

# Working with English Language Learners (ELLs)

The key to being a flexible, respectful, and understanding tutor is by embracing the diversity of experience within English Language Learners (ELLs). Each person is on a unique journey of language acquisition as are you. **Though there is no guaranteed set of tips that will make you successful, below are some tried and true strategies to guide you as you support ELL students.**

## Tip #1:

### Be welcoming, connect, and have fun.

When working with a student who is learning English, be mindful about your vocabulary and how you communicate. Take time to connect with the student by asking them about their culture or home country. We learn from students as much as they learn from us.

Using Google Translate together to translate words from their native language into English. But be careful! Google Translate isn't perfect. Use it as a guide rather than a one-to-one translation tool.

#### Do:

- Be patient.
- Avoid idioms.
- Find a new way to say something instead of repeating it.
- Speak at the same volume level as you usually do.
- Speak clearly and not too fast.
- Use gestures or visual aides.
- Be flexible with tutoring styles.

#### Try:

Repeating students' words back to them with corrected grammar, phrased as a question, not a correction. It's important to do this in a way that feels safe and welcoming for students.

**Student:** "I have been to New York last summer."

**Tutor:** "You went to New York last summer?"

## Tip #2:

### Transcribe students' words.

To help a student to get started, write down their ideas for them. Ask the student to talk about the topic or ask specific questions, then transcribe exactly what they say, word for word. By asking the student questions and writing down their answers, you can make the process a lot easier for the student. When you reach a pause, ask them to read the words back to you. This will help them understand how they sound and sharpen their reading comprehension.

## Tip #3:

### Try to gauge the student's English level.

The key to performing well on an assignment is to fully understand the instructions. But students are all on varying levels of English proficiency. It's important to ask questions to gauge an ELL student's understanding of the assignment at hand, and then help them plan how to achieve their goal.

#### Ask:

"Where do you think we should start?"

"What sounds like the most challenging part of this assignment?"

"What else do we need to know about the topic first?"

"Is this interesting to you?"

#### Do:

Highlight and discuss key vocabulary.

Identify or insert strong action words ("compare," "explain," "argue," etc.)

Number the order in which tasks should be completed (1. Research, 2. Explain, 3. Compare, 4. Discuss, 5. Conclude)

Draw symbols or visual aids (e.g., a web of related ideas)

## Tip #4:

### Ask specific, generative questions.

To check in about a student's understanding of the lesson or assignment, avoid asking questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" (e.g., "Do you understand?" or "Does this make sense?"). Ask them to explain in their own words what the assignment is, or review key vocabulary from the lesson.

#### Ask:

"What do you want to focus on next?"

"What is your favorite part so far?"

"What does this word mean to you?"

"What else do we need to know about this?"

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## Additional Resources:

For further tips on tutoring ELL students, check out:

- ["How Can I Support ELLs in My Classroom?,"](#) Penn State College of Education
- ["ELL Strategies and Best Practices,"](#) Colorín Colorado
- ["Language Learners: A Quick-Start Guide for Teaching English,"](#) Education Week
- ["Teaching English Language Learners: Strategies that Work,"](#) Scholastic