

Description of ESOL Level 4

I think of Level 4 as the first level of the upper-level classes. The students in the first three levels of our program need a lot of structure in the way they learn English. This structure gives students the safety net they need at these levels and also focuses the task to something limited and not overwhelming to the students. Levels 1 through 3 are concrete, which then means that level 4 is when students will experience more abstract concepts. The tasks we give students should push them to express themselves more fully and to show more of their own initiative. It is in level 4 where the flood gates open and it is important to find ways to corral the flow of language through content that is engaging and meaningful to our students.

Students in this level come with a variety of language backgrounds. During placement testing, a student who has mixed skills (high verbal, low literacy or vice versa) has a very good chance of landing in level 4. We have had an increasing number of students enter our program with very high verbal skills and very low writing and sometimes reading skills. On the other hand we still have students entering our program who learned English in countries with a heavy emphasis on writing and grammar. These students tend to have lower verbal skills. How you pitch your class will vary with the students you have.

Writing: The focus of Level 4 writing is on fluency with an emphasis on syntax (grammar and sentence structure) and mechanics (spelling, capitalization, punctuation). It is about writing narratives, informative or expressive texts that are coherent and having the ability to string grammatically correct sentences together tied to a common idea. For a more detailed description of our program's orientation to writing, please read the document entitled *Writing Manifesto* on the instructor website.

Writing is hard to do, especially if it isn't engaging or meaningful to the students. I give all my students dialogue journals (blue books) at the start of the quarter. They can write whatever they want throughout the week and turn them in on Monday. I don't explicitly correct their mistakes, but rather model their corrections in my replies and comments. However, if I find errors that are consistent, I will talk to the students individually.

Writing circles is an activity I use to incorporate creative writing during class using the book *More True Stories*. I set up the story (pre-teach vocabulary, and introduce characters and setting), and have students listen to part of a story a couple of times. The students then discuss what they heard and talk about a possible conclusion. Then I give them time to brainstorm and free write either their ending to the story or a more detailed narrative using the sandwich approach (introduction, main idea, details, and conclusion). After a set time, the students must stop, read their own paper carefully, revise and edit the best they can using an editing checklist. I then give students time to read their papers to each other at their tables. I collect the papers and we listen to the end of the story and compare our conclusions. This is a great activity to get students to think creatively and to practice writing for an audience.

For over a year, Anne Dolan (ABE/GED) and I have done a pen-pal project between our classes. Our students are paired up and write to each other weekly. Students ask each other a series of questions every week. As time goes on, the students really get to know a lot about each other. Students write their questions on a separate piece of paper and work with a partner or group to form grammatically correct questions (reinforcing the idea that writing is a process). Once they are finished, I check their questions and students can then write them in their pen-pal book (blue book). The same method applies to student responses the following week.

Grammar: Of course, writing brings out grammar issues. There is a list of grammar points that we expect students to have control of before they leave level 4, which is available on the instructor website under *Program-wide Grammar Outcomes*. Grammar points should be introduced and practiced in context. The following are activities I use to address this type of instruction.

Error correction is an activity I use quite frequently. For all writing that is turned in (minus dialogue journals), I find 10-20 sentences/questions that are incorrect. I type them up and generally highlight the words that are incorrect or provide lines where words are missing. Students work together to edit the sentences and write them on the board when they are finished. We go over the answers together, and talk about why they made the types of errors they did and what the correct forms of their sentences are.

Another activity I use to address grammar instruction is used in conjunction with a reader. I play certain pages we have read in class using the book's accompanying audio CD and ask students to listen for a specific grammar point. For example, groups compile lists of irregular past tense verbs they hear. Groups write their lists on the board and we compare what we heard. This activity is great for listening practice too.

Reading/Listening: I like to use a mix of books and movies in my class and use them in different ways. I have created reading/writing activities for movies (writing summaries) and listening/speaking activities for books (audio CD paired with content questions). This summer I used the movie *Up*. If you are interested in using this movie, the materials will be available online soon. This quarter I am using a book called, *A Picture to Remember*. The materials will be on the web soon as well. In the past, Jean created a lot of materials for the movie *Night at the Museum*. She also produced materials for several books (all in ESL versions): *The Canterbury Tales*, *Round the World in 80 Days* (make sure it is the Longman Classic Stage 2 in the library now out of print), *Tales from the Arabian Nights*, and *Strong Medicine*. These are all online if you are interested and there are class sets of these books in the library.

Speaking: A couple times a week, I pass out Cathy's Cards to students. Each student gets one card and he/she asks a partner their question. Then they ask the other students at their table. Afterwards, students are given the opportunity to walk around the room and ask other students of their choice. This not only allows students to practice speaking, but strengthens the bond between students and overall sense of community as they reveal

more personal information about themselves to one another. More importantly, students are comfortable and speak in a natural and unforced manner.

Pronunciation: To address pronunciation issues I do a couple of things. We do in-class reading using our selected reader. I ask students to read silently and to use strategies by circling words they can't pronounce and underlining words they don't know. I then do a read aloud with the reader (same pages the students read) and students follow along. I address pronunciation and vocabulary issues after each paragraph or page and any other questions that come up. After the read aloud, I pair students up and they read to one another. I remind them to think about their audience, speed and pronunciation.

Secondly, I give students tongue twisters a couple times a week at the start of class. This is not only fun, but students really try hard to pronounce them correctly. I have them read it to 3 people at different tables. Again, this builds community in the classroom.

Technology: Technology is also another avenue to help achieve English fluency. I use the lab as a time for students to strengthen some of their weaknesses. Students who need additional help with grammar use the Focus on Grammar program. Students who need help with reading/listening use www.cdlponline.org or www.newsforyouonline.com. Those that need to work on spelling, test themselves at www.spellingcity.com. I also have mini-conferences with students during this time. I address their issues as they arise throughout the quarter and look for ways for students to overcome them with additional materials.

Homework Policy: Successful completion of homework is an indicator of readiness for level completion. Our students have busy lives. However, I encourage students to work outside of class. This will help them reach a level of fluency much faster than a student who only attends class.

As I develop and refine the materials, I will notify you via email and make them available online. If you have any questions or would like to talk about ideas for level 4, please email all of us. We can talk about it more at the teacher meetings throughout the year too.

Submitted by Aaron Leavitt