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**Idea Sharing: Teaching Entertainment or  
a Second Language?:  
Reflections on Learner Expectation  
and Learner Behavior  
in and out of the Classroom**

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I make two explicit assumptions and two unfashionable arguments in this paper. The first assumption is that learning a skill necessarily involves repetition, and repetition is boring. The second assumption is that mastering a skill requires a certain discipline of patience, dedication and practice, and that mistakes and 'failures' are an inevitable part of the learning process. From these assumptions I argue first, somewhat unfashionably, that students should not be misled into expecting all language learning to be 'fun'; believing that one can master a second language by only playing games and engaging in ever-entertaining activities is, I argue, counter-productive to long-term success. The second argument is that instead of focussing on entertainment, teachers should promote awareness of the learning behavior of successful learners. I provide one suggestion as to how that can be done in the classroom, with a practical worksheet given in the Appendix.

**Introduction**

Let's face it, English is an inherently boring subject. We buy activity books, photocopy each other's worksheets, search the

Internet, and read journals such as *PASSA* in the hope of finding a new game, a new activity, a new idea, or a lesson plan that will interest and engage our students for more than five minutes. We invest time, money, and effort in putting together material that our students ignore, chatter through, leave on the desk at the end of the lesson, or make paper aeroplanes out of. If only we had been physics or archaeology teachers, we might sometimes wonder, discussing the origins of the universe or ancient civilizations to rapt audiences, we wouldn't have to be constantly telling our students to be quiet, pay attention, get on with the activity, stop fooling around, go outside if you're going to use that mobile phone, and so on.

Despite all the games, activities and hard work put into creating interesting materials, English is an inherently boring subject for the simple reason that it is a tool to be used for something else, and not a-something-in-itself. In more formal parlance, that is to say English is a skill-based not a content-based subject, and the learning process carries little inherent interest even to those who are highly motivated to acquire the skill. The received wisdom of modern TEFL methodology is that the interest has to be added by the teacher in ways that are, if not genuine, at least minimally artificial. Hence the need for games, role-play activities, watching DVDs, using the Internet, and so on. Regardless of all these ingenious inventions, still there are those (large number of) students who will stubbornly let their attention wander elsewhere...

The fact is that English is not only a non-content-based subject and therefore inherently boring to learn, it is also a practical skill, like playing the guitar or learning to cut hair. No matter how much fun you have, there is no getting away from the fact that you'll never riff like Jimi Hendrix or style like Vidal Sassoon unless you practice, practice, and practice. The simple truth is that skills are acquired by repetition, and repeating anything is inherently boring.

### **A. Learner Expectations**

I hope by now the reader has guessed that the purpose of this paper is not to solve the boredom problem (did I mention that it is inherent?), but to resolve it by changing the expectations and

behavior of our students. Students who are misled by the mantra of “language learning is fun” will never acquire the discipline to master what must, inevitably, at some point or other, be a hard old slog. Like playing the guitar or sculpting a fine head of hair, the reward for learning a skill is in the long-term gratification gained from attaining mastery of something, not in the short-term ‘fun’ of role-playing Angelina Jolie shopping for stockings in Tesco Lotus.

How much ‘fun’ students really find the various activities we subject them to is also a moot point. I have known teachers who can make the driest grammar lesson interesting, and others who cannot raise a smile from a whole class playing hang-(the teacher)-man. My own feeling is that entertainment in the classroom is largely a matter of teaching style and class dynamics rather than choice of teaching activity.

Regardless of how that may be, the real point is that focussing on entertainment is not only doomed to failure (you can’t entertain all of the people all of the time, as Lincoln might have said), but educationally counter-productive. Watching DVDs or doing Internet searches can have their place in the curriculum, but students should not be misled into thinking a second language is some kind of game or light-hearted activity that they can master without any real application or dedication. Instead, they should be directed towards succeeding in their goals in the most effective way. Rather than worrying about entertaining our students, we should give them realistic expectations and focus on providing effective learning strategies.

What is most effective in the classroom depends on the learning objectives. Sometimes the objectives may be best served by using new technology, watching DVDs or giving small group presentations. Sometimes they may be best served by laboriously working through a grammar exercise combining sentences according to a target grammar rule, or repeating the correct pronunciation of a word after a speaker on an audio file.

Whatever the objective is, it should always be uppermost in our minds when choosing instructional activities and media. Effective learning requires clear learning objectives that should never be sacrificed for the sake of entertainment. No single learning

tool, however 'entertaining,' should determine the curriculum, be it computer, video, course book, or a teacher's special interest. The reasoning is obvious and indisputable: plans are said to have worked when they achieve their goals. Therefore, the means must be subservient to the ends. Designing plans in order to implement particular tools – making the ends serve the means – is to misunderstand the nature of our task, which is primarily to teach English and not, primarily, to provide entertainment or any other service.

Reminding students that language learning is difficult and requires dedication, patience and practice has its own educational value. All students struggle with learning a second language, no matter what the sales pitch of certain 'quick-fix' language schools say. We acquire our first language naturally as we construct the world; in other words, we develop linguistic competence as we develop cognitive and conceptual thinking abilities. A second language, however, is not acquired by construction but hard-learned through translation<sup>1</sup>. One of the myths of modern educational theory is that second-language learning can be based on the same principles as first-language acquisition (with the implication that this will somehow be cognitively 'easier'), a mistaken idea that ignores the vast behavioral, psychological, and cognitive differences between pre-linguistic human beings and adult language learners<sup>2</sup>. Recognizing the real difficulty of second- language

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<sup>1</sup> This point has long been widely accepted in the philosophy of language, the philosophy of psychology, and the philosophy of education. For some reason, it appears to have been overlooked or ignored in the finance-driven philosophy of second-language learning. For details, see Quine's seminal argument on meaning acquisition by translation and hypothesis formation in Quine (1960); the ramifications and controversies are discussed in endless literature generated by his work over the last fifty years.

<sup>2</sup> It is misleading to describe babies, the majority of pre-linguistic human beings, as 'language learners' since the concept of 'a learner' implies someone who purposively engages in an activity to achieve some goal. By the time children are purposively learning to read and write at school, they have already acquired language. This, and the previous point about translation, is why I disagree with the theoretical explanations behind the so-called 'Natural Method,' the 'Automatic Language Growth Method,' and the 'Callan Method.' The latter can be credited, however, for at least having the virtue of recognizing that language learning is about repetition.

learning can, however, help students get over misplaced feelings of inadequacy or academic incompetence. Students who expect language learning to be always fun and entertaining will interpret failures as evidence of personal ineptitude. Students who understand that language learning requires dedication, patience, and practice will see failures as a temporary, inevitable part of the learning process, rather than, say, a personal disaster to be hidden from their parents. Like learning to do a pirouette in ballet class, the amount of times one falls down is directly and inversely related to the probability of success next time out. We learn by doing, and at least some of the time that means we learn by failing.

### **B. Learner Behavior**

If English is boring (it is) and failure an inevitable occurrence (it is), how can we use these realities to help our students? I believe that students must be made aware of the inherent difficulty of learning a skill and consequently of the qualities successful learners typically exhibit. In my classes, I like to start a new course by asking students to reflect on their learning behavior. I suggest (somewhat jokingly) that I can predict what score they will get for the course depending on how they answer certain questions in the first lesson (the questions and worksheet appear in An appendix to this paper).

Though this is, dare I admit it, a game, it has a serious point. Most 'A Grade' students I have known exhibit similar qualities of behavior both in and out of the classroom. These students I call 'independent learners.' Independent learners are motivated by challenge. They look for answers to problems outside of the classroom and by consulting materials they find themselves, as well as those given by the teacher. They tend to ask a lot of questions in class, and visit the library regularly. The main characteristic of independent learners is that they do not rely on the teacher, the course material, or their friends for answers – they take responsibility for their own learning and for getting the best possible grade.

On the other hand, the vast majority of students who get low B and high C scores typically exhibit 'dependent learner' behavior.

They are the students who attend classes regularly, do all the assignments and generally work well. However, dependent learners rely too much on the teacher, their course books, and their friends. They do not think for themselves, and they do not explore different material or different resources. They tend to solve difficulties in coursework by copying their friends or relying on the teacher, and they rarely visit the library.

Then there is what I call 'the Lazy Genius.' This kind of student also usually ends up with a C+ or a low B, but much to his and everyone else's surprise. His relatively low score is a result of not paying attention to the requirements of the course. The Lazy Genius is someone who did well in earlier studies (probably by being an independent learner) and now thinks he can breeze through the present course without doing much work. The Lazy Genius usually thinks the course is unchallenging, but that's only because he is not asking the right questions. He will fail to see the opportunity to learn something new because he thinks he knows everything already. If he visits the library, it is probably to look up something for a course he will take in the future, rather than the course he is taking right now.

Finally, there is 'the Rebel,' who often ends up with a C, D, or Fail. The Rebel can be, and often is, one of the brightest students in the class, but the Rebel has an attitude problem: usually, he thinks he is cleverer or cooler than the other students and thinks the course is a waste of his time. The Rebel tends to resent the teacher, the college, and anyone else he thinks is stopping him from being 'cool.' The Rebel will proudly tell everyone that he doesn't even know where the library is.

Often, the same student may exhibit different learning behaviors at different times. For example, some students are dependent learners in some subjects, but independent learners in others. Some lazy geniuses turn into rebels, and occasionally, a student may go through all four different behaviors at different times during his education<sup>3</sup>. No one has to be a perfect student all of the time, but

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, my classification of learning behaviors is based partly on my experience as a teacher, and partly on my own autobiography as a student.

recognizing his own behavioral pattern in a particular learning environment can help a student to improve his chances of success in any given course, if he chooses.

By using this kind of reflection at the beginning of a course, I aim to impress upon students the idea that the most important factor in their success is their learner behavior and not whether the course is boring or 'fun'; not on whether they like the course textbook or not; not on whether they like me or not; and definitely not on whether the course is 'easy' or not – any course that is easy is, of course, a waste of the student's valuable time.

The greatest factor in success at anything, I maintain, is the learner's willingness to study and practice independently. At the end of the day, nobody can learn English by confining their practice to classroom hours. The skill simply requires more time, dedication, and practice than can be afforded in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Being honest with students about the reality of successful language learning is key to their development. Disguising this reality with an entertainment-based approach to learning is only likely to give them false expectations and, accordingly, be counter-productive to their chances of long-term success. Instead, I argue students should be made aware of the necessity of acquiring good learning behavior, and one way to do this is to consider the typical qualities of successful learners. Undoubtedly, encouraging and reinforcing good learning behavior is something that requires more than just an introductory activity of the sort I have suggested; therein lies a potential direction for further research.

### **The Author**

Phil Stokes graduated with first class honors in Philosophy from the University of Reading, UK, and won a British Academy Award to pursue an MA in the Philosophy of Logic and Language at Bristol University, UK. He is the author of several articles and a book entitled *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*. He moved to Thailand in 2004 to focus on the application of philosophical methods and principles in



language education, in particular, the use of critical thinking and learner autonomy in second-language acquisition.

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