

Strategies and Experiences in Polytechnic English Teaching

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Abstract: The students in general from polytechnic colleges are relatively poor in English. To improve their English, teachers are required to take appropriate and effective strategies. The thesis presents the following arguments: building an ideal teacher-student relationship, gaining confidence and competence, accepting the individual differences, homogeneous grouping, point reward system.

Key words: strategies; polytechnic; confidence and competence ; homogeneous grouping, point reward system

1. Introduction

If you are teaching English in an ordinary polytechnic, you are definitely not surprised with the following phenomenon.

“ ‘Put up your hands if you agree.’ No answer.

‘Then raise your hands if you disagree.’ No response.

‘Are you awake?’ Still silent.”

I'm now working with Ji'nan Engineering Polytechnic or Ji'nan Vocational and Technical College. In my English classes, “Did you dream or are you awake?” is the sentence I often ask my students when I see their blank faces and reactions to what I'm saying. Anyway, it was quite disappointing whenever you see your students all eye on you without saying anything. I must also admit that, however, these are challenges to me. I have to do something to make my students positive in class.

2. My Strategies and experiences

2.1 Building an ideal teacher-student relationship

The relationship between a teacher and a student is very important to both teachers and students. A good teacher-student relationship will make learning enjoyable and efficient as well as make the teacher's job

worthwhile. In contrast, a bad relationship will discourage the students from learning and make teaching as an unpleasant task.

But how to build an ideal teacher-student relationship? First of all, the precondition of good relationship requires a tone of mutual respect and consultation that will serve both the teachers and the students well. Moreover, the teacher's attitude plays an important role. If the teacher is too strict, he might frighten the student; if the teacher is too permissive, the student may become lazy. In addition, as for the student, he or she should be eager for knowledge and willing to work hard. If he or she learns from his teacher modestly, he or she will be able to profit fully from his or her teacher's teaching.

In conclusion, a good teacher-student relationship needs common efforts from both the teacher and the student. And it can be mutually beneficial. The student gains knowledge eagerly and enjoyably, and the teacher gains satisfaction from his teaching job.

2.2 Gaining confidence and competence in spoken English

I must admit that I really find it hard in the beginning to teach oral English among my students. First, it's the language barrier.

The first thing for me to do is to create a classroom environment that is conducive and relaxing for the students. With this, I always make my lessons fun and enjoyable injecting humor, songs, or games once in a while. I limit the pressure among my students to make them more comfortable during discussions. I have proven this to be very effective because in the weeks and months that followed some of my students are more comfortable with each other in expressing themselves orally in English.

Building confidence among my students was the next thing I did. So many students are too shy to speak in English because they are afraid that others will laugh at them. And this is where my role comes in, to support and encourage the students in everything they do. I helped them build their confidence through various motivations and let them participate in all class activities. I also pointed out the importance of cooperation and unity inside the classroom for more effective interactions. I always make them feel that they are appreciated with all the effort they make in trying to learn English.

If the students are confident enough in speaking English, then they also develop their competence in using the language. If they have the competence, this will enable them to build their vocabulary and comprehension of the English language. This will also make them more aggressive in speaking and using the language. And if they are competent, they can explore more and reach out to other people especially if they intend to travel and work abroad.

2.3 Accepting the individual differences

To achieve the goal of our college to produce happy and competent students in their field of specialization, it's my duty as their English teacher to make them functionally literate in English. My utmost focus and concern in my teaching is my students. I believe that every learner has unique qualities. Accepting the individual differences of each my student is my first big step in knowing and understanding them. Through acceptance, I recognize that my students have different needs and learn things in varied ways and place. Thus, I must know them better to find ways in helping them to learn English the best possible way. After all, a way of recognizing the uniqueness of each one of them helps me in determining how they perceive understanding.

Then I keep myself aware that different learners (visual learners, auditory learners and tactile or kinesthetic learners) have different ways of approaching learning. Visual students can learn more through the aid of pictures and printed materials. Auditory students can achieve more with the help of instructional materials

with the use of sound. Tactile or kinesthetic students learn more through action. But mind you, there are some learners who can be identified as the combination of two or all types. Their different approaches or ways may be termed as their learning styles. Their learning styles also refer to the cognitive, affective and psychomotor traits that reveal the ways learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment. These diversified ways of how my students learn guide me in planning my lessons, activities, strategies and instructions that would enhance learning or provide more learning opportunities for my students.

2.4 Homogeneous grouping

I want to share with you my experience with my present college, Jinan Engineering Polytechnic. In my first few weeks with my two classes, I had difficulty in dealing with them. It was hard to get some students' attention. While other students were attentive, the rest were also busy having talks with other classmates. Few were fond of going in and out. Thus, interested students were distracted. I got some sleepless nights. I had tried many kinds of teaching approaches but they weren't so effective. I was really upset with my inactive students. I was afraid that they would affect the well-motivated students. Actually few of them were already influenced. Furthermore, I wanted to provide them with more opportunity to learn English well. How I wish I could motivate less bright students. Lesson wasn't done continuously because of some disturbances.

Cooperation between the college and the teacher is a contributive factor to the success of teaching-learning process. The teacher knows well what is beneficial and isn't beneficial to his or her class. If I think a way, which might help, in my teaching that needs collaboration from college, I let the people in charge know about this. So they can find means to help me for the benefit of students. It can't be denied that the college officials and the teachers have one common goal and that is the success of the teaching-learning process.

An idea came into my mind. What if I divide them into three groups? I firmly believed that this would help

a lot. Class size is one of the most important factors that contribute to the success of teaching-learning process. Less motivated students would be separated from active and interested students commonly known as homogeneous grouping.

I also consider the importance of Group Work Method, Activity Based on Easy Language, careful selection of topics and tasks that can stimulate interest and keeping the students speak the target language.

I often used the Group Work Method when I find the time so limited to give chance to all students perform by group. Even though there are some limitations yet the most important point in using this method is that shy students are encouraged to perform without fears because they are performing as a group and not individually.

I am also comfortable with Activity Based on Easy Language. This method is more on activity based on the Easy Language or it is being done using the patterned open sentences in a given situation. Changing the situation might result to other possible answer. This may encourage students to perform a dialog with no fear of losing their lines at any part of the conversation.

One important method I used in my class is the careful selection of topic to be integrated in my class discussion. I always keep in mind that topics should be within the limits of their understanding and interest. It is very important so that they can relate to the things being talked in class. If they can relate, then with no such great efforts, they will participate enthusiastically. These principles can be seen in the different strategies that I am using in my class.

I divide the students of a class into three groups according to their English levels. Three groups of classes had built up good results. Good students had more opportunities to do more challenging activities than usual. In addition, they also had more chance to be exposed in speaking than before. All of them got involved to every task or activity given. We had a smooth lesson and they could easily understand the topics discussed since there were no interruptions as what I had mentioned before.

They enjoyed what was assigned to them. I myself enjoyed with their class too.

2.5 Point reward system

It is now widely recognized that motivation plays an important role in mastering a foreign language (Dörnyei, 1998). A reward is more effective than punishment. One way to get them involved is to acknowledge their efforts appropriately. In my class, I often use the Points Reward System and I find it highly effective.

Each time they could do the activity or speak in the class like volunteering in answering questions, they received reward in a form of extra points. So most of them became aggressive in class participation because of the points they earned.

On the other hand, there were also some changes with less motivated students. Sleeping and talking were minimized. They were gradually aroused in getting involved in class activities. Can you guess what made them inspired? The points they got! There was one instance that one of my less bright students asked me, "Mr. Li, how many points will you give me if I perform?" Rewarding in terms of points really aids in the teaching-learning process. Points system had encouraged more students to get involved in class participation.

In my classes with different majors, I utilized different teaching methods such as "More learners Talk" Approach. I started the lesson with having a motivation such as in a form of questions or situations. This motivation activity served as springboard to the presentation of the lessons. The unlocking of difficulties followed this. Then a short discussion of the lesson came next. I then present a sample dialog related to our lesson and let the class practice by doing the choral reading.

Pair Work Activity was given to the students for drill. Students were grouped again most commonly with 4 members. By giving situations, learners would prepare a conversation to be presented in class.

Or sometimes activities like Small Group Discussion and Role-plays were also used depending to the lesson that fits this. Many were confident enough in performing the assigned tasks. To encourage more

students' participation, I used the "Point Reward System" also. Learners were given additional point every time they could make any participation in class. And it was very effective. More and more would like to earn points. And in our examination many had good answers to the questions. I was greatly impressed of their performance in a group conversation. They were creative enough in making their presentation. Almost everybody did the conversation very satisfactorily.

With my second term students, there was one class that I need to remind our usual rule in order to have the lesson done smoothly without interruptions or disturbances. I used also the "Point Reward System" to any involvement they made to encourage more students' participation in class. I used various types of activities in class such as pair dialog, conversation, situations, games and others. I always start with motivation questions or situations, which will lead to the presentation of the lesson. It was a rewarding approach to bring students focus to the lesson. The presentation and unlocking of difficulties followed this to clear the barriers. Discussion and students' interactions also came next. I always give my students opportunity and encourage them to say the ideas they had in mind not only for practice but also in developing more confidence in them.

More Learners' talk was my approach in Business Oral English and Extensive Reading with matching "Point Reward System". I just only had a short but a thorough discussion to facilitate the students' activities.

I evaluate my students based on the following points: regular work such as notes-taking and text or workbook, elastic assignments such as certain papers, attendance rate, learning attitude, extra points earned by creative activities. Here, I stress the importance of students' attitude. Attitude matters in my assessment. I believe that a portfolio in teaching management is a purposeful collection of a student's work that exhibits his or her efforts, achievements and progress during the learning of English. Lots of advantages associated with the use of portfolio-based assessment in teaching have been suggested by some researchers. They have reported

growth in students' pride and confidence as a result of portfolio assessment (Frazier & Paulson, 1992; Krest, 1990).

3. Conclusions

It is high time that we used some ways to break through the bottleneck of English learning and teaching in our college and get an ideal result in the near future. Take vocabulary learning as an example. Vocabulary acquisition is a way of worthwhile trying. Krashen, (1989), for instance, argued that reading allows new words to be picked up unconsciously so that incidental vocabulary learning can occur.

Thus, as educators, we must project a positive attitude towards our subject and maintain a respect towards our students and never ridicule, belittle the students in our teaching. If we feel that student's behavior are blocking learning then try to encourage, recognize and reward their effort in the class.

As learning and applying the skills of oral English are so closely related, the classroom should be the place where the use of spoken language is sensitively supported and where active listening is respected, valued and developed. Promoting a relationship of mutual trust, accepting student's oral language and accommodating variety of communication styles in the classroom, student's learning is more effective. It is important that teachers recognize and understand students' diverse talents, abilities and backgrounds to improve their English.

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