

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

Using Picture-Based Humor to Lower Students' Affective Filter

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I have taught English to secondary level students in Chile and Japan. As unlikely as it may seem, English language learners in both places exhibit similar behavior in that they are reluctant to use their English, even when they have a fair degree of proficiency in it. In other words, the gap between their level of competence and their performance is often very wide. Of course, there are several reasons for this, some of which are individual, but in general, I have found that in both settings:

- English language instruction is largely form-focused.
- English classes are typically viewed as standardized test preparation courses.
- Students are accustomed to being corrected when they make mistakes. They quickly “learn” that by not speaking, they can avoid correction.

Unfortunately, my colleagues who have taught in other countries tell me that these observations are not unique to Chile and Japan.

At first, I did not realize that the lack of response and unwillingness to speak that I saw in my students were really outward expressions of fear. As I got to know them better, I realized how high their level of anxiety was. I am a friendly, relaxed, outgoing person and a non-native speaker of English, but my students still saw me as an authoritarian figure who had power over them and might shame or ridicule them if they made mistakes. Clearly, their affective filter was too high. Telling them to relax was not enough; I needed to do, rather than say, something to help them overcome their fear if I wanted them to answer simple questions or engage in English conversation with each other and with me. If I could help them overcome their fear, I knew they would not only be able to use their English but that they would enjoy it and be surprised by their success. I decided humor might be

helpful, but I knew that word-based humor would only add to the level of anxiety in the class. Instead I tried the picture-based strategy described here.

Procedure

1. First, I planned my next lesson as usual creating a digital slide show to introduce the topic, new vocabulary, and example sentences to illustrate the grammatical patterns in our textbook. The topic was healthy and unhealthy personal habits, and the language focus was on modals such as should, shouldn't, must, and mustn't.
2. I added illustrations to my example sentences, but this time, I made two changes from my usual routine. First, I illustrated the target sentence patterns about healthy and unhealthy habits with images from the popular animated American television show *The Simpsons*, with which my students were familiar. Second, I pasted a photo of my own face over Bart Simpson's face.
3. In class, I previewed the topic as usual, using the opening slides of my presentation and focusing on the target structures.
4. Then, I advanced to the next slide showing the Simpsons with my picture where Bart's should be and these sample sentences: I am in 8th grade. I am 14 years old. I am an excellent boy. The last sentence was designed to introduce the topic of healthy (and unhealthy) habits in the context of this famous, but fictitious family. Making myself part of the family helped students see me as a participant in the fun. The positive effects appeared immediately. Students took notice, relaxed, laughed, and were eager for more.
5. On subsequent slides, students read "my" healthy habit sentences: I get up early. I drink plenty of water. They also read about some of "my" unhealthy habits: I go to sleep late. I get stressed.
6. In subsequent lessons, I continued using this technique.

This simple strategy—using pop culture illustrations and inserting my image into them—had a dramatic effect on classroom dynamics. Each humorous illustration helped students relax, process the target language information, and understand the example sentences. They eagerly looked forward to the next picture, sentence frame, and example. Moments of laughter, followed by understanding, lengthened the period of student engagement and gave me more time to explain and answer questions. More importantly, students were now eager to participate,

answer questions, and talk about their own health habits without fear of making mistakes. Before the lesson ended, students were giving each other advice and expressing opinions related to healthy and unhealthy habits, and from that time on, the classroom environment was more relaxed, more fun, and full of English.

A Few Thoughts . . .

1. Contextualizing new language information by placing my image on pop culture images had the desired effects for me—helping my students relax and making me seem more approachable. I hope readers will see how to adapt this idea for their students and teaching situation. For example, I can imagine using rock stars, popular entertainers, or historic figures to present and contextualize or localize lexical or grammatical information.
2. It is not necessary to have high tech facilities to use the ideas presented here. I could have used paper copies, magazine cut outs, or even hand-drawn images on the board.
3. I used this activity at the beginning of the class to present the new vocabulary and grammatical elements for my lesson. I could just as well have used it at the end to review, consolidate learning, check on understanding, or revive students just before class ends.

Conclusion

Many students in EFL settings experience high levels of anxiety when it comes to speaking English. No matter how often their teachers tell them not to worry about mistakes, tradition and prior experience make it difficult for them to shed their anxiety. This simple strategy—using picture-based humor—lowered the affective filter of my students, allowing them to relax enough to use the English they already knew and feel motivated to learn—and say—more.

About the Author

Gabriel Fierro is an English Teacher at Escola Nikken Gakuen in Mie Prefecture, Japan. He holds a bachelor's degree in secondary English teaching from San Sebastian University in Chile. As an exchange student at Selkirk College in British Columbia, he completed programs in Practical Studies in TESOL and Advanced English. He has just completed his first year in the MA TESOL program at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies.