



***Teaching English as a Foreign Language:
Lessons from the Classroom***

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What makes a good teacher?

Teaching has been compared to emancipating (Jacques Rancière), lighting a fire (Ralph Waldo Emerson), the path to immortality (Dalai Lama XIV), and the drooling of idiots (Vera Nazarian).

With a total accumulated lifetime teaching experience of less than ten hours, I do not as yet feel qualified to express an opinion about the nature of the endeavor. What I can say thus far is that, for me, teaching English as a foreign language has been terrifying, exhilarating, challenging, rewarding, frustrating—and fun. Fun enough to want to continue down this path, at least for a while.

But, who do I think I am (pedagogically speaking)? What kind of teacher do I aspire to be? The very best teachers possess a wide range of skills, talents, and motivational tricks. They are performers, cheerleaders, ringmasters, psychologists, and much more. Their obvious love of teaching and “second sense” of how to reach even the most unmotivated students inspires the class to want to achieve.

Unfortunately, not every teacher can be Sidney Poitier in *To Sir with Love* or Jaime Escalante, on whom *Stand and Deliver* was based. However, there are some things every teacher can do:

- Believe in your students. If you are not absolutely sure, in your heart of hearts, that your students can master English or anything else they set their minds to, you won't convince them of it, either.
- Believe in the endeavor. Every teacher wants to run screaming from the classroom at some time. However, on a day-to-day basis, you have to believe that teaching English to non-native speakers is a worthwhile use of your time, no matter how limited the resources or adverse the circumstances.
- Care about your students. My experience many years ago with Big Brothers/Big Sisters showed me the effect a single caring adult can have on a person's life. When students know that their teacher truly cares about them, they will overlook or forgive a wide range of mistakes and missteps.

Self-assessment

On a personal level, I believe I have the ability to connect with learners in the ways noted above. My classroom observers seem to agree that I have a good rapport with students. On several occasions, students have approached me after class to ask where I am from or to make other conversation; and students I taught weeks ago still say hello to me in the halls. That indicates to me that they believe I like them and am interested in them. No matter how strong students' practical motivations for learning English might be, feeling that teachers care about them is a big part of why they feel good about coming to school on any given day.

Another strength I believe I offer is the ability to develop interesting, instructionally sound lesson plans and activities—given the time. One of my shortcomings is that I may be spending more time crafting lessons “from scratch” than is practical.

Another challenge that has been pointed out to me, and with which I concur, is that I am not yet able to instantly switch gears and revise an activity on the spot, or scrap it entirely if necessary. Also, I sometimes miss opportunities to “mix it up” in the classroom in order to keep things lively and engaging and to reduce teacher talk time. I do feel confident that the skills mentioned above will come, as I gain more classroom experience.

Classroom approach

In order to create a fun and motivational classroom environment for students (and teacher), I envision using a learner-centered communicative teaching approach, based on the idea that “language, first and foremost, is a system for communication” (*International Teachers Training Organization: A TEFL Certification Program*, 2014)¹ That means:

- understanding learners’ language needs and motivations outside the classroom, and tailoring content accordingly.
- using a wide variety of authentic materials that challenge students without being so far beyond their skill level as to demotivate them.
- employing role play, pair and group work, and other methods to help learners develop communicative competence—both fluency and accuracy.

Creating an engaging, communicative classroom requires finding creative ways to teach uncreative subject matter. Memorizing vocabulary lists and doing grammar drills are not inherently fun, but they are necessary, and when integrated into communicative activities, they become the classroom equivalent of sneaking vegetables into a child’s diet by disguising them as pizza. *International Teachers Training Organization: A TEFL Certification Program* (2014) suggests “drilling structural patterns using meaningful situations.”² For example, to practice using active and passive voice, students could reflect on and write about key events in their lives.

I personally feel that requiring students to study vocabulary and/or grammatical notions and functions **every day** is essential in a non-immersion environment. Daily “checks” – they needn’t be called “quizzes,” but they do need to happen daily, and students do need to prepare for them – can help students progress more rapidly toward their language goals.

Working with limited resources

As we have seen so many times during the International Teachers Training Organization course, creating a motivational classroom environment is not dependent on having abundant resources. The teacher’s dedication and imagination are the most important resources in making activities fun and meaningful for learners.

¹ *International Teachers Training Organization: A TEFL Certification Program*, 2014, p. 120

² *Ibid*, p. 251

Nevertheless, there are low-cost, easily available resources that teachers can use to make classroom activities lively and varied, and to make the classroom itself an inviting place to learn.

In terms of activities, online websites such as Busyteacher.org offer a wealth of resources that can and **must** be customized to the teacher's specific classroom needs. There are also numerous podcasts aimed at English learners, such as BBC World Service's "The English We Speak," that teachers can use as teaching resources. Of course, as with any third-party material, the teacher must first gauge the podcast's appropriateness for students' ages, levels, culture, and interests.

Additionally, "low-tech" resources as such as magazine images can brighten up the classroom and serve as the basis for many types of activities, language-related as well as cultural.

As noted in the International Teachers Training Organization course, student participation is a key requirement when creating the physical environment of the classroom. The English classroom is students' home for learning English. The more they feel *it belongs to them*, the more they will feel *they belong there*. When possible, teachers should involve students in creating classroom décor. Reserving one wall on which to record students' good behavior is another tactic that seems very much worth a try.

Professional growth

I never wanted to be a teacher. My parents were both teachers, and their lives seemed boring and repetitious to me. I couldn't picture myself spending evenings grading papers at the kitchen table, teaching the same material, year in, year out... And yet, here I am. At this point in my life, teaching English as a foreign language seems like the culmination of a lifetime of different personal and work experiences. In one way or another, it draws on my background in instructional design, one-on-one mentoring, writing, marketing, media production, and management, as well as my lifelong wanderlust. It just makes sense.

It is too early on this journey to know where it will take me, or to identify my professional development goals as a teacher of English as a foreign language. I know I want to be an excellent teacher. I know I want what I do to *matter*. Beyond that, the future is completely open... and I couldn't be happier about that.