

## Five Missteps of First-Year ESL Teachers

by [Crissy Smith](#)

Three years ago, I sat at my teacher's desk and stared vacantly at the blank walls canvassed before me. In a few short weeks, the classroom would be full of moderately proficient upper-school students still jet-lagged from their journey halfway across the world from China. What those poor Chinese students did not know was that the teacher who had been hired to help them, whose sole responsibility was to improve their English, was just as wary about the upcoming school year. Even though I was approaching my seventh year teaching, it was my first year teaching ESL, and I felt like a novice teacher starting from scratch.

Eventually, I made my way through the uncharted waters and proved to myself that perhaps the powers-that-be who hired me knew what they were doing. I *was* fit for the job, even if inexperienced. If only I could go back in time and expedite the learning curve for my former self.

For those newly licensed ESL teachers, staring at their own blank walls, here are a few missteps I stumbled upon and the advice I wish I had.

### Misstep 1: Staying in Your Comfort Zone

As a former English teacher, my natural inclination was to focus on reading and writing and pay less attention to the other two areas of learning a language: listening and speaking. I was in my comfort zone when I was teaching a novel or the difference between a strong thesis statement and a weak one.

In order to overcome this mistake, *chisel out a chunk of time* where you focus on the area that you tend to neglect. I often neglected explicitly teaching pronunciation, so I devoted Fridays to this area. Every Friday, I focused on teaching stress, linking, intonation, and proper mouth formation. Additionally, *have a few token activities* that are your go-to activities. My go-to activities for speaking were character reenactments, debates, and dialogues. For example, whenever we read a novel, I would have the students assume the role of a favorite character and reenact scenes from the novel to practice their speaking skills.

It is important to note that class time should be allotted to students' needs, not teacher preference. Even though the four areas of learning a language are intertwined, more focus should be given to the areas where the students are weakest.

### Misstep 2: Speaking Is Not the End-All Be-All

I often found that faculty would mistakenly jump to the conclusion that a student was more proficient than he or she actually was if he or she was talkative. Faculty was more inclined to steer the more verbal second-language speakers into more advanced classes, despite their placement tests. Just because a student can adequately and confidently express him- or herself through spoken language does not mean he or she is more proficient than less verbal peers. In

fact, some of my strongest writers, and most proficient ESL students, were the quietest. These students would produce grammatically correct, eloquent sentences in the written form, but barely utter two-word responses in conversation. It is important to remember that personality, and not just ability, has a lot to do with a student's confidence and how readily he or she converses.

### **Misstep 3: Finding Age-Appropriate Reading Material**

As a high school ESL teacher, I found it challenging to find age-appropriate novels for my students. I learned in my master's courses the golden rule—one should never “water down” material for students. This was especially true in my case, because I was teaching extremely intelligent, if not gifted, Chinese students. Their minds needed a challenge. My solution to this problem was to stick to literary classics from the modern and postmodern time periods. I found that classics such as *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald), *Lord of the Flies* (William Golding), *Kite Runner* (Khaled Hosseini), and *Night* (Elie Wiesel) worked well. Short stories like *Animal Farm* (George Orwell) and “The Metamorphosis” (Franz Kafka) were also well received by my target audience. These pieces allowed for rich discussions and had challenging vocabulary. But because these pieces were written more recently than say, Chaucer, the language was familiar. I also tried to avoid pieces that were heavy on dialect (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Harper Lee). English is tricky enough in its most straightforward form.

### **Misstep 4: Wasting Time Searching for the Best Resources**

As I created my own curriculum, I wasted countless dollars and planning time searching for the best resources. If I could go back in time, I would point myself in the direction of Betty Azar, who is, in my opinion, the English grammar guru. Her texts in the series [Understanding and Using English Grammar](#) (Pearson Longman), coauthored with Stacy Hagen, are a must-have for any secondary ESL classroom. The texts are complemented by easy-to-follow, free, online PowerPoint presentations and other supplementary materials.

As far as pronunciation, Judy Gilbert's [Clear Speech series](#) (Cambridge University Press) is another must-have for any secondary classroom. The lessons are clearly laid out and have an auditory portion easily accessible online. There is even a Clear Speech app that allows students to play games to practice their pronunciation. Of course, there are several free ESL websites that are helpful as well. However, some of these cost or are so plagued by advertisements they are not user friendly. My favorites are [A guide to learning English](#) and [Guide to Grammar and Writing](#). On these two sites, students can find additional grammar and vocabulary practice. There are interactive quizzes sorted alphabetically by grammar concept, and the overall layouts of these sites are advertisement free and easy to use.

### **Misstep 5: Fighting the “English-Only” Battle**

Every day, one of my biggest challenges is persuading my students to speak English. Because they are predominately Chinese, they like to speak Mandarin whenever possible. Unfortunately, this leaves the few Dutch students, and one Korean student, feeling left out. Sometimes, I see

them gesticulating wildly, and I, too, want to know what is behind the passionate conversation. Beyond curiosity, I like the students to speak English inside and outside the ESL classroom. I argue they will never achieve full fluency if they are always retreating to their comfort zone and speaking their native language. Yes, sometimes it is inconvenient to search for words in English when the Mandarin equivalent is right there. But it is just like lifting weights: Improvement will only come by pushing through this discomfort. I am still searching for solutions to this problem. Deducting points from assignments works in the classroom, but what about outside the classroom? My best advice would be to create opportunities (via homework and projects) for students to interact with speakers who do not share their same language, so it is impossible for them to revert to their native language.

The truth is there is no master's degree or advice that can compensate for experience. With every new year and new crop of students, new challenges will arise. If anything, I hope these tidbits of advice lend some perspective to the new teacher staring at his or her own blank walls. Think of it as a gentle pat on the back. You are not alone; and soon, you will be writing your own list of missteps.

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