

**“You Get What You Need:”
My Educational Practice**

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A few core ideas form the framework of how I teach English and what I expect from students. These ideas are based on my education and experience, academic research, as well as feedback from students. Teaching is not a static occupation, to do it well requires flexibility and reflective thinking.

One fundamental idea involves practical course content. I have gradually developed materials for teaching English Conversation, Business English (English II and Communication Skills), and Global Course Essay Writing classes. Making practical and challenging materials with a high interest level is an ongoing process.

Class atmosphere is also a very important part of education. For example, students must participate by being active in class, particularly with speaking activities. They must cooperate with each other and show respect to classmates to create a more engaging learning environment. Students have to switch partners often, and must speak English with many class members in each activity. This should be a shared goal since everyone wants to improve their English and communicate with their partners. My English classes have plenty of opportunities for students to communicate in a friendly, low-stakes atmosphere, while utilizing skills they have previously learned but may have never really activated.

Another goal for students is to develop critical thinking skills. Students *can* activate higher level thinking skills in a foreign language. For example, in information gap activities, students are focused on solving a problem. Taking longer turns in speaking activities develops language

ability and critical thinking. Examples include making summaries, and doing short speeches or presentations. A “poster carousel” presentation format allows students to present multiple times with different audiences that ask disparate questions.

Although I primarily teach conversation, all four English skills are a part of my lessons. Writing is fundamentally an act of thinking that requires a series of judgments, organization and communication of ideas. To do so in a foreign language is a challenge that students should be exposed to. Timed writings, with an emphasis on idea generation are an important way to foster thinking in English. In addition, at least once a semester every student is assigned to write a structured, formal essay to communicate their ideas.

Reading is also important for improving English skills. Reading extensively and developing reading speed help students recognize language patterns, add vocabulary, and use “another sense” to develop facility with the language. Students are required to read at least 50,000 words of English outside of class each semester and class leaders usually surpass 100,000 words. This reading is verified through on-line quizzes from the MReader.org web site, which also records and tabulates quiz results and word count totals.

Students need to learn to develop autonomy, which is the ability to take control of their own learning, and develop their own learning strategies. They do this by selecting their own levels and genre of books to read, choosing discussion topics and conversation partners that suit their

level, and developing independent learning habits. When students learn how to learn from their own successes and failures, they can become more efficient and independent learners in the future.

Communication is the most important function of the classroom, and students have ample opportunities to express their opinions and describe their experiences. Students have ideas they would like to express, and want to hear their classmates' ideas and opinions as well. They can gain a sense of accomplishment by being able to improve their English communication skills.

There are limits to how much students can learn when they have full schedules of challenging classes. Still, progress can be made. Developing an awareness of how English is used and noticing patterns and structures are small steps towards fluency. As proficiency improves, certain aspects of language become easier and speaking and listening become more automatic. Ensuring students have the opportunity to develop these fundamentals provides a foundation they can build upon in their future English language endeavors.

My evolution as an English teacher continues. There is always more to learn, and improve upon. Progress for students is incremental, as it is for the teacher. After a year or two of English conversation, Students might not “get what they want,” but they do have the opportunity to “get what they need.”

