on elements that accompany natural language use (general context, nonverbal reactions, intonation, gestures). Students make meaning by formulating hypotheses using clues provided by other speakers in the classroom.

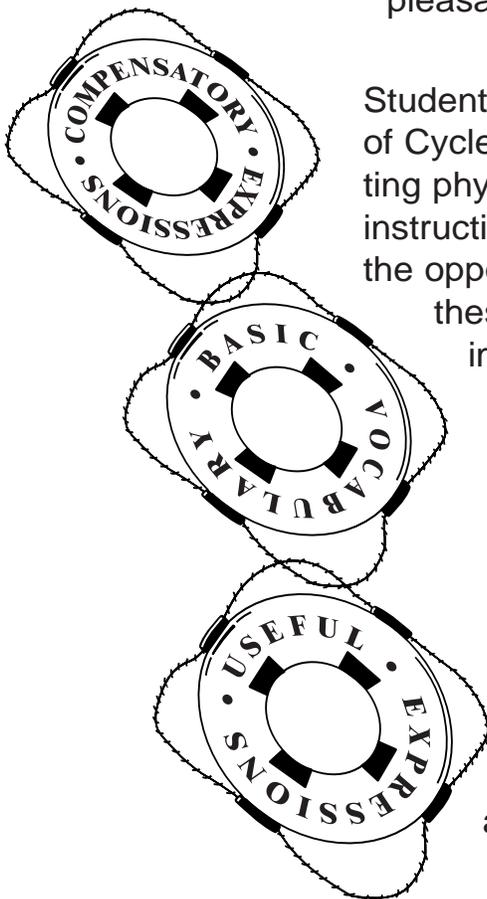
This stage is particularly apt for

- associating physical actions to precise instructions;
- establishing simple routines (greetings, pleasantries, ...);

Students at the beginning of Cycle Two enjoy reacting physically to simple instructions and having the opportunity to use these instructions by improvising their own scenarios that make other students move and react. This is an ideal way for learners to acquire key action words, and to increase understanding and participation.

The task “My First English Class in English” proposes such a situation in the third and last activities. Given the fun generated and the numerous possibilities of reinvestment that these activities offer, teachers should let beginner students practise action words frequently in class.

Establishing simple routines is another excellent means of providing a sense of security for beginners while fostering understanding. It is important to integrate unforeseen events in order to keep the interactive aspect of the moment and avoid falling into monotonous, automatic behaviour. The frequency, the time allotted and even the ritual of the routine vary according to the situation. Two activities from the task “My First English Class in English” demonstrate the beginnings of simple routines - the first activity (personalized greetings) as well as the fourth activity (writing the date).





## Practice Makes Perfect

**Students need multiple opportunities to manipulate and use the functional language in a creative manner - learning to do a lot with little.**

To allow students to interact spontaneously in English, teachers must set up situations and scenarios that call for the introduction and reinvestment of functional language. The use of functional language is essential during and after activities: while finding partners, preparing the activity, deciding on how to proceed, borrowing items, checking the progress of their teammates, comparing discoveries, expressing ideas and opinions, etc...

Consequently, it is important to trigger use of functional language for peripheral activities.

Teachers should leave traces of the new language by providing expression lists, posters, reflection and self-evaluation activities. They should also encourage their pupils to use them as reinforcement tools outside the classroom.



## ... Practice Makes Perfect

**It is worthwhile to encourage students to reinforce and continue their learning outside the classroom.**

There should be a focus on ways to promote follow-ups to learning between classes. Clearly, teachers cannot accompany their students outside of class, but reinforcement is possible.

It is important that students realize that regular follow-ups between classes can bear much fruit. They increase the amount of exposure to the target language and to authentic linguistic models.

In order for learners to accomplish such follow-ups, teachers should provide concrete tools that allow young learners to practise functional language with a high potential for reinvestment (banks of expressions, action words, etc...).

Such tools have the advantage of offering students accurate models, which may be lacking during peer practice in class.

Teachers should take time to discuss with students the benefits of out-of-class efforts in English. They should also plan for periodic discussion in class of the outside work students have been doing in order to maintain interest and bolster motivation.

Without reinvestment between classes, progress will be slower because students will need to spend more time reactivating functional elements. Regular oral practice between classes can work wonders. It is an excellent habit to develop.





## Adjusting Input for ESL Beginners

The English that teachers use has to be comprehensible. ESL beginners already have the considerable challenge of learning a new language. What students hear and understand has to be adjusted to facilitate learning. Just as parents adjust their input for young children, so can ESL teachers adjust both the content and the means of transmission of their input to ESL beginners.

The content of teacher-talk can be adjusted by:

- focusing on functional language;
- making short statements;
- keeping explanations brief and concrete;
- using cognates;
- using highly frequent vocabulary;
- reinvesting learned words and expressions;
- repeating key words and expressions;
- reformulating in order to simplify information;
- delivering instructions step-by-step;
- presenting factual information logically and sequentially.

Teacher-talk can be adjusted employing the following means:

- pronouncing clearly, using a natural delivery;
- not repeating in French;
- pausing to let students process information and gather their thoughts in order to respond;
- varying intonation for specific words and expressions;
- using gestures and body language;
- referring to posters, pictures, checklists, posted rules;
- using mime and dramatic demonstrations;
- modelling activities with students;
- writing essential information on the board, or on a transparency;
- presenting activities, providing examples, correcting on the overhead projector;
- using props, puppets, and realia.



Adjusting input to their young learners is a crucial task for ESL specialists. If teacher-talk is not adapted to the comprehension limits of students, then teachers may have to resort to the overuse of French.



## Time Out's

**English is the predominant language in the ESL classroom. However, French may have to be used in certain circumstances.**

Reflection on language and strategy use helps learners to focus on success and overcome difficulties. Regular teacher-directed reflection activities also contribute to discovering efficient ways of using English.

Given the level of English needed, it is clear that reflection activities cannot be carried out in English at the early stages of learning. The use of the first language as a resource is called for rather than delay the introduction of reflection on strategy use.

Nevertheless, to accomplish this without losing the Englishness of the ESL class, the use of French necessarily has to be considered exceptional, a "time out".



As students become more proficient in English, it will become feasible to reflect on strategy use without having to revert to French.

"Time Out's" may also be necessary to resolve major disciplinary problems, to intervene when an activity goes awry and other situations where the level of English would be too sophisticated for the students.

"Time Out's" should not be used as an easy way out — they are no substitute for careful planning and the choice of tasks that correspond to the proficiency level of the students.



## Conclusion

Setting up a classroom where oral interaction is omnipresent takes time. This is time well-spent and necessary for the first competency is the backdrop of all learning in the ESL classroom. It is paramount to give oral interaction the chance to manifest itself whenever possible. So, when time is taken to “live” in English, it may seem that less “material” is being covered. However, teachers must not feel that time is being wasted when spontaneous interaction situations happen. On the contrary, such situations plainly illustrate the oral interaction competency.

Above all, oral interaction in Cycle Two and Cycle Three aims to develop basic, functional language in meaningful contexts by providing students with ample opportunities to use it again and again.

Everything else is secondary to this main goal.



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## Teacher's use of English in class

**Evaluate your use of English.**

Date:.....

Name:.....

*Check (✓) along the continuum.*

	<b>French</b>	French	English	<b>English</b>	Adjustments to be made
Greetings					
Outline of course					
Routines					
Instructions					
Presentation of content					
Explanations					
Introducing activities					
Examples					
Correction					
Assigning homework					
Comments on student work in class					
Comments to students during activities					
Chatting with students in class					
Chatting with students outside class					
Minor management problems					
Major discipline problems					

Points to Ponder...



*To use or not to use English;  
that is the question!*

**Some Issues Concerning the Use of English  
in the ESL Classroom**

**Myth or Reality?**

- 1- Students panic when they hear a lot of English.**
- 2- Students won't like the English teacher who insists on using English.**
- 3. Parents expect ESL teachers to use French.**
- 4. Teachers can get more done when they use French.**

Points to Ponder... (Teacher's Key)



*To use or not to use English;  
that is the question!*

**Some Issues Concerning the Use of English  
in the ESL Classroom**

**Myth or Reality?**

## **1- Students panic when they hear a lot of English.**

- Students will panic if they are not used to hearing English.
- Teachers have to adjust their input. They should start out with relatively simple activities that can be done entirely in English. Bank of useful expressions and posters can be provided.
- All activities can be modelled as well as explained simply.
- In time, students will accept and expect that ESL classes be run in English.

## **2- Students won't like the English teacher who insists on using English.**

- Students appreciate nice teachers. But, in the long run, they value and respect teachers that help them learn a lot of English.
- A confident, "professional" teacher takes on the role of being a linguistic model.
- Being a teacher who demands more English does not prevent a teacher from being the student's friend.

## **3. Parents expect ESL teachers to use French.**

- Teachers can meet with parents and explain the importance of functional language in the ESL classroom.  
Students are also provided with resources, such as banks of useful expressions, posters, etc.
- Have parents reflect on how much English they actually learned from English teachers who used a lot of French.
- After a while, an ESL teacher using English all the time will be as commonplace as a physical education teacher wearing sneakers.

## **4. Teachers can get more done when they use French.**

- Saving time by using French is an illusion. Using French for instructions, routines, etc. is a lost opportunity to have more English in the classroom.
- Using English to do things, major or minor, makes English real and meaningful to students.
- The teacher who uses English is constantly developing his/her students' comprehension skills and encouraging them to respond in English.
- Besides, with so little time available for English, there is no time to use French.