

## Trying to keep *English lessons* from being *boring*

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In June 2012 I completed my 37<sup>th</sup> year of teaching English in Macau. Previously I had taught in Ireland for two years and eight years in Hong Kong. You can imagine the great changes that I have seen in the attitudes of students in that time. In 1975 most students were poor and education was the key to a better life so they worked very hard. Nowadays material things come too easily and there is not the same urgency. Down the years, ideas about how English as a second language should be taught have come and gone; textbooks that were supposed to make everything easier for everyone came and went; and the problem of keeping students "awake" and attentive in class is still with us!

I feel sure we have all had experience of students who appear to be exhausted even before class begins in the morning. This is not too surprising since students today do have very many external distractions: late nights on the internet, mobile phones, part time jobs, etc. All that comes before studying and doing homework! Of course, there are always those students who are eager to learn English and they are the ones who pay attention and participate no matter what is going on in the class. The ongoing problem about how to motivate and keep the attention of all students will always be with us.

Personally, I would say that I have succeeded in teaching English more effectively in the playground rather than formally in the classroom. But even here

I find change. In the past, students would approach me to practice speaking. Some would actively join in the conversation while others benefitted by just listening quietly. Today very few approach me and when I approach them, some turn and walk away pretending they have not seen me!! (It could be me; maybe I am not in their wavelength anymore!)

For the past number of years I have been teaching only the top classes, Form 5 and now Form 6. The level I have always aimed at is that when students leave school, they are at a competent level and will not have too much difficulty in using English as a tool in their future studies and work. They have a good foundation and they can build on that.

One of the failings I have noticed in recent years is a deterioration in the ability of students to understand passages and answer context questions. The reason for this is, I believe, the unwillingness of students to read independently - even good students claim they do not like to read. (I realize that this is almost a universal problem.)

I do not use any textbook! Instead I take passages from different sources, especially passages that have been used in the various university entrance examinations Macau students need to take. In this way, the students experience a very varied type of passage and, since they may be answering questions on a similar type of passage a few months later, they show a bit more interest.



When studying a passage, I ask students to read one or two sentences and then ask the reader to explain the last sentence he has read. Often he does not know what he has read! ... Sometimes I will ask another student a question and this helps to keep most students alert. The big problem is, of course, the large number of students in a class, the limited amount of time and the students' (in) ability to answer quickly. So, from time to time I give sudden written quizzes: this can mean printing out a question paper or simply dictating a few questions which they have to answer in writing. I do not believe in giving too many tests as they are very time consuming. They are also a cause of distraction in other classes --- students trying to secretly study the subject of their test ignoring what they should be studying. I feel tests do not help students to learn as they are interested only in their mark and try to avoid correcting and learning from their mistakes. I give tests but put more emphasis on their participation in class.

As 6<sup>th</sup> Year students have been studying English grammar for at least ten years, I see no point in teaching formal grammar again in F.6. Instead, I ask a student to explain a construction we meet in a passage to his classmates. For example: "Why is the 'to infinitive' used here?" or "What tense is that and why is it used in the context?", etc. At first they may be unable to do so, but very quickly they begin to recognize the various patterns and the majority will be able to answer. Hopefully a classmate who has not understood will ask him to explain again later. After some time I find a definite improvement in the accuracy of the written work of most of them.

Another time-filler at the end of a class is to write a sentence on the board and ask the students to "rewrite as directed" or "correct an error in the sentence". Through lack of reading the proofreading skills of students are very poor, but again they improve and this exercise takes little time. Again, one has to alert for the students who sit back and wait to be given the answer.

The part of class my students seem to enjoy most is what I call "Question and Answer". It means one student gives a short presentation on any subject of his choice. Then all the students in his row MUST ask him a question based on his topic. Other students are free to ask questions too. I allocate 10 - 15 minutes for this exercise every day. Often, if the students are interested in the topic, the exercise can go on for the whole class. One has to be aware when students start asking silly questions just to 'waste' time and stop the exercise at that point. It is very easy to spot the students who are really participating and those who avoid asking questions. Because everyone in the same line as the presenter MUST ask a question, every student has to make the effort from time to time. Students like this so much that past pupils often ask me if we still have "Question and Answer" in class. They encourage me to keep it up as they themselves found it interesting in class and that it gave them confidence in speaking English when they left school. I advise students not to present topics or ask questions that are too personal e.g. family matters, or hurtful e.g. unpopular teachers. Some do this exercise very well. Recently a student kept his classmates buzzing with questions on the topic, "Will Power". He was very good. I also inform students that this is part of an on-going assessment and that they will not have a formal oral examination at the end of term so their active participation is very important.

I would love to think a reader or two will have got an idea that they might adapt and try in their own classrooms. There is no one perfect method of inspiring students to study. There is merit in all ways and ultimately it all depends on the self-motivation of students.

