

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE -
WHERE DO OUR RESPONSIBILITIES LIE?

An answer to:

The Whole Process Approach - Language
Teaching and Responsibility by Jeremy
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No one would dispute that the expatriate teaching of English to non-native speakers has evolved from something that 'anyone who speaks English ought to be able to do' to a reasonably established profession. The teacher now has access to research and published materials and also has the opportunity to make use of a qualifications system which is widely accepted as a means for advancement, even though the profession still in fact lacks a completely satisfactory career structure.

It is maybe the latter that has led to a more than usual amount of 'what am I doing and why' feeling in TEFL. This is not to claim that TEFL holds the exclusive rights to existential anguish, but the EFL teacher is frequently forced to re-define his or her position on every level, often against the backdrop of many different countries and cultures. It is at this point that I think it worth considering exactly what responsibilities the teacher of English does have as opposed to those they might like to have or feel they ought to have.

The job of the EFL teacher is what it says: the teaching to people who do not know the language the means to use it for their own purposes as efficiently as they can. I am confining my remarks here to the adult fee-paying student overseas, since that is where the majority of my experience lies and there is a different argument relating to how the language/cultural content should be presented when it is part of a country's educational system.

A recent movement in TEFL has been the focussing on ways of developing the learner's overall ability to communicate. Helping someone to communicate in a foreign language obviously enables them to do so to a wider range of people, and we may hope that they use this ability responsibly, but we have no right to see that they do so, be it on a personal or more global level.

This brings me to the content of the EFL classroom. I do not advocate the teacher as a neutral fence-sitter carefully steering the discussion away from politics and on to school uniform - the case for abolition! The move recently has been to make the classroom as relaxed and natural as possible. If the students are used to having and want to have political discussions outside the classroom, then there is no reason why they should not be given the chance to do so within it and for the teacher to express his or her own opinion as well.

But I am very against any pre-set political orthodoxy from the teacher being taken as correct and a situation arising where a student feels unable to try to express his or her own views in English, since he or she would possibly go against the attitudes, whether implicit or explicit, of the teacher. And no, I am not advocating, as it happens, a nuclear arms race or racial discrimination. But there are acceptable and far more effective channels to fight for one's beliefs. The EFL classroom is not the place.