

A FANTASY CLASS...

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... where the students are talking! conversing! with each other! freely! in English!

Sound impossible, or unlikely? Well, it is possible, and it is likely, if both teachers and students are willing and able to rethink what we have considered their "traditonal" roles, and try something new.

As teachers, we bemoan the small amount of time our students actually spend conversing, discussing, and generally using extended discourse in the English classroom. We know that they are able to babble on endlessly in their own language outside of class, and wish they would apply some of this ability to their work with us.

Let's look at the situation outside of class and inside. Outside the classroom, our students talk in order to exchange information, ask and answer each other, disagree, agree, solve problems, make plans, and evaluate people and things, in an atmosphere free of language error, correction, and concern for accuracy. Once inside the classroom, these ~~same~~ students have become accustomed to a fog of tension accompanying what each of them says, because of the possibility—even probability—of making a mistake, which is considered a mark of failure in a classroom. Of course they clam up!

What would happen if we began to think of our English lessons as divided into two parts: one, accuracy; the other, fluency? Would we, as teachers, be able to let our students talk, errors notwithstanding, during the "fluency times," and save our correction for the "accuracy times"? Could we really turn the learning over to the students? Let's see what can happen.

Suppose that on the first day of a new term, or somewhere at random in the middle of the school year --it makes no difference-- you were to ask your students to "take a number" as they came into the classroom, and group themselves so that all fours are together, all sevens together, and so on? The numbers group the students into teams (or task forces, or workgroups, or whatever you or they want to call them) of four or five each in which they will work together for the next month. This means some reshuffling of the seating arrangements, and you may prefer to divide the class into groups in some other way; no problem: it's your classroom, after all! I like groups of four; recently another teacher told me that he prefers groups of five, so there will be a tie-breaker-- a very valid reason.

Now there are these groups. Now what? What are the students in groups for? Why, to work together, of course: to talk, exchange information, ask and answer each other, disagree, agree, solve problems, make plans, evaluate people and things haven't we just said that about another situation? Hmmm, can the skills of the native language in the "outside world" really be transferred to the classroom? Yes. It works.

Clearly, students at the beginning level will be capable of only limited conversational give-and-take in their teams. But they can have short conversations ("How are you?" "Fine, thanks, and you?" "Fine, thanks."), exchange information ("When is your birthday?" "September 23. When's your?" "March 29."), disagree ("I love chocolate ice cream." "Oh, I don't like it at all." "But it's delicious!" "No, I hate it."), and so forth. At the intermediate levels, the discourse becomes more involved and longer, and by the advanced level, students can behave and sound almost like normal people on the outside! Amazing, isn't it?

But what do we do about accuracy? How can we let the students chatter on and on with all the broken English and error-ridden speech that they are so wonderfully capable of? Again, no problem: this segment of class time is not the entire class period, and you as teacher really do have a vital role to play in both instructing and correcting. When you are conveying information about pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and all those good things that make up our professional lives -- that is when you and your students can appropriately be concerned about accuracy. And when you are leading them in their first practice of something new, and when you are testing their knowledge and recall -- that is the time for accuracy. We need to remember that a person who knows all the rules and is accurate, but who is afraid to open his/her mouth for fear of making a mistake, who is deprived of an opportunity for self-expression and growth because of this fear, does not really know English, any more than a grammar book, which certainly contains a lot of English, can be said to "know" the language.

Here are some activities that work well in these small groups at various levels. Try them, and check the professional journals for more ideas for group and pair work, and give those to your teams to try.

1. Variations on Twenty Questions, with one team member being asked all the questions on one topic: What's my favorite color/food/sport/season/TV show/performer? How do I feel today? (health, emotions) What am I going to be? (future tense, professions) What do I usually do on Saturdays? (auxiliary do, present simple/habitual tense).

2. Who am I? Provide each pair of students in each team with a picture of some interesting-looking person (I take them from ads in magazines), and set a time limit. Each pair invents a biography of the person, including name, personality traits, feelings, likes/dislikes, hobbies, education, occupation, past history. The pair may want (or you may want them to) make notes in English about these characteristics, for future reference. When the time is up (perhaps ten minutes), and each pair has a good idea of who their person is, one pair describes their person to the other pair in their team. The second pair has the assignment of asking at least four questions of the presenters. Then pair # 2 presents to pair # 1, which asks questions.
3. Categories (a type of problem-solving). Provide each team with a list of objects or people, or with pictures of these things/people. The task is to divide these things/people into categories, such as famous/unknown, living/dead, beautiful/ugly, harmful/beneficial, essential/nonessential. Not only do the teams divide these words or pictures, but also they are to explain to each other within the teams their reasons for how they categorize. You might want a representative from each team to explain their choices to the whole class, as well, as a public speaking exercise.

And what are you doing all this time, while the students are working away in their teams? Just as you suspected, this doesn't give you a coffee break! You are free to move from group to group, responding to them if they need help or have questions, and at the same time monitoring their English so that you are more easily able to review what they really lack in order to communicate more clearly, and so that you can steer the whole class in the direction of the students' needs. Give it a try! Let it work for you!

4. Talk about your and their reading likes.
5. If possible, organize reading circles, forming small groups based on the students' interests, needs and likes. Let them decide on a text or book which should be read at home by all the members of a team. Then have discussion sessions where students can exchange their opinions and comments about the material they have read.
- 6) Have continuous feedback sessions where students can comment their progress and suggest new ideas for the course.