

Tips for the Teacher of English as A Second Language

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Language teaching has changed considerably in recent years as a result of research in linguistic studies. The audio-lingual approach has replaced the traditional method of learning a language by studying printed words and the rules governing their arrangement. Language is now considered as a set of speech habits and the rules of grammar as a description of these habits. Hence, language is taught today chiefly as a tool of verbal communication. This does not mean that reading and writing are neglected in favour of speaking and understanding. On the contrary, they are essential communication skills and receive due emphasis in modern language teaching. However, the teacher's main task is to present and drill oral patterns as it is recognized that speech patterns are the basis of language. Once the patterns have been mastered orally the pupils should have no difficulty in symbolizing the orally-learned material in written form, and in understanding the written form in the act of reading.

Let us now see how we can cultivate in our pupils the speech habits of the English language. Like any other habits, language habits are acquired slowly and through constant repetition. Great patience and considerable skill are necessary for teaching a second language. It is not true that anyone who can speak English can teach it. Language teaching is both a science and an art; its methods must be based on a correct theoretical foundation and may be perfected only through a great deal of practice.

To begin with, our pupils must become accustomed to the unfamiliar sounds of the new language. They must also develop an awareness of English as a living medium of communication, rather than as a school subject which they have to learn for the examination. It is therefore advisable not to speak to the pupils in their own language or to translate from English into their language. Our aim is to enable our pupils to understand and to speak English automatically without having to stop and think or to perform laborious mental translation before responding.

It is important that the pupils do most of the talking because it is they who need the practice and not the teacher. As a guide, we may say that the teacher should

not do more than 25 per cent of the talking in class, and that the pupils should be allowed to do 75 per cent of the talking. The teacher presents the pattern; then, by means of carefully planned drills, gives the class practice in the new material. Often the class responds in chorus. Individual responses are also elicited. With the help of gestures the teacher ensures that the proper tempo is maintained, that there is a proper balance between chorus drill and individual drill and that mistakes do not go uncorrected. Skilful pupil performance depends on careful teacher preparation and so it is important that the teacher spends enough time on lesson planning. A good teacher should never stop in the middle of a lesson to think what to do next.

When a pupil makes a mistake, either in pronunciation or in structure, we need not explain to him why he is wrong. Explanations are intellectualizations about language, but our aim is to enable our pupils to use English, not to intellectualize about it. We should produce the correct form immediately and get the pupil to repeat it several times. Good English language habits are developed by listening to and imitating correct English speech.

While it is desirable that errors do not go uncorrected, too much correction of a pupil's mistakes may discourage him. We should try to strike a happy balance, correcting his more serious mistakes and letting the lesser errors pass if we feel that reference to them might dishearten our pupil.

To keep the number of errors to a minimum, we should avoid using material that is too difficult or that has not been practised. Incorrect responses, if repeated, will lead to the formation of incorrect language habits. We can help our pupils avoid making mistakes by introducing new material little by little and by revising previously taught material frequently.

Learning a language is like building a house of bricks: one brick must be laid at a time, starting with the foundation stones and building upon them. Care must be taken that the foundation is strong for the whole construction is likely to be weak if one or more of these basic bricks are loose.

A new structure should be presented orally using either a visual or a linguistic situation. Let the pupils hear the structure a number of times, then have them repeat it many more times. Write it on the chalkboard for them, and get them to write it. Make sure that they understand and are able to use the new structure correctly before proceeding to the next structure.

Language proficiency is a skill and like any skill may be developed only through a great deal of practice. We learn to dance by dancing, and to play a musical instrument by practising. We learn to speak a foreign language by repeating its basic patterns and vocabulary items over and over again until their instruction becomes automatic.

Repetition need not be boring if approached with interest and enthusiasm. These attitudes are highly contagious. Maintain a lively pace and vary the types of drills. Strive to obtain a good imitation not only of the words that constitute the structural pattern but of its pronunciation and intonation as well. Bear in mind that you are seeking to develop in your pupils automatic control of the patterns of English, a result which may be achieved only through constant practice.

It is important that we train our pupils to listen attentively to our model utterance before they repeat it. If they attempt to say the sentence along with the teacher, as pupils often do, they will neither be able to hear the correct model nor will the teacher be able to hear their errors. Consequently, the value of the exercise will have been lost.

A very valuable drill technique in second language teaching is the substitution drill and pupils must be given plenty of it. It trains them to use a great variety of words within a limited number of grammatical patterns, and hence be able to express in English a variety of concepts. When pupils have become thoroughly familiar with the mechanics of the substitution drill, various sentence parts may be substituted within the same exercise. An even more advanced type of drill requires transformations (into questions and negative forms, for example) as well as substitution. Complex forms of the substitution drill, however, must be used with discretion and only when pupils demonstrate readiness for them. The mental alertness demanded for their successful performance may prove exhausting to many pupils if carried on over too long a period of time. Furthermore, if pupils must stop and think for some time before producing a correct response, the whole purpose of the substitution has been lost. An excellent feature of the substitution drill is that it may be readily adapted to any proficiency level, from complete beginner to very advanced, and it is a more challenging and varied type of practice than the simple repetition drill.

Much classroom time is spent on question and answer practices, with the teacher asking the questions and the pupils answering. Although such drills provide good comprehension and oral production practice they require the teacher to do 50 per cent of the speaking, and they fail to give the pupils vitally needed experience in asking questions.

Give plenty of drill on question forms, and then get your pupils to ask one another questions. Control such exercises carefully, insisting that pupils keep their questions within the framework of a basic pattern. Most pupils enjoy asking questions. In so doing, they are using the foreign language as a communication tool to gain further insight into the environment.

A teacher should never go into a class without knowing what the objective is for the lesson. Write out a lesson plan for each lesson and refer to it unobtrusively during the lesson. After class, ask yourself whether you achieved the objectives you intended, and in what ways your plan might have been made more successful. Such frequent evaluation will ensure that you continually develop your teaching skills.

Be flexible in amending your plan to suit the needs of your particular pupils. But remember that while it is possible to make alterations in a plan, it is not possible to teach successfully without a plan.

A good textbook goes a long way towards easing the teacher's task. It is, however, not a teacher; it cannot speak, listen, correct or encourage. Instructions must come from the teacher, and not from a book, no matter how well organized or well written.

Quite a number of teachers greet their pupils with a "Good morning, children. Open your books to page 36". The entire period is then spent in reading and doing exercises from the textbook. The teacher and his pupils become entirely dependent on the book, slaves to the written word—the printed instruction. The teacher does not teach, and the pupils do not achieve mastery of the patterns of English.

Use a textbook as a supplement to your teaching. Introduction of new material and preliminary oral drill should come from you, and textbooks should be closed while new structures and vocabulary are practised. After a considerable amount of oral practice, have your pupils open their books and work with the material in its written form. Be creative in your use of a textbook, employing its materials in a variety of ways. Many textbooks lend themselves to a number of uses: performed with books open or closed, orally or in writing, by an individual or a group of pupils. Above all, keep in mind

that your textbook is simply a very useful tool to aid you in the achievement of your objectives. Do not use it as a crutch, or as a teacher-substitute. The essence of language is two-way communication.

Psychologists have confirmed that praise of good performance stimulates pupils to do better work than does punishment or criticism for bad performance. We must keep in mind that learning a foreign language may be a difficult and often frustrating task for a child. He must train the muscles of his tongue and lips to produce new sounds. New neurological patterns must form in his brain. Suddenly the familiar environment is full of strange objects for which he knows no name. He is reduced to helplessness and he resents this. He is afraid to speak for fear of making mistakes or of appearing stupid.

Help your pupils by praising their good performances and their progress. Put the harder questions to your better pupils. Compliments will make your pupils do their best, and when a real desire to learn exists, half your job is already done.

Laughter is a great aid in relaxing the tension and lightening the fatigue which builds up during a period of

concentrated study. Let your English class be an enjoyable experience for you and your pupils. Use humorous stories, anecdotes and example sentences liberally in your teaching. Tell an occasional joke, simplifying structure and vocabulary as necessary. Your relaxed enjoyment of the teaching-learning situation will evoke a corresponding enthusiasm on the part of your pupils making the teacher-pupil collaboration a fruitful one.

In short, the teacher of English as a second language should never lose sight of the fact that his task is to foster in his pupils the development of a new set of speech habits. He must demonstrate the new habits to his pupils, one at a time, according to a carefully planned sequence, and then insist on ample pupil repetition of the model in order that each new language habit may become an integrated element of his pupils' behaviour.

Learning a new language is not an easy task; but with proper guidance and encouragement from the teacher, pupils will arrive at the agreeable discovery that English has become a habit—an enjoyable habit. This discovery is their key to a new and exciting world of communication.