

Teaching English Today

Based on « A Course in English Language Teaching » by Penny Ur 2012

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Teaching Priorities

- **Fluency and accuracy:**

Accuracy: “refers to the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but may not include the ability to speak or write fluently” (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 223).

Fluency: “the features which give speech the qualities of being natural and normal, including native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress, rate of speaking, and use of interjections and interruptions” (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 222).

It is important for learners of use English both fluently and correctly. There are situations where getting the message through is more important than absolute accuracy; and others (less frequent) where correctness is the priority. However, in general, according to Ur (2012), teachers should do their best to ensure that their students maintain a balance between the two as fluency and accuracy are both important goals in language learning.

Teaching Priorities

- **Fluency and accuracy:**

Task:(Ur, 2012, p. 2)

Recall an occasion when you were reading or listening to English which had obvious mistakes in it. What effect did these mistakes have on you? Which of the items below best describes how you felt?

- a. I had no problem at all with reading/listening and understanding. The mistakes did not make any difference.
- b. I felt slightly uncomfortable reading or listening. I would have felt more comfortable if there had been no mistakes.
- c. I sometimes had to make an effort to understand.
- d. I found it quite difficult to understand.
- e. I actually misunderstood.

Inaccurate grammar, vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation very rarely produce misunderstandings. They may, however, interfere with the smoothness of the communication and result in a feeling of slight discomfort for both speaker/writer and listener/reader.

Teaching Priorities

- **Different styles and Englishes:**

Learners need to know the difference between **informal** speech and **formal** written discourse; between the language used **online** (chat language), and the language used for writing an **academic essay**.

Furthermore, Ur (2012) emphasizes the existence of different varieties of English, linked to a particular local community, social group or profession.

Task: (Ur, 2012, p. 2)

Make a list of different kinds of English styles or genres you have heard, read, spoken or written over the last few days. For example, a shopping list, a telephone conversation, a text message (SMS) or a novel. How many different kinds of texts did you find?

Teaching Priorities

- **Vocabulary:**

Ur (2012) criticizes earlier methodologies to foreign language teaching which recommended spending most time teaching grammar, assuming that the vocabulary would take care of itself. Acquiring vocabulary simply by reading or listening during a language course will not provide learners with the amount of vocabulary they need. The **incidental acquisition** should be supported with **deliberate teaching** and review of lexical items.

- **Incidental learning:** learning something without the intention to learn it or learning one thing while intending to learn another, for example, unintentionally picking up vocabulary, patterns, or spelling through interaction, communicative activities, etc.
- **Intentional/deliberate learning,** for example learning by following a deliberate programme of study to enhance vocabulary or grammar (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 276).

Teaching Priorities

- **Writing:**

Writing has long been considered as a vehicle for language practice and testing, rather than an independent skill itself. Nowadays, however, writing is viewed as **a means and an end**. Ur (2012) emphasizes that teachers and educators need to invest more effort in helping students achieve written, as well as reading, fluency. According to him, both formal and informal styles should be part of the writing curriculum. Similarly, Crystal (2006) maintains that, nowadays, informal writing is also important for communication, mainly due to the widespread of email, online chat, texting and social networking platforms.

English as an International Language

Perhaps the most dramatic development that has taken place in the field of English language teaching in the last 50 years has been the shift in its primary function: from being mainly the native language of nations such as the UK or USA, to being mainly a global means of communication. The speakers of English whose L1 in another language already vastly outnumber native English speakers, and their number continues to grow. For most of its learners, English is therefore no longer a foreign language (i.e., one that is owned by a particular ‘other’ nation or ethnic group) but first and foremost an international language (one that has no particular national owner. This development has brought with it a number of changes in the principles and practice of English language teaching. (Ur, 2012, p. 4)

English as an International Language

- **Language Standards:**

One of the questions that many teachers/learners of the previous generation had difficulty in answering had to do with which variety of English they are teaching/learning: British or American? According to Ur (2012), “This is no longer a relevant, or even an interesting, question, The question which needs to be asked is rather: which lexical, grammatical, phonological or orthographical (spelling) forms are most likely to be understood and used worldwide?” (p. 4).

- It is more useful to teach *two weeks* instead of *fortnight*: two weeks is more universally used and understood.
- It is useful to encourage students to pronounce the /r/ in words like *girl*, *teacher* as it is easier to understand and more consistent with the written form.

Therefore, the concern should be on what is likely to be most easily understood and accepted by other English speakers (native and non-native around the world) rather than on what does a British or American would say.

Task: (Ur, 2012, p. 2) Can you think of any other vocabulary or grammatical forms which are specific to the variety of English you might use yourself with friends or family in your local community, but that you would not use if you were communicating in English in a wider context?

English as an International Language

- **The Native and Non-native English Teacher:**

It has long been believed that the native teacher is the best teacher for foreign language learners. This belief has been refuted through time. This is not to say that native English-speaker teacher cannot be effective teachers; however, they are not necessarily superior to their non-native colleagues. English teachers who speak the language as an additional rather than as a native language are likely to be a better model of international English if they are fully competent and fluent. The reasons behind this, Ur (2012) explains, are as follows:

1. Non-native teachers have been through the same learning process as their students;
2. They have insights into the kinds of problems that are likely to come up and how to deal with them;
3. They can function as role models: ‘If I can do it, so can you!’

English as an International Language

- **The Place of English Literature and the Culture of English-speaking Peoples:**

Traditionally, the culture of English-speaking peoples has been considered as the ‘target culture’. Accordingly, texts in the course materials are to be copied or adapted from ‘authentic’ texts written by native speakers. According to Ur (2012), this has changed.

Courses today may include not only texts from English-speaking countries, but also those written in English, or translated into it, from anywhere in the world. And in most teaching contexts, it is inappropriate to talk about ‘target’ culture, meaning a native-speaker one. Most learners need to become aware of a diverse, international, cosmopolitan set of cultural customs, literature, art forms and so on, rather than those of a single community. (p. 5)

What is more important nowadays than whose culture and literature to introduce in foreign language education, Byram (1997) emphasizes, is to foster multicultural awareness on the part of students. It is obviously impossible to expose them to all the cultures of the world, but it is possible to expose them to samples and make them sensitive to the differences from their own cultures and foster their intercultural competence.

References

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