

Rediscovering Themselves: Learning to Read for Survival

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I came into the ESOL classroom ready to instill the English language into the minds of my students. I believed that I needed to drill and drill the grammar and sounds of English to teach efficiently. As a fledgling teacher at the University Settlement Society of New York, in New York City, I had a lot to learn about meeting the needs of learners.

I learned that my students were real people with pasts and a lot of pain from their childhoods. Many had limited views of the world and the possibilities available to them in the future. Many of the women -- primarily immigrants from the Caribbean, Latin America, China, and Bangladesh -- had less than a fifth grade reading level in their native languages and had not been to school for years. Many were in school because they were mandated by welfare to attend classes or have their welfare cases closed. Many felt contempt for the 'system' for forcing them to attend classes.

A Large Task

Setting out to develop a level of trust and communication in my class, I asked the students why they were coming to school. The reasons varied. I came to realize that my task as a teacher was larger than I ever imagined. Teaching words and sounds was the easy part; my true challenge would be to inspire my students to rediscover themselves, for some to regain inspiration for the future and for others to develop their path for success.

I started learning to take into account my students' pasts and the issues that were relevant to them. I began to see that students bring to class every day concerns that act as barriers to learning. Throughout the year I observed behavior that reflected my students' ongoing struggles. I knew that I had to deal with all this or I would never have a viable class.

I had the students talk about their problems, develop solutions, and plan for the future by writing their own stories and reading them aloud. I shared my experience: how I began working at the age of 13, how I worked full-time to make it through college, and how I had to struggle in this country. I told them that they all could achieve what they wanted if they planned for their goals.

The students began talking about their hopes and dreams for themselves and their children. We developed text based on the topics we discussed. We did follow-up reading activities using literature written by other literacy students or magazine or newspaper articles that dealt with the issues we were discussing. In the following months, we continued our dialogue.

Bilingual Teachers

The fact that I am bilingual really enhanced the class. At our program we offer classes taught bilingually so teachers can use their native languages to talk about personal issues and also to explain fine points of grammar, which are easier to teach in the students' native languages. Higher level ESOL classes are taught completely in English.

The model of teaching and learning we use expects everyone in the group to begin to respect and trust each other. It forces individuals to explore the difficulties of the past and deal with their fears of the future. Our method is not easy to implement: it is easier for teachers just to teach and students just to learn words and sounds. But our approach is truly effective.

Many come from educational backgrounds where the teacher was the sole source of information. They were told what to write and were taught to memorize information. They expect to see red ink corrections on their writing samples. As a result, many initially could not see the relevance of using their lives and issues as part of a curriculum. This comment illustrates their perspective: "Look, I am a poor woman with little education; I just need to learn a little English so I can survive in this city. My life is not what I want to talk about."

Three Phases

Working with my colleagues at University Settlement Society, we developed a three-phase model that addresses the tension between this view and our interest in using the lives of teachers and learners as part of the curriculum.

Phase 1

In the first phase, to get the students accustomed to talking and reading about issues in their lives and to build relevant English vocabulary, teachers use learning materials in which fictional characters deal with issues such as child abuse, domestic violence, limited education, and lack of health care. Classroom activities include debates, dictations, and writing. Students share their beginning writing activities with their classmates. They are exposed to theme-based learning and critical thinking activities, and develop portfolios of their work.

Phase 2

In the second phase, with the teacher facilitating, the class begins to talk about issues as they pertain to their own lives. Students work on theme-based activities about their children, families, or communities. They create group texts, bring in relevant articles, and make presentations in English about their themes. Teachers lead traditional grammar and writing lessons addressing specific needs that arise in the course of the class. In this phase, students write one-page stories and use complete sentences in English, with minimal grammar mistakes.

Phase 3

In the third phase, the students develop journals and personal dictionaries -- their own word lists -- and may be ready to begin independent projects. Students choose a theme they want to work on by themselves and develop a presentation or piece of writing. Teachers assess the progress of the projects and create activities that support students in completing their projects. Students working with their teachers analyze their portfolios and journals, and begin developing written plans on how to reach their future goals. Students begin to work as peer teachers in the lower level classes, assisting teachers in taking the new students through the process they have experienced.

Conclusion

The rate at which a class or an individual can move through this process depends on many variables. It depends on the teacher's ability to assess students' needs and progress and plan lessons accordingly and the teacher's ability to create a safe and comfortable learning environment for her students. It also depends on the needs, goals and commitment of each student. Some take two years to progress; others take six. Many of our students visit us years after they have finished. It is a place where they were given the chance to rediscover themselves as they learned to read. One student told me, "You taught me that I can have whatever I want in life if I want it and plan for it. I will never forget this."

Summarized by Bella Hanson. This page is located at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=458>