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PRACTICAL ENGLISH TEACHING

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Teaching tips

This is an occasional section featuring teaching ideas which are shorter than usual P.E.T. articles. Try out the following tips submitted by John K Eastman, Bryan Robinson, Gill Hamilton, Bruce Monk, Michael O'Donoghue, Alison Lyall and Richard Cooper.

The possessive apostrophe

Students of English often have difficulty with the possessive apostrophe as in *Sheila's books*. It is probably related to the alien (to them) idea of adjectives coming before the noun, but more specifically of marking possession in this way, which is unique among European languages. Furthermore, in an attempt to be modern or international, commercial enterprises in certain parts of the world aggravate the situation by misplacing the 's, as in Pub Fox's, Bar Pepe's. The student repeatedly sees this misuse and may think that it is correct. Typical errors then are: 'books Sheila's', 'the Sheila's books' etc.

Recently I had a beginners' class where I found teaching this structure more difficult than usual, until I hit upon an explanation which worked like a charm.

Original formula

I had previously used the following formula and examples:

[Owner]'s possessed thing(s)
A/the [lady]'s hat/hats; A/the [lady]'s husband;
A/the [lady]'s children
 and *[Bill]'s motorbike; [Bill]'s jobs; [Bill]'s sister; [Bill]'s friends*

With this particular class, however, the explanation proved inadequate, and the students made many errors in the short consolidation exercise I gave them. Rather than persist with the same theme at that time, I told the class that we would return to the topic at a later date.

New formula:

1. A few days later I reintroduced the topic and wrote phrase a) on the board (the class already knew that the asterisk meant incorrect usage), and beneath it the correct version b).

- a) *The doll of the girl
 b) The girl's doll

2. Then, by using circles and arrows, I demonstrated what had happened:

- a) *The doll of the girl
 b) The girl's doll

The class could then see how a), a transliteration from their mother-tongue, changed into the correct English version b). They also saw that -s stood in place of the ... of.

3. Then I showed how the same mechanism worked with plural owners:

- c) *The dolls of the girls
 d) The girls' dolls

by adding the apostrophe to the plural form of the owners.

4. The class then attempted to solve

- e) *The car of Pepe
 f) Pepe's car

avoiding the typical error: 'the Pepe's car'.

5. Leaving phrases a) to f) on the board for the class to refer to, I then wrote a short exercise on the board using both singular and plural owner nouns (both common and proper) for the class to solve singly, in pairs or groups as they wished. I went round and checked these.

6. Next I asked them to write two or three phrases which were real to them (that is, real objects belonging to real people they knew).

To my delight, they made few mistakes. Where students repeated old errors, I asked them if they were sure about the phrase they had written, which made them search for and recognise their errors by referring to the examples on the board.

7. Finally, I cleaned the board, asked the class to cover their notes and wrote up another short exercise:

- *The toys of the boy
- *The toys of the boys
- *The clothes of the women
- *The restaurant of Paco

Nearly all the students were error-free even without the support of the previous examples, and the whole process took only about 20 minutes of class time. ■

John K. Eastman has taught at the Official School of Languages in Alicante, Spain since 1974. He is currently writing a doctoral thesis on listening comprehension.

Class libraries

In schools where there are only limited facilities it's often valuable to start a class library to encourage learners, from their first year, to read English for pleasure. Here are the main components of a class library set-up, which was successfully introduced at a private language school in northern Spain, where almost three-quarters of the learners were between eight and 17 years old.

Objectives:

- to encourage students to read for pleasure as much as possible;
- to motivate their reading by providing simple objectives;
- to provide a frame to monitor this extensive reading.

Procedure:

1. Each teacher should sign out one set of 12 books per class (1).
2. Introduce the books and the concept of extensive reading in class (see suggested lesson plan below).
3. Allow each student to take one book and mark these up on a wall chart:

Students names	Book titles						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	etc
1							
2							
3							
4							
etc							

4. Students take the books home to read them at their own pace.

5. After a decent length of time (e.g. five or six classes) ask those students who have finished their books to: exchange them; put up on the wallchart their comments (*good, bad, it's all right* or whatever they like); complete a summary sheet (see figure 2).

6. Put all the summary sheets in a class library file so that students can refer to them before taking out their next book and so get an idea of what it's about. ■

Figure 1: lesson plan

(Time: 50 minutes)

1. Start the class by talking about reading preferences, time spent reading, favourite authors, books, the last book read, etc.

2. Pre-teach/elicite the names of different genres: detective stories, horror stories, romance, autobiography, etc.

3. Have each learner choose one book from a selection, all of which are very easy for them to read.

4. Allow two minutes for the learners to skim the books to extract the: title, characters' names, types of book, setting.

5. Ask one or two students if they have any clues as to the story's development (i.e. have they looked at the synopsis?). Do this quickly for interest not accuracy.

6. Pair off the learners and ask them to choose one of their two books to look at in more detail.

7. Give them the summary sheet and ask each pair to complete as much of it as possible — not every category will be applicable to every book.

8. Use translation/dictionaries to help

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them read as quickly as they can.

9. Each pair should present their summary to the rest of the class, you then collect and display the sheets for all to see.

10. The learners take home one book each with a blank summary sheet to start the class library.

Figure 2: summary sheet*

Report written by: _____

Date: _____

Book title: _____ Level: _____

Author's name: _____

The story takes place:
where? _____

when? _____

The hero is called: _____

The heroine is called: _____

The subject is: _____

The other characters are: _____

The problem is: _____

The difficulties are: _____

The solution is: _____

In my opinion: _____

*Based on *Introduction to TEFL* by Bright & McGregor (Longman).

Bryan Robinson is a freelance teacher and teacher trainer based in Spain. He specialises in organising training courses designed to meet highly specific needs, both inside and outside E.F.L.

Note

(1) At this school the books were provided out of the school budget. In other centres class libraries have been just as successful when each member of the class has bought one book, and then been able to read all of the others.

A children's story?

I've used this idea with a class of 15-20 pre-intermediate adult students. The idea uses writing, listening and speaking.

1. (It's important that students do this step individually. They shouldn't consult their neighbours or you!) Ask students to write a list of 12 things which they could hold in their hand and would not be visible if they closed their hand. For example, a ring, a bus

ticket, an ant but not a dog, an umbrella or a pen (ban the word 'small!'). I allow students to write some of the words in their mother tongue. Stop them after five-10 minutes. Very few will have 12 but an average of six is enough to continue with.



Michael Bramman

2. In pairs (not looking at each other's lists) students define the words on their list and see how many they have in common. Some of the problematic words are cleared up here. Spend five-10 minutes on this.

2. Clear up any vocabulary problems. I ask students to define the word and I give them the English.

4. Get one word from each student and write them up on the board (about 20 words).

5. From the list on the board, the students, as a class, select the 10 words they like or want, and rub off all other words.

6. In pairs or groups, students have to write a children's story in which the 10 chosen words must appear. As it's very unlikely that in a 50 minute lesson the story will be finished, make sure each student has a copy of what the pair/group has written so far, so they can finish it at home if necessary.

7. I correct their work and pin them round the class for everyone to read.

I'm sure you will be pleasantly surprised at their efforts. ■

Gill Hamilton is currently a teacher and teacher trainer for the British Council in Valencia, Spain.

Acquiring useful input

Sadly, it is often the case that a group of unprepared students are forced to have a meeting along the following lines: 'Here are your roles, now I shall take a video of you.' We should remember that people do not automatically learn by doing.

How do you input useful phrases though? One way is to revert to a form of dictation which can be developed into just the sort of socially interactive language exercise which can lead on to a meeting. Here the student is forced to interact with his/her fellow-students; to have a meeting about a meeting with little interference from the instructor; to practise listening, speaking, reading and

writing skills. There is an interplay between social and independent activity which will be of benefit in later functional situations.

Setting up the task

1. Play through sections of a recorded meeting or phrases taken from a meeting. The tape should be rich in appropriate material for the students' later use.

2. The students take down what is said in dictation form - by two students working at the board and the others on paper.

3. When you have gone through a section of the tape ask students to come up with a perfect final version of the tape. This can be done in small groups working together or as a class activity using the version on the board. The teacher should not interfere at all. The students discuss with each other what they hear and keep listening carefully to the tape. Encourage the use of dictionaries as well as the marking of stress and intonation (which should be pre-taught).

During this activity, students repeat words, phrases and sentences to each other; correct grammar; respell words; work out stress patterns and incorporate intonation into units of meaningful speech.

Reinforcement

Finally, record the dialogue or phrases on to a second tape-recorder for sentence by sentence comparison with the original. The students can hear for themselves if there are still differences and can be aided by the teacher to make further guesses.

Conclusion

If well organised the activity of intensive group listening helps the students obtain valid meaningful phrases that can be used later in role-playing situations. At the same time the participants are involved in a lot of linguistic interaction as they work out the content, correct themselves and learn from each other. The tape is giving them useful input all the time and never tires.

The teacher's major task is to select an appropriate section of tape for content and difficulty. Even if the teacher's selection should prove the weak link in the chain, the students will still have a lot of very good practice in the four language skills. ■

Bruce Monk has taught modern languages and E.F.L. in primary and secondary schools in Britain, France, Sweden and the Soviet Union. He is currently working as a lecturer for the British Council in Moscow.

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