

Re: Teaching and Learning English in Hong Kong

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On Sun, 27 Mar 2005 06:45:31 -0800, phippmartin thought carefully and wrote:

- > *Hi. I tried to call you but it was Sunday. When is a good time? :) You*
- > *can also try calling my cell phone: 0917476998*

I sent you a text message. Hope to hear from you tomorrow.

- > *Younger students tend to pick up spoken English faster. But they can*
- > *only learn so much in one semester. True story: I asked a*
- > *kindergartener once "Do you like fish?" and she stammered "Yes, I am...*
- > *Yes, I can..." Which was fine. It takes a while for students to learn*
- > *the grammatical rules. It's a lot easier for them to learn the*
- > *substitution patterns "It is...", "It is a...", etc. or the pat*
- > *responses "I am fine, thank you" but it takes a lot of practice for them*
- > *to actually converse meaningfully.*

Agree, sort of.

- > *Yes, because they know the grammar in theory but don't use it.*
- > *Similarly, I have zero speaking ability in Japanese now, even though I*
- > *did study it for a while.*
- >
- >> *Students who can use English to express their own thoughts are the path*
- >> *to fluency.*
- >
- > *Indeed. Which is why I do ask students not to discuss things amongst*
- > *themselves in Chinese before they answer me in English. They need to*
- > *break the habit of translating everything they think from Chinese into*
- > *English before they answer me.*

Agree. BTW, in my school's classrooms, speaking Chinese is forbidden. Neither the teacher, nor the students are allowed to speak Chinese during the class.

- >> *My students are motivated by successfully acquiring useful skills.*
- >
- > *Except that step one is convincing them that being able to speak a*

> *foreign language IS a useful skill.*

Actually, pleasure in learning is (usually) enough.

>> *I provide a motivational role model by showing them that THEY can express themselves in English.*

>

> *I think you mean that the students who can speak English well serve as role models for the other students.*

No. I mean that when they experience expressing themselves in English, it motivates them to learn more. This experience happens in the first class, when they say, "It is a pig" understanding what they have said.

> *.....Oh but when the weaker students start to understand, their motivation does pick up! I've certainly noticed that!*

They should "understand" from the very beginning. Good teaching and a good syllabus should ensure that.

> *Students get confused when the same flashcards are used for he/she, boy/girl, Jim/Mary, brother/sister, etc. You need to provide more context than that. One time I had to explain the word "cousin" to kindergarten students without knowing the word in Korean. Any suggestions?*

Cousin is extremely hard for complex cultural reasons. When we meet we can discuss this. The best way to teach "cousin" is (1) wait until they know all the other family terms perfectly and (2) draw a family tree on the white board, with familiar names for each node.

Then say, Johan is Mary's cousin. Mary is John's cousin. John is Susan's brother. He is not Susan's cousin. John is Mary's cousin. Who else is Mary's cousin.

[They should answer Susan]

I strongly agree that the context MUST be clear. If the context is confusing, the exercise is worse than useless, it is damaging.

>> *Explaining the difference doesn't produce fluency. My way does.*

>

> *I disagree. If you were studying Chinese, you'd probably want to know what the particles "de" and "le" mean.*

I am and I don't.

I want to be taught correct sentences. I will figure out on my own what they "mean". [Hint: de doesn't mean "apostrophe s"]

- > *Some things need to be explained, especially when they are concepts we*
- > *aren't familiar with in our own language.*

Actually it is the familiar ones (subject) which can most usefully be "explained". The Chinese don't have a Past Perfect tense, and teacher after teacher has "explained" it to them, without results.

My advanced students FEEL the meaning. Explanation is neither helpful nor necessary.

After all your Mother didn't explain English, did she?

- >> *A student preparing to take that test HAS TO be able to read English*
- >> *well enough to study English grammar in English.*
- >
- > *Actually, no. The questions given on the GEPT writing test at the*
- > *intermediate level are all given in Chinese. I was floored when I saw*
- > *that.*

That is not an English test in any sense of the word.

- > *No. Just say "past tense" and then elicit the correct sentence. Don't*
- > *just make them repeat after you. Otherwise they'll keep making the same*
- > *mistake. Really.*

When did you teach your first English class in Asia. I have been doing it since 1987, and you are wrong. Flat wrong.

- > *A common mistake is "I play computer". I would ask "Did you play*
- > *computer games?" They would say either say "Yes" or say "No, I checked*
- > *my e-mail". If it was the latter then I would say "So you weren't*
- > *playing, were you?"*
- >
- > *Finally a kid confronted me. He asked me why he couldn't say "play*
- > *computer" if he was checking e-mail so I explained that checking e-mail*
- > *is not a game, so you don't play it. He NEEDED the explanation and*
- > *appreciated it.*

Whatever.

- >> *My students don't make those mistakes, because I teach them how to say*
- >> *something is spicy and how to say something has alcohol in it. They*
- >> *learn bus stop and bus station by looking flashcards that clearly*
- >> *distinguish them. Etc.*
- >
- > *If you don't know they have this problem though you might encounter*
- > *serious confusion later on. I once asked a student "Is there a bus*
- > *station near here?" and he told me that there was one right outside at*
- > *the corner!*

He didn't study English in my school.

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Of course I know about that confusion. But better than fixing it is avoiding its creation. They make that (and many other mistakes) BECAUSE OF learning by translation.

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Love, Jim