

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

Aloha and welcome to another addition of Teacher Talk. We hope that everyone has had a nice week. Here in the US we are about to celebrate the holiday season. At night, everywhere you look there are brightly colored lights decorating buildings and shopping centers.

This week I went to another teacher development workshop. It was on pronunciation. I teach pronunciation when teaching vocabulary or incidentally if a student makes a mistake. I also teach it in grammar lessons (just yesterday we talked about how “You’d better” often sounds like “You better”). I have also taught it in by using minimal pairs (e.g. “ship” or “sheep”). However, I never felt very confident about it or it was a successful part of my lessons. Therefore, I was very impressed with some of my colleagues’ suggestions. One teacher suggested making individual pronunciation groups based on shared problem areas (e.g. students who have problems with r and l work together on r and l activities and students that cannot make the th sound work together) and taping the students. What a great idea...for a small class or private lesson. Another teacher suggested using pronunciation lessons as warm-ups at the very beginning of class. This was a good idea for me, because many times when I bring pronunciation lessons to class, they end up the activity I don’t have time for. How about you? How do you teach pronunciation?

Classroom Speech

Last week we featured expressions for clarifying student speech. The following are expressions to hesitate and rephrase.

To hesitate:

Now, let me think...
Hold on...
Just a second...
Just a minute...
Let me collect my thoughts...
How can I put it...?
(And the favorite of all English speakers) Ummm...

To rephrase/self-correct:

I mean... Sorry, what I meant to say was... What I mean is... Or rather... Did I say (word)? I meant (other word). I just wanted to add...

Teaching Tip:

I use to never give dictations. I thought they were dull and not a good use of time. However, I had one class of students who loved them and begged for them. Slowly, I began to see that they were useful for focusing on the small points of English that often get left out, like articles and prepositions. They also help with spelling and (of course) listening.

This week's teaching tip is quick and easy. It was told to me by my friend George Harrison (not the Beatle who just passed away). Instead of doing a traditional dictation, the students must listen to a short passage several times. Afterwards, they get into small groups and try to recreate the dictation from memory. This way the students are more focused on the meaning of the passage and practice forms to get their meaning across.

Thoughts to consider:

I heard some interesting anecdotes about pronunciation. The workshop leader was a non-native speaker of English. She said that one day, after she had been in the U.S. for some time, someone corrected her pronunciation. It was shocking to her, because she had never realized that the correct sound for the word existed in English. Once she became aware of this sound, she heard it everywhere and could consciously produce it. Still, it took some time before she was able to make the sound without thinking.

Another woman from Hong Kong shared an experience about learning to say the word, "the". She had a patient tutor who sat with her for an hour teaching this one sound. She said it took half an hour for her to even hear the difference between "da" and "the". On the way home, she said she practiced it over and over. Still, it was a while before she learned to produce the sound naturally.

Maybe some of you have similar stories.

The point of these stories was the same point as the old proverb, "Rome wasn't built in a day". It means that we build our knowledge and abilities gradually. This was welcome news to me. I often go into class with the attitude: "Okay. I have ten weeks. I have to teach the students everything about the subject and make sure they remember." In reality, that is an impossible goal and I need to keep in mind that the fruits of our labor (the benefits of our teaching) may show up much later.

Well, that's all for this week. I hope you all have a wonderful week.



Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have. Mahalo!

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