
Why Our Students Fail

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author contends that most EFL students never learn to communicate effectively in English. Two major reasons for this, he argues, are that too much emphasis is placed on the memorization of functional formulas and that teachers fail to get students emotionally involved in the learning process. General guidelines for creating an atmosphere more conducive to language learning are offered.

Why is it that so many students of English fail to learn to communicate? What have we been doing wrong? Of course, it's not completely our fault. Many of the reasons are out of our control. But clearly, as teachers of these students, we must take a lot of the responsibility for this failure. There must be something quite fundamental which needs to be changed.

WHOSE WORLD IS IT?

In a traditional language class, when students walk into the classroom, they move from their world into the teacher's. When they leave the classroom,

they return to their own world, and maybe take with them some of the knowledge that has been imparted. But their world outside the classroom and the teacher's world inside the classroom feel distinct and unrelated. No wonder they forget so much of what they were taught. And no wonder they usually can't use the little they can remember spontaneously or communicatively.

BRINGING THE WORLDS TOGETHER

One of our primary roles as language teachers must be to narrow this gap between the classroom world and the students' daily reality.

Some ways of achieving this are:

- (1) Creating a need for language -- introducing new language targets through techniques which help the students realize how important the language targets are before discovering them.
- (2) Personalizing language practice at every stage of a lesson.
- (3) Making extensive use of games and "fun" activities.
- (4) Distinguishing between the step-by-step development of communicative skills and the memorizing of functional expressions and dialogues.

(1) CREATING A NEED

To create a need for a language target means to use a warm-up activity which makes the students understand the importance of this language target before they learn it. They should feel a genuine and personal need for this new target. They should not feel they are being taught by the teacher. We do not start with explanation, translation, pattern practice or mechanical eliciting of the language targets. The key question to ask ourselves is *Do the students feel they are learning what they want to learn or what the teacher wants to teach?*

At the beginning of a lesson, mystery is more important than clarity. We start with a puzzle which is fun, at the right level, and requires the target words or structures in order to be solved. The students' interest in solving the puzzle motivates them to search for the new language targets, and this is when we lead them towards discovering these new words and structures for themselves.

I suggest that "creating a need" for a new language target in this way is probably our most important role as language teachers. We cannot expect our students to produce new words and structures with spontaneity and flexibility unless we have created a need for these words and structures first -- except, of course, if they are part of the small percentage of highly motivated students who will probably succeed anyway.

Example Target: *all, most, some, none*

Write the following on the board:

noses

study hard

don't do homework

gorillas

The students might be able to solve this puzzle without any help. If they need help, lead them towards the target language by asking questions like "How many of you are gorillas?" The target is "All of us...", "Most of us...", "Some of us...", "None of us..." The class may decide that none of them do their homework or that some of them are gorillas, but this just adds to the fun. The students then make their own sentences about the class, their family, their club etc., using the four sentences "All of us..." "Most of us..." "Some of us..." "None of us..."

(2) PERSONALIZATION

Personalization is often introduced too late in a lesson. It is often only after the meaning and usage of a new structure have been practiced in a non-personalized way that students are encouraged to give examples using their family, their friends, their city or other things which have more relevance in their daily lives.

If we want our students to be fully involved in the learning of new language targets, these new words and structures should be personalized during warm-up activities, comprehension checking, follow-up activities, written exercises -- in fact, at every stage of a lesson.

For example, consider these two ways of checking the students' comprehension of the sentence "Richard's a teacher":

Method A:

Teacher: What does Richard do?

Student 1: He's a teacher.

Method B: Teacher: Is Richard a ballet dancer?

Student 1: No, he isn't.

Teacher: What?

Student 1: What does he do?

Student 2: He's a teacher.

Teacher: You?

Student 2: What do you do?

Student 3: I'm a student.

Teacher: X (name of a friend, family member, movie star etc.)

Student 3: What does X do? etc.

As the second example shows, comprehension checks can provide an opportunity for the teacher to use humour and to elicit content the students are genuinely interested in. All of this can be done at a fast pace, and after students have got used to the technique, they will think of follow-up questions on their own, allowing the teacher's role to become more peripheral.

The above example is simple, but the basic problem is very simple too — we are being too academic. If we ask a comprehension question which has no connection with a student's own feeling, the exercise is academic, and the answer is only of interest to the teacher. Whatever level the students may be, if we want to train them to communicate, we must stop being academic and get inside our students' own emotions. This means relating language to their own world, in other words "personalizing" language, at every stage of a lesson.

(3) HAVING FUN

A traditional tendency has been for teachers to use "fun" activities at the end of term or on other special occasions, not in "real" lessons. Recently, these kinds of activities have been gaining more respect, but there is still a tendency for them to be used for practicing language which has previously been introduced by more conventional methods.

This division of lessons and courses into serious parts and fun parts defeats the point of the fun activities. How can less motivated students suddenly be expected to produce new language spontaneously and with feeling in these fun activities if they have only practiced this language in rational activities where they haven't been fully involved?

By having fun all the way through a lesson, the students can relax and sense and feel new words and structures, and are thus more likely to be able to produce them spontaneously and communicatively. This doesn't mean that the students just have fun; every fun activity can have a purpose and can fit into a tightly controlled course. It also doesn't mean that the students can't learn to talk about serious subjects; they can also do this

in activities where they are fully involved and enjoying themselves.

(4) STEP-BY-STEP VS. FUNCTIONAL PATTERNS

It is important to distinguish between the long-term development of communicative ability and the short-term memorizing of functional patterns.

It is sometimes considered that the best way to develop communicative competence is to memorize functional patterns and dialogues. If one of our students is going to London next week, it may be highly relevant to teach shopping or restaurant dialogues, and this will certainly improve the student's ability to communicate in London. But it is questionable whether learning these functional patterns will make much difference to that student's ability to communicate in the long term. It may in fact do a lot of harm, because the student may develop a very mechanical way of learning.

Our students are intelligent humans with curiosity and feelings: they are not parrots. When our students communicate, they need to think on their feet, react instinctively, and use language flexibly and creatively. Memorization certainly plays a role in the development of these abilities, and highly motivated students can certainly learn a lot by memorization without it necessarily affecting their ability to use language spontaneously, but for most students an overdependency on memorization may easily deaden the sense and creativity we want to foster.

If we lead our students towards discovering English in a clear step-by-step structural sequence, building their confidence, keeping them fully involved, and putting them in situations and activities where they can use these structures to achieve meaningful goals, there is a pretty good chance they will learn to communicate.

Notice the emphasis on discovery. The idea is for our students to always feel they are learning what they want and need to express themselves, not what we want to teach. Learning something is completely different from being taught something. The more we teach, the less motivated most of our students will be to learn.

IN CLOSING

Probably the most fundamental problem we face as language teachers is that over 90% of foreign language students fail to learn to communicate. Unfortunately, most of us were part of the 10% who succeeded

when we were students, so we tend to hang on to traditional assumptions. If we want our students to learn to communicate effectively, it is time to question many of those assumptions.