

Beyond Speaking Slowly *Seven Suggestions for an EFL-Friendly College Classroom*

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“International students need to get used to real English.”

“They’re young. They’ll catch up.”

“They made the TOEFL cut off, didn’t they?”

This sink-or-swim attitude is counterproductive. A student may arrive with a large vocabulary and good comprehension, but recognize little when the instructor makes no EFL-friendly adjustments. Panic ensues, which makes comprehension drop even further. A vicious cycle forms in which the student is too anxious to recognize, recall, or retain information, and the resulting sense of failure begets more anxiety.

An EFL-friendly classroom will aid students in recognizing words they already know and help them to acquire new vocabulary. With less mental energy demanded for sheer comprehension, students are freer to focus on concepts and volunteer their thoughts. Enacting these principles will also help you to identify non-native speakers who are falling behind. A student who understands 90% of what is said is less afraid to ask about the other 10%.

You do not need to worry that an EFL-friendly classroom will “pamper” your students. They will get plenty of “real English” from other classes, peers, media, etc.

Below are seven ways you can make your classroom friendlier to non-native speakers. I have compiled the following principles based on seven years’ experience teaching EFL to adults and undergraduates, first in Russia and then at Pace University and New York University. I am now a professor of music, so my examples reflect that, but these principles can be used in any educational setting. You already know you should speak slowly, repeat important vocab, and write unfamiliar terms on the board. Here are some other ideas.

1. Pre-teach vocabulary.

This principle applies to both your EFL and native speaker students. Weeks before you formally define, say, **stretto** in counterpoint class, casually sprinkle the word into a description of repertoire.

Let’s check the Roman numerals starting in measure thirty.

[Play measure thirty.]

[Quietly, as if to yourself] *There’s a nice stretto here...*

[Loudly, to the class] *Now, what’s the chord on the first beat of measure thirty? Tyler?*

Do this every few weeks. If asked, define **stretto** or say that you’ll get to it in a future class. But if not, when you finally introduce the term formally, students will be receptive. What is subconsciously familiar seems important. Conscious familiarity works just as well: “What is this **stretto** I keep hearing about?”

2. Start with IF.

In English, **if** can go at the beginning or the middle of a sentence. The meaning remains the same:

If I loved you, words wouldn't come in an easy way.
Words wouldn't come in an easy way if I loved you.

I have observed that non-native speakers are more likely to understand a sentence when **if** is at the beginning.

I believe that this is because of cognitive load. When a sentence starts with **if**, the listener is immediately alerted that this is a situation with two possibilities. When **if** is introduced in the middle, the listener has to simultaneously reinterpret what was just heard (the first half of the sentence is now a “maybe”) while comprehending the second half of the sentence.

Standard English:

*You can turn to your neighbor and quietly compare your answers **if** you've finished working.*

Clearer:

***If** you've finished working, you can turn to your neighbor and quietly compare your answers.*

3. Favor single-definition words.

Like anyone learning a foreign language, your EFL students have learned to rely on single-definition words for efficiency and clarity. Once a student learns to say **because** (*I drove **because** it was raining*), it is not a priority to learn **since** as a synonym (*I drove, **since** was raining*). Better to concentrate on learning **since** to refer to time (*I've been here **since** 3pm*).

Standard English:

*Some of this will be **set** for homework.*

Clearer:

*Some of this will be **assigned** for homework.*

4. Use only one negative per sentence.

one negative = negative

*I **don't** want to miss a thing.*

two negatives = positive, unlike many other languages:

*I'm **not nobody**! = I'm somebody.*

two negatives sometimes = an emphatic negative:

*I **can't** get **no** satisfaction.*

*The man **ain't** got **no** culture.*

For maximum clarity, split up a complex sentence so there is only one negative.

Standard English:

*Do **not** compose in keys **other than** C Major or A Minor.*

Clearer:

*You can compose in C Major or A Minor. **Do not** use other keys.*

Double negatives with “un” such as “It’s not unusual” remove some of the confusion, though they are still not as clear as a positive. The same goes for [litotes](#), combinations of two negative ideas such as “Let’s **not fail** to acknowledge their contribution.”

Standard English:

*I **can’t not** mention...*

Clearer:

*I **can’t forget** to mention...*

Clearer:

*I **have to** mention...*

5. Soften statements with questions and pauses, not extra clauses.

Diplomacy is important. But phrases such as *perhaps you would consider, I’d be curious to know if...* are problematic for two reasons: 1) They make the sentence long. 2) They introduce conditionals (those cognitively demanding *if* situations again). Softening a comment by adding a pause or a question not only makes the information more digestible, it’s more culturally universal.

Standard English:

*These block chords continue all the way through these first two pages. **Perhaps you could consider** some different kinds of textures such as arpeggios, or at least some rests.*

Clearer:

*These block chords continue all the way through these first two pages. **[Pause.] Have you thought about some different textures? Maybe arpeggios or some rests?***

6. Avoid non-intuitive phrasal verbs.

This principle is the hardest to apply because it requires that you consider English, word by word, from an outsider perspective. A phrasal verb is a [verb + adverb / preposition(s)] combination that changes the meaning of the component words.

Some phrasal verbs are intuitive: *look up to*. If you know the words *look, up,* and *to*, you can guess the meaning.

However, knowing *take, up,* and *on* will not help you decode *I want to **take you up on** this offer*. Phrasal verbs are also difficult to learn because they use common words in numerous combinations, all with

different meanings: **take over** the conversation, **take after** your mentor, etc. (We are back to the synonym problem.)

Standard English:

*This is good. That sharp sound is always moving between right and left channels, so the excitement **doesn't wear off**.*

Clearer:

*This is good. That sharp sound is always moving between right and left channels. It **stays exciting**.*

Of all the seven principles, phrasal verb usage requires the most practice and judgment. It is one thing to avoid long words in our speech, but quite another to weigh our short words for “intuitiveness” in combination. Do we want to confuse an already bewildered student by telling him he has **mixed up** two voice leading rules? What not say **mixed together**?

The other word choice you will have to make is between “common but possibly confusing” and “less common but precise.” Which is better: **make up for** or **substitute**? If you're not sure, recall the words that your international students use in class. Which of these do you hear them say more often? **Substitute**. (And yet... everyone seems to know what a make up test is!)

In my classroom, I do in fact use non-intuitive phrasal verbs, but only a limited repertoire. My students hear them at least once a week, and I make the meaning clear from context: **figure out**, **keep going**, and **go over**.

7. Separate your words.

Language students tend to study words in isolation (e.g. flash cards). Most learn their languages in a classroom setting, alongside other non-native speakers. (Perhaps the teacher is a non-native speaker, too.) When it is time for conversation practice, students quickly learn that separating their words makes them more easily understood by their classmates. Making the transition from separated speech to the typical, run-together speech of an American classroom is a tremendous adjustment. Luckily, it usually only takes a few years for non-native English speakers to recognize what familiar words sound like in the context of native speech.

Conclusion

Creating an EFL-friendly classroom helps international students to gain comprehension and confidence. This in turn increases their participation, contributing to a more inclusive environment for the whole class. If you apply these principles and a student is still having difficulty, remedial EFL classes are in order. Aside from students who need extra help, however, by making these adjustments I have found that international students leave my courses with skills and mastery comparable to that of native speakers.

Test Yourself

Which option would you choose for an EFL-friendly classroom?

1.
 - a) You can look at this page for more examples of sequences if you run out of ideas.
 - b) You can look at this page for more examples of sequences if you have no ideas.
 - c) If you have no ideas, you can look at this page for more examples of sequences.

2.
 - a) I wonder if you could demonstrate that for the class.
 - b) I have a question: are you OK to demonstrate that for the class?
 - c) Would you be so kind as to demonstrate that for the class?

3.
 - a) Turn the publicity to your advantage.
 - b) It's publicity. Turn it to your advantage.
 - c) Use the publicity to your advantage.

4.
 - a) Don't not audition because you're nervous!
 - b) Don't run away from the audition because you're nervous!
 - c) Don't eschew the audition because you're nervous!

5.
 - a) Wait—Is it truly impossible?
 - b) Are you sure you want to rule it out?
 - c) Don't rule it out yet.

Answers: 1. c) 2. b) 3. c) 4. b) 5. a)