

Three insights gained from ESL/EFL teaching

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THREE INSIGHTS GAINED FROM ESL/EFL TEACHING

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Those who teach ESL/EFL¹ tend to encounter a wide variety of classroom situations. As one might expect, EFL teachers who choose an itinerant lifestyle are exposed to many different teaching and learning styles as they move from region to region and country to country. However, even teachers who prefer to teach in an English-speaking country and never leave their native land are greatly affected by waves of immigration caused by distant conflicts and tensions. One month the majority of incoming students are Vietnamese or Cambodian and the next, Nicaraguan or Guatemalan; one year the classroom is full of students from India and the next, students from Hong Kong. In learning to cope with different students, cultures, and educational expectations, effective ESL/EFL teachers gain insights which are useful in any classroom. In this article I will briefly share three of these insights.

1. Every Teaching Situation is Different

Every teaching situation is different, a fact that is made clear to an ESL/EFL teacher each time she or he meets a new class. Classes vary greatly depending upon the cultural and educational background of the students, and teaching methods must vary accordingly. For example, students with a European background will recognize many cognate words and, sharing a common European culture, will often readily understand the underlying concepts which the teacher is attempting to teach. On the other hand, students from societies which are very different, such as the hill tribes of Vietnam, where telling time by the clock was formerly unknown, will require different teaching techniques. Furthermore, classroom interaction varies greatly depending upon the cultural background of the students; teaching a class of Italian students, many of whom noisily and simultaneously shout out their own opinions, is not the same as teaching a class of Japanese students brought up with the knowledge that "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down."

In addition, for successful ESL/EFL teaching, the needs of the students in the class must be determined. The needs of students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who intend to use the language instrumentally to achieve some purpose, are different from the needs of immigrant students in an English speaking country learning English as a Second or Additional Language in order to integrate into their new society.² For example, immigrant women in a neighbourhood class in Canada need to be able to do different things with English than students studying English in Japan because they want to pass a TOEFL exam to enter graduate school in an English speaking country. Moreover, even among students studying English as a Second or Additional Language in an English-speaking country, there are great differences between the needs of the recently arrived and those who immigrated earlier, between homebound women with small children and women working in factories, between high school students who are refugees from war-torn countries and those who have emigrated through family choice.

Because each classroom situation is unique, a teacher cannot use the same textbooks, materials, and methods term after term; these must change as the classroom situation changes. Formal or informal needs analyses need to be done to determine what students need and want to learn in a class, and consideration must also be given to their previous educational experiences. Has their previous education been continuous or has it been disrupted for various reasons? Were students encouraged to ask questions and to participate actively in the classroom or were they expected to be passive recipients of knowledge? Only after meeting the class and determining the background, previous learning history, and present needs of the students can an ESL/EFL teacher concretely plan the course; before that, only broad objectives and possible teaching materials and methods can be decided.

All teachers can benefit by conceiving of each class as a unique teaching situation requiring special materials and methods suitable for the students being taught.

2. Careful Groundwork is Essential

When one teaches students for whom English is an additional language, it is immediately obvious if one assumes knowledge that they do not have because classroom organization collapses. For example, if students do not know that the earth revolves around the sun and not vice versa, introducing the planetary system without very careful groundwork will lead to great confusion. Students who do not know the meaning of a word which is central to an idea which one is trying to convey will not be able to do the thinking expected, and their bewildered faces and non-responsive actions will clearly signal a breakdown in communication. Students who do not understand a teacher's classroom instructions such as "Open your books to page 56" will clearly indicate their lack of understanding by their non-compliance with the request.

After a number of painful experiences in which one's students display utter bewilderment, effective ESL/EFL teachers learn to proceed slowly step by step, building upon previous knowledge. When planning a lesson, they ask themselves, "Can my students be expected to know this? How can I most effectively explain it to them?" Careful groundwork may include pre-teaching of necessary vocabulary, eliciting from the students what they already know about the subject, or presenting the material in such a manner that language skills are not heavily relied upon. In this respect, "key visuals" (Mohan, 1986) can often provide the framework necessary for students to grasp a principle without needing language.

Teachers need to realize that lack of the target language does not indicate stupidity, that language learners are able to think clearly in their own language. They should be aware that ESL/EFL students flourish when given information not only through written and spoken discourse, but also by means of key visuals which de-emphasize language. Such visuals may be charts, diagrams, pictures, or any other means of presenting information visually. If students can see the organization of the material being taught, whether through a time line, graph, or an outline of the information, they are better able to understand the language used in discussing the material. An effective ESL/EFL teacher continually seeks effective methods of presentation which do not rely solely upon language.

Teachers also need to learn to check for comprehension frequently and review often so that students have many opportunities to encounter the same information and ideas. When it becomes clear that students are lacking some necessary piece of background knowledge, the teacher should not continue following a predetermined schedule but return to the area of confusion and work to clarify it.

All teachers when presenting classroom material should think carefully about what students probably know and don't know and devise necessary pre-teaching exercises. If in doubt, they should check with the students themselves to find out what they already know.

3. Building a Sense of Community is Important

As they learn the new language, EFL/ESL students sometimes feel both incompetent and stupid as they find themselves in a vulnerable, disenfranchised position. Because of this, effective EFL/ESL teachers, recognizing the importance of the affective domain, endeavour to establish a supportive classroom environment in order that students will learn effectively. Furthermore, because ESL classrooms often have a mix of students from a variety of cultures in them, successful teachers learn the importance of establishing an environment where students from different backgrounds cooperate together rather than repeat historic conflicts. For this reason, ESL/EFL teachers often use pair and group work and cooperative learning techniques in order to build bonds between students. Students may be given information-gap tasks which require them to interact with other students to gain information, or students may participate in game-like language-learning activities in groups; such activities are not done simply to learn English but also to develop a sense of community.

Conclusion

Effective teachers of ESL/EFL students become aware of certain classroom realities and develop their classroom practices in response to these. Recognizing that each classroom is unique, these teachers develop teaching materials and techniques for each particular teaching situation. Realizing that careful groundwork is essential, successful teachers consider how best to build upon previous knowledge and strive to find methods that go beyond language to communicate ideas. Furthermore, understanding the importance of developing a sense of community among students, they use various techniques to develop opportunities for real communication between students. In my opinion, these insights apply equally to any classroom and all teachers, including those at the college level, can benefit by taking them into consideration.

Notes

¹ESL is "English as a Second Language"; EFL is "English as a Foreign Language." ESL is the term frequently used for teaching students who have emigrated to an English speaking country and EFL the term used for teaching English to students living in a non-English speaking country.

²Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguish between instrumental and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation means learning a language for a specific reason such as seeking employment; integrative motivation is learning a language to become part of a particular community.

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