

Using Awareness Raising Activities to Overcome Students' Problems with Areas of English Resistant to Teaching

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As a teacher of English, I am everyday faced with clear evidence that teaching and learning are quite different processes. Although I spend considerable time planning how students will practice aspects of the language, in order to maximise their chances of learning, frequently evidence of progress is highly elusive. It appears that there are numerous areas of English that are resistant to teaching and in my experience students face similar problems even though I vary my teaching methods. In this article I will outline a few of these problem areas, try to account for their existence, describe how many teachers have traditionally confronted this problem and illustrate what I believe to be a more effective approach, providing students with awareness raising activities.

An Illustration of an Area of English Resistant to Teaching

As stated above, experience has helped me identify areas of the language that students typically find difficult to understand and/or use. Strangely several of these areas do not appear to be complex, certainly from a teacher's perspective, but students evidently find them difficult to come to terms with. There is no better example than the third person 's' morpheme. Compared to Spanish, verb inflections in English are relatively limited and it would not be unreasonable to assume that this would help students in their learning. All teachers of English will realise that this is not the case and that this morpheme is problematic for nearly all students. In fact studies have shown that even

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advanced level students use this morpheme erratically (Lightbown 1983). We cannot say with certainty why this is so, but it may reflect the fact that it carries no great communicative salience. "She work in a bank" may grate from a teachers point of view, but the meaning is clear (Batstone 1994).

Accounting for Student Problems

When teachers draw the attention of students to errors in their use of the third person 's', for example after a fluency-based speaking activity, students often seem a little bemused as to why class time is being spent on such an elementary aspect of the language. 'Yes, of course we know that rule' is written all over their face. Subsequently, on the next occasion on which they are engaged in a similar speaking activity they repeat the error. For Krashen (1982), this can be explained by the fact that with the Monitor switched on, students can effortlessly produce the morpheme, but with a focus on meaning the grammar point is forgotten. However, there have also been studies that indicate that learners are to some extent programmed to acquire grammatical structures in a pre-set order and that classroom instruction has a relatively limited impact in re-ordering this (Bailey et al 1974, Lightbown 1993). For those who put this down to L1 interference, research has also revealed that speakers of different languages suffer from strikingly similar problems. Ellis (1984, 1997) has cast even greater doubt on the effectiveness of accuracy focused classroom activities, promoting the view that intensive practice of a language point does not facilitate the transfer of this knowledge to the area of our language store utilised in spontaneous communication.

Dealing with Language Areas Resistant to Teaching

So, how should practising teachers respond? During classroom observations I have noted a number of recurring teacher behaviours:

Over teaching:

Here an extended amount of practice is provided for learners in the hope that this will enable the structure to be learnt. The justification here would appear to be that practice makes perfect. However, neurolinguistic research (Seliger 1982) suggests that form-focused activities are dealt with by the right hemisphere of the brain, whereas it is the left hemisphere that carries out the deeper analysis required before language can be produced more spontaneously. Therefore, although students 'get it right' when doing repetitive drills, whether written or oral, they tend to revert to their previous level of performance when communicating in real time. There are other occasions when practice does seem to have effect, however it may well be that students are simply

establishing greater control over structures they have already acquired.

The introduction of a policy of intensive error correction:

In the case of the third-person 's', I have seen teachers who enter class with a large piece of card with S written on it in a bright colour, waving it vigorously in the air each time this type of mistake is committed. Personally, I have yet to notice any identifiable long-term improvement in students' performance subsequent to such intervention. In addition to going against what has been said about our 'programmed' order of learning (namely that the structure will only be learnt when the student is ready), such strategies have also been criticised as being directly counter productive. George (1972) states that in focusing so intensively on a small part of the language, there is less time to provide other input from which learners may be able to extract the rules for themselves.

Recasts:

This approach to error correction can be equally intensive, but it is applied covertly. The teacher paraphrases deviant student utterances using the correct form of the target language but without explicitly stating that the original utterance was defective. So, a teacher concerned with subject-verb agreement might engage in classroom discourse similar to the following:

T : So, are Mexicans and English people very different?

S : Yes, the English people **is** much colder

T : Really, the English **are** colder.

This approach to correction has been criticised as ineffective on the grounds that students are frequently unaware that they are being corrected, and thus with their attention not being focused on accuracy, they do not 'uptake' the correction (Lyster & Ranta 1997). The result being that the error persists.

An Alternative Approach - Awareness Raising.

My own personal preference is to provide students with activities that raise their awareness of the structure in question. Awareness raising (also referred to as

consciousness raising and noticing) involves students studying language samples and from the evidence draw conclusions as to how the language works (Willis J & D 1996). The careful selection of samples and appropriate guiding questions can improve the chances of this input becoming intake, although it will never be possible to guarantee this. When new knowledge is acquired, it will then be accommodated within the learners language system, with previously held views being re-evaluated or possibly even rejected, a process referred to as restructuring by McLaughlin (1990).

Awareness raising activities are based on a discovery approach where students work, normally in pairs or small groups, to identify the most salient points of the language being studied. Thus, students obtain practice in using the target language communicatively in order to learn more about it. The teacher can give varying degrees of support and direction, in the form of guiding questions, but very importantly it should be the students who are actively engaged in finding answers. The justification for this approach is that what is learnt will be more memorable and meaningful than any teacher-led explanation.

Examples of Awareness Raising Activities

Below are examples of two activities I have used with my students. Both could be used after students have been exposed to the language through a listening or reading text.

Example 1

Embedded Questions (suitable for Pre-Intermediate level and above)

Below are a number of questions that tourists typically ask:

Where is the nearest bank?

When do the shops open?

Look at the following ways of asking the same questions:

Could you tell me where the nearest bank is?

Do you know when the shops open?

Which form is more polite? Why?

What changes are there to the grammar of the questions?

Example 2

Although and Despite (suitable for Upper Intermediate level and above)

Look at the following pairs of sentences and decide if they have the same meaning:

Although he got up late, he arrived at work on time.
Despite getting up late he arrived at work on time.

Although he never studied hard, he got a good grade.
Despite not studying hard he got a good grade.

Now consider the grammar associated with although and despite, how does it differ?

Do you have two such different grammatical forms in Spanish?

Awareness raising activities are at times skeptically accepted by teachers who express the reservation that they cannot be used with beginners. However, if the samples are pitched at the correct level and help is provided with guiding questions, there should be no reason why they cannot be exploited successfully. For instance, learners can be asked to study a simple conversation which includes examples of do and does and work in pairs to explain when we use each.

A Justification for Awareness Raising Activities

Whilst not resolving all the difficulties students face in their learning of English, awareness raising activities offer two distinct advantages. First, they go beyond the increasingly doubtful proposition that practice and more practice is the answer. Awareness raising activities are primarily concerned with helping students process target structures, not produce them.. Research indicates that production will only occur when student's interlanguage has reached the natural stage of development, however, awareness raising will enable students to build up explicit knowledge as to how the language works, which can be referred to once acquisition is underway, facilitating a speeding up of the process. As Ellis (1997 : 162) noted, "L2 acquisition can be more readily influenced by manipulating input rather than output".

A second important advantage is that although it appears that the 'natural' order of acquisition applies to students ability to produce certain structures of the language, this does not seem to affect their ability to comprehend these same structures (Buczowska and Weist 1991). Hence, activities that stimulate students' passive knowledge would not appear to encounter the problem of 'teachability' that is frequently witnessed when we push students to produce what has just been taught.

Further Types of Awareness Raising Activities

For any teachers who are interested in experimenting with awareness raising activities, I will briefly outline other variations. For more detail on these categories see Willis and Willis (1996).

Classification

Students divide a list of sentences into those that refer to real past time and those that don't.

Example :

When I was a child I could play the piano well.
I only wish I could play as well as you.

Hypothesis Checking

Students are repeatedly told that a question in English requires an auxiliary verb. Having studied a narrative text, for example about a crime, ask them the following questions.

What happened?
Who committed the crime?

After eliciting the answers, ask them to consider the grammar of the questions. How could they account for the omission of the auxiliary?

Cross Language Comparison

The introduction of the first language can be very useful in helping students understand how English works. For example, board a number of grammatical structures that students find difficult (be used to, don't have to etc), ask them to write a sentence in English using one of the structures. Then each student passes it to their left and their classmate must translate it into Spanish. They then cover the original sentence (in English), pass it on again for the sentence in Spanish to be translated back into English. It is surprising how much sentences change after several translations, sometime due to error, but also because the student has selected a different grammatical structure to express the notion. The sentences can be easily used as the basis of further study. This and other activities utilising translation can be found in Campbell & Kryszewska (1992).

Reference Training

A student who is proficient in the use of reference material (dictionaries, grammar books etc.) has a better chance of succeeding in learning a language (Rubin & Thompson 1983). Classroom activities can be designed around the use of such source material, allowing students to research a particular problem area and present their findings to their peers.

Conclusion

Once we recognize that teaching and learning are quite distinct processes, we can gain insight into many events that occur in the classroom and account for the fact that what is well taught is not always learnt by our students. Intensive re-teaching and persistent correction of errors, whether overtly or covertly, does not seem to be the answer. Research indicates that certain areas of English are resistant to teaching (and English is not unique in this respect), and although awareness raising activities will not eliminate this reality, they may well provide more opportunities for learning than more traditional teacher responses.

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