

# Re: Teaching and Learning English in Hong Kong

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2005-03/3410.html>

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Date: 03/28/05

Date: 27 Mar 2005 22:46:27 -0800

Jim Walsh wrote:

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

> *wrote:*

> > *.....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.*

Which is why I like to teach children from the very beginning. But even when you are teaching kids you get students who join classes in progress. It is the way bushibans work.

When you say "from the beginning", I assume that means you are teaching young children then. All in all, I've had more experience now with older children and adults. It is a bit different.

> > *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"]*

There are more uses of "de" than the possessive.

> > *Somethings 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?*

Second language acquisition is different from first language acquisition. How do you "explain" grammar to someone who doesn't understand any language yet? These students are not starting from zero: they already know one language and their knowledge of one language can be used as a tool to help them learn a new one.

- > > *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.*

It is a test of their ability to write English. Similarly, the listening and reading tests are multiple choice and don't require speaking or writing ability.

- > > *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.*

I've been teaching in Asia since 1997.

Are you saying that listening and repeating is the way to go?

We might have to agree to disagree. I am not going to take responsibility for how you teach your class. That is your choice. It's a question of whatever methods you personally feel comfortable with.

> > *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.  
>  
> 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.*****

Maybe. But the fact is that most people in Taiwan started studying English in junior high school. I have new students here at Chungtai (for me, starting in January) who finished high school last June and apparently can't speak a word of English. When everybody I teach will have started learning English in kindergarten then it will make things a lot easier for me. Until then, I will have to explain things to them so they can better understand. It's a big part of my job.

Martin