Tips for Teachers

Learning from Each Other: The Power of Personal Narrative in Adult ESL Classes

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This story begins in a small town in western Tennessee about 25 years ago. At the time, the working men and women in the community were employed primarily on area farms or in one of two large, locally-owned factories. In 1988, when both factories were purchased by Japanese conglomerates, a number of Japanese business executives, their wives, and children were added to what had previously been a roughly 99 percent white Protestant population. The men were assigned to work two year terms in the factories before transferring back to Japan. While they worked, their wives had time to study English at the local Adult Education Center. In 2006, I was hired to teach this class. Since I had previously taught English for two years in rural Japan, I felt well prepared. Also enrolled were several Chinese couples who were owners and managers of the town's only two Asian food restaurants. Though they had lived in the United States for many years, they still felt uncomfortable with many aspects of English and wanted to improve their communication skills.

Within an hour of meeting the class, however, I realized that I was not nearly as well prepared as I had initially thought. By conducting a needs analysis, I learned that English skills and proficiency levels in the two groups of students were almost diametrically opposed. Most of the Japanese students had studied English formally through high school, and all but one had then gone on to complete college degrees. They had had at least six years of English study although typically instruction had followed a very traditional grammar and translation model. Until coming to the United States less than a year before the start of our class, none of them had ever left Japan before or had much interaction with native English speakers. Thus, their speaking, listening, and overall oral communication skills were very limited, but their writing and reading skills were quite advanced. When they found it difficult to respond to a question or take part in a conversation, they often wrote down their questions or frustrations in excellent English and submitted them to me for review. The Chinese students, on the other hand, came from

very different circumstances. They left school after the primary level to work and help support their families, came to the United States while still in their teens, and immediately went to work opening businesses serving mostly American customers. As a result, they quickly developed strong English speaking and listening skills, but had very limited skills in reading and writing.

Separating the results of my needs analysis into two piles on my desk, I was unsure how to proceed. First, there were linguistic issues. On one hand, I had highly educated students with little ability to communicate effectively in class but who could write and read nearly anything I put in front of them. On the other hand, I had a several students with advanced communication skills but who had trouble reading or writing English beyond the elementary level. I also wondered about their personal needs. I was aware of the benefits of having positive group dynamics in my class, so I wanted to help them to work together and get to know each other, but with this group, I was unsure how to make that happen.

Fortunately, I saw that a traditional teacher- or curriculum-centered approach would probably not be the best route to take with this class. It was an ideal opportunity in which to employ transformative teacher practices such as Critical Pedagogy to create a student-centered atmosphere where students not only interacted as equals but also took collective responsibility for articulating our goals and determining our direction as a class. To put these principles into practice, I followed this procedure:

1. I designed a series of simple interviews which functioned as conversation scaffolds. The questions gave students the opportunity and the means to share their personal narratives and life experiences with each other. We began with very general questions such as *Where are you from? Tell us about your hometown. Why did you come to America?*
2. Gradually the students began to take greater responsibility for designing their own interviews or surveys. I answered their questions and provided guidance as necessary, but they set the direction. A useful resource for creating such surveys or interviews is the *Internet TESL Journal*, particularly this link to "Conversation Questions for the ESL/EFL Classroom" at http://iteslj.org/questions/.
3. I created diverse groups intermingling students of different ethnicities, levels of English proficiency, and interests.
4. I gave each group the written interview.
5. I asked students with stronger oral fluency to interview classmates with weaker fluency. The interviewees needed to respond to questions, giving them some much-needed speaking practice, but they did not feel overwhelmed because they were "simply" answering questions.
6. During their conversation, the interviewer took brief notes on what the interviewee said.

7. All students wrote brief reflections of the interview including what was asked and what was answered. This step challenged students with weaker literacy skills.
8. I walked around the class, checking for understanding and facilitating as needed.
9. We met as a class and various groups reported their findings. Other students took notes.
10. I asked several questions about survey or interview results and called on students at random to answer them.
11. Students returned to their small groups to refine their written reflections. Stronger students assisted their classmates with writing, editing, and correcting their papers.
12. We repeated this process over the course of several weeks with different groupings. Over time, each student was able to work with every other student in the class.

Through this routine not only were students able to accomplish English tasks using all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—but they were also able to get to know their peers, understand what they had in common, and appreciate each other's unique skills, challenges, and stories. Indeed, this last component became almost as important as the English lessons themselves. For example, students who lacked formal education began the course feeling that their college-educated classmates were much more advanced, or "better" as English students. Working closely together, however, they were able to see that each of them had strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others and that they could help each other meet their individual and class goals.

Though this was my first encounter with such a uniquely diverse group of English language learners, I am confident that my situation was not unique. Many language teachers throughout the world have highly diverse classes with students of different backgrounds, proficiency levels, general education, socioeconomic standing, and overall goals for learning English. I hope that other teachers can adapt the transformative student-centered procedure described above to foster a sense of camaraderie, motivation, and excitement about learning English as well as to build bridges between various groups of students.

About the Author

John Clayton is an instructor in the Center for ESL at the University of Cincinnati. He has taught in both EFL and ESL settings in the United States and abroad. He is particularly interested in transformative teaching practices such as Critical Pedagogy.