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Statement about teaching

The first English class I ever taught was a group of low-intermediate students in the ALP’s intensive program. Fresh from graduate school in linguistics, I had no language teaching experience nor any background in pedagogy or second language acquisition. My level leader (who taught half of the class’ 16 hours per week) met with me the Friday before my first class and suggested that I teach the modal verbs of ability, *can* and *can’t*. There was no textbook, but I was not concerned, since I knew what modal verbs were. I first decided that if teaching one modal was good, teaching all the modals would be even better. I then set about preparing an elegant, three dimensional model of the semantic fields of English modals, with each modal arrayed along one of the intersecting axes. In class, I explained my analysis, gradually reproducing the three-dimensional model on the blackboard. At the end of class, I asked if there were any questions. No one said anything, and I felt gratified that everyone had understood.

My level leader observed that class, and we met afterwards. Looking back on our meeting, I still marvel at her kindness and tact. She did not say, as she could have, that not one student had understood my analysis and that not one student had spoken a word. Rather, she suggested that teaching only *can* and *can’t* would have allowed the students to actually use English and then showed me the ALP’s picture files, which included pictures of people engaged in a variety of activities. I saw immediately how students could use those pictures to practice *can* and *can’t*; it also made sense to me that in a language class, the students should use the language.

That class and that meeting began a long and continuing learning journey for me. My teachers have been my students, my colleagues, and faceless researchers who study how second languages are learned. Sometimes they teach me different facets of the same lesson.

One teaching issue that I became immediately aware of is the need for language students to be actively engaged in classroom activities. At the ALP, most teachers plan several classes around a central topic which is developed through materials from a variety of media (readings, listenings, videos). The vocabulary and language structures come from those materials, and all language skills are practiced in the context of the topic. Because the topic continues over several classes, there is a recycling and reinforcement of the targeted vocabulary and language features, which promotes learning and retention. Student interactions also lead to involvement with English. The students in an ALP class typically come from several countries, and the exchange of different cultural perspectives on an issue is often as interesting to students as the issue itself. This interest leads to more participation, which leads to more practice, which leads to greater learning. The series of classes culminates in a writing assignment on the topic; after spending several classes exploring the topic through a variety of materials and discussions and after working with vocabulary and language features relevant to the topic, students have something to say and the tools to say it.

A second issue that was not apparent to me after that first class was the role of error correction in developing accuracy (no errors, of course, could have occurred in my first class

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because no students spoke). High levels of accuracy, as well as high levels of fluency, are crucial goals for most ALP students, who plan either to attend a U.S. university or to use English in a professional capacity. Research suggests that fluency will not develop without substantial use of the language for real communication; on the other hand, spontaneous speech, the most natural form of real communication, is likely to be the least accurate. In the classroom, the two goals may seem to be at odds: when the teacher directs students’ attention to their errors, there will be some interruption of activities that promote fluency. I have been lucky to observe a range of techniques that my colleagues at the ALP use for error correction and have learned much from them. Research on second language acquisition also provides insights. Some features of language are learned in stages that apparently cannot be skipped. My students, for example, will first learn to pronounce the English TH sounds when they occur at the beginning of a word (think or then), next in the middle of a word (author, other), and finally at the end of a word (bath, breathe). With beginning students, I draw attention to mispronunciations of TH at the beginnings of words (think) and am less concerned with mispronunciations in other positions. With more advanced students, the focus shifts. Not all features of language, however, proceed in stages, “fixing themselves” as learning progresses. The omission of the 3rd singular present –s ending (he play), for example, is an extremely common error among ESL students at all levels and may only improve through (relentless) on-the-spot error correction. More generally, research also suggests that students should be familiar with the teacher’s approach to error correction and that error correction should be limited to structures that can be corrected quickly and whose rules are well-understood by the student.

These are two facets of teaching that I have learned since that first class. But there is much more. I’ve learned about the world from students who come from all of its corners and share their views over the course of a semester. They frequently reveal to me stereotypes I was not aware I had and possibilities I had never considered. I also learn as I research materials for new lessons: about global population trends; about parallels and contrasts between Gilded Age capitalists and those of today; about why the mental rocket ship of humans took off while that of the other great apes remains on the launching pad. And finally, each day reveals more to me about the magnificence and mysteries of human language, the subject that brought me into graduate school. There is no complete grammar of any living language. My students remind me of this when they ferret out some usage in English I had never thought about and ask, “Why does English do X in this context but Y in another?” I sometimes have to say, “I don’t know, I’ll look it up.” I search every available reference, including an old 7-volume English grammar of remarkable detail; I ask my colleagues. And it is no longer a surprise when I cannot find a clear answer, only the shared intuitions of native speakers that “this is the way it is in English.” These quests and discoveries, the product of the current that flows between teaching and learning, motivate and invigorate me. They make teaching an adventure, with the risks and rewards of any good adventure.

I still have days when my lessons fall flat, when I wonder whether my efforts have an impact on student accuracy. My teaching beliefs and practices continue to change as I continue to learn from students, colleagues and other language professionals. Although I know that I am a better teacher than I was on the day when I taught the entire modal system to an uncomprehending first class, observed by an astonished but kind level leader, I know that the day will never come when I say I have nothing left to learn, no improvements left to make.

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