

Listen to the Learners

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For me, learning with the learners happens when I am quiet and the learners are contributing to class. Over the years, my students' input has led me to change all parts of my teaching from planning to final evaluation. I used to think it was me and all about me – my ideas, my lesson plan, my personality, - that made a class sparkle. Giving a student more freedom opens up the classroom to a profusion of experiences, ideas, and impressions. The classroom becomes an immensely enjoyable and interesting place where we can share our individual personalities. I need to trust my students and give up trying to be completely in control of everything. My learners have shown me that when I speak as little as possible, and they speak as much as they can, the final results are much more satisfying and lasting.

One day I ran out of time to prepare my lesson. I gave up trying to generate ideas by myself, went to class, and asked the students for help. I felt like I had failed because I couldn't come up with more ideas, but it turned out the ideas they wrote on the board were so interesting I was stunned. This was my epiphany. I needed to find ways of including more of their ideas in my lessons.

Conducting a needs analysis allows students to have input into what will happen in class. My Early Childhood English course was not a popular course at first and few signed up. I asked the students what they wanted to be able to do in English and found they wanted to be able to tell a story. We came up with different ideas for individual storytelling projects and I ended up discontinuing the final exam in favor of a final presentation. I completely overhauled the syllabus and evaluation method and students now fill my class.

One of the first times that I hesitatingly allowed high school students to take control of a topic of study was for our Oregon-Oxford type of class debate. The first of two debates that the class does is a silly or fun topic to get the hang of debating and the second debate is on a serious topic. The students decided they first wanted to debate whether digging the meat out of a tiny *shijimi* clam during mealtime was an etiquette faux pas or not. However, the "silly" debate turned out to be a weighty debate on tradition, social progress, respecting your elders, and food waste. Many members of the student audience were chanting "*shijimi, shijimi*" by the end of the debate they were so fired up by the debaters. Allowing students to select a topic of their own choosing turned out to significantly increase their interest, participation, and recall of what they had learned through the debate experience. Autonomy has reaped these types of rewards time and again and I learn so much along the way from my students.

No matter how young or old the learner, one thing everyone seems to enjoy is a fun game or activity. My younger students especially have begged me for games so I finally made an original board game using the class material. It was so well received that every once in a while, I will invent a new one. It helps the students to stay focused on the subject, improves the class dynamics, participation goes up to 100%, and motivation not only for the game but for my class goes up as well.

Trying to keep bored or discouraged beginner students interested in English is a challenge. When I have let them try to write their own dialogues with the little vocabulary and grammar that they know, they have shown me amazing creativity in their writing. I ask them to dramatize their dialogues and the entire class focuses on their production. Their personalities emerge and class becomes a fun and accepting place.

Students tell me over and over that presentations are stressful! In order to cut down on the stress, I sometimes have three or four students presenting simultaneously around the classroom with a few students in front of each presenter acting as their audience. After the speaker is finished, the listeners move to a different speaker and the speaker repeats their presentation to a new audience. Students have told me that their stress level is reduced as they do not have to present to the entire class at once, with all eyes looking up and the attention on them. Through repeated performance of the same presentation, the quality of the presentation goes up and there is more participation from the smaller audience.

For me, learning with the learners happens when I am quiet and the learners are talking, or writing, and creating. Giving learners more say about what happens in the classroom has helped me to develop classes where students make English their own tool for communication. I owe so much to my students who have taught me to be a better listener, to be more accepting of all kinds of people (and learners), and not to be afraid to let people be who they are.

Suggested Resources:

Benson, P. (2001). Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning. Harlow, England: Longman.

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). Teaching and researching motivation. Harlow, England: Longman.

Toland, S. H., & Crawford, J. (2012, May 20). Carousel mini-presentations: A merry-go-round of authentic communication. Lecture presented at JALT Task-Based Learning in Asia, Special Interest Group Conference in Osaka Shoin Women's University, Osaka.

Willis, D., & Willis, J. L. (2007). Doing task-based teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Bio: Lorna Asami was at Rikkyo Junior College and High School for many years. She recently accepted a full-time position at Kanda Jogakuen, another private girls' high school in Tokyo. Her research interests are in the areas of learner autonomy, motivation, and task-based learning.