

Why TESL?

By JULENE EVANS

A few years ago the personnel manager of a large corporation asked me why I was majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language. To him such a program was superfluous; he could not understand why a person with an English major could not teach English to everyone, including non-native speakers of the language. At the time I did not have the opportunity to tell him that teaching English to non-native speakers with the same methods used for teaching native speakers would be as frustrating to him as explaining the operations of his plant to me in the same terms he would use for instructing his experienced foremen. Perhaps the best way to explain why a teacher whose students learn English as a second language must be trained differently from a teacher of regular high school English is to point out some of the differences in the students and material each will eventually teach.

The students which a high school English teacher instructs are, presumably, native speakers who have been speaking English for at least thirteen years. Though they may still make occasional grammatical errors, they

internalized the basic structural rules of English as children. Just how they learned these rules is not known, but it is evident that they learned them well enough to be able to communicate with sophisticated speakers of the language. (If high school students resort to slang and incorrect English it is often because they prefer to, not because that is all they know.) Their English teacher must make minor corrections in their grammar while reinforcing the correct skills which they already possess.

At this point in their studies, high school students are ready to be introduced to English literature. Their teacher must be well versed in literature for his task becomes guiding them through poetry, short stories and novels. Literature, besides broadening and deepening the students' views of life, is a means by which the teacher may enlarge their vocabularies and effect greater eloquence in their speech.

In contrast with the sophisticated English of high school students, English as a Second

Language (ESL) students, when they first come to their teacher, very often have had no previous contact with English or that contact which they have had has not been adequate for them to learn the language. No matter what their native language, ESL students will encounter new features when studying English; among these features is sound. The meaningful sounds, or phonemes of English, will need to be explained by the teacher. Often English phonemes will resemble some of those in the student's native languages. The finer the distinctions between two sounds, the more skilled the teacher must be in identifying the difference and describing this to the student. Phonemes entirely different from those found in the native languages will also need to be taught.

Learning how the sounds may be combined to form words follows mastery of the phonemes. English has phoneme combinations which are not possible in other languages. Spanish speaking students, for instance, find /s/ difficult to pronounce at the beginning of words because it is never found in that position in their language. Consonant clusters, /bl/, /str/, /kr/, etc., do not exist in Samoan and create pronunciation problems for students whose native language is Samoan. Being aware of these and similar difficulties, the ESL teacher would know in which areas his students require special help and how to give it to them. Knowing how to analyze language is essential if an ESL teacher is to identify and help overcome individual student problems, but is something which other teachers of English are not required to know.

At the same time they are learning to form words, students should be learning how words may be arranged to form sentences. Just as possible phoneme combinations differ in each language, so sentence patterns and inflections are different. Though students who are native speakers may also study sentence patterning, they study it already knowing the basic rules. They may not be able to state these rules formally, but they obviously know them because they use them everyday in speech. ESL students are likely to have this problem in reverse. After study, they may know the rules, but find it difficult to apply them. Nevertheless, a Second Language teacher must help his students learn to use deep, often obscure,

structural elements of English if they are to acquire a satisfactory level of speaking and comprehension.

Verb tense and mood, subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, pluralization, misplaced modifiers, sentence fragments, punctuation--commas, colons, semi-colons, apostrophes, dashes, parentheses, quotation marks--are problems with which both native and non-native speakers must deal; but the native speaker has an advantage: he has been working on them all his life. The ESL student has been working on similar problems all his life too, but in another language. Essentially his instructor teaches him to forget what he has already learned about language and to learn something new and different.

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One of the more difficult elements of English for an ESL instructor to teach is prepositions. Their usage can be learned only by memorizing specific instances rather than general rules. Consider the problem of explaining why one depends *upon* people, but trusts *in* them. *In*, *on*, and *at* are all prepositions used when referring to where one lives which any native speaker could use correctly, but which second language learners would undoubtedly find confusing. The subtle differences in meaning between prepositions and the numerous meanings associated with some prepositions are not adequately defined in a dictionary. The ESL teacher must become his students' personal source of reference, contrasting and comparing prepositions until they become meaningful for his students.

As culture is intimately involved with language and is, in fact, expressed through language, it is necessary for ESL students to be taught the culture, as well as the language, of the people with whom they wish to communicate. A single word which conjures up paragraphs of meaning for native speakers may have mere dictionary meaning for ESL students. It is also very likely that, not knowing the culture, ESL students may use a word which when translated into their own language is innocent, but in English is socially unacceptable. Hence, the ESL

teacher would be required to teach culture which native high school students grew up living with, knowing and helping to change, but which ESL students have never experienced.

Briefly, the above are some of the dissimilarities between English and ESL students and material to be taught. Underlying the dissimilarities in language teaching is the fact that an English teacher tries to *reinforce* and *broaden* already known concepts, whereas, an ESL teacher tries to *change* existing language concepts and *introduce* new ones. Each teacher attacks different problems from different directions; so, they should not be expected to use the same techniques. Not needing to use the same techniques, they would not need to be trained in the same methods or use the same texts.

Requiring each type of teacher to learn the techniques of the other would be superfluous; yet, requiring an English teacher to instruct ESL students as he would native speakers would be frustrating for both the teacher and the students. Each should be trained for his particular position.