

# Innovative Teaching Strategies That Support ELL Success: Transferring Lessons from Online Classrooms<sup>3</sup>

In 2016, the total number of English Language Learners (ELL) in K-12 schools was approximately 12 million. This number represents 22% of U.S. children who do not speak English at home. Research indicates that while the number of ELLs has increased, the quality of education these students receive in schools has not.<sup>1</sup>

A 2017 research study reports that schools often fail to provide adequate instruction and support for ELL students.<sup>2</sup> On a practical level, this means that most teachers have ELL students in their classroom that they have not been trained to teach. As the school ELL population increases, every classroom teacher would benefit from learning proven ELL teaching strategies and putting them into practice.

Based on the interactions of more than 60,000 North American teachers and 500,000 Chinese students in over 180,000 online classes daily, VIPKid teachers have learned a lot about teaching English to non-English speakers. Many VIPKid teachers have developed teaching strategies in the 1:1 online tutoring environment that they are putting into practice with the ELL students in their traditional classrooms.

## Transferring Teaching Skills

Understanding the transfer of learning is an important aspect of teaching. VIPKid teachers have found that teaching on the online platform has helped them hone a variety of pedagogical techniques that now benefit students in their K-12 classrooms. With intensive and repeated exposure to English learners in the 1:1 online environment, VIPKid teachers have both intentionally and unintentionally transferred many beneficial ELL practices into their traditional classrooms. The ability to be self-reflective further helps teachers facilitate the transfer of learning from one context (online) to another (in person) and to expand their teaching effectiveness.

For example, one of the most important teaching

---

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from Education Week, <https://tinyurl.com/yczcerx8> on December 6, 2018.

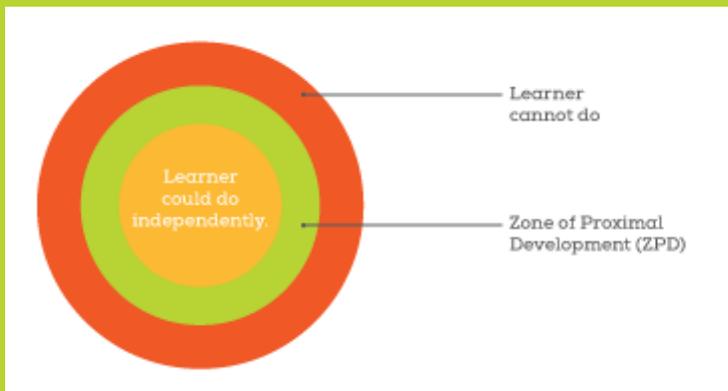
<sup>2</sup> Same

<sup>3</sup> Top Tips for Supporting ELLs: Innovative Strategies for Success”, by Stephenie Lee on edweb.net

strategies also leads to greater student engagement in both a 1:1 environment and a traditional classroom. Total Physical Response (TPR) is a teaching method for language or vocabulary that creates a link in students' brains between speech and action, and is found to be highly effective for ELLs. So much of our communication is based on body language and tone of voice rather than the actual words we use, which is especially helpful in teaching ELL students. Teachers can use body language to emphasize how they are listening to students and how to convert words to actions. By ramping up their physical movements, often using props or gestures, teachers become livelier and students are more engaged. Referring to the TPR technique, one VIPKid teacher said, "This has made my [regular] classes more interactive and keeps students engaged for what had been long 90-minute sessions previously."



## The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)



Teachers are encouraged to apply these ELL teaching strategies in the context of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD is a teaching and learning framework. The individual student's ZPD features skills that are too difficult to master alone, but that he or she can learn with guidance such as 1:1 tutoring. All of the ELL teaching strategies

mentioned here are ways to scaffold learning for students as they tackle new skills. In the illustration below, the inside ring represents the tasks that an independent learner can accomplish alone. The outside ring represents tasks a learner cannot do without assistance. The middle ring is the zone of proximal development where, with appropriate assistance and tools, students can accomplish a new task or acquire a new skill. This assistance is called scaffolding, and is a familiar concept in teaching.

## Successful ELL Teaching Techniques

These are additional strategies that VIPKid teachers practice in online ELL teaching that easily transfer to a traditional classroom. These strategies are also TESOL recommended strategies.

**Repetition:** Teachers are encouraged to not only repeat concepts, but to extend them and create context around them. This process enriches students' understanding and builds a network of neuro connections in their brains. The more connections we have, the easier it is to retrieve specific information.

**Relevance:** Through their communication, the teacher and student are co-creating a learning experience. What you say can be: a) relevant to yourself, b) relevant to your student, c) relevant to both of you, or d) relevant to neither of you. It is helpful to build on students' understanding of topics by initially providing more relevant examples and scaffolding to less relevant examples [See box on ZPD].



**Simplifying language:** Higher level vocabulary is more complex and can be difficult to learn. Complicated sentence structure can also complicate language. Try to simplify your language - vocabulary and/or sentence structure - for student understanding. Ask yourself if you can you simplify the language enough to accomplish your learning objective? Continual practice, including on the online platform, helps teachers hone this skill.

**Structuring language:** Using sign post expressions, like street signs, provide direction and determine the speed at which students can understand and process language. For example, a simple set of sign posts could be “first, second, third, and finally.”

With intensive 1:1 practice online with the above strategies, VIPKid teachers find they intentionally and unintentionally transfer these methods into their daily classroom practice in support of their ELLs and diverse learners.

With non-English speakers in almost every K-12 classroom in the country, it is important that all teachers have tools and strategies in their tool kit for teaching ELL students. It is clear from the experiences of thousands of VIPKid teachers that they have been able to transfer the skills they that they have been able to transfer the skills they have acquired in tutoring in an online, immersive English program to their own classrooms. In fact, one teacher reported that teaching on VIPKid had helped make her a better teacher. Another shared that starting her mornings with VIPKid helps her bring the joy of teaching into her classroom each day.

While there are differences in the teaching environment of an online platform and a busy classroom of 25+ learners, the teaching skills highlighted above can achieve meaningful learning outcomes in both environments. Through intensive practice with ELLs in a 1:1 setting, the lessons learned from teaching ELL students online can be successfully transferred to a physical classroom.

### About VIPKid

VIPKid is an education technology platform that connects Chinese students with teachers from North America so they can begin learning English in an immersive environment from an early age. Visit [www.VIPKid.com](http://www.VIPKid.com) for information on becoming a VIPKid teacher.

### Some ELL Best Teaching Practices

*Since the majority of teachers with ELLs in their classrooms do not have special ELL training, some of the following instructional practices may prove helpful:*

- *When teaching students with very limited English, consider introducing longer pieces of language in song—it helps students recall and understand more.*
- *In striking a balance between vocabulary/grammar instruction and conversation, always be conscious of how difficult it might be for students to share their opinion. Stay close to their ZPD in making corrections to their grammar.*