

**ASSESSMENT**

# 7 Tips for Building Positive Relationships with English-Language Learners

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Positive relationships are the foundation of any successful classroom and particularly one that includes English-Language Learners (ELL). Teachers must learn about their students' experiences and backgrounds in order to connect them to new learning. Teachers also need to know what their students are interested in and what their goals are in order to create lessons which engage them and are relevant to their lives. When teachers get to know their students, they can make better decisions about the curriculum, instructional strategies, classroom management, assessment, pacing, and the list goes on.

Here are a few strategies that we use to build and maintain positive student-teacher relationships.

## 1) Regular Check-Ins

The simplest way for teachers to get to know their students is by talking with them on a daily basis. This can easily be done by "checking in" with a few students each day, either before class, while they are working at their desks, or after class. Taking this time to ask students about their experiences, both inside and outside of school, helps to build a genuine relationship, one where the students feel that their teacher takes an interest in their lives.

## 2) Reading Student Writing

Another simple way for teachers to learn about their students is by reading what students write. Sometimes they feel more comfortable sharing through writing, and a quick note from their teacher can mean a lot. There have been many times we have learned about our students' feelings, problems and successes by reading their weekly written reflections.

## 3) Teachers Writing About the Classroom

Students can also read what the teacher has written, especially when this writing is about the class and about the students. In today's world, many teachers already blog and write about their teaching experiences. However, they may not take the extra step of sharing this writing with their students. This can be powerful on a number of levels, but in terms of relationship building, it shows students that the teacher thinks about them outside of the classroom. Taking a few minutes to write about the class (whether it is a simple reflection on how a lesson went, how a student demonstrated an exceptional insight, or sharing a few successes and challenges from the week) and then sharing this writing with the class can increase trust and respect between the teacher and the students.

When students feel that they "matter," their levels of motivation and achievement are more likely to increase. Joanne Yatvin explains this idea ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/letting-teachers-reinvent-their-own-wheel/2011/07/06/gIQAM9IQ1H\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/letting-teachers-reinvent-their-own-wheel/2011/07/06/gIQAM9IQ1H_blog.html)) in the context of the "Hawthorne effect" – the results of a well-known study of workers in a Michigan manufacturing plant where lights were dimmed so workers had a hard time seeing, and production actually increased. Yatvin argues that this study is often interpreted as illustrating "the fact that human subjects who know they are part of a scientific experiment may sabotage the study in their eagerness to make it succeed." However, she points out a deeper meaning which reflects the importance of students feeling valued in the classroom: "When people believe they are important in a project, anything works, and, conversely, when they don't believe they are important, nothing works." In other words, when students believe they are an important part of the educational process, then they will act like it! Having students see that teachers are writing about their insights and their successes publicly, whether on blogs or in emails to other teachers, is just one more way to show them they are an important.

#### 4) Teacher/Student Letter Exchange

A good way for teachers to introduce themselves is by writing a brief letter to the class during the first week. This letter can serve as a model for students to follow as they write back to the teacher. The teacher's letter could be simplified depending upon the level of the class, and the teacher could give beginning students sentence frames to scaffold their letter. (My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am \_\_\_\_\_ years old. I was born in \_\_\_\_\_.) This activity helps teachers learn more about their students and also provides a quick sample of each student's writing. It can be helpful to keep on hand copies of both the teacher letter and the instructions for the student letter to give new students as they enter the class later in the year.

#### 5) Weekly Reflections

One way for teachers to stay connected to students is by having them write a weekly reflection. This reflection could simply be a journal or responses to questions. The teacher can structure the journal prompt or questions as an invitation for students to share their feelings, concerns and questions about the class and about their lives outside the classroom. (What classroom activity did they like the best this week and why? What are their weekend plans?) Reading student reflections can help teachers "take the pulse" of the class – which activities are being enjoyed, areas of confusion, pacing issues, etc. Teachers can immediately make adjustments, offer feedback, and address any concerns. Teachers also gain important information about what is going on in their students' lives, and can use this information as "talking points" when they speak one-on-one with students. These reflections can also function as a formative assessment.

#### 6) Evaluations

A teacher can build trust with students by asking them to anonymously "evaluate" his/her teaching and use the results to reflect on his/her practice. This could be done by distributing a quick survey or set of questions about class activities, the teacher's style, the pace of the class, etc.

#### 7) "Talking and Walking"

Having one-on-one conversations with students about their goals, interests, struggles, etc. can be difficult to do during class time. One way to quickly connect with students is to take a brief walk around the school campus. This five-minute conversation could take place before or after school, or even during a teacher's prep period (if they make prior arrangements with the student's teacher for that time). These talks can strengthen the

teacher/student relationship and can also be helpful when getting to know new students or when dealing with students who are having behavior challenges.

This is not a comprehensive list of ways that teachers can develop positive relationships with English-Language Learners and other students. What are suggestions that you would add?

**Source:** [www.edutopia.org/blog/building-positive-relationships-ELL-larry-ferlazzo-katie-hull-sypnieski](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/building-positive-relationships-ELL-larry-ferlazzo-katie-hull-sypnieski)

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