

A Change of Attitude and Other Questions Regarding Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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“You are not a teacher.” Is that so? I should have asked- when a retired English teacher addressed these words to me; who had no idea he was talking to a trained colleague, only heard the following answers to a common question, What is it that you do? When I said, and I quote “I help university students to come over their fears and blockages to give them courage and bravery to be more fluent and authentic on their verbal English exams. I approach them as a friend, someone they can trust and be honest with and they do not to be afraid of in any way. They can feel free and as an equal.” “Because you are not a teacher.” The response is followed.

So let’s spend a moment on this man’s words. So that would mean none of the above mention activities shall be part of a teacher’s job or a teacher should not do any of them because it is not what teaching is about? Or every teacher should stick to the syllabus? Or only lexical knowledge can be taught? Then what is teaching about? If not helping to overcome fears, helping walls to come down, making frightening obstacles look hideous- isn’t it what every teacher should do in every lesson towards every student? Because in my opinion, it is. At least that is one of the most important reasons why I teach- to make the unapproachable problem look solvable or even easy. To show the power of creation and the power of our minds (and fears and courage) within every single one of us. To believe in the hidden talent in everyone, to teach them to believe in themselves even if others do not see any potential in them. And I do not expect any less from any of my colleagues. So after his interesting and thought provoking note, I corrected this man, I held about a half an hour lecture about all the alternative methods we have been learning, teaching, perfecting and practicing in Hungary and about the DIE program in England and about the change of role a teacher can fill and so on.

The question though still remains- Why? Why was that so important for this man to feel he is above anyone or anything? Because that was the attitude he was projecting also towards me, also towards the students he was talking about. So here is an unsolvable mystery: Why certain teachers like to make children fear

them? That is the attitude I wish to raise attention to. The hierarchy based "Only I know something perfectly, you may try to come close" way of thinking. The unnecessary use and projection of it. I find and have found it most useless and even harmful in language teaching. When we are trying to achieve a common mental platform, speak to each other on another language, learn to express ourselves and communicate on a foreign way already takes a tremendous amount of courage and bravery! I cannot see any other way to reach this common mindset then to be equals in the classroom, private lessons, Skype lessons where all mistakes are welcome! (This catchphrase appears lately on every kindergarten's website! Why can't we see in high school's sites?) It is challenging to teach almost anything. We simply must admit that. It is hard and an everlasting process and whomever says otherwise is either a born and raised educator or really not bright who have had never tried to spread knowledge in the world. In that spirit and following the previous thought- apparently teaching English seems easy for some people. I even had the chance to meet future teachers who had absolutely no clue about nor the methodology of teaching (anything not just languages), neither the role they would be „playing“, not to mention dramatic, theatrical speech exercises that could help their future apprentices' pronunciation and language skills (which I personally think crucial to every successful English lesson) and the most frightening fact was that they thought with complete and unshakable confidence that they were already trained and ready to teach! And as an „educational anthropologist“ I could not help but ask the questions: Why? How? How come? What are the sources of the problem and what could be solving them?!

In this paper I will present some of the basic questions I am working on and wish to continue to investigate in a form of a PhD thesis. These are only not yet fully analyzed notes, thoughts and ideas that have been gathered and raised by observation, participating observation, interviews and they are only pre- analyzed and not yet backed up with professional literature. Here you will be reading mostly about the current French situation-with Hungarian and Dutch or English comparison in cases.

Without further due here is the first question and suggestion: Why don't we teach how to read in English? Let's teach reading English like natives do! Before you go ahead and roll your eyes, please think for a second. I did not ask why don't we teach how to read English- because as you may know it very well, teachers tend to teach how to pronounce letters and words, some of them even bother to teach applied phonetics -but here lies the problem. Comprehensive reading is different from just reading letters and words out loud. Have you ever noticed that other elements also exist in a language, like syllables and sintagms and reading is not only about pronouncing

letters after one another, but requires intonation, rhythm, pauses, stress and modality? And recognizing those syllables and expressions and starting to understand the literal meaning and the recognizing the meaning beyond the word or words. Where are those things written in a beginners English text book? I learnt phonetics from a very dedicated teacher who loved English so much, she married an American man. No one ever bothered to spend time with us to re-teach us the alphabet and also to teach it backwards- to make the use of dictionary faster, or took the time to listen to the same song two hundred times until we got the lyrics right, or order and actually age appropriate book, like Chatterbox. (Personal note- I still remember all the memorizers we were given to learn- such as: „I want to be a judge because I’m interested in the law“- said a freshly released inmate from prison- which seemed hilarious at the time.) The point is, that it has been proven that bringing the language close by using age-and maybe even gender or personal interest-fitting materials achieving higher personal involvement, deeper interest is doable without a doubt! So what if we stop using Headway and Grapevine for all ages and levels and try to distinguish and personalize? Question and suggestion number two.

If we go deeper into the best example I ever had, we still have to notice that even she didn’t teach us to find syllables and read syllables and find the meaning of more elaborate sentences as they do it in England or the USA or New-Zeeland or any other Anglo-Saxon country where English is the official language. I dare to ask the question: why? Why don’t we teach how to read English as we teach our pupils (and students) how to read their mother tongue? Three university students went under experimentations within the last academic year and they all showed the same results. When they started to learn to find and pronounce and intonate syllables words and sentences properly, their speech improved, their level of fluency got higher. (So far all experiments were made on students of similar ages and educational and financial and familial backgrounds. Yes all of the factors mentioned do matter.)

Personally, I believe that there is a gap between learning letters and words and creating sentences. We skip a step at least, if not more. If they teach searching and finding syllables, most common letter connections, words and expressions with the right length, rhythm, tone, modality and stressing, why don’t we? And if at this point your answer is „We do not have the time for this kind of foolishness, young lady!“ then I have to tell you that nowadays there are more and more adult students who are searching and paying serious amounts of money for this and these kind of teachers, trainers, coaches, who can teach them (again) how to read out loud properly and speak in public with more confidence, calmness and better pronunciation so young adults and adults whose work language

is English can make a better impression when they present their scientific findings, research paper or even PhD. The students mentioned above have been learning English for over 15-20 years or more as we almost all do or did and yet they need more time and practice. But why? How about if we reverse all this and start everything with the actual (according to me) basics not with grammar or basic words? Ask yourself how many times have you used the word sponge or ink in your life (before you started to teach English (if you do)) and how many times did you have to use the right stressing? You shall find a huge difference.

We shall revisit the main topic of this article, about the attitude and the need for a change. Do we really need to raise a question or can we all just agree on the fact the up till now used integrity and power based methods are safe to say not working? Whereas my friendly and direct (build close personal connection to the students- such as learnt interest and family situation-school issues) way of approaching is working. (Some parts of the syllabus can be taught by self-discovery in group work and some by frontal teaching, but most of the use of English, the vocabulary and verbal presentation of it shall be taught in a personalized and dramatized way in my opinion.) Suggestion and question number three.

Why do we need another approach from frontal teaching and why do I say no to strictness? In the past I had the chance to see several teens learning German from scratch to intermediate level in less than a year or eighteen months where strictness was the teacher's key method. Alongside with frontal teaching, homework that took several hours to complete and constant repetition to put the skills into the long term memory. (But did it really work and stay there? No, it did not.) This teacher was considered a semi Goddess for her success rates. Her students almost always passed the required state certifications. Which by itself should be or could have been a good thing, so to speak, right? But no. It was as fake as it could be. None of her students I knew uses the language they have a certification of and they don't even dare to try using it. They are not confident in the language, they didn't have, they weren't given the time to get comfortable with the language, the culture, they didn't learn how to think on that foreign language, they just learnt several rules and words and put them next to each other and applied them as an exercise. Is this how languages work and people operate? Languages are living and changing. How could one think of it as an equation that's elements are perfectly controllable and be prepared for every possible variation? How come I have never met anyone who learnt and speaks English as if it was a realization of a recipe? Sociolinguistics is about our moods and choices of words and choices of expressions and the tone we use. These things hardly can be genuine if they don't come naturally, if they are not the reflection of

our thoughts but learnt and repeated patterns. And in my opinion being able to share one's thoughts with another member of another nation shall be one of the main goals of learning a foreign language.

France, and French English teachers. This is a problematic case. Maybe that's the word that describes the most the current situation in language teaching and in the French education in general. A study just had been conducted and published that just proved a theory I created about three years ago that said – „French students do not dare to speak English because they are afraid... (of several things)“. And no surprise, a new official study shows that French students in general do not dare to answer even the simplest questions in a test they are not familiar with because they are so frightened to give the wrong answer.

So here is another question and a suggestion: Why French teachers use their mother tongue more in English lessons than English in certain cases? I already asked the question mentioned to a native English university professor continuing with: "Did you need French to learn English?" And all I got right away was a body language sign – arms strictly cross, conversation over. But a week later I was invited to the beginning of a new semester where they introduced a brand new course: French in English lessons- An enemy or an ally? So I suggest here and now, let's hold every English lesson in English, also in universities (except for one lesson and one only- translation)! If we go deeper into the methodology of English lessons in France and compare it to Dutch or (good) Hungarian lessons, significant differences can be found. For example the following sentence was used in Holland in a ten year old age group: „How do you say to word *bloemen* in English?" Whereas the same sentence sound like this in a French English lesson: "Common tu dit le mot *flower* en Francais?" And the Hungarian lessons come close to the Dutch ones. If we observe them closely, we can deduct a 70-80% difference. Which number also can be a rough estimate of the fluent English speakers in Holland which is unfortunately more or less equivalent with the number of the strugglers in French. I am all for this to change for the better...

