

Lean on Me: Applying What I Learned to Multi-level ESL

by *Angela Foltz*

ABSTRACT

Although the various forms of professional development are meant to improve both the instructional quality of teachers and the lesson plans they implement, many teaching professionals find themselves rarely integrating practices to which they have been exposed. Possibly the lack of noticeable results is inevitable when abstract theories lacking a real-world connection are being delivered to teachers who lack the time and energy to decipher the theoretical code or to experiment within the classroom. This article attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice by showing how an ESL teacher applied what she learned in a professional development workshop to her multi-level ESL class. Her experience serves as a testament to the value of teachers continuing their education.

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Although I have been teaching English as a second language (ESL) for over six years, it often has been difficult for me to see a meaningful correlation between professional development and its direct impact on the classroom. However, I had the opportunity to attend training on multi-level ESL instruction last year and I am impressed by the difference it has made in the quality of my teaching. Besides reminding me of the benefits derived from the rich experiences of other practitioners, the training also inspired me to try a new approach with my multi-level classroom.

I have always struggled with trying to select material that is suitable and flexible for my multi-level classes. I want to engage the learners in issues that really matter to them, yet I want them to master the grammar they need to improve their English. I want to see my students grow not only in their English proficiency, but also to develop as whole, thinking persons. My students are probably a fair representation of other ESL populations: they often work 50-70 hours a week, in addition to dealing with their family responsibilities, and trying to adapt to a new language and way of life. My desire is to see that these adults feel connected to something and to someone and to see them use their developing English skills as a medium to reach the goals they have set. My students have different English proficiency levels and a medley of educational backgrounds, cultural identities, and goals, so it is extremely difficult to meet all of their needs.

The workshop I attended on teaching in a multi-level ESL classroom helped me to see the students' different levels as assets and not as deficits. The training encouraged teachers to be creative in the selection of activities in order to include students of all English proficiencies. During the final session I resolved to experiment with a project involving music and language that I had wanted to do for years. Until I took the multi-level workshop I didn't see how I could implement it with such an array of English proficiencies.

Music for all levels

Determined to use music in my content for the following semester, I

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selected eight different well-known American popular from a variety of time periods. I reasoned that through the analysis of the themes and lyrics of the songs, the students would improve their grammar, listening, writing, and conversation in a natural and nonthreatening manner. They would have the additional benefit of investigating a bit of Americana.

My class that semester was one of my most diverse, with immigrant representatives from Albania, Bulgaria, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Lebanon, Mexico, Morocco, Romania, Vietnam, and Yemen—and that was among only 15 students! To make matters more complicated, the students ranged in age from 17 to 60 and some students had attended school for only a few years while others had studied more than four years at universities.

Yet because I used many suggestions from the training I attended, I was able to meet the challenge of providing quality instruction to every student by using a flexible thematic approach centered on the chosen song for the week. I included songs such as “Wonderful World” (Louis Armstrong), “María” (from *West Side Story*), “Love Me Tender” (Elvis Presley), “We Belong Together” (Ritchie Valens), and “Pretty Woman” (Roy Orbison). Although each song enabled students to work on specific grammar skills and promoted conversation around various topics, one song seemed to connect with the students. It was “Lean on Me” (Bill Withers). The following description may give a snapshot of how a week’s classes were structured around the backdrop of that particular song.

Listening, reading, writing, speaking

Upon entering the classroom, students encountered the writing topic on the easel, *What are some differences between education in your birth country and the United States?* During the first 30 minutes the students worked independently on their responses. Some students were applauded for writing only one sentence while more advanced students were responsible for several paragraphs. I used this time to work individually with students, especially those who needed more support. After 30 minutes students volunteered to share their written responses aloud while fellow classmates provided feedback to their ideas. This activity strengthened the community identity that had been established and learners came to trust and identify with each other, depending on one another for support, thus encouraging them to take more risks in language use.

Following this activity we focused our attention on specific vocabulary taken from the selected song they would listen to that evening. Then I provided background details on the song and artist and students often asked questions about the time period in which it was composed. So, in harmony with the

writing/conversation topic on education, I presented some facts about the inequity of education, highlighting the progress made with much struggle during the 1960s and 1970s.

With that discussion as a foundation, we listened to the song “Lean on Me” by Bill Withers—once without lyrics and again with the complete lyrics. After this listening exercise, students asked questions about the grammar and usage of the lyrics. For example, they asked about the idiom “lean on me” and how it is used in daily life. I also planned auxiliary grammar points to discuss, which included vocabulary development and comparing verb tenses. We read the lyrics as a class and students focused on pronunciation. It was during this activity that learners digested the meat of the language being investigated through the lyrics.

Following a break, students had the opportunity to test their listening and comprehension skills by completing a Cloze exercise based on the lyrics of the song. I made Cloze exercises at four levels of difficulty that omitted certain words in the song. This allowed students to choose a worksheet according to the level with which they felt comfortable.

To enrich the students’ understanding of some current issues in education I introduced the video *Lean on Me*. The students eagerly watched the movie and I asked them questions to check for comprehension and also answered their many questions. All these activities, which took two class periods of three hours each, gave the students an active role in learning English through the lens of an issue that they care about—education.

Impact of professional development

The professional development in which I participated had an impact on both the learners and me. Had I not attended the workshop on multi-level instruction and analyzed what the information meant to my teaching situation, I might not have had the tools and confidence to try this project. The students’ enthusiasm and active participation throughout the classes were contagious, and they often voluntarily stayed after class to ask me more questions about the topic we were discussing. The success reinvigorated my love for teaching and deepened my appreciation for professional development. I was amazed at the marked improvement in my students’ writing, listening skills, fluency, and confidence. It is rewarding to see people, who on the surface have very little in common, grow to care and support each other as a community of learners, “leaning on” each other as they make their way in a new society.