Practical Applications of TESOL's *The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners*

At the TESOL International Convention & English Language Expo in Chicago last year, TESOL International Association was actively promoting one of its newest publications, *The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners: Grades K–12* (TESOL 2018). I was intrigued to compare the authors' notion of the six main principles with what I have learned in my 18 years of international English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and teacher-training experiences.

The "6 Principles" are based on decades of research and are meant to serve as universal guidelines for effective English-language teaching and learning. The principles are as follows (TESOL 2018):

1. Know your learners.

2. Create conditions for language learning.

3. Design high-quality lessons for language development.

4. Adapt lesson delivery as needed.

5. Monitor and assess student language development.

6. Engage and collaborate within a community of practice.

Of course, English-teaching contexts vary greatly, and some teachers have far more freedom to be flexible and to experiment with ways to apply these principles than other teachers do. Facilities, access to resources, and class size can differ significantly from school to school. I acknowledge that in this short article, it is not possible to fully explain the principles and how they can be applied in different contexts. I also understand that, for various reasons, you might not be able to take steps to apply these principles in your teaching right away. Still, my purpose here is to offer a closer look at what the principles mean for EFL teachers and to share practical suggestions for incorporating them into your teaching and career.

PRINCIPLE 1: KNOW YOUR LEARNERS.

This principle suggests that teachers "learn basic information about their students' families, languages, cultures, and educational backgrounds to engage them in the classrooms and prepare and deliver lessons more effectively" (TESOL 2018, inside front

---

The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners is a trademark of, and the corresponding text is a copyright of, TESOL International Association. © 2018 All rights reserved.

cover). While this suggestion may seem obvious to some teachers, it is solid advice in any educational environment.

One could argue that Principle 1 should begin with learning your students' names. From a student's perspective, there is a power in the knowledge that the teacher thinks you are important enough to remember your name. Knowing students' names can be the beginning of building motivation. Consider the difference between calling on a student by his or her name and simply pointing at him or her. Students feel good when the teacher knows their name and can become more motivated in the classroom when they feel respected and important.

How can you quickly learn students' names?

- Using notecards is one way to learn students' names, as teachers can review the cards and write identifying information on them (e.g., "wears glasses"; "sits near the door").

- Seating charts provide teachers with a way to memorize students' names by location in the classroom.

- Name games are a fun and effective way for both students and teachers to learn names. Here are two suggestions:

  Adjective Name Game. Students stand in a circle and introduce themselves with their name and an adjective beginning with the same first letter of their first name (terrible Trent, musical Maureen, funny Felipe, etc.). The teacher begins with "My name is [terrible Trent]" (be sure to insert your actual name!) and then asks the person to his or her right, "What is your name?" That student must reply with his or her name and an adjective ("My name is musical Maureen")—but must also restate the first person's name ("and this is terrible Trent"). The next person adds his or her name and restates the name and adjective of everyone who has gone before ("My name is funny Felipe, this is musical Maureen, and that is terrible Trent").

Not only does everyone learn names, but incidental learning also takes place (i.e., students practice using correct adjective–noun order, creativity with using adjectives, simple present with *be*, pronouns, demonstrative *this* and *that*, and complete sentences). This activity builds a positive classroom culture, offers multiple listening opportunities, and promotes confidence in using the language, as students start to get used to talking out loud in front of the teacher and their peers. You may not think it possible, but I have done this with groups of over 30 people, and we have never failed—and I know every student's name by the end of the first class!

Name Aerobics. Again, students stand in a circle and introduce themselves, but this time, they must perform one action (e.g., clapping, hopping, stretching, turning around) for each syllable in their name.

A second aspect of Principle 1 is the importance of learning students' interests, which is information that can be used to personalize lessons and inform teaching. Warm-ups and icebreakers are effective means of getting to know students, as these activities allow teachers to access students' prior knowledge, learning preferences, study habits, and interests. This information allows the teacher to adapt, create, and use relevant materials effectively.

Remember those notecards we used to help learn student names? We can also use them here because as we learn more about our students, we can add information to their notecards and even use them, for example, when we group students (that is, students can be grouped by similar interests, by varied interests, by learning preferences, by career goals, etc.).

Meanwhile, warm-ups in the EFL classroom can prepare students for new or challenging language material. Warm-ups should be fun, interactive, easy to understand, and nonthreatening, and they should serve as opportunities for successful language usage.

As an example, let's look at the "snowball fight." Teachers may need to explain the notion of a snowball to students who come from a country or region where snow is sparse or nonexistent. This explanation can be done with photos or drawings. When students have a basic understanding of a snowball fight, the teacher can have them take out a piece of paper and a pen and write down three "things" about themselves on the paper. Students might write their three favorite sports or foods, three interesting places they have visited, three special abilities they have, or three interesting things about their family, and so on. (Note that this might be an opportunity for the teacher to provide sentence stems to promote further language usage.)

Keeping their answers hidden from other students, students "make a snowball" with the piece of paper by crumpling it into a ball and then count down to the snowball fight. Students engage in the snowball fight by throwing their snowball—their crumpled-up piece of paper—and then finding another snowball and throwing it. When the teacher says "Stop," students open the snowball they are holding to read what another student has written (e.g., three favorite sports).

Many options exist here as teachers can have students read out what is written on their snowball, have the class guess who wrote it, or compare answers. As an example of how a snowball fight can be integrated with course content, suppose your next unit will be about families. Using a warm-up such as a snowball fight (with three sentences written about family members, for example) enables the teacher to activate students' background knowledge, identify known and needed vocabulary, and assess grammatical competence; meanwhile, students have fun as they practice authentic use of the language. In addition, this warm-up provides the teacher with valuable information on students' families.

The information teachers can gather via these activities can be used to support their teaching, making it more personalized and effective. By getting to know their students, teachers can better understand them, learning where they come from, the kinds of knowledge they bring, and the areas that interest them. Teachers might also find ways to use students as resources within the classroom.

Try this: What is one warm-up you could do in your next class to learn more about your students?

PRINCIPLE 2: CREATE CONDITIONS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING.

The second principle states that teachers should work to create a positive classroom culture so "students feel comfortable" and that they should "make decisions regarding the physical environment, the materials, and the social integration of students to promote language learning" (TESOL 2018, inside front cover).

I find one of the best ways for a teacher to create positive conditions in an EFL environment is to share your own stories. Teachers are human; we are neither robots nor perfect. Sharing your stories enables students to identify with you, their teacher. Doing so makes connecting with students easier and can make you more likable. Sharing also leads to the identification of common experiences and can increase trust and respect; if the teacher models that he or she is not afraid to share, then students shouldn't be, either.

As an example, when I first moved to Nicaragua and was learning Spanish, the students enjoyed it when I entertained them with a bit of my growing Spanish skills. I told them about meeting my girlfriend's parents, spilling a drink on the table, and then trying to impress her parents with my Spanish abilities by saying, "*Lo siento, estoy muy embarazada*!" I thought I was saying, "I'm sorry, I'm very embarrassed," but what I actually said was, "I'm sorry, I'm very pregnant!"

This example, my story of my own language-learning difficulty, served many purposes. It showed that I'm human, and it created a connection with my students, as they also understand the difficulties and occasionally

embarrassing moments in learning a language. This kind of story also serves as a form of modeling in that it lets students know that mistakes are not just okay, but that they can be opportunities for deeper understanding of language and how the target language works. In fact, I now purposefully use this story as a way to introduce cognates into my language teaching.

Another means of promoting a positive classroom culture is to consider the language you use as a teacher. Teachers, as models of English usage for their students, should have a clear understanding of how they use language, and that includes modeling positive language. A good place to begin is reflecting upon how you praise, discipline, and encourage your students. Do you have students that "cause problems"—or do those students "create challenges"? Do your students make "mistakes"—or do they provide "opportunities for learning"? Is that one student really "disruptive"—or is he or she "energetic"? Is the student who wants to know everything "impatient"—or simply "eager"? Is the student who takes a long time "slow"—or is that student "thorough"? Is the student who is hesitant to answer "afraid"—or is he or she "cautious"?

How do you describe your students—in a negative manner or a positive one? What type of language do you model for your students?

One way to promote positive language use is to start a *compliment circle*. Begin by complimenting one student. Have that student say "Thank you" and then compliment a classmate. Students take turns giving compliments around the classroom, promoting positive, authentic interaction. This activity models positive and polite language while providing opportunities for listening and speaking. The teacher can further promote this idea by rewarding student comments and questions with praise. In essence, the idea is to offer sincere praise for the language and behavior you want from your students.

Another method of promoting a positive classroom culture is to make effective use of nonverbal communication (NVC). I have noticed a correlation between a positive classroom culture and proper classroom management in EFL environments. NVC can be helpful in both of these areas; below are three suggestions for using NVC to improve your classroom culture.

- *Eye contact*. We send information with our eyes and can use them for praise and/or disapproval. Eye contact can be used as a form of classroom management and is a means of allowing students to feel noticed. When students feel noticed, they tend to pay attention more, and this feeling can be motivating for many of them.

- *Proximity*. Proximity in a teaching context refers to how far apart the students are from one another as well as from the teacher. If students are not participating, or if they are doing something they shouldn't be, try standing next to them. This is a simple and often effective means of classroom management. Moving closer to a student allows the teacher to continue the lesson without interruption, while giving the student a little extra attention. Limiting distractions can promote a positive classroom culture.

- *Smiling*. I believe that the teacher can dictate the attitude of the class, and a teacher who smiles has a positive, uplifting impact upon the classroom. For example, try the goofy but effective technique of smiling until your students smile! When you take attendance, as you say a student's name, look up and smile until the student smiles back. It might feel a bit strange, especially at first, but in my experience, it works, and this act of smiling can create an instant, positive, and personal connection. Later on, I have seen teachers switch from smiling to using funny faces, exaggerated frowns, and other facial expressions. This approach serves as another form of modeling, and the teacher can further promote the positive atmosphere simply by greeting students with a big smile.

When we consider NVC, what we are really attempting is to stimulate positive emotions in our classroom. Eye contact, proximity,

and smiling are just three types of NVC, so it can be helpful to teach students that emotion is exhibited with physical gestures, facial expressions, and even speech intonation. One way to get students to think about their emotions and use of NVC is by using a Bowl of Emotions activity.

Bowl of Emotions is best used after the class has begun studying vocabulary related to feelings and emotions. Prepare small cards or slips of paper with a different feeling or emotion written on each (*happy*, *sad*, *angry*, *surprised*, *afraid*, *bored*, *excited*, *disgusted*, *nervous*, *relaxed*, *tired*, *confused*, *impressed*, *jealous*, etc.) and place them in a bowl, bag, or hat. Students choose an emotion card but keep the emotion written on it a secret. Students must decide what the appropriate NVC and intonation associated with the emotion would be. After teacher modeling and in conjunction with a prompt such as, "We need to get our things and move to a different room," students must individually act out the emotion on their card by using NVC and intonations to convey that emotion to the class. The rest of the class tries to guess the emotion, and then the next student "performs," using the emotion on his or her card and the same prompt. The activity allows for individual student expression, and I have found it to be a fun and engaging means of using authentic language while expanding student comprehension of emotions and feelings as well as the effective use of intonation and NVC. (*Tip*: To extend this activity or use it with younger students, try using emoticons, defined and created by the class, rather than emotion cards.)

Again, this principle is really about modeling the language and behavior you expect from students. Learning a language takes time and effort, so a positive classroom culture that provides opportunities for successful language usage enables students to feel comfortable and motivated. Understanding the language—both verbal and nonverbal—we are using and modeling its appropriate use provides an example for students.

Try this: What story about your own language-learning experience could you share in your next class to motivate your students?

PRINCIPLE 3: DESIGN HIGH-QUALITY LESSONS FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT.

This principle suggests that teachers "plan meaningful lessons that promote language learning and help students develop learning strategies and critical thinking skills. These lessons evolve from the learning objectives" (TESOL 2018, inside front cover).

Objectives specify what you want students to learn and how that learning will be measured. Of course, sometimes our objectives are dictated by others (e.g., a ministry, the school administration, or a language coordinator); however, we should always try to develop objectives for both content and language. The objectives you write should be clear, measurable, and attainable.

Let's look at an example. A teacher writes an objective: "Students will write paragraphs about what they did on summer vacation." This learning objective describes the content and a bit about the language students will engage with, and it is most likely attainable. However, it lacks specific description, and the language-learning objectives are implied or vague at best. That isn't to say that this example is a terrible learning objective, but the teacher could vastly improve the objective by making it clearer and measurable. Let's see how that might look:

> "Students will write a paragraph using five past-tense verbs about what they did on summer vacation. The paragraph should contain at least five complete sentences."

By including content and language-learning objectives, as well as making it specific and adding a means to measure student output, the teacher has made the objective more meaningful for students by providing them with a better understanding of what they should be able to produce and how that can be achieved. This revised objective is more meaningful and useful for the teacher as well. (*Tip*: Be sure to let the students know what their learning objectives are—you might be surprised how many of your students really want to know.)

Learning objectives are for many stakeholders—teachers, students, academic departments, administrators, and even parents. The most effective learning objectives and activities lead to engaging students in the use and practice of authentic language. Learning a language is an active and interactive endeavor. An effective learning environment is not only positive but also focused. Creating clear, measurable, and attainable learning objectives is an essential practice in ensuring that students are making appropriate gains in their language learning.

Try this: Look at the learning objectives you have for an upcoming class. Can you make them clearer, more measurable, and more attainable in order to better promote student learning and success? Can you let your students know what those objectives are?

PRINCIPLE 4: ADAPT LESSON DELIVERY AS NEEDED.

In a sense, this principle is about gathering data. The gathered data can be used to monitor student progress as well as to make adjustments to lesson planning. The principle recommends that teachers "continually assess as they teach—observing and reflecting on learners' responses to determine whether students are reaching the learning objectives" (TESOL 2018, inside front cover).

Monitoring student progress can take place in various ways, but a simple method is by using checks for understanding (CFUs). CFUs provide students with opportunities to show comprehension and are a replacement for the highly ineffective practice of asking students, "Do you understand?" Naturally, the class says "Yes," yet later the teacher finds out that many students, or even all of them, did not understand. CFUs diminish this issue by providing simple and effective means of demonstrating comprehension.

Two of the simplest CFUs are Thumbs Up and the Five-Finger Technique. Thumbs Up changes the teacher's question from "Do you understand?" to "Thumbs up or
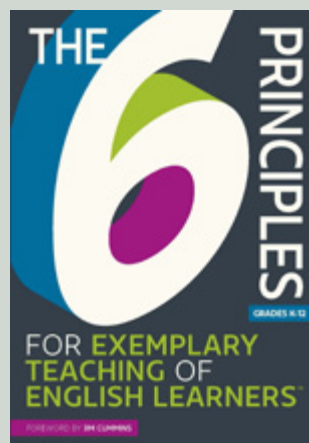
As the number of English learners around the world continues to grow, so does the need for quality English-language instruction. TESOL International Association has defined a core set of six principles for the exemplary teaching of English learners. The 6 Principles™ will help you make informed decisions to support English-language instruction and assessment. These foundational principles are a framework for all educators who work with English learners and are applicable across different educational settings.

The first book in The 6 Principles series, *The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners: Grades K–12*, features a detailed explanation of the principles, practical applications for your classroom, ideas for building a strong community of practice, and more.

Visit www.the6principles.org to learn more about the principles, access resources, and download a free quick guide.

Future publications in the series are *The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners: Adult Literacy and Workforce Development*; *The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners: Academic and Specific Purposes*; and *The 6 Principles Quick Guide for Paraeducators*.

down?" Students use a thumbs-up gesture to indicate they understand, turn a thumb sideways to indicate they understand but have questions, and point a thumb down to show that they do not understand at all. The Five-Finger Technique, meanwhile, might sound like something from a martial-arts movie, but it is actually similar to Thumbs Up. Rather than using thumbs, students indicate comprehension by holding up a number of fingers. Five fingers mean full comprehension (like a thumbs up), four fingers mean they feel pretty confident in their understanding, three fingers show they understand but still have questions (like a thumb sideways), two fingers indicate doubt about their understanding, and one finger shows they do not understand (like a thumb down).

CFUs like these are effective because they give students a nonthreatening way to show their true level of comprehension (no student wants to risk being the only person to say "No" when the teacher asks if everyone understands) while allowing the teacher to quickly scan the classroom to gauge comprehension. Using CFUs is an effective way to gather data on student progress and comprehension. (See McCaughey 2015 for more practical strategies to quickly check comprehension.)

So what should the teacher do with this data? Once you gain an enhanced understanding of student progress and needs, you can quickly adjust three areas: teacher talk, student tasks, and materials used. Here, we will focus on adjusting teacher talk. There are adjustments teachers can make if they identify that students have not fully understood the lesson:

- *Adjust wait time.* Teachers can lengthen their wait time in order to allow students time to process information, understand the question or prompt, and so on.

- *Repeat and rephrase.* Teachers can both repeat and/or rephrase the information they are giving. Doing this has the added benefit of offering a second listening and more time to process information.

- *Ask probing questions.* Teachers can ask questions to elicit more information (e.g., "What else … ?"; "Why do you think … ?"; "How do you know … ?"; "Can you tell us more about … ?"; "Do you agree? … Why?"). These questions give students additional time and offer a bit of repetition while also creating further opportunities for students to critically think and use the language through expressing their opinions—another positive skill worth developing.

- *Adjust the pace.* Teachers can speed up or slow down the pace of their speaking, based upon data gathered from CFUs.

- *Smile.* Don't forget the power of smiling, as discussed earlier. A smiling teacher can decrease anxiety for students, encourage them to continue their efforts despite possibly not understanding fully, and promote a positive classroom culture.

By monitoring and adjusting, teachers can discover when students have misunderstood the lesson or specific concepts, and they can make adjustments to increase the chances that learners reach the learning objectives. Whichever CFUs you choose, they allow real-time evaluation and are invaluable in adjusting lessons to better meet the needs of students.

Try this: What kind of CFU can you use to better meet the needs of your students?

PRINCIPLE 5: MONITOR AND ASSESS STUDENT LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT.

This principle is a continuation and expansion of Principle 4. Because students "learn at different rates," Principle 5 suggests that teachers "regularly monitor and assess their [students'] language development in order to advance their learning efficiently … [and] gather data to measure student language growth" (TESOL 2018, inside front cover).

In essence, for the EFL teacher, this principle refers to formative assessment, which is generally seen as ongoing assessment to

improve teaching and learning (National Council of Teachers of English 2013). Formative assessments are a quick and easy method for finding out what your students understand—and what they don't—as well as each student's level of understanding.

One of my favorite forms of this type of assessment is exit tickets, which are small pieces of paper—"tickets"—that students hand to the teacher as they exit the classroom. The exit ticket offers many possibilities, but often has an answer to a question ("What are three greetings we learned?") or a response to something covered in the class ("Draw your favorite _____."). The teacher now has data about how well the students understand the questions or concept. This information in turn provides the teacher with a deeper understanding of student progress and can be used when planning the next lesson.

Suppose you use exit tickets to find out how many of your 30 students understand the concept of a greeting. You use this prompt: "Write three greetings we learned this week." You collect students' exit tickets as they leave the class and discover that only six students have a firm grasp of the concept, 16 get it but not perfectly, while eight students have very limited understanding.

What you do next depends upon your particular teaching context. But the notion of this principle (and the previous one as well) is that monitoring our students' progress informs our instruction by allowing us to make appropriate adjustments to our teaching as well as provide whole-class or individual feedback to ensure that students progress as needed. In this case, the tickets show that a review of the lesson would benefit many students. But they also show that some (in this case, six) students might be able to help their classmates increase their understanding. With this information, you can develop your ideas for how to approach the next class.

Exit tickets benefit both teachers and students. For teachers, they provide a quick, easy, and immediate assessment of students' comprehension, which you can use to inform the next lesson or to provide feedback. Exit tickets can also document student learning and the effectiveness of the lesson or activity. For students, exit tickets serve as a low-stress form of assessment because the tickets provide a safe environment to show students' level of comprehension. Exit tickets also allow students to reflect on the day's lesson, which can promote deeper understanding of the content and/or skill. (*Tip*: Exit tickets are useful whether you have students write their names on the tickets or not. Have students write their names on the tickets when you'd like to give student-specific feedback; have students omit their names for low-stress, whole-class assessment.)

Using formative assessments like exit tickets, teachers can continue to monitor student progress, adjust their lessons, and provide timely and more effective feedback to assist learners' language development.

Try this: What type of exit ticket can you use in an upcoming lesson?

PRINCIPLE 6: ENGAGE AND COLLABORATE WITHIN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE.

The final principle involves professional development and working with others in mutually beneficial ways. The principle suggests that teachers "collaborate with others in the profession to provide the best support for their learners" and "continue their own professional learning" (TESOL 2018, inside front cover).

Working with others could mean sharing your knowledge—about techniques, activities, lesson plans, and various successes—with other teachers. It could mean co-planning. Working with others could also involve assistance in teaching, implementing the six principles with the cooperation of school administration, and even sharing such principles with parents.

Professional development in the EFL world is about growing professionally and

becoming a resource for your students, other teachers, and your school. Opportunities for professional development differ vastly by country and educational context, but if possible where you teach, consider doing any of the following:

- Participating in continuous learning and ongoing professional development

  - Workshops hosted by binational centers, embassies, educational nongovernment organizations, colleges and universities, and school systems

  - Forums such as *English Teaching Forum* for getting and sharing ideas for teaching and professional self-development

- Attending local and global conferences, such as those arranged by TESOL or the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL)

- Participating in online discussions and webinars

  - TESOL discussion boards (https:// my.tesol.org/home)

  - American English Facebook live events (www.facebook.com/ AmericanEnglishforEducators)

  - American English MOOCs (https:// www.aeeteacher.org/MOOC)

One goal should be to enhance your teaching skills, but many teachers discover that by actively engaging in professional-development activities, they improve their language skills as well. Another goal could be to develop leadership skills and become a resource at your school. You can take what you learn from workshops, webinars, online discussions, and conferences to offer professional-development workshops at your school or act as a peer coach to colleagues and new teachers.

In many EFL environments, working with colleagues and seeking out professional-development opportunities may not be encouraged or readily available. Encouraging colleagues to work together and promoting your own professional development may not be easy in your situation, but you can lead the way, improve as a teacher, and become a more effective resource for your students and school. Who knows? You may become the source who inspires other teachers to collaborate more and develop professionally!

Try this: Start small. How can you collaborate with other teachers to improve the teaching in your school?

CONCLUSION

The "6 Principles" are a solid foundation for any program, and though they need a bit of localized refinement for the wide diversity of EFL contexts, they are an excellent source of reflection on current teaching practice. I hope you will consider finding ways to use these principles and tips as a guideline to continue strengthening your own teaching and to build a stronger connection with your students and colleagues.

REFERENCES

McCaughey, K. 2015. Practical tips for increasing listening practice time. *English Teaching Forum* (53) 1: 2–13.

National Council of Teachers of English. 2013. Formative assessment that *truly* informs instruction. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/ Positions/formative-assessment_single.pdf

TESOL International Association (TESOL). 2018. The 6 principles for exemplary teaching of English learners: Grades K–12. Alexandria, VA: TESOL International Association.

This article was written by **Trenton Hagar, PhD**, a former English Language Fellow in Nicaragua and Panama who currently teaches English, linguistics, and intercultural communication at Utrecht University and Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands.