

# I'll Never Start On Time Again (Fifteen New Semester Resolutions)

Bob Burbidge, United Nations Staff Language Programme

I have been studying a foreign language at different institutions in the New York City area on and off for the past couple of years, and for me, an ESL teacher, to actually be a student learning a language in a classroom has been a revelation. I have learned a lot of language, for which I thank my teachers, but I have also gained a lot of insights about pedagogy and classroom management.

In the light of this language learning experience, I would change some of my own teaching behaviours because I felt, as a student, confusion and frustration at some of the things which occurred in my classes. Therefore, I would like to make a list of the things I would not do (again?) in my own ESL classes. What follows is very much a personal reaction, and is in no way intended as a prescription for others. What I have to say is not at all profound and may well be already self-evident to the reader. If so, I apologize.

## My Resolutions

In the future, in my ESL classes I will try *not* to...

1. Start the class exactly on time regardless of the number of students who have arrived. I felt very disoriented upon arriving a few minutes late to find the teacher in the middle of an explanation of a new point, or the few students in the class in the middle of a drill or an exercise. Before getting into the main thrust of the lesson, I would wait until most of the students had arrived. Of course that is not to say I would

not do anything; I would talk to the students, or deal with any individual problems, or have the students compare and discuss their home assignments before giving them to me to look at.

2. Arrange the chairs in horizontal rows. I found it very disconcerting not to be able to see the other students' faces when they were talking. There was no sense of community; it was as if there were only the teacher and the student she was addressing in the room, and that what they were saying was of no interest to the others. I think that a semi-circular arrangement of chairs, or a circle, or several small tables with students grouped around them would create a much more sociable and vital atmosphere.

3. Start an exercise or task without giving explicit instructions, or without making sure that the students know what to do. Sometimes we were on question no. 3 before I had even found the right page (just the kind of student teachers love, right?), or even if I was on the right page, I did not know what to do (remember, not only was this a completely new language for me, it was also a new alphabet). Of course the teacher does not always have to give explicit instructions; the students in groups could work out what they have to do, but at least they should be given time.

4. Do a listening exercise without providing contextual information and without giving a purpose for

listening. I found it almost impossible to understand a dialogue without first getting some background information on the speakers and the situation. In the case of a multiple-choice exercise, it would help tremendously to simply have time to look over the distractors, or guess the correct answers before hearing the dialogue, or even try and guess the questions.

5. Give the students answers to questions too quickly. Sometimes I needed time to frame my answers to the teacher's questions, and it was very frustrating if she jumped in with the required response within a couple of seconds because I felt I could have done it had I only been given a little time. I would try and give my students plenty of time to reflect and respond; I would not be afraid of silence; silence can be rather nice after all.

6. Correct errors at once. Sometimes my fellow-students would be making heroic efforts to get a sentence out (you could see the agony on their faces), and they had just managed to utter the first two words when the teacher would come in like a rapier with a correction; concentration and morale destroyed. I am not advocating no error correction. But I think I would wait until the student had expressed his/her idea until giving feedback, or make a note of the errors and discuss them later.

7. Get impatient or irritated with a student because s/he doesn't know the answer. It's devastating! Of course our patience is not infinite and there will be times when we succumb, even if only by facial expression or body posture, but we should be aware at least of the effects it might have on our students. At times I felt quite humiliated and wanted to crawl away into a corner.

8. Indulge in lengthy grammatical explanations or write elaborate grammatical charts on the blackboards. While such demonstrations might excite the linguist in all of us, I don't know whether it helps the students. As a teacher myself, I found them interesting from a linguistic point of view but I don't think they helped me use the language, which is what I wanted to do. I would give simplified explanations, even at the expense of complete accuracy, and write simple charts. I found that all-inclusive charts with all the cases and all the genders to be confusing.

9. Drill or practise a grammatical point immediately after presenting it. I found it very hard to start producing right away. I needed time to think about it and look at it, time to assimilate. So perhaps students need to hear something many times and to read it and to reflect upon it before they are ready to produce.

10. Tell students they should know something because "we did that last lesson/week/semester." I found that even though the teacher had covered something previously, that was no guarantee that I would remember it. In fact, in retrospect, it would be remarkable if a student remembered everything. I don't think, in any case, that learning a language is a synthetic process consisting of learning a bit each week and then suddenly putting it all together. Perhaps it is a more dynamic process in which the learner is continually reviewing and revising what s/he has learnt by testing hypotheses. And since what we are teaching (or what we think we are teaching) is not necessarily what the students are learning, it would seem to be wise to revise what "we did last week".

11. Answer a student request for information with "Oh, we're going

to do that next semester" or "We'll do that next week." It seemed to me if I needed to know something crucial to get my message across I would stand more chance of remembering it than if it were just taught in isolation in a grammar lesson. I think I would be very flexible as far as the syllabus is concerned; indeed, the grammar items or vocabulary that the students request might be the most valuable for their purposes.

12. Write uncontextualized lists of words or numbers on the blackboard. I found it very difficult to remember parts of the body, for example, when they were listed, and I also had a devil of a time with lists of opposites like *big/small, long/short*, etc. It confused rather than helped me. I also had great difficulty with random numerals from 1 to 10 on the blackboard for which we were required to give the word. I think I would present such words and numbers in small doses and in contexts. Like that, I think they would be much easier to remember. In the same vein, learning vocabulary lists for homework was impossible. I could never remember them. Learning in chunks, like we might learn the words of songs or poems seems much more feasible, and the "read silently, look up and speak" technique advocated by John Fanselow is a good way of doing this.

13. Have the students each reading a dialogue to the class. Sometimes pairs of students would read the same dialogue one after the other. Personally, I would have preferred the teacher to read the dialogue herself 20 times. At

least I would have been hearing a good model. Again, I think pairs of students reading the dialogue to each other using "read silently, look up and speak" would have been more fruitful.

14. Say to students, "I'm not interested in what you really saw on TV last night; I just want an answer in the past tense". I felt that if the teacher was not really interested, all the communicative value was lost and there was no point in responding. It seems vital to me to be more interested in the content of what is said rather than the form. I am not saying that the form is not important; it's just a question of priorities.

15. Forget to bring all sorts of realia into the classroom. I always felt a tremendous uplift and surge of interest when the teacher brought photos, pictures or objects to illustrate a word, a grammar point or text. I think that using media in the classroom in addition to the linguistic really assists in learning.

Those are my fifteen resolutions for the new semester. In conclusion, I would like to say that actually being a student in a class over a long period may be a valuable teacher training tool, because we can experience first-hand what effects our teaching has on students, and it may lead to a re-evaluation of some of our behaviours, and ultimately to change. Being a student may be an excellent means of professional development, especially for experienced teachers.