

Teaching English: Views from an Outsider

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Abstract:

In this paper, I will discuss the teaching of English but from the perspective of a non-English teaching specialist or practitioner but one who is involved in teaching using English as a medium of instruction. Here, I will share my views on the students' weak proficiency in the language as well as some strategies which I have employed to improve their proficiency in the language.

i) Introduction

Confucius, the patron saint of teachers everywhere, once said that “if you want to know what is water, do not ask the fish”. In the same way, you will find that this paper is the odd one out, in the sense that the author is not an English teacher nor does he hold any academic qualification on teaching English. What then, you may ask, is he doing here?

My only claim would be that I am not a “fish”, i.e., an English teacher. I am here today, to offer some views on teaching English from the perspective of an outsider who happens to have some (if somewhat tenuous) links to teaching English through my mother who was an English teacher, my colleagues who are mostly English teachers and my wife who is also an English teacher. In addition, to bolster my somewhat dubious link, all the courses that I teach use English as the medium of instruction. In this paper, I want to share with you some of my views on teaching English through my own experiences and discussions with my colleagues and wife on this matter.

ii) English as She is Sp(br)oken by Students: A Personal Encounter

I started my career with INTI in 1997 where I was employed to teach Sociology under the American Degree Program. I was under the impression at that time, given the nature of the program, all my prospective students would have a grasp of the language. This impression survived only up to my first class. I was, to put it mildly, shell-shocked at the level of proficiency of most of the students I first came into contact with. Since that day, the same experience keeps repeating itself daily that I will be very shocked if I have a whole class which actually have satisfactory proficiency in English!

Here, I want to share with you some of my personal observations on the proficiency level of students in English. Let me begin by giving you the usual litany share by all English teachers as well as teachers who use the language as a medium of instruction on students' weak command of English. It is something which all of you have heard and experienced before.

First and foremost, almost all the students whom I encounter have absolutely no grasp of the structure of the language. That is, they could not speak nor write English in a grammatically correct way, e.g., subject-verb agreement, tenses, etc. As a result, their answers in assignments or test seems like a confused jumble of "*rojak*" which makes no sense as a result of confused grammar. It is extremely frustrating to mark such assignments or test papers. Much of the time is spent on trying to decipher what they are trying to say rather than evaluating whether they have learned or not from my course. By the end of the day, I usually get a headache as a reward for my efforts.

And this problem is compounded by the fact that my students have a limited vocabulary. Due to the nature of my courses, I teach Philosophy and Sociology, students are required to have an extensive vocabulary in order to follow my lectures. Ideally, I should just lecture on without the need to stop to explain words. However, in practice, I am forced to pause, to explain to my students the meaning of common English words as well as the more technically demanding words of the disciplines I teach. As for the latter, this is something to be expected but not the former! As a result, this problem have slowed me down in my teaching. Where I should be focusing on finishing my syllabus, now I am forced to slow down to ensure my students understand what I am saying.

Apart from a weak grasp of the structure of the language and limited vocabulary, I also noticed that my students lack the confidence to use English, which is usually translated into stony silence in class, when ideally, they should be discussing whatever questions or points which I have raised in class. Such silences are hampering my efforts in teaching them, as discussion is another one of the time-honoured ways of learning.

I believe that their lack of confidence is due to the cultural conditioning which they have received where they were taught that admitting one's ignorance or mistake in public is a taboo. Such lack of confidence has brought about a situation where students prefer to speak their mother tongue outside the classroom rather than using English which might have improved their proficiency level.

I believe that what I am saying here is not a new revelation to any of you here today. Indeed, I believe that if we were to have a story swapping session, all of you could give me some anecdote of what I am saying here. Yet, we are here today not so much to

talk about the low level of proficiency in English among students but rather to share ideas on how to improve their proficiency of the language.

iii) First-aid English: A Hodge-podge of Methods

The low level of proficiency in English among my students have forced a change in my teaching methods where I have, apart from teaching them from the syllabus, to incorporate some “first-aid” to their language proficiency. In this section, I will discuss some of the ways which I have used to try to improve my students’ proficiency of English. However, I must offer the following disclaimer before I continue on. The following ideas are not based on any research but rather a hodge-podge of methods developed through experience which may not work in your situation.

I want to share with you a few methods which I have utilized in trying to raise the level of English proficiency among my students. The first method is what I call the “dictionary approach”. In this method, I ask all my students to bring a dictionary to class. During class, I will introduce a few related words for the day’s lesson where I will ask them to look it up and tell me the meaning of the word. The idea here is, of course, to build up their vocabulary. It is also aimed at helping them to understand the different shades of meaning in which a word might have and the different contexts in which a particular meaning might apply.

A variation of this method is to get students to construct sentences that bring out the various shades of meaning which the word might have, once they have looked up the various shades of meaning the word might have.

“Free writing exercise” is another method which I have employed from time to time. Here, I will ask students to write a couple of paragraphs of relevant ideas to the day’s lesson where I will then take back to mark. Of course, apart from marking for contents, I try to correct simple grammatical mistakes such as tenses, subject-verb agreement, etc. Hopefully, when the students get back their answer script, they will learn from it.

Finally, I have also employed what I call “if you don’t talk, I won’t carry on” method. From time to time, I will field certain questions or issues in the class where I will then wait for someone to talk. As usual, students will keep quiet. I will then respond in the same manner until someone talks and once the ice is broken, usually others will join in the discussion. This is, of course, to help them in their oral as well as thinking skills.

As I have stated before I am not an English teacher. The methods above are simply “first-aid” to help my students to be able to follow my courses and are not meant to be concentrated effort to improve the students’ level of proficiency in English. I only utilize these methods if, and only if, it can dovetail with my lesson objectives or when I have the luxury of time. Even then, I would have to make snap judgement on the competency level of a particular class to decide whether I should even want to try to improve the proficiency level of the students. If I judge the majority of the class have a satisfactory level of proficiency then I will usually forego this “first-aid”.

Due to the constraint of time, I have not really gone in-depth as to the mechanics of these methods nor other ideas which I have used in my class. Nonetheless, I hope that you find some of these ideas useful and can be employed in your own classes.

Why am I here today? Basically, to learn from your experiences as teachers of English where I hope to get new ideas which I might employ in my own classes. I hope through my discussion with you, we can have a mutually profitable time in helping our students raise their level of proficiency in English.

iii) Teaching English: Some Concluding Remarks

We live today in what some people has dubbed a global village where it is increasingly common for people of different cultures and languages coming into contact with us. English has, by default, become the global *lingua franca* used by people to communicate with one another. We, as teachers, owe it to our students to ensure that they are proficient in this global language if they are to carve a future for themselves.

The issue that faces teachers today, especially English teachers, is how do we improve our students' proficiency of the language? I believe that one of the main barriers to mastery of English is that our students do not have the motivation to learn the language. Language, like any other skills, can be taught but if there is no motivation then there will be no language acquisition.

This is not an easy task, as students are not motivated as they do not see the need to learn English. This could be due to the fact that we do not have an English-speaking environment where students can observe the need to acquire the language. I believe that successful English language acquisition requires that we create an environment where students are required to use the English thus motivating them to learn the language. This

ideal, an English-speaking environment is the challenge that faces English teachers. Hopefully, at the end of this session, we can spend some time in discussing how we can create such a situation.