

IN-CLASS DYNAMICS IN TESL

by Jason B. Alter

I would like to share some techniques that I have developed to dynamicize the language classroom. The instructor must gear his delivery to the clientele, but I have found these techniques to be efficacious.

For want of a better term, I some time ago coined the word "spont" (spontaneous participation, orally, on newly-introduced topics) to apply to the technique of planned spontaneity in the classroom. One need not limit sponting to TESL; I contend that it can rejuvenate any language-learning classroom.

Recently, I gave a talk at a workshop on E.T.C.H. (English Through Cartoon Humor). Here I propose to spont with this mere title, to provide insights into the system.

I might ask the class for words that rhyme with "etch." From the list, we can mention the homonym "wretch." Students can be asked to make questions or statements with any of the rhymed responses; questions are preferred, for then another student can be called on to answer.

Pronunciation practice can proceed by contrasting "etch," "itch," "each," and "ouch." Here again, rhyming words can be elicited for the last three. Rhyming is not frivolous; it checks on sound discrimination as well as on vocabulary control. As for "ouch," one can probe as to equivalent expressions in the student's own language.

Sponting allows the teacher to create a fast-paced language-learning environment. There is no dead time. The class is involved totally, every minute of the class hour.

Next, we look at the letters of E.T.C.H., as well as at the words that each letter represents:

"E" Ask the students for any word that begins with an "e." The teacher can then spont from the student's free response. The possibilities are endless. It's spontaneous, because no one knows exactly what the cue will be, as this depends on the student's self-produced response.

Words can be spelled backwards to spell

other words or to spell themselves: "pots" = "stop"; "trap" = "part"; "level" = "level." There are a few words of four letters that can be spelled inside out: "time" = "item"; "Edna" = "Dean"; "mane" = "amen." Consider the cultural overtones of the expression: "He uses a lot of four-letter words." In most other languages, no epithet would be implied.

Take the word "English," and discuss these:

- A. He put English on the ball.
- B. He tried to use body English.

Ask for other languages that end in "ish," such as Danish, Spanish, or Finnish. Differentiate between "Spanish" and "Spaniard." What is a prune danish? Compare "Finnish" and "finish;" what is a finishing school? Culture again. Mention the old saw that "the United States and Great Britain are two nations separated by the same language."

"T" "Through" can be contrasted with "thru," and the comparative unacceptability of the latter in formal written English can be noted. Then, the notion of register can be dealt with; how do we talk to a preacher, and how do we talk to our roommate? As the current song asserts, "it goes on and on."

Note the highway sign: No Thru Traffic. Here "thru" is an adjective. Let the class get experience making their own sentences using "through/thru" in various ways. Note the homonym for "through": "threw." Ask for other words that follow this prototype: "know/knew"; "grow/grew"; "blow/blew." Mention some two-word verbs with "throw": "throw out," "throw over," "throw up"—and the idiomatic meanings of these.

"C" Compare "sea" and "see," and the plurals of all three: "C's," "seas," "sees," as well as See's (candy), and "seize." Note the exceptional spelling of the last, violating the "I-before-E" rule. Another intriguing spont is to ask for homonyms across languages.

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Compare "C" and "si" ("yes" in Spanish). There is also "nine" and "nein" ("no" in German). This recalls an instance when a student of mine in Taiwan was reluctant to accept the name "Faye," as this turned out to be a virtual homonym for two different characters in Chinese that mean "fat" and "bandit."

Ask the students to come up with words that begin with "C" with a "K" sound ("cattle," "cause," "call") and with an "S" sound ("cease," "Caesar," "cyst").

Compare "cartoon" and "carton," which I would classify as a minimal pair for vocabulary. (We are mistakenly apt to limit the minimal-pair notion to pronunciation.)

"H" Note that we say "an H" not "a H." Ask for words beginning with a silent "h.": "honor," "hour," "herb." Thence, discuss the merits/demerits of the honor system. A homonym for "hour"? The pronunciation of "Herb" when it is a name?

Ask for other words that end in "-or": "tumor," "color," "ardor." Large numbers of students are coming to the United States from Hong Kong, where British spellings have long been in vogue. Such students need to be reminded that American English eschews the second "U" in "humour."

Jason B. Alter, an associate professor of ESL at the University of Hawaii, served as acting director of the Language Centre at Nanyang University in Singapore. In addition to his duties at the U of H, Dr. Alter edits textbooks for a publisher in Kuala Lumpur and is an ESL consultant to Kansai Gaidai-Hawaii Ko.

Humor operates at a very high level of linguistic sophistication. For a student to be able to understand a joke in another language requires considerable fluency. Thus, I am sponting not with humor per se, but with the language.

It becomes apparent that meaningful, dynamic language-learning activity can be generated within a class from the simple acronym "ETCH." The language teacher can spont to the nth degree using the language in the lesson of the day. Students of all persuasions enjoy this technique. I invite you to "spont whenever you want."