

10. Getting Elementary-level Students to Talk

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Abstract

This article is a plea for getting rid of books and methods in the classroom and allowing students to talk about themselves, to use themselves as the subject matter for their classes. To do so is to create a completely new feeling among the students, to turn the class into a group of friends who come together with very real pleasure. Who is the most important person on the planet for me? I am! And this is true of every single one of the people we work with. So, let it show, make it obvious! Help them to meet each other.

This article is a description of how I worked with the students of an elementary level evening class in order to make it happen.

The class

The class I will describe was a fifty hour evening class which took place over twenty five weeks from October 1998 to June 1999. There were twelve students in the class, more than half of whom had already had fifty hours of English the previous year with the school where I work. This course took them from fifty hours to one hundred. Most of the students were over fifty years of age, and several were over sixty, which could be construed as a handicap.

It is important to note that the fifty hours of English they already had was taught using the Silent Way approach, which means they had several advantages coming into this second year. (For those readers who don't know Silent Way, two remarks are required. Firstly, Silent Way gets its name from the fact that the teacher remains silent almost all the time, which means that the students do ALL the talking. Secondly, the Silent Way puts the emphasis heavily on structure, to the detriment of vocabulary.) So my students were aware both that it was their job to do all the talking and also that it was my job to correct what they had to say until it was acceptable English, "acceptable" meaning grammatically correct and decently pronounced.

Getting going

I began the class as I very often do, by giving the students a five-minute potted history of the English language. If English people are still called Anglo-Saxons, it's because the Vikings came from the north, from Saxony in what is now called Germany and from Jutland, now Denmark. The Anglo-Saxons spoke Germanic dialects with conjugations and declensions, the ancestors of modern German. William the Conqueror was from Normandy and he and his barons spoke French. Since the nobles after 1066 spoke French and the serfs spoke Germanic dialects, they couldn't understand each other, and used simplified language to communicate. "Me Tarzan, you Jane". Modern English is in fact half French and half German, with all the endings and most of the difficulties left out! Since my students are French, they already know 50% or more of the vocabulary of English so if they have something to say, they should just have a guess based on what they already know.

This short introduction worked its usual wonders. I then told them that I was going to stop talking and that they should find something they wanted to ask, someone they wanted to ask it to, and then see if they could manage to get the message across. For the first few weeks, the going was quite laborious, but by the end of November, they were getting the hang of chatting in English. However, one of the problems I had was that they absolutely wanted to take notes. I absolutely didn't want them to do so, knowing that if they were busy writing, they would miss parts of the conversation and the whole way of working would be doomed.

In the end I found a suitable compromise. I would record the whole class with a tape recorder, type up the conversation and give it out the following week. This is how we functioned until the end of the year and have done so ever since. This is why I can still today produce for this article what was done in the class two years ago. While the students are waiting for everyone to arrive each week, they read over the sheet I have just distributed. Since the work was very thoroughly done the previous week, there are usually no questions about what the sheet contains.

Here is what took place on the first evening I recorded. (Indentations indicate a change of speakers.)

Thursday 12th November, 1998

- Virginia writes with her left hand.
- She's left-handed.
- I'm right-handed.
- Everybody is right-handed except Virginia.
- Was it a problem for you when you were at school, Virginia?
- No, it wasn't.
- Young children haven't decided which hand they will use.

- I have ordered an English magazine, and I am having problems reading it.
- Which magazine did you order?
- I ordered *Vocable*.

- When are you going to retire, Yolande?
- In June 1999.
- Yolande has promised champagne for the month of June 1999.
- She is going to retire then.
- We will all remember Yolande's promise!
- When are you going to retire?
- In ten years' time, if I can save enough money.

- Can you repeat your sentence, please.
- Say it again!

- Virginia began work at the Redoute a week ago.
- Virginia, what do you do there?
- I receive the packets and I register them on the computer.

- What music does he like?
- He likes pop music.

Clearly, this is hardly a conversation, although the students were starting to make an effort to keep talking about the same thing and not simply make random

sentences. I too was involved in a learning process. Therefore when I became aware that they needed more structure to the class, I asked them to find out more about someone in the class.

Thursday 3rd December 1998.

(Here is a conversation which will help to illustrate the teacher's job. I often add headings which help to structure the conversation when I type the work up. I have left these in.)

- Last Thursday, I went to a conference by Jean Lacouture and Jean-Pierre was there.
- Who is Jean Lacouture?
- He is a journalist and a writer.
- What does he write about?
- He writes biographies.
- He writes biographies about famous people.
- Of Michel de Montaigne, François Mitterrand, Charles de Gaulle...
- What does he write?
- He writes books.
- He writes articles.
- What does he write about?
- He writes about famous people.
- He writes about politics.

- From where I am sitting I can see the moon, like in a fairy story.
- The moon is full tonight.
- It's very beautiful.

- Is it possible to close the door?
- Of course, but we are still waiting for Claudine and Serge.
- Perhaps there is an accident.
- Maybe there is an accident along the way.
- There may be an accident along the way.
- She may be late because of an accident.
- It's not good to laugh about accidents.
- Yolande! Stop laughing! Some things are serious!

Planches Lane
Planches Way
Plançon Street
Kennedy Boulevard
Siffert Avenue
The Belfort Road

There is a railway line from Besançon to Pontarlier.
There are some runways at Roissy.
There is a subway in New York.
There is a highway between Besançon and Pontarlier.
There is a motorway between Besançon and Paris.

Virginia

- Virginia, how old are you?
- I'm twenty-two.
- She's young!
- She's the youngest in the group.
- She's the youngest of the group.
- She's the youngest of us.
- Are you married?
- No, I'm not.
- Are you single?
- Yes I am.
- If you aren't married, then you are single, of course!
- Yes, I'm single.
- Have you got any children?
- No I haven't.
- Have you got many friends?
- Yes I have. I've got a lot of friends.
- What is the name of your best friend?
- Her name is Marilyne.
- Were you born in Besançon?
- Where were you born? In Besançon?
- Yes I was.

- Have you got any brothers or sisters?
- I've got one brother.
- Do you live with your parents?
- Yes I do
- Have you still got all your grandparents?
- No I haven't. I've only got two grandparents. I've got my maternal grandmother and my paternal grandmother.
- Both your grandfathers are dead.
- How do you spend your free time?
- I like riding my motorbike.
- Where do you go?
- I go to the valley of the Loue.
- All the motorbike riders go to the valley of the Loue!
- What sort of motorbike have you got?
- I've got a Kawazaki 500 GPZ.
- How fast can you go with your motorbike?
- I can go at 160 km an hour.
- She can go at 160 km an hour.
- How fast can your motorbike go?
- How fast can it go?
- I don't know.
- I don't know how fast it can go.
- Have you got a car or only a motorbike?
- I haven't got a car, I've only got a motorbike.
- When it rains, it isn't pleasant.
- When it rains, my father lends me his car!
- When it rains, her father lends her his car.
- When it rains, her father lends Virginia his car.
- What was the last movie you saw?
- I don't remember, because I never go to the cinema.
- I'm tired.
- It's eight o'clock. It's time to stop.

This conversation is already much more structured than the previous one. The students are obviously making an effort to actually talk to each other. It also allows the reader to understand at least partially how I, the teacher, am functioning.

Perhaps the most important point is that I say very very little in English. After all, my English is perfect, and I don't need the practice. They are the ones who need to be talking in English, not me. When a sentence is produced, I usually begin by asking the class, in French, if everyone has understood what the person is trying to say. If there is the slightest doubt, I point to the words on the Silent Way charts, and write up on the board any word which is not on the charts. Almost always, the message has got across.

I then hold out my hands in an open gesture, which means "How can you correct the sentence?" (Don't forget, I am saying as little as possible!) The class collectively tries to work out what the correct sentence should be. When they arrive at their best effort, if the sentence is still not right, I give small indications which will help them to perfect the correction until the sentence is correct. In particular, I use the Silent Way technique of finger correction with each finger on my hand representing a word in the sentence. By simply wiggling the appropriate finger, I can indicate where a problem is located without saying anything. This is often enough for the students to know how to correct the sentence. This correction technique often produces two or three slightly different ways of getting the same idea across. Each of these alternative constructions is corrected and practised, all the students saying each of them together in chorus until they have the sentences down pat, in decent English.

I then add any vocabulary that may be needed to produce the sentence being worked on. This is vocabulary that no student has been able to find or dream up. But, knowing that vocabulary is easily forgotten, I always try to find something which will help them remember the word being studied. This might be the same word in a French context such as "snow", which they don't know, as in "snowboard", which they do. It could be a word in English that I know they know such as "the African bush" or "President Bush" or a word with the same root. I might even show them a spelling difference that they will find quite often between the two languages such as "gu" or "g" in French becoming "w" in English as in "Guillaume" - "William", "garderobe" - "wardrobe", "guerre" - "war" etc. I give them anything that might help them remember.

I also expand their vocabulary using series. In this conversation, the word "way" has come in so I add "railway", "runway" and "subway" to give them

a feel for the word “way”. I also write up on the board some very well-known local street names which give them collectively the opportunity to produce the following list - “way”, “lane”, “street”, “avenue”, “boulevard”, “road” with a feel for the type of street involved. The only words I ever give them are the ones they can’t find.

I then indicate that we can go on, and the person who originally produced the sentence chooses the one they would like to use from the different sentences available and says it to the person it was originally destined for. In this way, the conversation moves on.

Thursday 18th March 1999

(By March, the conversation had become a real discussion.)

Danielle’s trip

- I won’t be present next week because I’m going to Amsterdam
- You can sing “On the port of Amsterdam” on the port of Amsterdam!
- How long are you going to spend in Amsterdam?
- I’m going to spend a week.
- Are you taking the TGV?
- No, I’m not. I’m taking the new train, the Thalys.
- What is the Thalys? Is it a special train?
- Yes it is. The Thalys is a special train for Amsterdam.
- The Thalys goes through Brussels. (Brussels sprouts are good to eat.)
- The Thalys is blue. It’s very comfortable.
- How long will the train trip last?
- It will last about six hours.
- Where will you take the train?
- I’ll take the train in Besançon.
- In Paris will you take a car or the underground to go from the Gare de Lyon to the Gare du Nord?
- I will take the underground.
- Where are you leaving from?
- I’m leaving from Besançon.
- When are you leaving?

- I'm leaving on Sunday at 6 o'clock in the morning.
- I'm leaving on Sunday at 6 a.m.
- Do you speak Dutch?
- No I don't. But in Amsterdam, they speak English, and so do I!

- Creuff was called The Flying Dutchman.
- Creuff's nickname was The Flying Dutchman.
- Now he is a coach.
- No, he has retired.
- "The Flying Dutchman" is the name of an opera too.
- "The Flying Dutchman" is also the name of an opera - by Wagner.
- You will eat chips!
- No, It's a pity. Amsterdam is the capital of cheese.
- No, no!!!
- Of other cheeses... Amsterdam is the capital of other cheese.
- Mickey Mouse cheeses!!!
- That's right! I agree with you.
- Shame on you!!!
- Do you like Dutch cheese?
- Yes I do, especially when I eat it on the spot. I have a spot on my trousers.

A spotlight

Eric, stand up! On the spot!!

- Do you prefer Comté or Dutch cheeses?
- I like all cheeses. I love cheese.
- In two weeks' time, we will eat some cheese from Amsterdam.
- Yes, it's sure!
- I will bring a bottle of wine.
- Or beer from the Netherlands.
- She will bring us beer from Holland.
- She will bring us some beer from Amsterdam to drink with the cheese.
- What sort of wine will you bring, Marcel?
- I will bring a Jura wine or a Burgundy wine or a Provence wine, whatever you like.
- I'll bring the glasses!

- Your glasses are not expensive glasses!
- I'll bring crystal glasses!!
- Which wine would you prefer?
- Which wine goes best with Dutch cheese?
- I will bring a bottle of Bordeaux and a bottle of Jura wine.
- One bottle per person!!!
- If we drink a bottle of wine per person, we'll all get very drunk!
- Completely drunk!!
- The cheese is only a pretext for drinking!
- That's true!

True is the opposite of false.

true - a true story

I told the truth.

I told a lie = I lied.

That's right

a right angle

The opposite of right is wrong

By now, the students had reached a stage where they could really talk to each other and the course had become more like a party. They came every week with obvious pleasure, and loved chatting. We drank champagne half a dozen times after the class to celebrate birthdays, a retirement, births and the trip to Amsterdam. Among the things we discovered were : Yolande had a new grandson; Marcel now that he has retired, sings in a semi-professional choir, distills his own plums and apples and represents the city of Besançon in Burkina-Faso; Gérard runs half marathons; Thierry also runs marathons and was away in the Sahara the week of the "Marathon des Sables"; Danielle loves travelling and saw Leonard di Caprio when she was in Italy; Jean-Pierre was brought up in Italy and speaks Roman and Venetian; Rolande loves opera music and goes to concerts now she has retired; most of the class went to Switzerland to visit an art show... All these subjects of conversation came up in an entirely natural way.

Learning to write

Since some of the students wanted to write, I proposed that they write me letters. I asked them not to write about important subjects like Bosnia or nuclear waste,

but about their own lives. Instead of correcting the letters, I simply write a letter back. All the letters, theirs and mine, have been hand-written up to date. One of those who writes regularly is Marcel.

Here is his first letter.

26 - 11 - 1998

Roselyne

I have some difficulty to folloy the class of Englisch save if I do some efforts at the house, with the books, cassettes and computer. I hope not to annoy my friends more in advance than me. I am going to work again, with my excuses to question sometimes.

Thank you very much for your patience.

Marcel

Here is my answer to Marcel.

2nd December 1998

Dear Marcel,

You tell me you have some problems following the English class, except if you make an effort at home with books and cassettes and the computer.

You hope you don't annoy the students who are more advanced than you. I'm sure you won't.

I'm not very patient. I like working with students!

Thank you for writing to me. I hope you will do it again.

Good bye for tonight.

Roslyn

When I asked Marcel if I could borrow his collection of letters in order to prepare the TESOL Congress of November 2000, I discovered what I had suspected. He does in fact use the answers to correct his own letters. I had never asked him if he did so, though to judge by the progress he has made, I was pretty sure that he did.

Here is what we wrote to each other several months later.

Mamirolle, Wednesday 5th May 1999

Dear Roslyn,

Soon the English class will be ended. Still three lessons to learn a maximum of words

and english sentences. Now, I can understand a little more the writing, but I have still a lot of difficulties to understand the english speaking - my ears do not perceive the subtleties of it. Perhaps in numerous years of working with a friend english near me, I will be more competitive to speak.

I hope the beautiful weather gives you the pleasure of gardening. Did you find the materials for the roses in front of your house?

At the moment, the Chenestrels are repeating the programme of concert in Bouclans. You will learn a negro spiritual : steal away, so Schubert, Mendelssohn and gregorian, latin, French song too. We will sing Hoec Dies of J Gallus in eight voices. It is very beautiful, but it is difficult for us. I think that a lot of people will come to listen our choir.

Now, I'm going to work in the loft and to finish the fence behind my home.

See you soon,

Marcel

P.S. Thursday 6th May, I will speak a little more, like last Thursday. it's more my nature.

Here is my answer to Marcel's letter.

Dear Marcel,

Yes, the course is almost finished. I feel you have made a lot of progress, especially in writing. You are right, it takes a lot of time to learn a language, but if you have an English friend, you will learn to speak more quickly.

I have tendinitis in my elbow, so it's difficult for me to garden at the moment. I have put 6 tons of rock in my trailer now, and my elbows are finished! Yes, we found the posts and supporting bases for the posts. Now we are waiting for the mason to cement the bases into the ground.

I will be very happy to hear your music. I love Negro spirituals, and Schubert is my favourite composer. I'll arrive early to get a good seat.

It's always a good idea to speak as much as possible.

See you soon, Marcel

Roslyn

My letter is written as though Marcel were my friend, which indeed he has become. These letters are part of a real correspondence between us. The same thing happens with all the students who write.

How much time does it take?

Teachers often ask if this way of running a class is time consuming. My answer would have to be "Yes and no". Writing the letters takes only a few minutes. I can zip off a letter like the one above in a very short time. Each student gets about as much as he or she writes, with my maximum length being a page, though the students sometimes write up to two pages to me. It also takes about an hour to transcribe the tape of the evening, which is not a huge amount of time. On the other hand, the course can never be prepared, since I have no hand in what is said or done.

Why not try it?

My plea is for teachers to give up books and methods and let the students use themselves and their own lives as the basis for all they say. In the class described in this article, the quality of the language was not diminished in any way by this way of functioning, while the quality of the exchanges between the participants was enormously enhanced. The class transformed itself into a group of friends and came together every Thursday evening with very real pleasure. This I consider to be one of the most important aspects of any class.

Roslyn Young works at the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Besançon where she teaches English, mainly to French adults and to secondary school students in difficulty, almost always in crash courses. She met Caleb Gattegno in 1971 and has been using Silent Way ever since. She used it as a general basis for the class described in this article. She has been active in the French Gattegno association, Une Education Pour Demain, for twenty years and more. She writes articles and books on teaching and learning, and completed her doctoral thesis on Gattegno in 1990.