Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Linguists don't yet agree on what linguistic knowledge consists of or how it is acquired, but no modern theory would suggest that a successful language user's knowledge is learned explicitly. Even native speakers of English don't have perfect conscious knowledge of the language. Further, the input native speakers construct linguistic knowledge from is vast, disorganized, and in some ways deficient - suggesting that even if it were possible to speak a language by being told its rules, this isn't the natural course of learning.

So, as a teacher of ESL, I recognize the need to somehow facilitate the student in creating linguistic knowledge, even though I cannot provide this knowledge directly. I believe there are four things that I can do for my students in spite of this limitation:

1. Provide a diversity of meaningful, realistic, challenging, and structured language input.
2. Make the student aware of what patterns can be expected to appear in the input.
3. Provide the students methods and venues to practice their linguistic knowledge.
4. Evaluate students regularly, and teach the students to evaluate themselves as well.

I see these practices as making room for the student to acquire the "rules of the language", while remaining agnostic as to the nature of these "rules" and how they develop.

So what does this mean for my students? First and foremost, meaningful communication will be central to my classroom. The purpose of language is communication, and I find that most ESL learners' goals come down to being able to communicate fluently. Some research has also suggested that language learning occurs most successfully when meaningful communication is made contingent upon it.

Meaningful input can be provided in the classroom in a number of ways, but here are a few examples of what might go on in my classroom:

- Reading or listening to and discussing authentic texts reflecting students' interests, with an emphasis on why certain parts of the text convey the meanings that they do
- Having students simulate realistic communicative activities, like telling a story to a friend, giving instructions, or giving an academic talk - or simply talking with me and with each other
- Processing-instruction activities: students hear or read pairs of sentences with meanings that differ only on the basis of some particular linguistic characteristic, and then must perform a task that they can only do successfully if they've understood the meaning
- Cloze texts: students fill in blanks left at critical points in a text, so that the full text communicates what it was initially intended to.

In contrast, exercises that emphasize linguistic form in itself, rather than as a means to linguistic function, will have little place in my classroom.

Second, while high-structure instruction and even lecture might sometimes be necessary, I see its role not as imparting some rule or another to the students, but as drawing their attention to some regularity
of the input to expedite a process that occurs in their minds, the process of turning input into knowledge. This means that:

- Students will be asked to infer rules, rather than being told them. This is a type of practice that reflects how linguistic knowledge is acquired “in the wild”.

- Students in every ESL class will be taught some basic linguistics - enough to make them knowledgeable about what patterns might appear in a language.

Objective evaluation of students is a fundamental part of ESL teaching, and I think it deserves serious consideration, because how to quantify proficiency is not at all clear. But nonetheless, we as teachers have a responsibility to our students to use teaching methods that are empirically justifiable and to confirm whether or not our methods are effective. So in my classroom, learning will be at least in part measured on the basis of achievement of quantifiable goals. Students will be encouraged to set specific goals, as well as the broad overall goals of a class, and to work with me to find a way to quantify their achievements. In addition, regular holistic assessments of a student’s proficiency will be made through one-on-one meetings, recordings, and formal proficiency testing.

Finally, I have some remarks about teaching in general and the overall classroom atmosphere. The best teachers I've ever known were all characterized by a few traits, in addition to their pedagogical skill: they all respected their students, and they all treated them compassionately. Respect, to me, means respecting students' diverse strengths, intelligences, and interests, as well as being aware of their weaknesses and needs - and then being responsive to these things in the classroom. I had a teacher once who realized that I liked to read novels. I'll never forget some of the material from that class, because she would occasionally call on me to help illustrate some point with an example from a book I'd read and loved. It also means respecting students' time and interests by only doing activities and enacting policies in the classroom that can be shown to positively affect learning and progress towards goals. Compassion appears in the classroom when a teacher is flexible with students exactly to the degree that it will help their learning.

As a teacher I am serious, respectful, sincere, and concerned with quantifiable progress. I am also positive and enthusiastic towards my students, and I genuinely care about their progress - that's why I'm so interested in the best practices for the ESL classroom.