

Being an ESOL Tutor

By Calvin Allen

I've been a volunteer teacher of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), aka ESL, aka teaching English to Latinos at the Literacy Council of Buncombe County (LCBC) for about five years. It's been one of the most fun and rewarding experiences of my life. I have met women, children, and men from Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and El Salvador. As a professional and then volunteer teacher since 1977, I have had the fun of playing with students from ages five to 65.

I try to lecture as little as possible. I like to get the students up and moving around: acting out scenes, acting as teacher, working in pairs, playing games that make them run around the room. I try to involve everyone in the room: observers, assistant teachers, kids, etc. (We make the English speakers answer in Spanish.) One of my students' favorite games/exercises is to video a story that they've read in class. Everybody in the room has a part: man, woman, child, gorilla, puppies, narrator, filer, props manager, set designer, costumer (if you've ever watched the credits after a movie, you know that it takes a lot of people to make a movie). The more the merrier.

I try to encourage laughter. Most of my students have already worked a minimum of 40 hours at their job, prepared an evening meal for themselves or a whole family, and now are coming to class exhausted. If they aren't having fun, they won't come back. I'm convinced they learn better if they're laughing.

Key points for teachers to remember:

The most important "lessons" you're teaching have nothing to do with the subject -- you're modeling how to relate to other human beings in a respectful, encouraging way.

Maybe because most of them are naturally friendly, or maybe they feel welcomed, or maybe it's the sugar-free candy and prizes I bring, I have been unofficially adopted into several families in the area. I've gotten eggs from one couple who has a farm with goats, rabbits, hundreds of chickens, quail, and ducks. After the wife passed her citizenship test, they gave me a beautiful Mexican ceramic bowl filled with exotic dried fruits. Another couple invited me to a quinceanera, where hundreds of elegantly dressed Latinos ate traditional foods, marched, performed elaborate coming-out rituals, and danced the night away. A couple of days ago, a 15-year-old drove me around Swannanoa for several hours with her learner's permit. I met the grandmother, two sisters, a husband and the older son (I already knew the younger son from his role as a waitress in one of our videos, when his skirt -- that had been tucked into his jeans -- fell off while he was serving a plate of spaghetti).

In conclusion, as is true of most teaching, I have gotten much more from my students than they have gotten from me. I have whacked at pinatas, eaten tongue soup, drunk the warm sweet drink made from rice and milk whose name I can't think of right now, helped hand-roll tortillas and fry up dozens of pupusas for sale to friends and neighbors, fished on local lakes, and eaten soup made from the fish we caught -- the fish (eyeing

me warily) floating whole in a vegetable broth that looked horrible but tasted delicious. I've eaten hot dogs made with chicken legs, pickled beets, and slaw, a special treat for Salvadoran birthdays. I've sampled elote loco, corn on the cob smeared with mayo and sprinkled with cayenne pepper or paprika.

I can't wait until June -- it'll be my second quinceanera, and I'm buying a special suit for the occasion.

-Calvin Allen, Tutor
Literacy Council of Buncombe County