



Tell Me What you Want

Giving your students the tools they need for genuine expression

Please stop me if this sounds familiar to you: A- Hi. B- Hello. A- How are you? B- Fine, thank you. And you? A- Fine, thank you.

I was recently involved in a discussion about dialogues of this sort on the ETJ mailing list. The question was, how much of this kind of dialogue do our youngest students really understand, and how can we tell? As English teachers, it seems that student understanding should be a basic consideration with anything we teach; but, if our students can parrot set phrases that sound like English, can you really assume that they've actually learned any English?

Language without comprehension is communicatively void. It has no meaning whatsoever to the speaker. If my concern is to teach communicative English to my students, what should I be teaching, and how?

Since that discussion (and again in writing this article) I've had to re-examine my assumptions towards presenting new English structures. I teach many, very different, kinds of kindergarten and early-elementary classes, but here are a few general principles that I've come to follow in my teaching.

Take the initial dialogue. It is, admittedly, a very important exchange, and our students will certainly encounter something like it later on. But, why go through all the trouble of teaching something, and practicing something, if your students don't know what they are saying? Unless you explain to them, in Japanese, the meaning of "How are you?" they have no real way of understanding what you are asking them to say.

The key to promoting real understanding and interest here is, I think, choice and personalisation. Why not also teach your students "happy", "sad", "sick", "depressive" and "manic" (maybe with appropriate mimes, and pictures)? By providing them a few alternative answers, and asking them to choose between them, you can see whether your students understand what they are saying to each other - and even greeting dialogues can become a fun game. This same principle holds true with expressing likes and dislikes, desires, and other language related to their internal selves - children as young as three or four can understand and enjoy telling you what they think.

Another important way of promoting, and assessing, understanding is to give your students the simple word, "No." This really should be one of the first words you teach a group of students. Then give them the opportunity to use it - often. It's a quick and dirty test to gauge understanding, plus there is little that injects enthusiasm into a class as quickly as the opportunity to prove the teacher wrong. Show them a card they can already describe in English. T- "It's an elephant." Ss - "NO!" T- "Yes. It's an elephant." Ss- "No! It's a mammoth!" Or, have a similar dialogue about the weather. Five and six year olds love this kind of thing, and younger students are quick to follow their lead. Try to catch your students off guard, and surprise them. It's a fantastic feeling, watching a class of kids repeating every word that comes out of your mouth by rote, then grind to a halt when they realize you are completely wrong, and then desperately try to show you the correct answer (T- "It's a purple cow." Ss- "No! It's a black, white cow!")

Make sure you also teach the words, "Okay!" and "Yes!" or the kids will drive you crazy.

Also, it is crucially important to

use the vocabulary the students already know in different contexts. Don't teach a phrase like, "Can I go to the toilet?" when you've already taught requests and "Toilet, please," works just as well. Why try and drill the, meaningless, phrase "Simon says" into their heads, when "Jump, please. Run, please," consolidates the notion of polite requests?

A corollary of this principle is to be careful what vocabulary you teach. Keep in mind long-range targets, not just immediate ones. Don't throw lots of new words at your students never to use them again. Use words that your students can immediately relate to. Your classroom can be a good source of vocabulary: door, window, trash can, board. These simple words can be used many times in many ways. Flash cards are a great way to bring the world into your classroom, but choose ones that can be used to illustrate, and reinforce, several language points instead of just one. By

combining old words with new patterns, children are involving themselves in meaningful conversation and demonstrating comprehension. If they say, "Yummy! I love hippopotamus!" they are either fooling around (which is good), or have no idea what they are saying (which is bad). Animal cards are excellent - you can initially teach the animal words, then use the same animals to reinforce big and little. And then perhaps go on to colors then verbs using the same animals. Children as young as four like songs where they can look at a flash card and sing something like "The kangaroo is jumping!"

It is relatively easy to teach even very young children the forms of English and train them until it sounds like they're having a conversation. But, our goals need to be more ambitious. We should be thinking about making the English we teach mean something in the minds of our students. By giving them the linguistic

tools to choose their responses to questions, to respond with their own thoughts and ideas, and to use the language they've already mastered in a variety of different contexts; and then providing them real opportunities to use that language in the classroom, I think we are enabling our students. We're giving them meaningful language that they can communicate with. ■

Bibliography: I've used, and disliked, many curricula, but now I base most of my kindergarten classes around *Tiny Talk* (Oxford), by Susan Rivers. I also borrow heavily from David Paul's *Finding Out* series (Heinemann). Most of my good ideas were pulled from one, or both, of these sources.

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