Learning Can Be Fun!: Reflections on Incorporating Student-centred Learning Activities & Humour in an English Language Classroom

Dr WONG Jock Onn
Centre for English Language Communication

1. Introductory Remarks

One of the more interesting things I have noticed about classroom teaching is that how a teacher approaches teaching depends, to a fairly large extent, on their cultural background. In other words, it seems to me that approaches to teaching tend to be culture-specific. When I was a student in Singapore in the eighties, lessons conducted in class were a “serious” affair. The teacher was positioned as an authority, a “know-all” whom few students would question. Many of the things taught in class were positioned as facts or definitive ideas. Most students were there to “absorb” knowledge and were not expected to contribute much to the learning process of the class; students were “seen” much more than “heard”. Additionally, as far as I can remember, teachers put on a “no-nonsense” façade most of the time and so jokes were few and far between. They enjoyed a high status and presided over their students. In short, classroom learning was a rather solemn process.

That is perhaps why, when I was in Australia to pursue my degree, I experienced a kind of classroom culture shock. There, although teachers were seen as knowledgeable people, their ideas were not unquestionable. In fact, students were encouraged to share their opinions with others and they talked in class in ways that I was not familiar with, mainly because I was used to being an “attentive” student. I remember at times thinking that some students were talking excessively and not giving the teacher enough time to share their ideas with us; after all, I was there to learn from teachers, not the students! I thought those students were disruptive and the teachers were excessively accommodating. Even in non-academic courses, participants often dominated the discussions and instructors sometimes appeared to play only a marginal role. Furthermore, teachers rarely “corrected” their students and, in many instances, no definitive answers were given at the end of the session, something that often frustrated me because I was looking for such answers from the teachers. Students would share their experiences and perspectives with others and the teachers were supportive of whatever students said, as long as they could justify what they said. Teachers did not preside over students. In fact, teacher and students appeared to be like equals, like friends, and interacted on a first-name basis. They even went to pubs for drinks together!

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Later in life, when I read pedagogic articles about student-centredness and learner autonomy, I realised that my encounters in the Australian classrooms were examples of another approach to teaching, one with which I was not familiar, one which positions the student as an autonomous learner and the teacher as a facilitator. In this approach, students are encouraged to play an active and interactive part in the learning process and not to be merely passive absorbers of facts and ideas. I remember thinking that this was a rather good approach because, for a start, it encourages students to think for themselves and be in control of their own learning. It can also empower them and give them a sense of self-worth. I quickly accepted the ideas that the learning process should be interactive and that students should be given a bigger role in learning. After all, this is how children are believed to learn their first language. There is abundant evidence that children learn their first language through speaking and interacting (see, e.g., Bohannon & Bonvillian, 2005); children do not, and probably cannot, learn a language by passively observing people speaking or by watching television programmes like Sesame Street. They certainly do not learn their first language by doing grammar and writing exercises only.

Another thing I noticed as a student in Australia was that the discussions were not only lively, but also often marked with humour. Some students would say funny things to liven up the atmosphere in the classroom. As a result, I seldom found these classes boring. On the contrary, they were, in my experience, usually enjoyable and the key word to describe these classes seemed to be “fun”. This was also something I was unfamiliar with as I was more accustomed to the more “solemn” mode of classroom behaviour, where deference and reverence for the teacher (often in the form of silence) were preferred. In traditional Singapore culture, “fun” was rarely associated with learning. Interestingly, although “fun” appears to be an important element of education in some Western cultures, to the best of my knowledge, it has not received much attention in research. We do not seem to know much about the role of “having fun” in the learning process.

In addition, I also noticed that the more active students in the Australian classes I attended were usually white Australians; many of the Asians tended to be passive. However, it was not true that the Asian students were quiet because they were not good in English; in fact, when they were asked to answer questions, many of them spoke very well. It therefore appeared that they needed the teacher to ask them to speak before they did so—something to which I was quite accustomed when I was a student in Singapore. It became obvious to me then that differences between Australian and Singapore classrooms could be best explained in terms of culture.

My experience in the Australian classroom has had a profound influence on my teaching style, as I have found myself metamorphosing from a “teacher-centred” teacher to a “student-centred” one. Over the years, I have tried to practice student-centredness by giving my students a much greater role (subject to their competence) in their learning process. I have also tried to inject humour in my classes, on the belief that it is conducive to learning. In this article, I would like to share with readers some of the things I have done in recent years as a teacher. Admittedly it is difficult to quantify the effectiveness of these approaches, but I have received encouraging feedback and there is evidence of student learning in their writing. For example, a number of my former students seemed to experience fewer problems regarding where to position old and new information. When they made a mistake in this area, they could be easily reminded of what they should have done with the simple question ‘What’s your name?’ (see Section 2.1). Moreover, these approaches are also compatible with my preferences as a student (long ago); open discussions often sustained my attention, keeping me awake, and a humorous teacher rarely failed to have me looking forward to their classes.
2. Giving Students a Greater Role in the Learning Process

2.1 Using Inference to Enhance Student Engagement

As an English teacher, one of the things that I do not like to do is to give direct answers to questions from students. When I want my students to learn something and if time permits, I try ways to allow them to acquire it through inference, usually with questions. I like this approach because it allows students to learn to work things out for themselves. Let me illustrate this with examples.

In academic writing, it is important for one not to overstate things and to moderate or “tone down” one’s claims. In my experience, however, PRC Chinese students tend to have difficulty with this academic feature; they seem to have a tendency to overstate things. I believe this is cultural. It is important for students to learn how to understate and they need to firstly understand that their native culture or language may predispose them to overstate things. However, instead of pointing this idea out to my students directly, I try to do it indirectly. As an example of what I did, I first wrote a simple sentence on the whiteboard and asked the PRC Chinese students to translate it into Chinese (explaining what was happening to the non-Chinese students):

She is beautiful.

The PRC Chinese students translated the sentence into:

Tā hén/zhēn měi
(‘她很/真美’, ‘She is very/really beautiful’)

Most of the PRC Chinese students did not think much of it until I asked, “What is this word doing here?” The translated Chinese version included an additional word (‘very’ or ‘really’). From their facial expressions, it probably dawned on them at that point that in Chinese, it is odd to say something as simple as “She is beautiful.” One usually has to say “She is very/really beautiful.” This little exercise awoke them to the fact that Chinese grammar could “force” or predispose its speakers to overstate. Once they had understood the implications and become quite amused, I added emphatically, “Do not do this in academic writing.” It could be said that, in this exercise, the students worked the point out for themselves; I was merely a facilitator in their learning process.

Another problematic area for PRC Chinese students seems to be the use of the passive construction. In some of my previous classes, PRC Chinese students said, rather incorrectly in my opinion, that the passive voice allowed the writer to sound objective. However, instead of correcting them, I asked them what being objective was about. In one of my classes, a minor discussion led us to the following answer:

To be objective is to base our ideas on data, evidence, facts, reasons, logic, rationality, and not on personal preferences and feelings.

After everyone had agreed on this point, I then asked rather rhetorically, “How does the passive voice express objectivity?”

The next moment was marked by silence, their expressions a complete blank. They could not answer me and it was probably at this point that their belief that the passive voice was about sounding objective wavered.

I pressed on, “What is the passive voice used for?” After some deliberation, some students answered “emphasis.” Although the preferred answer was “to present new information”, I thought there was a possibility that they saw it as “emphasis” and so the answer was good enough. However, I was still faced with the task of making sure they knew what that meant. I began by writing two sentences on the board and asked them, for each sentence, what the “emphasis” was. I wrote something like this and I used names of students to generate laughter (often successfully):
Xiao Yan beat up Yanhua.
Yanhua was beaten up by Xiao Yan.

Students were divided in their opinions, but many said that the “emphasis” of each sentence was the subject and that was what I underlined.

Xiao Yan beat up Yanhua.
Yanhua was beaten up by Xiao Yan.

I then appeared to digress and asked them to answer a question in a complete sentence. I wrote the question and their answer on the board.

What is your name?
My name is Mohammad.

I continued by asking them to say what the “emphasis” of each sentence was and then underlined their answers:

What is your name?
My name is Mohammad.

I pointed at these two sentences and then at the previous two, focusing on the parts that were underlined. Unexpectedly, they laughed at the contrast. They were incorrect previously but ironically, the question and answer showed that they might have known the answer all along. Seizing the opportunity, I quickly reinforced what they might have already known by explaining that the English passive voice is usually used to position “new information” at or towards the end of a sentence, to maintain coherence and flow.

To further reinforce my point, I gave them the following examples, in which new information is presented in a place normally reserved for old information, compromising flow and coherence:

What is your name?
Mohammad is my name.

Where do you come from?
Iran is where I come from.

What is your favorite food?
Beef rendang is my favorite food.

They instinctively found them funny and laughed, which suggested that they understood what I was indirectly trying to tell them. I concluded by saying: “English can use sentence position to present something as old or new information. If you ever forget what the passive construction is about, just think of this question and answer: What is your name? My name is John.”

2.2 Using Debates and Open Discussion for Learning

Another thing that I sometimes did to encourage greater participation among students was to engage my class in a debate. When a student asked a question, I sometimes threw the question back at the class. When someone answered the question, I might ask if others agreed with the answer. If a student disagreed with the answer, I would ask the student to explain why. In this way, I sometimes engaged the class in a kind of debate. After the debate, I would explain to them that my purpose was to give them an opportunity to explain and justify their answer. I told them that sometimes it is not a matter of who is right or wrong but a matter of who can better justify their answer.

Yet another helpful activity is open discussion. An open discussion allows students to formulate ideas of their own, present their ideas and analyse other people’s ideas. An open discussion takes time and, if there is not enough time in class, the discussion can always move to an online space like Facebook (see Figure.1, which is a screenshot of part of an open discussion on Facebook about the movie ‘My Big Fat Wedding’).

I believe that by helping students learn something through questions, open discussions and debates, and not giving them the answer directly, I allow them to become part of the learning process and hopefully, they learn how to learn.
2.3 Incorporating Peer Review During In-class Assignments

To “decentralise” my role as a teacher, I emphasise to my students on day one that everyone is a teacher and student. The teacher does not know everything. Every person in class (including the teacher) has something to contribute and something to learn from others. It was with this view in mind that, as part of the Academic Writing course for Graduate Students (ES5001A), I implemented a peer review process for their in-class marked assignments.

Before I took over the module, there were two in-class tests and every student worked on each one independently. Each test was administered under examination-like conditions and students only had one session to complete the task. This was a conventional way of testing students but I thought that a class test should ideally be more than that. It should also be an opportunity for the students to learn something.
With this in mind, I redesigned the test and it now had four stages over two sessions:

i. Reading and discussion of the question in pairs or small groups;
ii. Writing of the first draft individually;
iii. Peer review;
iv. Writing of the second and final draft individually.

To aid the students in the review process, a review form including a checklist was designed for reviewers.

This way of writing appeared to be a hit with students. Many of them enthusiastically discussed the paper. The peer review process was also generally taken seriously, as indicated by the ticks on the checklist, although some students were not so forthcoming with written comments.

I feel that this way of writing comes with several important benefits for students. Firstly, it gives them an opportunity to experience what researchers do on a regular basis—to discuss a topic and generate ideas to solve a problem as a team. It also gives students a chance to speak in a non-threatening environment. The peer review gives them a chance to practice what they have learned in class. The checklist gives them an idea what to look out for in a review. Above all, through discussion and review of another student’s answer, every student hopefully sees things which they may have otherwise missed on their own.

In such a class activity, all ideas are generated by students through discussion and consultation (of the textbook and lecture notes). This means that students are partly responsible for what they learn. The teacher plays a facilitating role.

Feedback from students was positive. They found this way of writing useful as seen in some of their comments (only punctuation added only):

- “In real life, if we write paper, before submission, we discuss the content with our prof and lab mates. So this method is more useful.”
- “In really life, we seldom do research alone; thus this way makes sense in testing students.”
- “It’s quite useful. Although I pay a lot of attentions to avoid grammar mistakes, my partner still pointed several errors. What’s more, reading other’s article provides a chance to learn how he or she thinks. No matter how smart one is, there are always something that worth to learn from others.”
- “Yes. Actually, my partner and I have many different opinion [sic] about the same thing. We can exchange our opinion and make our ideas more logical and comprehensive.”
- “I have try to critique the partner’s work. And from finding out his errors, I realized that many of these errors are usually made by me as well, but I did not recognize them by myself. After this peer review, I will keep them in mind and avoid to do them again.”
- “In this way (your way of doing this test), I can know the idea of others about the topic and learn from them. But, in the conventional close book test I cannot know others’ ideas.”
- “I can refer to the textbook when I forget something. Therefore I will remember it well.”
- “For one thing, it greatly relieves the pressure caused by tests.”
- “The test was administered under less pressure, which leads to better results.”
- “Because I knew the question beforehand I was forced to read more about the format of DC [data commentary] and do the test well. So it is actually very helpful, after the test I am more confident to write a data commentary.”
- “I think this test is very similar to the real situation.”
There were challenges, of course. Some students indicated that they weren’t competent to give a good review and some would have preferred to spend more time on writing. Nevertheless, I believe that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

In summary, many of my students found peer review beneficial because it was similar to something they would do in real life, they could learn from each other, and it reduced their anxiety.

3. Making Lessons Interesting and Fun

As a teacher, one of the things that I dread most is the look of boredom among my students, which is occasionally accompanied by a yawn. Consequently, I constantly try to find ways to make my lessons light-hearted, interesting, and fun. I also think this is important to minimise the distance between teacher and student.

One of the first things I do is to ask students to address me by my first name, without titles. I am aware that using titles (e.g. Dr or Mr/Ms) is the norm in the NUS but, as studies have indicated, forms of address can create new relations and mark distances between speakers and the addressees (Gramley & Pätzold, 2004; Wierzbicka, 1992). By addressing each other on first-name basis, I hope we can create a more egalitarian structure and narrow the distance between us. I want my students to treat me as an equal and become comfortable and relaxed when they speak to me. I do not want any obstacle, psychological, social or otherwise, to come between us.

As implied in Section 2.1 of this article, I try to make my lessons more interesting by talking about culture when I teach academic English. For example, when talking about the English understatement, I try to make my lesson more interesting by sharing with students stories of how my tendency to overstate things while living in Australia resulted in cross-cultural misunderstanding.

There is one story that students seemed to particularly enjoy. When I was a PhD student in Australia, I had a British friend whom I would sometimes invite to join me for an evening outing. On some occasions, he declined my invitation and said that he was “a bit” tired. I was quite puzzled the first few times I heard it as I could not understand why being “a bit” tired was a good reason not to go out. It was only after a while that I realised that “a bit” might not mean “a bit”. We had a discussion and I then understood that to the English, “a bit” usually means “a lot”. I also told him that in Singapore, people tend to say “very/so (tired)” and “a bit” usually means, literally, “a bit”. After that, on some occasions when I said that I was “a bit tired”, my British friend would jokingly ask, “Is that the Chinese a bit or the English a bit”? My students laughed at this. By sharing such stories with my students, the lesson becomes more interesting and the students learn something about English, and hopefully also something about themselves.

One challenge I constantly impose on myself is to find ways to make students laugh, if only to break the monotony of studying English grammar and conventions. I know it is time to lighten things up when I see students become fidgety. Making students laugh is obviously not something that can be planned; it is usually spontaneous. An area where I can create laughter is when I use examples to demonstrate the use of an English feature. I usually try to use names of people in the class in my examples. For example, in one class, I used the following examples when we discussed the passive construction. The names in the example are names of two rather “vocal” students in the class.

Rajeev ate Tunika’s lunch.
Tunika’s lunch was eaten by Rajeev.

It is amazing that simple examples like these can generate some laughter. In this particular
example, the students were adults taking a career break to pursue a higher degree. Perhaps it is because students like to see others being “teased” in a friendly manner. Another example that students laughed at is one that I often used to demonstrate the use of the hypothetical conditional:

If I were a woman, I would not marry [name of a “popular” male student in class].

I did not think it was particularly funny but I kept it since it made students laugh. Another way of getting students to laugh was to ask a student to choose another student to answer a question. It almost always worked for me. I would say things like, “Choose the most handsome/prettiest male/female student in this class to answer the question.” A similar “instruction” I sometimes used was “Choose your favorite classmate to answer the question.” When this approach worked the first time, it became a regular thing for me. I do not always consciously look for funny things to say but when my students laugh at something, I keep it for use in another class. It helps that there are cheerful or otherwise “interesting” characters in class. I remember in particular two students I once had in the same class, one from India and the other Pakistan. They were very pleasant but I noticed something peculiar about them. Whenever the class was engaged in a debate or discussion, the two almost always opposed each other. When one said something, the other would come forth with an antithesis. It was never hostile of course; it was more like they were trying to outsmart each other. After it happened a few times, I pointed out what I had noticed, “Is it there rivalry between Chandra and Kumar?” I said it in a throwaway manner but somehow the students found it amusing and laughed, and Chandra and Kumar did not seem to mind it. Perhaps other students had noticed it but no one said anything until then. The word “rivalry” also stayed with some of them, including Chandra (see Section 4 of this article.) Presumably because I come across as someone who appears cheerful and jovial, most of the time in class, I find that many of my students enjoy our times together. I would like to think that most of them are attentive in class because of this. Of course, it is difficult to establish any link here but I would like to believe that my “personality” somehow has a positive effect on their punctuality, attentiveness, and learning. At the very least, I have one student comment to back me up (AY2012/13, Semester I):

- “Maybe he can tell us something about how to keep a good mood. It seems Mr Jock enjoy [sic] everything in his life.”

4. Some Evidence of Learning and Feedback

As mentioned, it is difficult to quantify the effectiveness of the approaches I use but I have received feedback, solicited and unsolicited, on some of my approaches from students and indirectly these comments tell me what make them tick.

Some students enjoyed my discussions on culture. In the end-of-semester comments in the last few semesters, I received comments like these.

- “Provide a broad knowledge of English, relevant Culture, relevant research methods, and critical thinking.”
- “I like listening Mr. Wong to talk about different cultures and different language traditions very much, those make the English classes really funny and helpful.”

It is always heartening for me to know that my students had fun and that it was something that stood out to them. It was something I did not get when I was a young student in Singapore. Now, it makes me happy when my students tell me they had fun. In previous semesters, under the category “What are the teacher’s strengths?” in the students’ feedback exercise, some wrote “funny” and “humorous” in their comments.
Unsolicited comments from other students also tell me that making lessons fun had a positive effect on them:

- “I also have so much fun in this module…”
- “I appreciate your humor and kindness which make the time we spend together so enjoyable.”

Here is one from Chandra that particularly heartened me:

> “Here is one comment to disclose. Before going to the English class in the beginning in this semester, one of my senior friends said [to] me that the teacher under whom you have been assigned is not really interesting compared to the lady teacher. But after just having the first class with Dr Jock, I reported her that your judgment is wrong. You believe me that I never forget the moments of my first class. I find Dr. Jock very very interesting. He makes the class always interactive. I really enjoyed the moments there only because of him, I think.”

My comment on the “rivalry” between Chandra and Kumar unexpectedly left an impression. Two students wrote about it, the first of which is from Chandra:

- “The interesting thing [that] comes out from this class is the so-called ‘Rivalry’. I enjoy this word though.”
- “I like the rivalry between Chandra and Kumar…”

Another particularly important thing to me is my relationship with my students. I do not want them to see me as someone “up there”, on a pedestal, looming above them. I want them to see me as an equal, a friend-like character whom they can approach without reserve, and I hope I have been successful in this respect:

- “You are not only a good teacher but our close friend.”
- “…your behavior to your students was one of the excellent ones during my past 20 years studies… I hope we can continue our good relationship even after this semester.”
- “I think we don’t just be professor and student, after class we can become good friends.”

I do believe that my approaches have helped me become a better teacher, as some comments from my former students suggest.

- “Lecturer is very skilled in providing a good phenomenon for learn/discuss, specifying clear instructions and material for students, and stimulating interests to learn.”
- “Clear and interesting explanation and communication.”
- “Able to conduct the lecture in well environment, try to let student understand well.”

Particularly heartening for me was an email from Chandra.

> (...) I am really too pleased to have had you as a teacher in English. I am very proud to inform you that all the three examiners highly encouraged my writing. All of them reported “The thesis is well written in English”...“The candidate has comprehensive background of the relevant area”....”The candidate has completed a very long journey in this exciting field (Ultrasonic vibration cutting of difficult-to-cut materials)”...”He extraordinarily clarified all the points and equipped himself in each section in this work”.

You would also be happy to hear that no corrections were asked by two examiners. Another examiner only suggest to have very minor typo error (10-14 words), to change two clear figures and to not use acronym in all the subheadings. That is all!
(...) I really thank and acknowledge you as I could learn and extend my knowledge in English while clarifying with you and my class friends regarding the thesis writing matters. (…)

The reason why I share these comments with readers is that they collectively tell me or remind me what students want in a teacher and I will continue to strive to be that friend-like, non-threatening, and cheerful teacher who can create an environment in which students can maximise what they learn and enjoy themselves at the same time.

5. Concluding Remarks

Knowing what it takes to engage students is not difficult. We were all students once, and all we need to do is to step into the shoes of a student to understand their needs—a non-threatening, relaxed and pleasant environment; a friendly or “friend-like” teacher; a sense of autonomy and being part of the learning process; interaction and humour to liven up the atmosphere; and activities that prepare them for the real world. It is all too easy for an English teacher to walk into a classroom, deliver a monologue of a lecture, assign students written work and leave, but the things I have talked about are not difficult to implement. They do not need a lot of extra work but do require a teacher to think, be mentally alert, and be constantly sensitive to their students’ needs.

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Works Cited


About the Author

Dr Wong currently teaches in the Ideas and Exposition Programme (http://www.nus.edu.sg/celc/programmes/iep.php). He believes in applying an ‘interactive’ approach to formal language learning, where students and teachers interact extensively and maximally in and out of the classroom (e.g. on social media such as Facebook). Such an approach uses interactive activities such as open discussion, peer review, teacher-student and student-student consultations, etc. He believes that it goes a long way in enriching his students’ learning and appreciation of the subject.