

TURNING STUDENTS ON TO ENGLISH

AN ANALYSIS INTO WHY STUDENTS SAY "I DON'T
LIKE ENGLISH!"

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When I recently changed jobs at the university where I work, I found myself in the fascinating but sometimes trying world of adolescents. Up to February of 1979, I had worked exclusively in EFL classes with university age students and adults. I considered myself a good teacher, open-minded and willing to accept a new idea: sure of my ability to adapt to, if not to conquer, any situation which might arise in the classroom.

Suddenly I found that all my old sure-shot techniques were not working as well as I had imagined they would; my vast collection of visual and audio aids met with a rather cooler reception than I'd remembered and I admit to feeling something quite less than enthusiasm when the bell was about to ring for me to go to a class with 27 squirmy junior-highers.

Not only were these students restless and easily distracted, but also, in general, they seemed to be totally negative about learning English. Their presence in my classroom was obligatory. They only needed English to fulfill the curriculum requirements of their school and they let me know it at times! Now those who share my experience in teaching adolescents know full well what happens to a class when students are negative and "not in the mood". Spontaneous gossip sessions, taking out other homework, sleeping (or trying to) suddenly remembering an urgent trip to the locker or the office, etc. etc.

To bolster up my fading self-image I decided to do some investigating into the "why" of this rampant negative attitude and "what" (I refuse to add "if anything") the teacher can do about it. The result of my investigation is this article in which I will discuss prevention and not cures.

At the MEXTESOL Convention in Oaxaca in 1979, Jerrilou Johnson gave a talk entitled "¡No Me Gusta Estudiar Inglés!" I wonder how many times we've heard our students say that. Maybe they don't use that phrasing and perhaps they don't use any words

at all, but communicate in a very clear non-verbal manner that studying English is quite the furthest thing from their minds any time, anywhere. And if we are receiving this message, how do we react?

I can think of three possible reactions. The first might be to feel a little guilty. Somewhere along the way we've failed, either ourselves or our students, or both, because we haven't been successful in instilling in them a kind of blind dedication to the study of English.

Another reaction might be one of righteous indignation. Students complaining? But then they're always complaining about something: grades, too much homework, the teacher's accent.

Or we might just shrug our shoulders and shrug off the comment. "After all, I just work here. How students feel is not really my concern".

However, I feel that a comment like "I don't like to study English" can go beyond just words and quickly turn an English class into a kind of martyrdom for teacher and students alike: a class to which the students go dragging their feet, for which the teacher only thinks about preparing; a class hour dedicated to "keeping them quiet". And if we've been receiving that message rather often lately, then I think it's time to consider how to change a lament into a statement like "English is great!" (or perhaps "English is OK!" the best we should expect from present-day adolescents).

I suggest that we as EFL teachers do share some of the responsibility for student negativism as regards the study of English and offer three main reasons why "I don't like English" is often teacher-oriented. First, we fail to correctly identify ourselves as teachers. That is, we don't know how our students see us, the kind of image we're projecting.

Secondly, we are unaware of the kinds of students we are likely to encounter in the EFL classroom. Here I'm referring to kinds of students in terms of degrees of motivation or lack of it. We are also unaware of what makes our students tick, what motivates them and what their needs and expectations are with regards to the study of English.

And finally, we persist in some rather harmful games which do everything but further the cause of EFL: psychological games which we may not even be aware are going on.

Mary Finnocchiaro once wrote that a language teacher must be a combination of linguist, anthropologist, sociologist and pedagogue, because, and I quote, "while teachers of other disciplines are called upon to inculcate habits, attitudes, knowledge, or skills in a medium already known to their students, the foreign language teacher must bring about changes or modifications in behaviour, habits, attitudes, knowledge, or skills in an unfamiliar medium requiring additional or different physiological activity..."(1)

Some task! Above and beyond needing to be so poly-faceted there are the individual teacher types to consider: all those little things that make you "you" and which surely stamp everything you do with your particular characteristics. Let's consider some typical teacher-types to be found in the EFL classroom.

The first is the SUPERSTAR. This teacher is interested in overwhelming his students by sheer personality. He is totally dedicated to the care for and preservation of his own self-image. Students are only necessary because without them there would be no audience.

The second teacher-type abounds in secondary and preparatory schools. This is the JUDGE. If a student's breath even faintly reeks of gum or tobacco, it's off to the Prefect of Discipline. One side-long glance or corner-of-the-mouth comment to a classmate results in a "doble falta".

The GOOD OL' BOY is another common staff member. He is known for just marking time. His response to any question a student might have is "Don't ask me. I just speak the language".

Good in very small doses is the POLYANNA. For this teacher everything is just super! The students speak perfectly and require virtually no teaching. Nothing needs improving. Life is great! As with the GOOD OL' BOY this teacher feels no incentive or reason to change or enlarge personal horizons.

Then there is the SNOB. This teacher is above such de-meaning tasks as making a daily lesson plan or keeping abreast of homework and test grades. Stacks of papers adorn his desk. At the bottom of this stack is the departmental programme. Fellow teachers are not enthusiastic about having to substitute for him.

The total opposite of the POLYANNA is the NEUROTIC. This teacher expects the worst of his students and is usually not disappointed. He can't imagine why students "keep making those same dumb mistakes when we've already covered that in class a

million times".

The POET is with us in body, but not in mind or spirit. This teacher has a very tentative hold on reality. Doing the past tense of the verb "be" means as much to this teacher as the study of the breeding habits of the shrew.

Lastly we have the VICTIM, a walking persecution complex. Students don't like English because they don't like him. They cause problems because of a deep personal dislike for the teacher. Every giggle in class is taken as a personal affront.

Is there some part of any of these common types in us? Only after seeing ourselves as others do can we consider changes. Getting to know ourselves is a pre-requisite to knowing our students and seeing them, not through dark or rose-coloured glasses, but as they really are and what they need and expect from us as EFL teachers.

Arthur Jersild writes "A teacher cannot make much headway in understanding others or in helping others to understand themselves unless he is endeavored to understand himself. If he is not engaged in this endeavor, he will continue to see those whom he teaches through the bias and distortions of his own unrecognized needs, fears, desires, anxieties and hostile impulses". (2)

Learning a second language can be a rather risky experience. At a fairly advanced age the adolescent student is launched into the study of English, a language which represents for many Mexican learners, at least, the people and culture of a country towards which he may well have some ambivalent feelings. Investigation in linguistics has shown that the attitude of the learner towards the speakers of the target language has great importance and can make a significant difference in individual performance. As EFL teachers we are rightfully anxious that our in-class language practice reflect, insofar as possible, an authentic "slice of English-speaker life", but we must be very careful to help our students retain at the same time "pride in their own language and culture as they move gradually toward the acceptance of the foreign language and culture". (3)

The EFL teacher must reflect a positive image of the target language and culture without falling victim to the cultural near-sightedness from which many EFL teachers (native speakers and others) suffer. They steamroller over the culture and language of their students, ignoring these elements entirely or degrading them as second-rate. They ask themselves why students say "I

don't like to study English".

Key to the learning process is the feeling of security and success and achievement which only the teacher can instill in his students. We must attempt to foster such positiveness in our class-rooms lest our students fall into "anomie", that feeling of not belonging wholly to the target culture yet no longer feeling totally at home in the native culture.

In a typical language class, we will find a combination of student types, all bearing different degrees of motivation. Motivation, some experts say, is dormant in all of us. It can only be stimulated to the surface by an external source. According to this theory a teacher cannot really "motivate" his students, he can only provide the stimulus and multiple and varied opportunities for that innate motivation to reveal itself.

A. I. Gates makes the following classification of students in terms of their motivation: (1) THE SELF STARTERS. They require very little outside stimulus, and are characterized by a willingness to always do what the teacher has planned. Unfortunately these students are few and far between. (2) THE SLOW STARTERS. These students are fairly dedicated but colorless. They are neither hot nor cold and the teacher may find it difficult to penetrate their wall of seeming indifference. (3) THE OUTSIDERS. These students will not respond to stimuli which are usually successful for two main reasons: either because they are already over-exposed to the target culture, or because the stimuli do not relate in any way to their previous experiences. These students are usually from the extremes of the socio-cultural spectrum. And finally there are (4) THE MIRAGES. They seem to have been directed towards a goal, but soon disappear and are lost. They are related to the teacher "poet" in that their spirits are elsewhere.

Since language is a vehicle for communication, students should be enabled to talk about their native culture in the foreign language. Listen to what your students talk about before and after class and you'll get a good idea of where their interests lie. Maybe you don't feel that it's quite your thing to discuss the deep socio-cultural significance of the song "Staying Alive" by the BeeGees, or the cuteness of Mimoso Ratón of the TV programme "Burbujas", but you can be aware that Barry Manilow, Shaun Cassidy, and the latest "telenovelas" play an important if not very transcendental part in your students' lives. The important thing,

however, is to let them know you know. As Jerrilou Johnson also says, you can use the native culture (or a selected part of it) to teach the target language and culture and I don't think she is mistaken. Tuning in to our students' interests and current fads is one sure way to get their noses out of the math books in English class.

In terms of the needs and expectations of our budding adults with regards to the study of English, I've found that they are mostly unaware of any need above and beyond passing the course. Their expectations seem to be the same: to pass the course. These students are far away from making any decisions about careers and indeed, secondary school may be the last stop for them along the academic highway. Many preparatory students choose not to go on to university studies as well. But English is a required subject and the EFL teacher finds himself in a somewhat delicate situation. Mary Finocchiaro is not joking when she speaks of the different "hats" the EFL teacher must wear. And to a great extent, it's up to us to see that our students experience English as pleasant, useful, appealing and interesting and not as boring and senseless.

Earl Stevick mentions that the self-concept a student has formed of himself will determine what kind of language student he will be. That is, if a student feels he is the "strong, silent type", that student will resist verbal interaction with his teacher and classmates more than the person who views himself as assertive and talkative. The EFL teacher can help the student to modify or amplify his self-concept. The "strong, silent type" may be able to say after a time "Usually I'm a bit shy and reserved, but when I'm in English class, I really let go!"

At the beginning of this article I made mention of three reasons why I felt students, and especially adolescents, turn off on English. The first two dealt with recognizing our own and our students' images and with realizing that students are people too. The last reason deals with certain psychological games in which we as teachers participate and in which our students participate also to their own and our expense. I'm speaking here, of course, of the kinds of games described by the late Dr. Eric Berne in his book called Games People Play. Dr. Berne spoke of three possible ego states in all of us, that of the Parent which resembles a parental figure, the Adult, that which is directed towards an objective reality, and that of the Child, an ego state in which patterns fixed in early childhood are still active. A "game" in Berne's terminology is a

transaction in which things are happening on at least two levels at once. At any given moment an individual will portray one or more of these ego states and he is capable of shifting and alternating these states as the need arises. For example, what may on the surface appear to be a conversation between two adults (Adults) may in reality be an interchange between two adults (Parent and Child). Crucial to the game is the "payoff" which comes at the end. This payoff is not monetary but is describable in terms of the feelings which it creates. The different participants in the game all may receive different payoffs.

A popular game which many teachers play against themselves is called "Why don't you--Yes, but." Let's imagine the conversation which ensues between two fellow teachers, one of whom has apparently asked the other for some advice about what to do with a troublesome, difficult-to-motivate group.

T1: Hi, got a minute? I'd sure like your advice on that second-year secondary group I've got. They just don't respond to my usual bag of tricks. It just seems that there's nothing I can do to get their attention let alone keep it for ten minutes while I'm doing a first presentation. Help!

T2: I know the feeling. But, hey, I've got an idea. If you don't have anything to do on Saturday, why don't you come along with me to the MEXTESOL meeting! Dr. "Z" from XYZ University is going to speak. He's just written a book on surefire techniques for getting their attention and holding it. You know he got a Ph.D in adolescent psychology. I've heard him speak before and I think he's got some tremendous ideas.

T1: Dr. "Z" you say? Well, some people think he's got something to say but I think he's just so much hot air. In fact I don't know anyone who comes out of that university that I'd shake hands with. MEXTESOL is never going to get any place unless they avoid speakers like the "famous Dr. 'Z'". I know I was right not to join.

Another example of a teacher playing "Why don't you--Yes, but" is the one who goes to a friend to ask for some advice on how to do blackboard drawings more effectively and ends up by condemning all visual aids as "Mickey Mouse". Earl Stevick concludes that this is the language teacher who at the TESOL Conference will go from workshop to workshop without finding anything of interest, or who systematically rejects all new books published on the subject of language teaching as being "not worth the paper they're written on", without having read any by the way.

In game terminology the payoff for the teacher in this game is the satisfaction derived from consistently being able to prove his fellow teachers wrong. It's a game of one-upmanship played by one teacher (Child) against others (Parents).

Here is an example of a game which students play. It's called "The Schlemiel". This is the student who constantly makes mistakes, who persists in making mistakes his classmates stopped making three months ago. The worst of it all is that he's so apologetic about it. Every error committed is a hung head and a mumbled "I'm sorry". The teacher's reaction at first might well be pity and forgiveness. Later he is likely to become exasperated, angry and finally desperate. He's been accepting and has tried to help this student after class and the same errors still persist. Where has he failed? The consistency of this student's errors should by this time have given the game he's playing away. He's saying "Look, I know I'm stupid. I'm just not a language learner. I'm really a hopeless case. But take pity on me, please".

Many students, and usually those with a rather poor self-concept, will fall into a pattern of this kind. The role of the teacher is to stay adult (Adult) and not revert to his Child ego state whose quite normal reaction will be to take this student at face value and agree with his own classification of himself.

The third kind of game I wish to describe is another played by the teacher, this time against his students. It's called "Stupid". In this transaction the students are the Children and the teacher is Parent and he could not have a poorer concept of them. This is the kind of teacher you will hear make the comment "Well, the 'stupid', I mean the 'students' are late again today". This teacher knows all his students are ignorant and every activity he plans is carefully calculated to confirm his opinion. His speciality, says Stevick, is the oral drill done at a rapid-fire speed. Every line provides multiple opportunities for student error. When mistakes are made this teacher says "What else could I have expected from you?"

To avoid falling into the games' rut, must we then add psychotherapy to our teacher-training programmes, or design job applications which will successfully weed out all probable "gamesmen" whose feelings of inadequacy make them dependant on what Stevick calls "The easy victories of the classroom where they work" with people who know less than they do". This quote is from the book Learning to Feel-- Feeling to Learn.

Again Earl Stevick says no and writes that the solution is to "select our materials and elaborate our techniques with an eye to their potential for making Adult-Adult transactions in the EFL classroom". (4)

Unless we are willing to re-evaluate our own attitudes, opinions and customs we will not be able to form of our students learners predisposed to participate fully in the process of acculturation which is necessary for success in learning another language. A more humane teaching of English will not be possible.

I suggest then that we reject "the easy victories of the classroom" and reject the concept of teaching as a sanctuary for those who, after having paid a rather modest price for obtaining at least titular mastery of some subject are then magically transformed into the only persons gifted with sight in the kingdom of the blind.

QUOTES

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3. Finocchiaro, p. 23.
4. Stevick, p. 87.

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