

Gentle Teaching: Creating a Positive Atmosphere in Young-Learner Classrooms

by **BELLARINA-DUNG NGUYEN**

Gentle Teaching is a philosophy and approach of care that emphasizes building positive relationships with individuals and fostering a sense of safety, security, and belonging. The principles of Gentle Teaching align with best practices in early-childhood education, making it a highly effective classroom-management approach that can create a nurturing and supportive learning environment for young learners.

The focus of this exploration is to promote Gentle Teaching principles in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) classrooms, not only to address disruptive behavior but also to create a positive learning atmosphere where all children feel safe, loved, loving, and engaged. This process allows educators to discern patterns over time, evaluate observed behaviors, and proactively build relationships with the aim of designing tailored interventions that address issues respectfully and effectively. This classroom exploration is beneficial to teachers working with young ESL/EFL learners and to other professionals in English language education.

A PIVOTAL CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

Early in my career teaching young English language learners, I encountered a student who profoundly influenced my pedagogical

philosophy. This student, referred to here as Jonas, was a bright third-grader known for his unyielding competitiveness. Although team-based activities usually elicited cheerful cooperation and laughter in my classes, with Jonas, losing triggered outbursts I will never forget. “It’s not fair!” he would scream, tears streaming down his face, and he blamed his teammates in loud, harsh terms. At their worst, his tantrums ended with him wailing on the floor amid shocked peers. Despite the collective efforts of his teachers to address this behavior, Jonas’s disruptions persisted.

Initially, this disruptive behavior greatly frustrated me, as I was only human. However, one time, upon hearing Jonas cry, “I tried my best!” with real anguish, I was left deeply affected. At that moment, I realized that my frustration was ultimately with my own pedagogical shortcomings. I felt that I was failing not only Jonas but also the entire class and myself. The experience highlighted the unmet socio-emotional needs of this gifted yet struggling student and motivated me to adopt student-centered practices that foster academic, emotional, and psychological growth. This pivotal experience laid the foundation for the gentle approaches I have since implemented, which have yielded significant success.

This classroom exploration is beneficial to teachers working with young ESL/EFL learners and to other professionals in English language education.

Four Pillars of Gentle Teaching



Figure 1. The four pillars of the Gentle Teaching approach

GENTLE TEACHING

What is Gentle Teaching?

Gentle Teaching is a philosophy and approach of care developed by Dr. John McGee in the 1980s with the aim of providing support to individuals with intellectual disabilities and severe challenging behaviors. It is rooted in interdependence psychology and emphasizes meeting fundamental human needs such as safety, security, and a sense of belonging.

McGee et al. (1987) introduced the foundational principles of this model for supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities. McGee and Menolascino (1991) expanded the scope, examining how the Gentle Teaching philosophy can be applied more broadly to provide compassionate, relationship-based care. Although Gentle Teaching was initially applied in clinical contexts, its focus on socio-emotional well-being remains relevant and valuable for all learners.

Four pillars

Gentle Teaching places a strong emphasis on fostering emotional connections rather than focusing solely on intellectual development. As educators, one of our goals is to create a learning situation where students feel safe, loved, loving, and engaged (Figure 1).

Gentle Teaching tools

Gentle Teaching incorporates four essential tools—presence, hands, words, and eyes—that play a vital role in communication and building connections within caregiving relationships (Figure 2). ESL/EFL teachers can leverage these four foundational tools to cultivate trust and support in their classrooms, even in the face of disruptive student behavior.

Presence. An ESL/EFL teacher's overall presence in the classroom should be one of full attentiveness and engagement. We should move around the room, staying in close proximity to students and demonstrating genuine interest in their

Gentle Teaching places a strong emphasis on fostering emotional connections rather than focusing solely on intellectual development.

Tools of Gentle Teaching



Figure 2. The four essential tools of the Gentle Teaching approach

language development. Teachers should avoid distractions like glancing at their phone, as this can make learners feel ignored. When addressing disruptive behavior, we should approach the student slowly and position ourselves nearby, but not so close as to make the student feel threatened. A teacher's composed, attentive bearing can help de-escalate tense situations.

Hands. Although physical touch may not be appropriate, an ESL/EFL teacher's hands can still be used symbolically. We should employ open, welcoming hand gestures to emphasize key points, guide students' attention, and foster a sense of connection—like pantomiming actions or pointing invitingly. These same gentle hand motions can be used to lead a disruptive student to a quiet area or offer to walk with them, without any sudden or forceful movements.

Words. The words an ESL/EFL teacher chooses should be encouraging, supportive, and tailored to each student's English proficiency level. We should offer specific praise for students' efforts ("Great job using that new sentence structure!") and provide constructive feedback in a kind manner, rather than resorting to overly critical language. When dealing with disruptions, teachers should use

simple language to quickly and effectively identify the root of the problem and manage the situation. We should validate the student's feelings and offer choices, avoiding accusatory phrases.

Eyes. Instructors should aim for frequent, warm eye contact that conveys acceptance and safety. We should scan the room and make brief, caring eye contact with each learner, rather than using a harsh or critical gaze that could undermine their willingness to participate. When a student acts out, instructors should maintain a calm, patient focus in their eyes, conveying empathy and a desire to understand the root of the disruptive conduct.

GENTLE TEACHING IN PRACTICE: REDIRECTING DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

From the Gentle Teaching perspective, disruptive behavior is not seen as something to be punished or suppressed, but rather as an opportunity for communication, understanding, and growth. Often, misbehavior is a manifestation of a student's unmet needs or difficulty expressing themselves.

It is the educator's responsibility to listen, observe, and try to understand the root

**From the Gentle Teaching perspective,
disruptive behavior is not seen as something to be
punished or suppressed, but rather as an opportunity
for communication, understanding, and growth.**

causes behind the student's actions. They could be related to language barriers, cultural differences, academic struggles, socio-emotional challenges, or other factors. Instead of immediate consequences or reprimands, Gentle Teaching advocates for a collaborative approach, where the educator works with the student to find mutually agreeable solutions. This may involve teaching alternative coping strategies, providing additional support and resources, or making modifications to better accommodate the student's needs. In all cases, educators should try to respect the emotions of the learner and avoid reprimanding or embarrassing them.

Sometimes, it may take only one application of the technique to help the young learner redirect their behavior. Other times, it may take several rounds of reinforcement and consolidation. Regardless, helping one student find more constructive ways to participate can also benefit the whole class, fostering a more focused and positive learning environment for taking in the English language—which, after all, is a foreign tongue for these students.

The Case of Jonas

In the case of Jonas, after observing and analyzing his behaviors empathetically, I realized that he was frustrated because he could not control the outcome of the game. He felt defeated, and his self-esteem and pride were hurt. He used hurtful language to get back at his teammates because he believed their mistakes caused the team's loss. To help Jonas, I first validated his feelings of frustration and anger, reassuring him that it is understandable to experience these emotions when you are disappointed and when you feel the results are not what you expected. I emphasized that winning and losing are part of the learning process, and

losing provides an opportunity for growth. I then offered Jonas the choice to leave the classroom temporarily to cool down, without it being a punishment. I also provided an option for him to act as the referee for future games until he felt ready to rejoin as a participant. This helped give him a sense of control over the situation and protect his self-esteem.

After Jonas had calmed down, I firmly addressed his tantrum and offensive behavior, explaining that while his feelings were valid, his actions were unacceptable. I emphasized the importance of teamwork and of not blaming individuals for losses, and I highlighted the disruption caused by the misbehavior.

Following this approach, an immediate positive shift in Jonas's attitude was observed. Although multiple trials and reconsolidation were required, Jonas eventually overcame his temper tantrums and exhibited exemplary behavior. This transformation can be attributed to his sense of acceptance, validation, and respect for his emotions. Through the provision of essential tools and guidance, he successfully redirected his emotions and actions. The disruptions caused by Jonas's previous misbehavior were minimized, allowing the whole class to benefit. Interestingly, a few months later, when a new student displaying similar negative competitiveness joined the class, Jonas took the initiative to approach the new student, offering comfort and emphasizing the value of learning from losses.

The Case of Jane

Another example of Gentle Teaching in the ESL/EFL classroom involves a student in a class I was covering for, Jane, who refused to

The transformative journeys detailed in this article underscore the power of gentle, empathetic teaching in cultivating positive change within young learners' classrooms, particularly in ESL/EFL settings.

participate in an activity. Instead of assuming she was lazy or testing me, I recognized that she was feeling confused because she was not sure how to do the task. Feelings of helplessness and inadequacy can sometimes manifest as refusal to participate. I approached Jane privately and re-explained the task, breaking down the instructions into smaller, simpler steps using language tailored to her needs. I chose not to ask if she needed help, as she might have been too shy or embarrassed to admit it.

As ESL/EFL teachers, we must remind ourselves that English, while the medium of instruction or the target language, remains a foreign language for most or all of our students. They may occasionally require additional support without feeling reprimanded or stigmatized. After our discussion, Jane carried on with the activity and seemed more comfortable. This approach not only addressed the immediate challenge but also fostered a supportive learning environment where students feel empowered to seek assistance without fear of judgment. The next few times I saw Jane in the hall, she always smiled and said hello, indicating that we had built a positive relationship through this gentle approach.

The Case of Alice

One more example of a Gentle Teaching approach comes from a conversation I had with my colleague. He told me about a student in his class, Alice, who frequently shouts out answers and tries to dominate the class discussions, even when it is not her turn. My colleague recognized this as a cry for attention and validation.

I suggested he try a gentle approach. Instead of scolding Alice in front of the class or

limiting her participation, I advised him to talk to her privately during a break. He could say to Alice, in a calm, caring tone, "Alice, I've noticed you really want to share your ideas in class. That's great, but sometimes it doesn't give others a chance to participate. How can we make sure everyone feels heard?" I suggested to my colleague that he should then validate Alice's need for recognition and attention. Together, they could brainstorm solutions, such as giving Alice specific roles or responsibilities in group activities, or implementing a "hands-up" or "talking-stick" system to ensure equitable participation. Specifically, the hands-up system simply allows students to raise their hands when they wish to speak, enabling the teacher to call on participants in an organized way and ensure equitable speaking opportunities. The talking-stick approach, meanwhile, involves passing an object around the room, with only the student holding the item permitted to speak; this regulates participation and gives each student a turn. These structured systems foster a classroom where all voices are heard, while addressing over-participation or interruptions.

My colleague took my advice and soon after reported back that by collaborating with Alice to find constructive outlets, he was able to validate her desires while also teaching her to express them appropriately. This gentle, empathetic approach helped build Alice's self-esteem and social skills, rather than shaming her for disruptive behavior.

FINAL REMARKS

The transformative journeys detailed in this article underscore the power of gentle, empathetic teaching in cultivating positive change within young learners' classrooms, particularly in ESL/EFL settings. By

prioritizing the creation of a safe and engaging language-learning environment, educators can redirect disruptive behavior and foster a more focused, distraction-free atmosphere for the entire class to thrive.

This approach extends beyond the immediate setting, as evidenced by students' proactive efforts to support others facing similar challenges. Gentle Teaching is not merely a strategy; it is a mindset that recognizes the inherent dignity and potential in every child, empowering learners to take risks, embrace mistakes, and cultivate the confidence to communicate effectively. With that being said, adopting this mindset requires time for teachers to familiarize ourselves and become naturally attuned to its principles.

To help ESL/EFL teachers integrate these principles into practice, I recommend the following actionable steps:

G – *Generate genuine interest*: Learn about the students' backgrounds, interests, and language-learning goals. Leverage this knowledge to provide personalized encouragement and support, fostering a sense of connection.

E – *Employ positive, constructive language*: Offer specific, sincere praise to highlight student progress. When providing feedback, focus on growth areas and suggest strategies in a kind, empathetic manner.

N – *Navigate minimal distractions, maximum engagement*: Maintain a calm, attentive presence by moving around the classroom and making eye contact with each student. This can help diffuse tense situations and keep the learners focused.

T – *Tap into symbolic gestures*: Use open, welcoming hand motions to guide attention, pantomime ideas, and cultivate a sense of connection with your students.

L – *Leverage collaboration with students*: Seek to understand the root causes behind disruptive behavior, then work together to

find mutually agreeable solutions tailored to their needs.

E – *Embody an empathetic mindset*: Recognize the inherent dignity and potential in every child, empowering learners to take risks, embrace mistakes, and cultivate the confidence to communicate effectively.

REFERENCES

- McGee, J. J., and M. Brown. 2007. *A Gentle Teaching primer*. Saskatchewan Alternative Initiatives.
- McGee, J. J., and F. J. Menolascino. 1991. *Beyond Gentle Teaching: A nonaversive approach to helping those in need*. New York: Springer Science+Business Media.
- McGee, J. J., F. J. Menolascino, D. C. Hobbs, and P. E. Menousek. 1987. *Gentle Teaching: A nonaversive approach for helping persons with mental retardation*. New York: Human Sciences Press.

Bellarina-Dung Nguyen is an ESL/EFL educator and researcher with a focus on creating meaningful and student-centered learning experiences.

She is passionate about fostering collaborative, compassionate, and supportive classrooms that inspire learners to succeed.

The images in Figures 1 and 2 were created by the author, based on information in McGee and Brown (2007).