

A Few Short Tips that Go a Long Way in the ESL Classroom

Omar Awara
Honam University TESOL Center

ABSTRACT

The teaching profession, unlike any other profession, requires constant upgrading and professional development. Many teachers become absorbed by the routine of teaching the same curriculum; semester after semester and year after year. Consequently, their attitudes change from being passionate and creative about teaching to becoming uninspired and stagnant. The purpose of this paper is to prevent us from falling into this category of becoming dull and passionless teachers.

I. Introduction

Being the Senior Head Teacher of a large English academy in Canada for several years has given me the opportunity of observing 10's of teachers, teaching different subjects to different levels of students. I have also conducted several student-teacher surveys assessing the different teachers' performance and measuring the students' satisfaction with their respective teachers. This experience has given me insight to the elements which make a class and teacher successful. By successful, I mean that the academic aims of the course are achieved and that the students have had an exceptional and enriching experience in the class. I have tried to culminate and categorize these elements into a simple list of attitudes that an aspiring good teacher should have. These attitudes, if exhibited by the teacher, will influence his/her actions in the classroom and in turn, lead to a successful class.

II. Attitudes of a Successful Teacher

Try to **broaden your range of choices**. Each lesson is a series of tasks and activities that are devised by the teacher to achieve certain aims. Between each task, the teacher has the choice of the task or activity which follows. Even during different activities, there is a wide range of actions a teacher can take. The richer the reserve of the choices the teacher has, the better and more innovative the teacher will be. Teachers can increase their choices by the following actions.

- Attending seminars like the one we are in right now.
- Attending professional development workshops.
- Using the internet as an abundant resource for fresh ideas and material.
- Observing colleagues and other teachers.

The only way to know if learning has occurred is for the students to produce the language on their own in an authentic manner. For our students to be able to do that, we must **enable them**, meaning:

- Do not be afraid to share your power with the students in the class.
- If you must follow a strict curriculum that is not flexible, give the students the

illusion that they are playing a part in the decision making process of the topics.

- Stay student centered.
- Learn to listen to your students full-heartedly.
- Elicit, error-correct, encourage, praise and support.

In our everyday lives, we always have a reason to use language. We use it to ask for information, give information, socialize etc... To motivate our students to use the language, we must **give them an authentic and relevant reason that stimulates them.**

- Bring the real life inside the classroom (use authentic material).
- Let the students see the relationship between the outside world and the language used in the classroom (contextualize).
- Use applications that can be found on the internet for example, applications for a gym membership, credit card or a points card etc...
- Use flyers, brochures, subway maps, museum guides etc...
- Use popular songs and clips from movies.

Any successful teacher spends time in **knowing their students beyond the classroom.** The more you know about your students, the better you will be able to cater and tailor the lesson for them.

- Know their likes and dislikes.
- Elicit feedback from them without asking them directly, “do you enjoy my class?”
- Ask students what they would change in the curriculum or about the course.
- Choose topics that are relevant to students’ lives.
- Know your students but do **not** take it personally.

I have noticed that teachers often give the students more information than they actually need to know. It is often a good idea to **keep your planning covert** and uncover pieces of the mystery at the appropriate time.

- Only tell the students what they need to know to complete each task.
- Keep your thoughts and plans to yourself (don’t think out loud).
- When giving instructions tell the students exactly what you want them to do, use the imperative not the future tense. (“Get into groups” not “You will get into groups and then....”)
- Do not tell the ending of the movie while watching it (keep the element of surprise).
- Timing is key, time when your students should get each dose of information. Keep them thirsty. This keeps the students on their toes and paying attention.

I have noticed that many new teachers **try to become “teachers”**. I mean that they have a certain image of how a teacher should be and what a teacher should do.

- Don’t be a teacher, let the teacher become you.
- Don’t let your images of what a teacher should be or do dictate what you do in the classroom.
- Be authentic and sincere, the students will see it and love it.

To elaborate on my previous point, I would like to add some more tips that you may find useful. I have a lot of gratitude and appreciation to the teachers I have had throughout my life, however, that does not mean that we cannot have generations of better and better teachers.

We cannot improve our teaching unless we get rid of some of our old, tedious and mind-numbing tasks that our language teachers made us do in the past and am afraid are still practiced today. These are some examples of what I mean:

- Making students take turns reading out loud.
- Teachers talking more than their students.
- Obsession with testing rather than developing. Language is a skill; it should be developed not tested.
- Telling the students what they can tell you.
- Asking students, “Do you understand?”
- Preventing errors, preventing creativity, preventing answers that the teacher didn’t have in mind.
- Not giving feedback or error-correcting.
- Scolding and embarrassing students.
- Taking things personally.

III. Conclusion

Being a student in a language classroom is similar to going to therapy for counselling or to the doctor for treatment. One cannot give the proper counselling, advice or treatment without knowledge and understanding of their client. In our case, this is the student. Though having a student-centered classroom seems simple enough in theory, many teachers find it challenging on the ground in the classroom. This paper is offering a few suggestions that can help you have a student centered classroom and above all a memorable class that will leave your students with an inspiring and enriching experience.

About the Presenter

Omar Awara, Bachelor of Arts with Honors, York University, Toronto, Canada. He was an ESL and Special Course instructor at King George International College for one year before becoming the Senior Head Teacher of the ESL campus of King George International College Toronto, Canada. He is currently the TESOL, TESOL for Kids and PMM Instructor at Gwangju TESOL Center, Honam University, South Korea. *Email: oawara@hotmail.com*