

Teaching Non Native-English Speakers: One Smile at a Time

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I remember with vivid clarity the first day I went to school in Harlingen, TX. I was 9 years old and in 3rd grade. In those days, in that part of the country, there was no such thing as bilingual education. There was just education and it was assumed to be in English. Only in English. I was terrified!

I did not expect to have compañeros (peers) who looked like me but didn't speak my language. I remember needing a sacapuntas (pencil sharpener) and **nobody** understood me. I resorted to 'charades' and acting the word out. I remember having to read the book Pug, which was on a 1st grade level—I was in 3rd grade! I was placed in the lowest groups for math and science. My teachers figured since I didn't speak English, there was no way I could actually understand 'complex' concepts. I am glad the way we educate children is changing. I am glad you are reading this because that means you have taken an interest in reaching out to a non-English speaking learner.

Today, I am a bilingual teacher and music educator. I have worked with students who are in this country for the first time. They have come from Asia, India, South America, the list goes on. My job is to teach each of them. A native Spanish speaker, I am also fluent in English, understand some Italian and French. However, I have noticed it's not the verbal language I speak that most helped a brand new non-English-speaker--that was my smile and willingness to include them without using words. This can be challenging at times, yet not impossible.

I have seen many people raise their voice at a student to make them understand. They may not realize when someone is yelled at, they usually withdraw even more. Besides following the basic human edict 'golden rule' of treating others as you'd like to be treated, the following may be helpful when trying to assist a non-English speaker feel more comfortable:

- **Use pictures** when appropriate and helpful.
- **Ask them to teach you** how to say something in their native language, invite others to learn and use the word/term.
- **Ask them to do things** that don't require written/spoken communication (many students can paint, draw, classify, organize, take notes to the office, etc. to feel valued and included).
- Often kids are not too shy to **use a computer**.
- People love games and there are some games that are very specific to each country. **Invite students to teach a game** from their native country/culture .
- **Find music from the student's culture** and incorporate it into your lesson. Invite the student to bring a CD from home to teach the class a song.
- **Use body language** to show support, acceptance, encouragement, and enthusiasm (thumbs up, high-5, smile, etc.).
- **Teach through examples and demonstrations**, avoid using too many words.
- **Repeat key words** important to the lesson.
- **Label as many things as possible (in several languages)** in your classroom/area, review these items frequently.
- **Smile**. You can never go wrong with a smile and a willing spirit.
- **Put yourself in their shoes**. America can be a big and scary new, world. Consider coming from a village with no running water. Now imagine not knowing how to use the toilet, the sink or the water fountain? It is a real situation for many students. If educators can make the transition even just a little bit smoother, we can help bring joy and not stress; love and not judgment; calmness instead of fear; foster education and not ignorance. We can teach. And we can learn.

Sandra Montes is a bi-lingual certified teacher in Sugar Land, Tx. Her route to teaching in Texas began at birth in Peru followed by a move to Guatemala before she settled in Texas in 1979. In Sugar Land, she currently is teaching reading in a bi-lingual setting and music to all walks of life. Her son, Ellis, is a primary motivator to keep living life to its fullest. When not teaching, Sandra can be found providing inspirational presentations to organizations, conferences and churches across the country. In her spare time, Ms. Montes is a noted international recording artist. Her recordings can be found in both English and Spanish. Sandra can be contacted directly via e-mail: sandratmontes@aol.com