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ESL STUDENTS: GEMS WAITING TO BE POLISHED

By Dariel Suarez

Being an ESL student is overwhelming. The level of uncertainty, self-doubt, and frustration an ESL student goes through makes for a stressful academic experience. I remember walking through the halls of John I. Leonard High School in Palm Beach, Florida, three weeks after arriving in the United States from Cuba, unable to understand most of my peers and instructors. I remember sitting in class hoping not to get called on, feeling afraid to ask the simplest of questions for fear that I'd be misunderstood, humiliated, or worse, treated as if I were intellectually inferior. This, I find, is one of the biggest issues ESL students face: they are commonly regarded as having an academic handicap.

Aside from the usual circumstances that afflict immigrant students—culture shock, language barriers, economic struggle, loneliness—it is the immeasurable gap between how they are often considered and what these students *can* offer that dispirits them. ESL students need respect, encouragement, and most of all, trust. They need to understand the academic expectations and be held accountable to them, but also that their struggles and fears are

surmountable obstacles, that if they continue to learn and grow they'll be able to express themselves with the confidence of a native speaker.

I recall having to write my first essay in an ESOL class, three months into my first year in high school. I knew that no matter how much effort I put into the assignment, my ideas would not come across as I intended them. So I decided to write the paper in phrases, things I had picked up watching TV, listening to music, observing other students debate with the teachers. After I handed the essay to my instructor, I was sure I would be stuck in ESOL for years to come. At the beginning of the following class, my soft spoken teacher—a native speaker—called me to her desk. She had my paper atop a pile, and I was certain her next words would be, "What is this?"

But they weren't. She lifted up her chin, stared at me with a subtle smile, and asked, "Do you want to go to college?" I nodded. She said, "Then you need to take regular classes as soon as possible." She went on to say my essay was excellent, that despite some mechanical errors, she could discern my ideas. She said they were organized, well written, and most of all, showed potential. She said I needed to take regular classes; that the challenge would be worth it if I were willing to apply myself. I told her I was.

She convinced the department to transfer me to a regular English class. My new teacher, another native speaker, assigned me special homework during the rest of the semester, allowing me to steadily catch up. Sitting among native speakers sharpened my listening skills, improved my writing, and eventually instilled in me the confidence to participate in class, get to know my peers, and become the student I was in Cuba, one who had been accepted into the country's best high school before my family and I left.

In college, my experience has been similar. The professors who have had the biggest impact on me are native speakers. They praise my writing, but are also not hesitant to point out its flaws. They commend the Spanish influence on my writing, inciting me to find and keep my voice. Thanks to them, my time in college has been extremely productive and memorable.

I share this experience because I feel that we, as tutors, must be mindful of ESL students' needs. As a bilingual tutor, for instance, I try to make the Spanish-speaking students who come to see me feel at ease. I let them know I understand their plight. I use positive reinforcement, inquire about their lives and what they've left behind, and assure them that, regardless of what they might think, academic success awaits them.

Even if you do not speak a second language, you can still have an immense impact on an ESL student's life. The patience, esteem, and eagerness you can show them will be more than they normally receive. If you present yourself as an ally, someone who genuinely wants to see them succeed, who has a good notion of what they go through, then you will earn their trust. If you can explain that struggling with prepositions, articles, and verb tense are issues most ESL students encounter, that using simple language is a natural step in their academic journey, you will be providing truly beneficial assistance. The encouragement I received despite my technical shortcomings became the foundation I needed to succeed in school. Hence, discussing and commending the global aspects in an ESL student's paper, instead of just helping them correct grammar and syntax, which they can acquire in time, will improve the chances of the students integrating themselves into the academic world with a sense of confidence and belonging.

The stories I hear from ESL students range from heartrending to remarkable. Many of them have experienced or witnessed everything imaginable: oppression, abuse, poverty, displacement, racism, violence, isolation. Yet, here they are, in our universities, trying to expand

their knowledge, develop their skills, assimilate into the culture, better their communities, provide for their families. The odds, unfortunately, are oftentimes stacked against them. Nonetheless, if we assure them that who they are is not defined by the obstacles they meet but how they overcome them, that their background can have a positive influence on their peers and professors, that you will show them dedication if they do too, then you will have done more for ESL students than you can imagine. If we can consciously educate ourselves as to their needs in order to lend what can undoubtedly be a life-changing hand, we can make our writing centers both a nurturing shelter and a driving academic force, a welcoming family and a steady guide for ESL students to thrive.