

Tutors FAQ

"How do I get my student to talk more?"

ORAL LANGUAGE is so important to most of our students in their jobs, going about daily errands, at schools, doctor visits, etc. Many students are reluctant and shy even with their tutor. Some students read well and answer written questions but when asked oral questions about what they read to check for understanding some tutors get little or incorrect responses.

I have had a lot of success starting by making students comfortable with oral language by asking questions about themselves or subjects that they know a lot about. Just as in the first meeting tutors are encouraged to tell students about themselves by bringing a family picture, I keep this going regularly by asking about their family, friends, and activities. I tell my students stories about recent holidays and how my family celebrates and ask if they celebrated or have a similar holiday in their hometown and what they celebrate. Besides family and holidays we share stories about their Homeland or Hometown, job, hobby, hopes and dreams, favorites like: sports, music, travels, foods.

Tutors also want more ideas for homework and writing assignments that are different from Side by Side lessons. I pretty much give them the same answers. All of the above mentioned ideas can be homework, "Think about your favorite music and come back next week and tell me what and why, or write about your dream vacation and bring that to class to read to me " and then we talk about it in our lesson.

I remind tutors that making students feel safe, focused on themselves and comfortable to speak makes a big difference in Oral Language success and keeps them interested, focused and holds their attention.

Of course academics are not the only questions. We sometimes get requests for dealing with personal problems of students and as tutors we don't have the answers. I remind tutors that we are English Language teachers and refer them to our office to see if Gisela might know where there is help or to 211 for help. It's a slippery slope to give help or even advice.

I'm just starting out with my student, how do I know what materials to use?

Most of our students who score in the beginning or intermediate range on CASAS, start in Side By Side Level 1. Even if they have the skills to move through quickly, it's best to work through the exercises together so that you understand their strengths and weaknesses and they can gain confidence. Our office, as well as your mentor, can help you with this decision. We recommend you meet a few times with the student BEFORE starting in Side By Side so that you have the chance to talk with them and learn about their interests and background. During those first few weeks, you can ask them to write some words or sentences about their family, job or recent events in their life. This will also give you good information about their learning level.

My student seems to speak and understand well, but they are hesitant to read. What can I do?

Reading in English can be daunting. If your student speaks and understands English fairly well, but struggles to read—it's a good indication that they cannot read well in their own language—and possibly have had minimal formal schooling. You can help a reluctant reader by reading interesting stories or articles aloud to them, then making a list of new vocabulary to practice reading and writing. You can model each sentence—then have your student read it after you. After doing this with an entire paragraph, your student will be more prepared to read others. And most importantly—read and reread familiar stories/texts. Reading something familiar—is an excellent way to build reading fluency!

Where can I find good reading selections beyond those in Side By Side?

There is a small library of high interest, easy reading books at the Literacy office available for you to check out. Additionally, you can register for free on NEWSELA.com. This is a website with short articles that students can read and/or listen to. The best part is, you can adjust the difficulty (exile level) of all selections so that they will grow with your student! TIP: Register as a caretaker/tutor—not as a teacher. Is your student high intermediate or advanced? Try VOA.com for more news articles they can print and listen to.

My student can read and complete written exercises—but they cannot understand what I say very well and are very shy about speaking. What's wrong?

Some students have studied English in a classroom setting, or they have very high literacy in Spanish—so reading is easier than speaking. And unless a student is around spoken English—they can have a hard time developing their understanding of spoken English. Slow down. Speak clearly. Keep your sentences a bit shorter than usual—but try to speak as naturally as you can. Before your student reads a selection, tell them you will read it aloud—very slowly. Ask questions to check for understanding. Encourage them to ask, "What does ____ mean?" Explain it, and read it again. And even again! Then have your student read it to you. Then have them listen again. The following week or two—read it again! Repetition of familiar sounds, words and phrases will slowly build aural fluency.

Is there a general rule of thumb about how much instruction in Spanish would be too much?

It is not necessary to know how to speak Spanish in order to tutor English. However, if you do know some Spanish, using it can be a timesaver, a useful and timesaving alternative to using a translation app when gestures and context just don't work. Just be careful that your tutoring sessions are primarily conducted in English so your student gets lots of practice with the aim being that your student eventually THINKS in English rather than translates.

My student didn't show up for our lesson and didn't let me know. My student has missed several lessons due to other obligations. What should I do?

Our students have very challenging lives and often put the needs of others in their families before themselves. It is important that your student communicates clearly with you when they are unable to meet and that they can make some time for lessons and homework. It is very frustrating for you as a tutor to be full of enthusiasm and ideas and then not be able to tutor! Do contact Gisela and get her help in talking to your student about their challenges. It may be that this isn't a good time for them to be taking on English lessons. Please know that you have a

right to ask Gisela for another student if they prove to be unreliable. In the past, we have lost good tutors who have quit out of frustration. We would hate to lose you!

Which Side by Side books (Student Book? Activity Book?) do I give my student? Give your student both books with the understanding that they can write in the Activity Book and keep it for review but that they will need to return the Student Book to the office when you are done with that level. As a tutor, you can access both books on the Side by Side eBook website for your own use. If you want your own hard copies, you can purchase them yourself. The Literacy Program can only provide one set per student/tutor.