

**Creative and Innovative Ways to Teach English:
YOU MAKE THE DIFFERENCE**

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian education scene is under going seismic change as we move from years of tried and tested rote learning strategies and venture towards advocating creative thinking skills. In keeping with the demands of globalization, there is deliberate effort to depart from an examination oriented system, often deemed the malaise of the Asian society, to one of creative learning. In order to encourage students to concentrate and participate in the class, teachers need to be creative and innovative. A wide variety of materials and methods of teaching should be explored as students come in different packages with different learning styles and capabilities. But perennial problems plague both the novice and the experienced teacher. The innovative teacher can extract information from texts, audio and visual sources of information for teaching purposes. This paper seeks to inform, to motivate and to explore the many possibilities of making out-of-the-box teaching a reality. Based on classroom and journalistic research across Malaysian schools and universities, this paper deals with the challenges that teachers face and provides practical classroom ideas on how to wear Edward De Bono's thinking hats in the very mundane classroom.

This paper will focus on the following issues:

1. How to generate interest among students
2. How to make use of everyday objects to bring fun into the classroom
3. Task-based teaching/ Activity centred teaching
4. Problems that teachers and students face (ESL context)
5. Thematic teaching methods - across the 4 skills

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian education scene is under going seismic change as we move from years of tried and tested rote learning strategies and venture towards advocating creative thinking skills. In keeping with the demands of globalization, there is deliberate effort to depart from an examination oriented system, often deemed the malaise of the Asian society, to one of creative learning.

In order to encourage students to concentrate and participate in the class, teachers need to be creative and innovative. A wide variety of materials and methods of teaching should be explored as students come in different packages with different learning styles and capabilities. But perennial problems plague both the novice and the experienced teacher. The innovative teacher can extract information from texts, audio and visual sources of information for teaching purposes.

Key points

In schools and institutes of learning, there are set curriculum guidelines to follow in the teaching of English as a second language. Usually, emphasis is placed on the teaching of the four skills i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking. English language teaching is made difficult by the increasing large classes that we face and the hot afternoons where most of these classes are carried out.

1. How can I generate interest among students?

What is interest? According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, interest is a sense of curiosity or concern about something. Ask any student to define interest and he will normally associate it with the things that he likes to do; never with learning English. Given that most students will only actually use the English language within the four walls of the classroom, it is of utmost significance that teachers imbue that sense of interest for learning English within the hearts their charges. The power of stimulating such a sense lies predominantly in the hands of the teacher.

Many students are afraid to communicate in English for fear of being laughed at by their peers. We teach English because we want to pass on the joy of knowing, understanding and using the language well. The English language is certainly more than prescribed texts and objective questions. Therefore, a student getting a distinction for English in a public exam does not mean that he has caught the passion for learning English.

How then can we as teachers inculcate an interest for learning English?

Just three words: *creativity, understanding and encouragement.*

2. How can I make use of everyday objects to bring fun into the classroom?

Surrounding us is a wealth of information that can be used and reused in the everyday English language classroom. Trying to make our classes interesting can be one uphill battle. As language teachers we are always foraging for ideas to keep the class 'afloat' in the sea of indifference, passivity and nonchalance. How can we challenge our students to speak and to participate? How can we motivate students who are not able to visualize the importance of the English language in the everyday world and subsequently do not see the need to master it well?

Every teacher and student is creative if he is given the opportunity, time and support to express that creativity. Activities for language teaching can be based on everyday materials. We should not be afraid to try out unconventional tools based on personal experience in the classroom. Both students and lecturers have creative potential. Lecturers can incorporate their creative skills into the teaching of oral skills. Students when allowed to explore their creative skills find speaking in the English language interesting, relevant and productive. Some people may have creative potential, but it remains latent unless they manifest it in some observable form, by using the

creative resources available to them. Creative and imaginative activities help alleviate problems that hinder language learning. (Di Pietro, 1987)

3. Task-based teaching/ Activity-centred teaching

Students need opportunities to be active participants in tasks that require them to negotiate meaning and practice language in communication with their teacher, their peers, and others.

Using projects and everyday materials to teach English is like an adventure. It basically consists of hands-on learning and debriefing. Hands-on learning is learner-based., process-oriented and relational. It involves shared experiences in a particular situation. Through active discussion, students discover language principles at work in the situation. Through debriefing, students are able to sort and order the information gathered and relate it to the lesson. The teacher guides the students but it is the students who actually discover for themselves what is being taught.

a. Feedback from students

According to my students, the presence of the everyday materials itself as a learning tool is a novelty. In fact, not using the prescribed textbook for an English lesson occasionally is a refreshing change. Most task-based activities are done in groups or pairs. This further eliminates anxiety and encourages teamwork. If the outcome is good, the team feels proud. If mistakes are made, no one individual is singled out. This provides a solution to problems caused by the Asian stigma of 'losing face.'

Other than enjoyment, students are more motivated to speak and to come out of their 'shells'. They gain more confidence in speaking the target language and more often than not they learn more new words as their team members will help them when they find difficulty in expressing themselves. What is noteworthy is that they are more willing to speak and they are not afraid to stammer or stumble in the process of putting their thoughts across.

Working in groups gives the students greater opportunities in the production of the target language. When students prepare themselves to present their project before the other students in the class, they are able to produce more spoken target language when compared to a traditional teacher talk lesson. To quote Davies (1990), discussion sessions would certainly increase the amount of individual student talking time. According to Genesee (1987)

“.....an activity-based approach provides opportunities for students to experience a much wider range of speech events and to use a much wider range of speech acts than is possible in conventional medium-oriented classes in which the language is taught as a subject, or even in message-oriented classes in which regular content is taught through the second language.”

b. Feedback from lecturers and teachers

In a number of workshops for lecturers and teachers that I have facilitated, participants eagerly searched everyday resources for ideas and brainstormed possible teaching areas.

In the process of generating teaching material for English language teaching, the participants learnt much from each other. They learnt how valuable such resources could be used in the teaching of all the four skills. In short, the participants discovered that there was a limitless source of creativity in each of them.

4. Overcoming problems that students and teachers face (ESL context)

Problems arise when students are not motivated to learn English. Both students and teachers get discouraged when they do not know where they are heading, in terms of language taught and language learnt.

a) Overcoming students' problems: Encouragement and Language Teaching

Understanding our students' setbacks and difficulties will go a long way towards building the teacher-student rapport that is essential for the inculcation of a good attitude towards learning the language.

Behavioural theorists such as Hull, Guthrie, Thorndike and Skinner focus on the role of reinforcement in motivating the individual to behave in certain ways. Feedback (positive, negative or neutral) and reinforcement (positive or negative) motivate both students and teachers to correct mistakes and to develop new plans for language learning.

The power of encouragement as proposed by the Behaviourist theorists cannot be understated if we want our students to catch the passion of learning the English language. The ultimate objective of learning a language is that the learner should be able to speak in the language taught. Every student perceives, conceptualizes, acquires information, forms ideas, processes and memorises and forms value judgments differently. Motivational factors affect the way they react to the classroom environment and to the acquisition of basic educational skills. (Collinson,2000)

Arguing that "attentiveness and involvement" are necessary for successful communication, Gass and Seliger (1991) maintain, "It is precisely active involvement that is the facilitator of communication in that it charges the input and allows it to penetrate deeply" (p.219) In view of this, it is necessary to capture the learners' interest and attention before any results can be achieved. Anxiety, on the other hand affects self esteem and defensiveness. (Clark & Fiske, 1982) Anxiety can be reduced when the situation is non-threatening and there is minimal stress, positive feedback and increased opportunities to perform a task.

b) Overcoming teachers' problems: Applying Edward de Bono's six thinking hats

Edward de Bono identified six thinking strategies to overcome problems in general. He theorized that of these approaches, most people used only one or two of the approaches and their thinking habits and perspectives of their surroundings are influenced by their limited approaches.

theorized that of these approaches, most people used only one or two of the approaches and that people developed thinking habits which in turn limited people to those approaches. de Bono

believed that if the various approaches could be identified and a system of their use developed which could be taught, that people could be more productive in meetings and in collaborating within groups and teams by deliberately using the approaches.

As a result of his investigations, de Bono was able to describe a process of deliberately adopting a particular approach to a problem as an implementation of Parallel Thinking™ as well as an aid to lateral thinking. Six different approaches are described, and each is symbolised by the act of putting on a coloured hats, either actually or imaginatively. This he suggests can be done either by individuals working alone or in groups.

The Red Hat represents Emotional thinking. The Yellow Hat represents Positive thinking. The Black Hat represents Critical thinking. The White Hat is purely the facts. The Green Hat is Creative thinking. The Blue Hat represents the Big Picture, sort of looking at it from all the viewpoints.

5. Thematic teaching methods - across the 4 skills.

The use of a thematic approach organizes subject matter around a unifying theme allows students to make important connections in their learning and understand more of the four skills. By planning thematic units, the teacher is able to incorporate a variety of language concepts into an interesting topic area which gives students a reason to use the language. Themes and lessons should integrate language, content, and culture into activities that allow students to practise the language and that prepare them to use it in a variety of contexts. Ultimately, students need to be able to interpret the language, express themselves in the language, and negotiate meaning in the language (Savignon, 1997). Visuals and manipulatives, gestures, sounds, and actions all help students understand the new vocabulary and structures.

CONCLUSION

Creativity, understanding and encouragement will go a long way towards establishing rapport with our students and towards learning the English language. Using task-based learning to teach English does not fall into the well-tried comfort zone of traditional teaching. The average teacher feels comfortable with the prescribed textbook. The introduction of task-based learning into the classroom may bring about the fear that ‘there is no teaching going on’. This unfortunately denies students the opportunity to immerse themselves in the English language.

It is necessary that teachers try using other materials as a teaching resource. The language of communication is real-life or authentic and un textbook-like in design. By incorporating hands-on projects into their everyday language classroom, teachers are preparing students to enter the real world. Teachers can create a non-threatening environment to encourage both shy and talkative students to participate. In short, teachers can help students catch the passion for learning English.

Wearing de Bono's six thinking hats can also change the teacher's perspective of facing problems: real or imagined. Teaching English is an uphill battle and the teacher who tries is the one who makes the difference.

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