

## **My experiences with an English as a second language (ESL) student**

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The first day I met my ESL girl, she could barely say "hello," let alone understand anything I could possibly say to her in order to teach her. She had just arrived two or three weeks before school started from Vietnam and could not speak a single word in English when she came. For those first few weeks, I mostly smiled and waved at her when I caught her looking at me. Eventually, I started saying small things to her, such as "My name is Miss Ally. Can you say Miss Ally?" and she would give it her best shot.

Once she could say some small words, my placement teacher asked if I would like to help her with reading as one of my daily responsibilities. I agreed, loving the idea of a challenge and wanting to make a difference for someone. Slowly we began working together whenever I came to her school for the classroom placement portion of my Teacher Cadet program. At first it was painful, and I struggled sometimes to be patient, despite knowing that it wasn't her fault. Eventually it got a little better and the student could not only say my name, but could also ask me how I was doing. The more our lessons together continued, the more I tried to ask her questions and get to know her better. She didn't always know what I was asking, but she understood that I was trying my best and that I cared about her.

Soon she was reading fairly well for someone who was still learning English. Since she was able to form some sentences, I incorporated a little fun into our lesson time. Two of these fun activities were the songs/motions to "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" and the "Hokey Pokey." My student didn't know it, but while we were having our 'brain break' I was still teaching her, because the songs required her to speak in English. "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" quickly became our special thing and whenever we took a break, my student wanted to sing 'our song.'

I had succeeded in getting her to trust me, and she was opening up to me like a flower in spring, as well as becoming better at speaking and reading English every day. This, however, did not occur overnight or without challenges. One such challenge we faced was when we were reading words from her big book of words (a staff-made resource that contains words with corresponding pictures with both English and Vietnamese translations). She read the word 'church' and showed me her cross necklace, saying something along the lines of "My church at home. Vietnam." I then took the opportunity to ask about her family that currently still lives in Vietnam, even though in the past I had been careful not to bring it up. She responded by telling me what she could in English and showing me some pictures in her big book, but afterward she was visibly upset. I had her stand up and told her we were going to sing 'our song' for her family in Vietnam and that if we sang it with love, they might hear us. She laughed, although I'm not quite sure how much she understood, and she sang with the biggest, most beautiful smile on her face! Cheered up instantly, we were able to continue our lesson.

A couple of weeks later, my student was ready to begin some writing and spelling practice. This was, and still can be, a very difficult task as I have to read a book with her, ask questions, and have her write sentences in reply to the questions. For an ESL student, reading and comprehending a book, being able to answer questions in English, and write sentences by translating sounds into letters, is an extremely difficult task. It requires both auditory and visual learning in a language with which they aren't familiar. Google Translate,

the big book of words, and acting things out, became very useful tools when speaking was insufficient to help her understand. My student kept surprising me time and again though. When we did this activity, I was able to see her incredible intelligence. Once, I was even speechless because she had written three or four words without hesitating or asking me questions. I was so dumbfounded and proud that I typed out a long message of praise into Google Translate for her to hear.

By taking on the challenge of working with this ESL student, I have learned so much about the power of patience, kindness, and time. I have loved every second of working with my student in my Teacher Cadet placement classroom, and she has truly carved out her place in my heart!