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## **A Strategy to Improve Proficiency in English- The Language Camp**

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### **Introduction**

If we allowed just one inadequate English teacher to teach in schools, there is a possibility that she would be cumulatively responsible for about 10,000 poor speakers of English by the end of her career. The figure is more grim if some of her low proficiency students slip in to become English teachers themselves. What about the influence of her students on their friends and their own children?

A growing phenomenon today is students who sign up for TESL courses not adequately proficient in English. They can communicate, but grammatical mistakes and inappropriate vocabulary and constructions are found in their spoken English. A question often asked of the TESL lecturer who intends to pass a weak student is, "Would you want your child to be taught by this teacher?"

We cannot expect perfection but we should prepare our teachers-to-be to inflict as little "damage" as possible. With the present situation, teacher trainers have to deal with proficiency as well as methodology.

Our task in Fakulti Pendidikan was to train the B.Sc.Ed undergraduates in TESL methodology. We found that their spoken proficiency was weak and it would be futile going into methodology without first solving the proficiency problem. The language camp was our strategy.

We found that proficiency improved minimally but the enthusiasm for learning English and the confidence to use the language increased tremendously. It broke down a lot of barriers against learning the language. It was a revelation to the students that there were so many things that they could do with the language -only they had never tried them.

We want to share the experience with those who are working at improving the proficiency of their students. We are sure many of the activities can be used during class or co-curricular time.

## Background

Twenty-seven students in their third year (B.Sc.Ed degree course) are being trained in TESL. They either pursue Science or Maths subjects as one major and TESL as the second major. The time allocation for TESL, however, is only 2 lecture hours per week.

The general findings of the three lecturers involved in the B.Sc.Ed TESL programme was that the proficiency level of the students was very low - especially in oral skills. Almost all had difficulty in expressing themselves in classroom teaching situations. Language used in the microteaching sessions was unsatisfactory for the following reasons:

- sentences used often contained grammatical mistakes
- inappropriate/inaccurate language was often used
- there was a lot of hesitation - long pauses while the student thought of the sentence or word to use
- there was general lack of confidence in using spoken English.

One of the most common mistakes was with concord and tenses. The simple past gave them trouble and often when the passive was used, the past instead of the past participle was used with the auxiliary verb.

The vocabulary of the students was actually quite extensive but the words were used inaccurately in context although the meaning was absolutely clear.

Students often stood in agony in front of the class while searching for the right words or sentence to use. They knew what they wanted to say (probably in B.M.) but the words just wouldn't come out and the more they panicked, the worse the situation got. One student was so completely overwhelmed that she shook her head, gave up and went straight back to her seat. Fear of the lecturer wasn't the cause for her loss of words.

The situation was serious because these students were going to be teachers of English. A language camp was therefore proposed, with the following objectives:

1. to raise (not perfect) the proficiency level of the students
2. to increase the confidence of the students in speaking and functioning as a teacher of English
3. to equip and motivate the students to continue to improve their own proficiency after the camp.

We realised that self-improvement was the only answer to the proficiency problem. Hence, objective 3 (self-improvement) was important. It was realised, however, that all three objectives were inter-related and each would contribute to the development of the others.

The students were mainly Malay girls (17 out of 28). The composition of the students were:

Sex/ Race	Malays	Chinese	Ind/Oths	Total
Male	0	6	1	7
Female	17	2	2	21
TOTAL	17	8	3	28

Three lecturers were involved in the programme. Two lecturers had a tutorial group of 9 students and one had 10 students. From an early assessment, only 3 students were proficient and confident enough to teach English. The majority needed remedial work.

## **The Problem**

### *Vocabulary and Sentence-construction*

From the practical teaching sessions,. it was found that the students had difficulty expressing themselves in English. They found it difficult to fluently put concepts across and there were numerous inappropriate words used and grammatically incorrect sentences.

There was hesitation in their speech and a tendency to be flustered while struggling for words to express themselves.

### *Confidence*

There was general lack of confidence in using English. This gave rise to a few related problems. The students felt embarrassed when using the language in front of their peers and the lecturer. When interviewed, a few stated that they felt judged by the lecturer and this gave rise to more tension and the vicious circle started.

Because of their lack of confidence, their voices were weak and they tended to utter sentences rapidly, hoping "mistakes" would not be spotted.

Language used was more formal than natural. Many of the students had memorised prepared sentences - which didn't come off well when spoken.

Many explanations were cut short and the students relied more on gestures and implied meanings. Such a strategy would not be beneficial in a real classroom where the pupils do not share the same world-view as the teacher.

Lack of confidence hindered the movements and the posture of the students. They tended to shuffle, pace, look down, make weak gestures, intersperse their sentences with "okays", and generally presented weak personalities. Teaching was ineffective.

## **Strategies**

To overcome as many of the problems as possible, the following strategies were adopted (many of the activities served dual purposes):

1. To improve proficiency: Word Wall, Reading Board, Graffiti Board/Book, Daily Quotations, Theme Files, Knowledge Pot, Newsletter, Story-writing.
2. To improve confidence and oral English: Daily Quotations, Topic Masters, I-Like-You slips, Video Documentary, Feedback Sessions, Story-telling, Public Speaking, Distorting Fairy Tales (Drama Activities), USA Day, Telematches, Newspaper Fashion Show, Request Corner.

Most of the activities were humanistic in nature. The main reference book was Moskowitz (1978).

## **The Language Camp and Activities**

A programme for the language camp was drawn up. Each day, which started at 8.00 a.m. and ended at 9.30 p.m., was divided into activity periods. This served as a time-table for the day.

The students knew that it was flexible and they had a right to change it anytime - shortening/lengthening or changing some activities. Negotiation rather than majority rule was the order of the day.

Every morning, the students read the bulletin board first to find out whether there were any changes in programme or special instructions. This was a reading activity which involved them directly.

Each day started with the Quotation for the Day. A quotation was put up by the lecturer and explained. The students were given a few minutes to react or not react - it was up to them.

Linked to that activity was the Topic Master. All of us had tea at 10.30 - at the canteen where special tables were set for us. Each table would have a topic master for the day. From a list of quotations given earlier, each topic master would then start a conversation revolving around that quotation - either explaining it and saying how it related to her life or why she liked it etc. It was the duty of the topic master to keep a conversation going during tea.

After the tea break and lunch break when the students were browsing through reading materials or finishing projects, a Request Corner was set up. It was just a tape recorder played over the public address system. Requests were sent in by other students and everyone had a chance at being a disc-jockey. There was no correction of language by the lecturers at that time since it was more for fun and confidence building. To make announcements over the PA system meant mistakes would be amplified too. Knowing this, it took great courage to speak into the microphone. With practice the students became "natural" and this helped build confidence.

At the end of every daily session, games were organised by the students. Students and lecturers participated. All instructions were in English. The objectives were to make sure that the studious ones had exercise, instill a sense of togetherness and cooperation, and develop a closer relationship between students and lecturers.

The students came up with telematches, treasure hunts, party games and one session of tortuous physical exercises which left everybody with sore muscles.

The end of the day or night was concluded with a Feedback Session. Here students aired their views about the activities going on or to come, and suggested changes. If there were any complaints, they were dealt with at that time. Suggestions on how to improve the camp were invited. Everyone was encouraged to be frank and constructive, thinking of the common good rather than criticizing for the sake of criticizing.

The feedback sessions were very successful in the sense that students were speaking English to air their views which were relevant and important to them. No role playing or simulation was necessary. This was the real thing. What was encouraging was the willingness of the students to speak up. One incident is worth reporting.

One girl who was known to be very silent in normal classes was referred to in one of the sessions. The lecturer advised the students not to be reticent and ended by looking at a usually quiet girl and said, ".hmm Siti?" (not her real name). Everyone, including Siti, took it as a joke. After the session, she came up to the lecturer and, in English, requested not to be branded as a shy student as she thought it would hinder her in trying to come out of her shell. It was unthinkable for her to speak to a lecturer in that way before that. There was confidence in seeking that request and expressing herself in English!

The outcome of the camp was positive. The activities kept the students occupied throughout the duration of the camp. Some of these were on-going activities, i.e. the instructions were given at the beginning of the camp and the deadline was the last day of the camp.

To give the reader some idea of the activities carried out, the following are brief descriptions plus comments of the main activities.

### **The Graffiti Board**

Mahjong paper was taped onto the wall. Students could write anything they liked on it related to the topic of the day. Every day had a different topic - e.g. Happiness is... A friend is.... etc. The ground rules were: students were not to write anything which could offend others and the language mistakes could be corrected by anyone.

The part about lecturers correcting language mistakes was a moot point. At the expense of perhaps stifling creativity, we chanced that since the entries were anonymous, students wouldn't be embarrassed if their mistakes were corrected. At least we were sure that the rest of the class would be reading correct English.

The Board was a popular one with many interesting remarks -very topical and localised. The students were spurred on to exercise their wit and humour after reading the first few entries. Some examples: "A good teacher is someone who knows how to frighten his students before they frighten him." "To be educated is to be one step better than you are now." " A friend is someone who pushes you when you're stuck."

For their own consumption, each was asked to keep a Graffiti Book in which friends could write what they wanted - there were no ground rules as it was a personal hook. In the end, however, the students exhibited their books.

### **The Word Wall**

The Word Wall used a part of the wall at one corner of the room. A picture of a brick wall with missing bricks was put up. Each day a new word with definitions and examples of use was written on a "brick" and added to the wall to build it up. All could "see" their vocabulary expanding as the wall became bigger and higher. Everyone was to try to use the word as often as possible in his conversation for that day.

For the Camp, we chose new "in" words from America because these were available from magazines and newspaper articles. We had to choose between words which might have looked pedantic - too much like "learning" - or new words which other young adults in the in-crowd were using.

The effect was more than we expected. The students started using the words with glee and it fostered a closeness because when they used it in conversation outside, their friends didn't know what was going on. It made our students feel special.

Later, a piece of paper was put up beside the Word-wall for requests for definitions of other words. This enabled the students to ask for what they needed.

### **Reading Board**

This was a soft board set up in a corner of the room. Short excerpts from various sources were pinned up. Contributions were from lecturers and students - anything they found interesting or challenging (puzzles and riddles) to be shared with others.

This didn't prove to be popular as there was the Knowledge Pot which had a similar aim. Most items pinned up were puzzles, riddles and problems (set by lecturers) which asked for reactions from the reader.

The Reading Board could have been further developed but there were so many more interesting activities happening simultaneously that this was under-utilised.

### **Theme Files**

To create Theme Files, students decided on a theme (in groups of 3's) and they collected all they could on that theme - pictures, snippets, jokes, articles.

These were not popular. Fifty-seven percent of the students disagreed that it helped them improve their English (4% agreed and 39% had no comments). Nevertheless, the files were well decorated and painstakingly put together. One of the praiseworthy qualities of the camp was the commitment shown by the students.

### **Knowledge Pot**

When students wanted to share anything with others, it was put into the knowledge pot (a decorated glazed flower pot). Jokes copied or cut out, short snippets of news and personal comments on life or the class were put in.

"Used" materials were filed separately so that every day, when one dipped into the knowledge pot, one would get new reading material.

## **Newsletter**

An editorial board was set up to report on the activities that the group participated in. This was to help them in their writing, editing (correction of errors/style) and reading skills. However, because of time constraints and the amount of writing being done in the other activities, they were allowed to abandon this project.

## **Story-writing**

Many small pictures were cut out and put in a hat. Students then had to pick out 3 pictures each, at random. They then had to write a story to link those pictures together. The students were free to develop the stories in any way they chose.

The stories which came out were so imaginative that we approached the University publisher for advice on how to get a few of them published. The students read out their stories to the rest of the class and the response was absolutely positive - 96% said they gained from this activity.

The students were asked to choose a few stories for an oral presentation during Presentation Day when the public would be invited. The authors were to read their work out aloud.

## **I-Like-You Slips**

To keep the atmosphere and attitude positive throughout the camp, many activities were planned as much for language/confidence improvement as for fostering positiveness and togetherness.

Each student and lecturer was to put an envelope with his/her name on it pinned to the wall. Each had to write a TRUE positive statement about each member of the class (lecturers included). No time limit was given. The slips were then put in the envelopes e.g. I like your new hairstyle.

This activity was very successful. The students made individualised decorated envelopes in all sorts of shapes. You should have seen their faces when they went to check their slips from time to time - the look of expectancy and the smiles of pleasure when they actually read the slips. It really built up their self-concept and we believe it helped learning. They were reading very agreeable things about themselves in English.

## **Video Documentaries**

Students were asked to pick a topic-traffic jams, university life etc., film the scenes or interviews and record the commentary. This they did in groups (there was only one video camera) but there was insufficient equipment for editing and dubbing. It was abandoned although it generated tremendous interest. It would have taken a long time and the returns wouldn't have been worth it.

## Conclusion

When all the activities were taken as a whole, we were pleasantly surprised to find improvements in the students surpassing our expectations. They had been reluctant to attend the camp in the beginning because the camp was to be held during their vacation and this meant they would have to miss their long-awaited trip home. On top of that they would have to "learn" English and incur extra expenses in lodging, transport and food.

It is hard to pinpoint which activities inspired them to be committed students. A questionnaire was issued to all (but only 23 returned them) to find out the effects of the camp. Some relevant findings are presented below.

To the question, "Was there a turning point when you became aware that your confidence was increasing?", 13 answered "yes" and most said it was during activities in front of the whole class - public speaking or drama.

All (100%) agreed that their attitude towards English was now positive but only 18(78%) thought they were capable of improving their English further on their own.

Students' self-rating was employed to provide a rough gauge of the programme. The gains, in their opinions, were generally very positive. Asked to grade themselves before the programme on a scale of 10, 91% rated themselves 5 and below; but 65% rated themselves 7 and above after the camp.

Sixty-one percent (61 %) felt their grammar had improved more than a little while 44% felt their vocabulary had improved more than a little. Though 100% felt their English had improved, only 17% felt it had improved more than 50%.

As for the methodology, the students were about equally divided on whether the lecturers should guide them more. Obviously, half would have preferred to work on their own after being given a project and the other half still needed the security of having the lecturers at their side.

They were also about equally divided (43% agreed and 57% disagreed) as to whether the lecturers should join in their games. The lecturers felt they were being "sporting" to join in and that this would be appreciated by the students, but it appears to have been only in the minds of the lecturers.

Of all the activities, 3 were highlighted for comments by the students: speaking activities (public speaking, storytelling etc), drama and writing.

Fifty-seven percent (57%) said speaking was the most important skill, followed by writing and drama.

On the whole, in the minds of the students, they had improved. From observations by the lecturers the students have generally improved, though sad to say one lecturer's remark holds true: They are still making grammatical mistakes but they are making them confidently now.

The important point is that the students were motivated to master English on their own. Their mental set was very positive and we believe we have made the motivation intrinsic rather than extrinsic. This was evident through feedback from students who stated so on a Comments Board which they created on their own. Almost all focused on the enjoyment they had had and the confidence they had gained. A representative comment is, "Through the camp I have become more comfortable with the language and am not afraid of using it in everyday speech. Besides, it also helps to improve the



relationships among ourselves." Our favourite is, "I really love this camp and I hope it will not end;..."

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