

# Teach Critical Thinking Skills in ESOL Students

## Use Interactive Activities to Develop Higher Level Thinking Skills

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ESOL/ESL students need to be both supported and challenged to develop critical thinking skills in the high school classroom. Here are activities which scaffold learning.

In order for mainstreamed ESOL/ESL students to be motivated, they must feel both supported and challenged to develop their own creativity as well as high-order thinking skills. These skills include the ability to apply and synthesis knowledge. By scaffolding learning through a variety of activities, teachers can help all students achieve high level thinking skills.

### Challenge Students Through Discussion

Teachers can facilitate the development of critical thinking skills through large group discussion with the teacher serving primarily as facilitator. For example, a language arts teacher wishing to promote creative and critical thinking about writing can present students with two quotes:

- “You must never put two words or lines where one will do; the age is too busy and hurried to stand it” [Charles Kingsley, *Advice to an Author*, 1848]
- “There has been a devastation of words . . . . A lot of words need a long vacation [Jackson Lears, *U.S. News and World Report*, 1983]

In a large group discussion, a teacher can facilitate student discussion in comparing these two quotes by asking probing questions, such as:

- With which statement do you most agree? Why?
- Can you think of examples of long-winded phrases that could be shortened into one or two words without losing the meaning?
- Can you think of examples of words or phrases that have been “devastated”?
- What perspective do these two quotes share?
- How do these two quotes differ?

Students can work on synthesizing the meaning of both quotes to discover several characteristics of good writing. The teacher can summarize the students' discussion by completing a Venn diagram on the whiteboard. Students should be encouraged to write down their ideas even if they do not wish to share them with the group.

## **Collaborative Group Work**

Once students have developed a solid understanding of these quotes and their implications, the teacher can arrange students into pre-designed collaborative groups. These groups should include 4 or 5 students of mixed ability levels. Together, students should seek out examples of writing which are too wordy or writing which incorporates trite, overused words. They can locate examples in their literature textbooks, novels available in the class, and/or each other's previous writing assignments/essays/ journal entries. If computers are available, they can also search for examples online.

Students will be expected to discuss why the examples are less effective in terms of the quotes to which they have been introduced. Because much of this activity is self-directed, students must use their leadership and interpersonal skills to get the job done. Additionally, students will be improving their creative and critical thinking skills throughout this activity.

## **Paired Activities**

After students have identified several examples of writing which contains wordy constructions and trite vocabulary, they will work in pairs to correct these examples of writing. In this arrangement, ESOL students will be encouraged to actively participate in discussion with their partner as well as work together to rewrite examples. Here, students have the opportunity to use their creativity to create interesting and improved writing samples to share with the class. During this activity, the teacher should circulate around the class, asking and answering questions as needed.

This diverse series of activities encourage student movement and interaction while instructing students to apply the knowledge they learned during the large group discussion. It also provides students with the opportunity to synthesize this knowledge by creating new, improved writing samples based on the samples they identified as containing characteristics of poor writing.

Mainstreamed ESOL students should gradually take on a more active role throughout this learning experience: in the whole group discussion, they can primarily listen and take notes; in the small group discussion they can start participating through active research; by the time they meet with one partner, they should feel more comfortable verbally expressing their ideas.