

My Three Most Memorable Moments in Teaching

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Five years working at an English conversation school in Japan has afforded me a cornucopia of memorable experiences. Teaching an eclectic array of students – ranging from 4 year-olds to university students, businessmen to the elderly – inevitably runs a gamut of emotions. I could feel happiness, sadness, embarrassment, exhilaration, and inspiration all in one day. Three of my most memorable experiences in teaching involve these strong emotions which include: 1) an embarrassing episode with a child in front of his mother; 2) a failed execution of a class game that broke a university girl down into tears; 3) an inspirational story of a businesswoman's resolution to succeed on the TOEIC test. Each case has given me pause for reflection and fueled my motivation to become a better language teacher.

The first memorable episode involves a nice 8 year-old boy named Tomoki and his mother. After every kids lesson at my school, teachers were instructed to show parents what their child had learned that day. The target vocabulary for the week was things found in the kitchen, like knife, fork, spoon, plate, sink, stove, and faucet. Using vocabulary flashcards with pictures and text below, I had Tomoki regurgitate the words to his mother in rapid succession. I often made duplicate copies of the flashcards to ensure more practice. Unfortunately, the order caused an embarrassing scenario. "Fork" came up twice in a row. Tomoki immediately recognized the picture and was able to vocalize it quickly. However, his pronunciation of /ɪ/ needed some work and the resulting utterance sounded more like a four-letter expletive. This made me a little red in the face. As fate would have it, the next card ended up being, "faucet." Regrettably, Tomoki didn't learn this word very well so he resorted to try to read the text beneath the picture. He had a good grasp of basic sound-letter correspondences so he did his best to sound out the word. I could see his eyes squint and the wheels turning in his head – "Fuh... Fuh...Fuh... .. F@\$& IT!!!" I could not help but belt out a guffaw of laughter. I remember thinking, "How pragmatically appropriate, Tomoki! That is exactly what I would say if I didn't know the answer to something!" However, mouth agape, Tomoki's mother looked horrified. It seems despite her limited English vocabulary, she knew those words! The manager of the school did not help the embarrassing situation by yelling, "What are you teaching this child?!"

This incident was memorable because it was humorous albeit somewhat juvenile of me for thinking so. Even though the episode ended up being quite embarrassing, upon reflection of that lesson, I realized the difficulties of English pronunciation, phonetics, and spelling. Inaccurate pronunciation can get you into trouble as others might misinterpret or mishear your intended word or meaning. Moreover, the spelling and pronunciation of English words follow rules that are irregular, opaque, and ultimately very difficult to understand by second language learners. Tomoki actually read the word "faucet" correctly in terms of the basic phonetics that he learned. In addition, I was impressed by Tomoki's valiant effort to try to sound out the word, even though he was unsure. As a language teaching professional, I shouldn't have laughed at Tomoki's pronunciation. Rather, a more appropriate response would have been to help him slowly and carefully sound out the word. If he still had trouble, it would have been better to inform his mother that we would continue to practice those words in the following weeks. Taking into account Tomoki's sincere efforts, I became more determined to work harder on pronunciation.

Another memorable experience involving a group of university students and a game that failed to go as planned. In my first year of teaching, I tried to make lessons as fun as possible by playing games at the end of the class. For one lesson, I decided to have the students read a passage and afterwards, they would play a quiz game. The class was divided into two teams. Then I asked some questions about the reading. Each team had a representative each turn, and whoever rang the bell on the table first would be given an opportunity to give the correct answer. Naturally, the team with the most correct answers would win. One of my favorite members of the class was named Aoi, who was a shy but an extremely intelligent student with a cheery disposition. I was certain she would find this game entertaining and informative. To my surprise, I noticed she did not perform very well. On that day, she was slow to respond and quite frankly, she ended up answering a lot of the questions incorrectly when it was her turn. Even though time was running short, I wanted to give Aoi one last chance at success. So I gave her one more turn before the class finished. But before I could even ask the question, I noticed tears welling up in her eyes. Unable to hold back, tears

started streaming down her face and she stormed out of the classroom. All the other students left the class presumably to comfort her. Left standing with extreme embarrassment and dismay, I had little choice but to think deeply regarding what went wrong and how to revise activities for that class in the future.

From this episode, I became more sensitive to my students' feelings, especially when they are put on the spot. Students are not a bunch of stoic automatons that come to class to input large quantities of English information for one hour a week only to spit it back out. Rather, they carry with them a lot of pride, ego, feelings, and moods on a daily basis that affect how they learn. I also came to understand how sometimes games can become too competitive which puts students' pride on the line and can potentially cause a student to lose face. Even though I myself was disappointed the game didn't go as expected, I went back to the drawing board to find out ways to improve the game. If I were to play the same type of game in the future, I would score points as a result of a team effort for every question instead of putting pressure on individuals every round.

Furthermore, this experience also made me more attuned to what kind of environment I created in the classroom. I realized every group dynamic is distinct so what I or other students think is fun and exciting in one class doesn't necessarily mean all students will think so as well. Although I'm still not exactly sure why Aoi broke down crying, I could only guess it was because she did not perform well in a competitive situation in front of her peers. Therefore, I started to prepare not only for the teaching material of the lesson, but also how to tailor a classroom atmosphere that suits my students' learning style with regard to their feelings and emotions.

Another lasting memory involves a businesswoman named Yuko. I was always impressed by how diligently Yuko would take notes in my class and do her homework thoroughly to completion. One day, Yuko told me she was going to take the TOEIC test. If she got a score over 800 points, she would receive a pay raise from her job. Yuko was an intermediate level student, so I thought a score of 800 was a little beyond her reach. She would be fortunate to get 700, I thought. Nevertheless, she said she was going to accomplish her goal. Over the course of three months, she would often ask me to provide her with extra homework or spend a few minutes before and after class answering her questions. At first, I was a little disgruntled by her persistence and meticulous questioning that shaved valuable minutes off my break time, but I soon realized how seriously she took her studies. The day finally came when she received her TOEIC score. With a wry smile on her face, she opened up the letter – an 850! Yuko had surpassed all my expectations!

Teaching Yuko made me recall something my Japanese language professor said to me during my undergraduate days as a language-learning student. In a class of thirty students, he asked me, "How many will go on to become proficient Japanese speakers?" I replied, "Maybe half." My sensei smiled and said I was being too optimistic. His estimation was

starkly different. "Two. At most." he said bluntly. A little surprised, I asked him why he thought so. He commented that there was only so much a teacher can do. To really achieve a high level of language mastery, students must rely on their own dedication and motivation. "Isn't that statistic a little depressing and demotivating as a language teacher?" I inquired. My professor shook his head. He then spoke with a gleam in his eye: "Those two students are the ones I enjoy teaching most." My years of teaching at the English conversation school supplied evidence for what my professor was talking about. To be honest, most of my students didn't study as hard as they could have. To my chagrin, I can't say I saw drastic improvements in their English either. Teaching Yuko made me realize she was that rare kind of student my sensei spoke of. I no longer became annoyed with her somewhat uptight, overachieving personality. Rather my own attitude changed. I began to really enjoy teaching her, just as my sensei said. Through this experience, I came to realize that the right attitude for learning is also contingent on the right attitude for teaching. I no longer took my students' efforts for granted. More than ever, I became resolute to succeed in teaching by doing my best to meet my students halfway.

In closing, all three memorable events have served as a great impetus to become a better teacher. These experiences have compelled me to think deeply about what constitutes a good language teacher, and in that process, I became more aware of the reciprocal and interdependent nature of teaching – that is, my students have also served as great teachers for me. I have come to see how much I rely on my students to become a better teacher. More than the intensive training sessions, ideas from teaching manuals, or knowledge of various teaching methods, Tomoki, Aoi, Yuko, and many others have humbled me into understanding my role as an effective teacher. I have come to learn that each student presents a unique opportunity for me to understand teaching a little better as my definition continuously grows and becomes redefined. Ultimately, my students' displays of courage, effort, and personal investment to succeed in English have in turn greatly increased my motivation as a language teacher.