

# The Five Senses Of Teaching/Learning English As An International Language

Larry E. Smith  
East-West Center

We are all familiar with the five body senses: smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing. As educators we are convinced that if we increase the involvement of these senses we will facilitate learning. For example, one can learn a great deal more about the baking of bread if instead of only reading and talking about it, one actually mixes the ingredients, kneads the dough, watches it as it cooks, smells it as it bakes, and finally eats it. There is little doubt that active involvement of the body senses increases the quantity and quality of learning.

In addition to the body senses I would like to put forward five senses of teaching and learning English as an International Language (EIL) and suggest that active involvement of these will increase learning dramatically. These five senses are (1) a sense of self, (2) a sense of the audience, (3) a sense of the relationship between self and audience, (4) a sense of the situation, and (5) a sense of the goal or objective.

Before discussing these senses, perhaps I should explain why I use the term English as an International Language (EIL) rather than English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These two terms (ESL and EFL) are common ones in our profession but I believe they no longer adequately describe the way English is used in most of the world. English is becoming the principal means of communication among people of different nations. It is estimated that 700 million people living on all continents use English as their primary or secondary language. Many of these are not native speakers but they use English, sometimes with their fellow nationals (an intranational use) but more frequently with people from other countries (an international use). These people from other countries represent both native and non-native speakers of English. It may not be long before non-native users outnumber native users; therefore I believe English should be taught as an international language rather than as a second or foreign language.

ESL and EFL are both subsets of EIL but they have major limitations. ESL and EFL imply that only non-native speakers need to study the use of English for international use. You never find native English speakers in an EFL or ESL classroom as students. In an EIL class you do because it is recognized that there are many varieties of English and that native speakers need to have some exposure to varieties of English other than their own. As a native speaker of American English, I need to learn something about British English, Canadian English, Filipino English, Indian English, Singaporean English, Thai English, etc. if I am going to work with people who use those varieties.

The performance target in EFL and ESL classes is almost always the native speaker. Students in these classes are told they should sound like and write like native speakers of English. In an EIL class, students are urged to aim toward mutual intelligibility while using appropriate language for the social situation. There is no suggestion that they develop a native speaker phonology or style of writing.

In EFL and ESL classes, the students are generally only prepared to interact with native speakers of English. Sometimes, in places like Singapore, India, or the Philippines the students are taught to interact in English with their fellow countrymen. In EIL classes, non-native speaking students are prepared to interact with native speakers of English but in addition they are also prepared to deal with other non-native speakers. Native speaking students are prepared to deal with non-native speakers as well as with other native speakers who use different national varieties of English.

I am also stressing EIL rather than English as a second or foreign language because in ESL and EFL classes, the cultural component is usually that of native speakers. I think it is time to look at other cultures as well. If a Japanese businessman is going to work in Malaysia, he will most likely be doing business in English. Having knowledge about a native speaking culture will do him little good there. What he needs to know is something about the culture of Malaysia. If an American native speaker is going to work in Singapore he needs to know about the ways Singaporeans do business. How do they make requests, suggestions, and refusals? Who speaks at meetings and what are appropriate topics of discussion?

With that explanation out of the way, let's look at the five senses of teaching/learning EIL. The first is a sense of self. Socrates said, "Know thyself and to thine ownself be true." Knowing ourselves is a life long process but we need to take inventory along the way. Today in knowing myself, I need to recognize that I am a white, middle-class American male. I am color blind and have flat feet. But these are rather simple, basic things about me. What about my values? How do I rank order things like honesty, integrity, fidelity, personal freedom, harmony, cooperation, wealth, power, faith, pleasure? When there is a conflict between or among any of these, which one is most powerful? I need to know these things

about myself and students of English need to know these things about themselves. They also need to realize that in studying English there is no reason not to remain themselves. One's ethnic, religious, and political background is an important part of one's identity. There is no need to pretend they change somehow when learning English. Students will certainly want to use English well and be recognized as those who do but this does not require them to try and change their identity. Language and culture are inextricably tied together. It is not possible to use a language without having a culture base. However one language is not inextricably tied to one culture. English already represents many cultures and it can be used by anyone as a means to express himself and his own cultural heritage. If it is used as a cloak to cover one's identity, it will only look ill-fitting. Using English does not make one a different person. There is no need to become more "Western" in order to use it well. One's morals and dedication to family traditions need not change at all. A sense of self is the first and perhaps the most important sense in learning English as an international language.

The second sense is a sense of the audience. In order to communicate most effectively with anyone, I need to know as much about them as possible. The more I know and understand someone, the greater are my chances for effective communication. That doesn't mean that once I am familiar with someone I will never misunderstand him, but it should mean that I am better able to cope with the misunderstanding and correct it more easily. In the study of English, one needs to know something about the prospective audience. If one is speaking or writing English to a Thai, knowing something about an American will not do him too much good. Non-native speakers frequently use English with other non-native speakers in business and the travel industry and their knowing about native speakers will not help a great deal in these cases. People who work with Thais need to know that they are more subtle and indirect than Americans and that a Thai audience is not as likely to be impressed by facts and figures as they are with form and style. We must learn as much about our prospective audience as is possible. Of course personal experience is the best way to get this knowledge, but much of it will have to come from reading about the experiences of others.

The third sense of teaching/learning EIL is a sense of the relationship between self and the audience. The degree of affiliation or distance between speaker and hearer will help to determine the register of the language we use. We don't speak to a stranger and an old friend in the same way. The status of the participants and the social distance between them are very important factors when speaking languages like Thai and Japanese, but they are also important considerations when using English in international settings.

The fourth sense of teaching/learning EIL is a sense of the social situation. We don't talk the same way at a funeral as we do at a wedding. There are formal and informal occasions that each of us participate in. We must be prepared to adjust our language use for different social situations. This is especially important in international settings and it is the kind of information we should be teaching in our English classes.

The fifth sense of teaching/learning EIL is a sense of the goal or objective to be accomplished. We don't use the same verbal and non-verbal behavior when we want to show interest as we do when we want to express disappointment. The objective may be very specific (e.g. to borrow money or refuse to loan money) or more general (make a good impression or keep the conversation alive) but it must be kept in mind if we are going to achieve it. In cultures like Thailand the overriding goal may be to show concern for the feelings of others which is demonstrated in the almost constant display of "Kreengjai" while in Australia the overriding objective may be to show that we are all "mates." Having a clear understanding of the goal/objective is essential if communication is to be facilitated.

I have dealt with these five senses of teaching and learning EIL because I fear one, two, or sometimes all five are being forgotten in our English classes. We sometimes have taught English as if the student must forget who he is and become like someone else. We have sometimes pretended that all audiences will be made up of native speakers although any visit to a hotel or government conference proves that is not so. We have sometimes acted as if there is only one possible relationship between speaker and hearer and only one social setting. We know that people do not speak and write English in the same way at all times but our classroom activities have not always reflected that knowledge. We have sometimes--dare I say often--neglected to state our goals of communication and to help our students in stating and understanding theirs.

It is common knowledge that if we increase the involvement of the body senses we will increase learning. The same is true of the five senses of teaching/learning EIL. The greater the involvement and understanding of self, the audience, the relationship between self and audience, the social situation, and the goal or objective, the greater the possibility of accurate communication using English as an international language.

Stories of M. L. Boonlua preceded my introduction to her by several years. However as is so often true of gifted people none of the stories could do her justice—perhaps because such stories focus only on one facet or quality of the person. In order to truly appreciate a diamond we must consider all the facets.

The story I want to tell is not a look at the whole diamond, but one facet which endeared her to me. Together with other memories that may be expressed in this journal one may get to know the diamond that is Boonlua.

At a conference at the East–West Center in 1978, the delegates were seated alphabetically in the circular U.N. style arrangement. This put Boonlua up front in perhaps the second seat. This was hardly the place for one who wanted to see every thing that was taking place, much less for one who had to have a cigarette every now and again. She lasted until the first paper was over and then she moved to the back near me in the U, V, W, section.

It was perhaps the second day, after we had listened to many learned papers presented by outstanding people, when one of the participants was giving a rather scholarly rebuttal or response to the previous speaker that Boonlua's hand shot up in the air dropping ashes without concern and her clear voice rang out, "Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman would you please ask the learned gentleman from Great Britain to repeat what he just said in simple words so a poor old Thai lady can understand him."

It was what the conference needed, and everyone became aware that there was a "presence" present.

In the East–West Center there are many meetings and the words "Mr. Chairman" are heard quite often. Whenever I hear them Boonlua is there.