

Assembling an ESL Teaching Toolbox

Author: Alysan Croydon, Seattle, WA

Like a craftsperson, an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teacher needs a set of versatile tools to do the job. You can reduce planning and empower students by developing a store of activities and strategies you can repeat many times. When students encounter an activity type or strategy more than once, familiarity with the procedure allows them to focus on the language itself. The best tools are those that can be used for a variety of purposes.

Visual Aids

Magazine Picture Files

Pictures are invaluable in any teaching situation but are critical in getting the meaning across to beginning level students. Since students are generally excited to talk about pictures that depict something from their own culture, search in magazines that feature a wide range of cultures, such as National Geographic. For easy retrieval, divide your picture selection into categories such as people, clothing, home, occupations, sports, food, geographical features, and so on.

Use your picture file to:

- Illustrate the meaning of vocabulary items
- Structure simple conversations around the pictures using different question types
- Set the scene for a dialogue or role-play
- Use as writing prompts: write captions or descriptions, develop stories or label items in the picture
- Use a picture of a person to create a character you can use over and over to teach and practice different target language

You may also be able to access a good picture dictionary designed for English-language learners, in a library or bookstore, or online (see the suggestion under Helpful Links at the end).

Realia

Use real objects to liven up lessons and bring in the real world. Bring in real fruit and vegetables or get a set of plastic ones; save empty food packaging and medicine containers; bring in your toolbox, first-aid kit, or kitchen equipment. The possibilities are endless. Concrete nouns are a clear starting point for complete beginners. Having the real thing helps kinesthetic learners, eliminates ambiguity, and gives more learning opportunities than pictures alone. You can incorporate Total Physical Response (TPR) by saying “Give me the hammer” or “Put the screwdriver on the table.” Students can sort, categorize, or alphabetize the items.

- **Maps:** Include a world map and a state or local map. These are great for learning names of countries, locating states, and finding and pronouncing local street names. Have students practice asking for and giving directions and describing locations.
- **A Calendar:** Calendars contain essential orientation vocabulary: the names of the days of the week, months and dates. You can also use calendars as a prompt to talk about routines and habits; seasons, and time frames such as “last week” or “next month.” Beginning students can convey a lot of meaning by prefacing what they say with “Two weeks ago...” even if they do not have mastery of verb tenses. Practice dialogues around making appointments or invitations using the calendar. Don’t forget that calendars may have useful pictures, too.
- **Money:** Include a selection of coins and bills. Use them for learning values, making change, and as props in dialogues around shopping.
- **A Clock:** An old clock, where you can manipulate the hands, is helpful for learning to tell time.

Field Trips

Once students have some basic language, take them on a field trip to apply it. If you have been learning the names of fruits and vegetables, go to the grocery store and find them. Field trips are great opportunities to practice asking directions, writing simple thank-you notes, listening to recorded messages about your field trip site and looking at bus schedules to plan your trip.

Versatile Activities

Question and Answer Practice

Beginning students need to understand and respond to different types of questions. The questions in this list get progressively harder to understand, since they require more language to answer and they become more abstract.

Question Type	Question
Yes/no type	Is it a man?
Choice type	Is it night or day?
Information type	Who, where, when, what, how?
Open-ended type	Why is he doing this? / What do you think?

- Use a set of prepared questions in conjunction with a picture as a quick assessment of understanding.
- Have students form questions to ask you about a picture as an assessment of speaking ability and question formation.
- Any time there is a communication block; consider the type of question you may have asked. Rephrase using a different question type.
- Vary the question types used to check comprehension. Avoid asking, “Do you understand?” since students will generally say they do.

Games

Games increase interaction and add variety. You can make many simple games in minutes if you have game templates handy. Create them for bingo and board games. Slip the template inside a report cover and use a dry-erase marker to customize your game. Then simply erase it for next time.

- For an easy board game, draw a set of boxes to form a border around a piece of paper. Place pictures or sight words on the game squares to review or practice vocabulary. Have students ask questions or make statements about the vocabulary words, or simply name the items.
- Save your vocabulary flashcards to play Concentration, Go Fish or Jeopardy.
- Include simple guessing games such as Twenty Questions, I-spy or Hangman.

Surveys

A survey is a simple tool that can be adapted to practice many grammatical forms. Decide on a question frame to practice, such as, “Do you have a ...?” and prepare a grid to record information.

Name	A Car?	A Job?	A DVD Player?
Jane	Yes	Yes	No
Abdi	Yes	No	Yes

Have students practice asking you or others the question frame, and record the answers in a table. Once you have information in a table, students can make multiple simple statements using the information to report their findings. You can introduce negatives and third-person statements and then transfer all information into writing simple statements or questions and answers.

Other question frames that work well include “Do you like...?” “Can you ... swim/use a computer/drive?” “Did you ... take the bus/wash clothes/go to work yesterday?” “What is your ... phone number/address/native country?”

In subsequent lessons, review the language generated in the survey by writing each word on an index card and mixing them up for students to review.

Everyday Text Samples

Collect samples of real-life print materials such as menus, forms, bills, brochures, and empty food packaging. Advertisements from newspapers are very helpful since they often have color pictures and prices on them. Use the everyday texts to teach vocabulary, locate sight words, practice reading skills, or act as prompts in speaking practice.

Dialogue Journals

Beginning students often fear writing. This technique is low-stress and enjoyable. It is essentially a conversation between you and a student on paper. Students respond to a simple prompt or question written by you. Journals are not generally corrected, but correct language can be modeled in your responses. Journals also give teachers a clear picture of how the student is putting language together. Persistent errors can be noted and addressed in separate lessons.

Information Gap

Information gaps are tools that require students to exchange information with you or each other. For example, one person has a list of people's names and phone numbers and the other has only the list of names. One person dictates the numbers to the other and then they switch roles with a new set of numbers. Many things can be practiced in this way. Students could be exchanging vocabulary lists or whole sentences. The information gap could be in the form of a table or map where students ask for and exchange information about opening and closing times, prices, locations, and schedules. Students are forced to produce language to complete the task.

Other Strategies

Back-up Plan

Sometimes lessons finish early, students are tired or sick, or we have misjudged our content and need to move on. Have a few ideas in your toolbox for these occasions.

- Bring in a newspaper and discuss or identify major news stories
- Haul out your family photo or a set of pictures from a recent vacation. Tell a few stories and have students ask you questions.
- Have students select a magazine picture to talk about

Recording Lessons

Help students keep records of what they have covered. Students with beginning literacy are not adept at taking notes and will need help to develop these skills. Keep word lists alphabetically or by topic and allow time in class for review. At the end of a lesson, make the material covered that day transparent by checking in with students and having them write or copy key language and vocabulary.

Review and Recycle

Students will not remember new language after the initial introduction. Elderly learners face more challenges with memory, and non-literate students who cannot write things down need language reviewed continually. Wrap up a lesson by reviewing what was covered and review this information again at the beginning of the next lesson. Revisit worksheets, work with flashcards, or play games to review. Spiral the new vocabulary and structures through your curriculum over time. For example, if students have learned greetings and introductions, incorporate this language in dialogues in new contexts as you meet them.

Helpful Links

- **Lanternfish** (<http://bogglesworldesl.com>) Worksheets and lesson plans for ESL instructors and students
- **The Internet Picture Dictionary** (<http://www.pdictionary.com>) Pictures and vocabulary words organized by category
- **Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy** (http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/Dialogue_Journals.html) Describes how to use dialogue journals with students, the benefits and challenges.
- **Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners** (http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/HOLT.html) Contains information about assessing low-level ESL learners, selecting materials for instruction, and instructional strategies.