

# A Teacher Questions . . .

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This paper asks mainly questions. After twenty years of teaching (nine in the field of EFL in Japan), the writer has more questions to grapple with and fewer and fewer answers as year follows year. Basically the questions concern English-language teaching in Japan but, generally speaking, they could be asked by an experienced teacher in any field who wonders why the classroom is so inviting and yet so frustrating; why the student is there and why the teacher is there. Why have both come together? Do we know the answer?<sup>1</sup>

*Question #1 : What is my purpose in being with students?*

When I began teaching junior-high English in a suburban school in Maryland years ago, I felt I could take my students to heights of English appreciation via poetry, stories, writing, reading. Ah! They would love words and use them as building blocks of their own imaginations. Some did; well, one or two did. Most didn't. For them it was hard work trying to compose or attempting to analyze some character in a story. Their interests and talents lay elsewhere: history, baseball, music, television; these interests and talents being as diversified as they were. I didn't quite realize that then though. I believed each one of those students could do it--if only *I* tried hard enough. And, in a sense, I was right. For, through no choice of their own, they had to do it if they wanted to ever graduate. And since they had to do it, I had to do it too: try hard enough to make them want to do it or at least want to finish it satisfactorily. And so my purpose as a teacher slowly began to change from being a sower of English-loving students to being a choreographer of a keep-in-step-let's-get-this-done-with-the-least-amount-of-pain-and-the-greatest-degree-of-pleasure dance. I came to view my place in the classroom as the motivator, the entertainer, the energizer; make it interesting and at least they won't be bored! It was so easy to "leap" in those days if I wanted to demonstrate the various ways one could "go" to the store: leap, pirouette, skip, hobble--and the language would be activated. Then I began to teach the language to non-native speakers, went to conferences, joined professional organizations, read books and articles on language teaching and finally realized I had better get down to this business of teaching the English language. Consequently for the first time in years, my English conversation

class had a textbook and I stopped "leaping". How can one leap with fifteen chapters weighing heavily on arms and legs? Why do I feel so bound to adhere to that book which holds little interest for me (and for my students)? After approximately twenty-five ninety-minute classes, only six units have been completed. My purpose in being with the students has changed again. In this particular class I no longer regard learning as something I can participate in with my students but as a time schedule to be checked off as accomplished. With about four classes left in the semester, do I dare disturb the universe and innovate? Months ago various ways of introducing changes were tried and all fell rather flat—as flat as that textbook, as flat as my energy level, as flat as my personality in that class. And this is the point I would like to stress. If I as a teacher cannot get enthusiastic with regard to the methodology or the subject matter, how can my students retain their interest in that subject? This does not mean the curtains open on an extravaganza each time the bell rings for class to begin. But it does mean that I must view my purpose as tempter. A teacher opens for students a world of possibilities and the desire for more. If I don't strive to do that, fifteen chapters will be here and gone and not much left to take their place.

*Question #2 : What is the student's purpose in being with me?*

In the above question I have purposely made the word student singular in order to emphasize that there are as many different goals, both primary and secondary, in an oral English language class as there are students. And although a purpose has a future direction, the initial reason for pursuing it and the present manner of achieving it must all be taken into consideration. With that in mind, my first and second year students were asked certain questions in Japanese to be answered anonymously in Japanese. Ninety-three students answered five questions. With the exception of question #2 and #3, some students gave several responses to the question and therefore the total number of answers is greater than the number participating in the questionnaire.

Questions 1, 2, 3, 5 and their responses will be recorded first in table form. Afterwards a brief analysis of their possible meaning to question #2 above will be discussed.

*Student Question #1 : Why did you decide to study English in junior college?*

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	
	<i>First Year</i>	<i>Second Year</i>
1. only subject interested in	12	5
2. become a translator	1	0

A Teacher Questions . . .

3. obtain secretarial license	4	4
4. helpful in getting a job	12	8
5. become an English teacher	0	2
6. teacher } recommended it	4	1
friend }	2	0
7. improve English ability	6	10
8. English department was less disagreeable than other depts.	6	6
9. a challenge to study something that is not a favorite subject	2	0
10. English is international language	4	5
foreign } travel	2	5
} culture	1	0
} contacts	1	0
home-stay program	1	0
11. for computer study	1	0
12. study literature	0	1
13. learn English from a different angle than that of high school	0	3
14. comparative study with Japanese	1	0

*Student Question #2* : Was your interest in English primarily in the language or in the literature?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	
	<i>First Year</i>	<i>Second Year</i>
Language	38	33
Literature	13	9

*Student Question #3* : Since entering junior college, has your English language ability improved?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	
	<i>First Year</i>	<i>Second Year</i>
No improvement	8	3
Slight improvement	30	14
Definite improvement	13	25

*Student Question #5* : What future use do you have for English?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	
	<i>First Year</i>	<i>Second Year</i>
1. at future company in case of foreign guests	21	9
2. communicate with foreigners	9	7
3. reading	0	2
4. work overseas	3	1
5. travel	14	7
6.            ) at an English <i>juku</i>	0	2
teach        ) own children	8	4
) siblings	0	1
) English	0	5
7. hobby	0	3
8. no use	0	3
9. translation work	1	1

As can be seen from the variety of responses to question #1, the students' reasons for studying English as a language are functional (#2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11), idealistic (#7, 12, 13, 14) and others (#1, 6, 8, 9) with a correlation certainly. When future use is considered (question #5), the functional aspect dominates but in terms of actual daily use in a job setting, only responses #4, 6 and 9 are truly applicable, accounting for only 26 of the 93 students although there is a total of 101 responses. Also noteworthy in question #5 is the absence of optimism in the responses of the second-year students who have already been "job hunting". Twenty-one first-year students felt that English language ability would be helpful in securing a future job compared to only nine second-year students who will graduate in three months.

What then is the student's purpose in being with me? Fundamentally the answer has something to do with strengthening their language skills but why? Are language skills improved in a vacuum? Just keep improving and one will be able to do whatever one wants to do? English for specific purposes at least has that--a specific purpose. What goals do the students have this year and next year's students? If this question were directly asked of each student, perhaps the answer would be to improve pronunciation, listening and speaking skills. But a simple tape recorder can do a lot of that! What is the purpose in having a teacher anyway? Depending on the subject to be

learned and the degree of mastery to be attained, and the student's personal involvement and determination, how vital is the teacher? They are with me because the educational system demands there is a teacher before a few credits can be given for the course. They are with me because so many have come to believe a teacher is necessary before learning takes place. They are with me because if I am aware of my purpose and they are aware of theirs, we can effectively help each other which leads into my next question.

*Question #3 : How can we synthesize our goals?*

Education is a beginning that should have no end. One might say, "I finished my schooling in 1985". Does one ever say, "I finished being curious in 1985"? How often we've been told (and have ourselves said) that education opens doors. By this it is generally meant that a diploma is necessary for obtaining certain employment. But education should really open the door to the worlds of knowledge, appreciation, pleasure--worlds that would otherwise be closed without the mind educated toward seeking. The student's goal and my goal are basically one for we both are continually in the process of marveling at something new. Language lives, changes, resurrects in us in unusual combinations of rhythm and meaning and sound. Often I've read the English compositions of Japanese students and was fascinated by an image, a way of expression that vivified the entire passage. Isn't that a world opening up for me? And my being there for them? That tempter, that encourager, that gentle push so many of us need in order to continue. The teacher/student relationship is comparable to those metal balls on separate strings. One hits the other and sets it in motion and this motion is then responsible for keeping the first moving and so on. Except in the student/teacher relationship the motion is wonderment and so each is both student and teacher at the same time. Our primary goal is rather idealistic but nonetheless attainable. It is rather the secondary goals that obscure our vision and we cease learning when the test is over and the mark is recorded. If only "education" (schooling) would prepare us to continue and not stop in March or in June or whenever the school year ends. But how? This is one of those questions for research.

*Question #4 : What, on my part, can be done to help achieve this goal?*

Earlier in this paper, when I alluded to being a late comer to the field of teaching English to speakers of another language, I did not mean to infer that trying to become more professional has hampered my teaching. Needless to say we are all in the process of learning how to become more effective teachers and so very soon afterwards, I felt the need for professional contact with other

English language teachers. I therefore joined TESOL and JALT as well as beginning a JALT chapter in Okayama. An on-going education for the teacher is essential not only to keep abreast of new methodology and developments in the field, but also to keep alive one's personal commitment to teaching and learning. Without this, teaching becomes merely a job and not a profession.

Another suggestion for retaining an enthusiasm in the classroom is never to repeat the previous year's plan. When the year ends, I clean out my files, throw away old worksheets, put aside any books I have used that year and begin to search for new ideas that will work in keeping with my personality. I, for one, can't go into a classroom prepared to teach English through songs. I can't sing and all my past attempts have ended in failure, both the students and I wondering why the activity was done. So creative ideas must be modified according to the person using them just as students then take those ideas and re-create them according to their own personalities. However I do keep successful lesson plans to be used in a year or two. Whenever I have not followed this rule, I have regretted it; there is a liveliness missing in me and in my students. It's hard work and it's time-consuming but in terms of actually being eager to go to the classroom and begin, nothing is as successful for me.

So far we have touched on professionalism and avoidance of getting into a rut. Let's not forget what every person needs—teacher or not—a sense of humor. Learning can be enjoyable and language learning especially should be. In that classroom with us are mature, intelligent persons who, in some cases, must resort to "baby talk", one or two words, simply to communicate! It could be devastating and humiliating for many. But our attitude, our acceptance, encouragement and sense of humor can help and so can laughing at our own mistakes help also. Laughter dispels tension not seriousness. My students help me to spell correctly; my students laugh with me when I mix up my words or pronounce them wrong. *We laugh together; we are serious together; we work together.*

Lastly, I feel we should be very attentive to students, not simply listening to what they might have to suggest but observing them in order to understand why a particular methodology works, to learn from them how they learn, to listen to their suggestions on how they would like to learn. The student questionnaire touched on this point.

*Students Question #4* : How would you like to study English?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	
	<i>First Year</i>	<i>Second Year</i>
1. live abroad	6	1
2. ask questions and review	1	0

A Teacher Questions . . .

3. through repetition	3	0
4. more native teachers	4	0
5. more oral English classes and practical English	1	6
6. video, films, songs	1	1
7. pronunciation practice	1	0
8. begin English study orally and aurally and then learn reading and writing	0	1
9. change entire educational system so that all English classes are entirely in English	6	11
10. more contact with foreigners	1	11
11. language lab	3	0
12. one-to one teaching	0	3
13. read, write, listen and speak every day	31	21
14. in small groups with the teacher	4	0
15. vocabulary building	1	2
16. emphasis on speaking	0	13
17. memorization of short conversations	1	0
18. synthesize all subjects	1	0

Responses #8 and 9 are of particular interest. It is note-worthy that they come from students; such suggestions should be advocated by teachers. Of the ninety-three students who answered student question #2 concerning their preference for the study of the language or the literature, seventy-one responses indicated their interest lay in the language. This does not mean to neglect the study of literature but to use it as a discipline in itself and as a way to further language skills. The students' interests are not being met if classes are conducted almost entirely in the native language at the junior and senior high levels or if the study of literature is in reality only minute translation exercises. Ways to implement suggestion #18 should also be studied and this could be tied in to #13 where the four skills could be related to the subject matter in other classes. A

diversity of activities during one ninety-minute class could include many of the above suggestions.

*Question #5 : What difference does it all make?*

Simply answered, a great deal. Although learning is a personal experience between subject and matter, the system of education today places great emphasis on the role of the teacher without whom, rightly or wrongly, education doesn't begin. The burden, consequently, is on the teacher. But teachers have and do work within this system to motivate learners beyond the textbook, beyond the curriculum, beyond the years of formal schooling to years of continual wonderment. The students are varied; the teachers are varied. Some are touched by one type; some by another. But we are all influenced and touched by anyone who respects us enough to continually strive to do a superior job and to do it in such a way that each of us feels personally honored: the teacher, when the student does it; the student, when the teacher does it. Perhaps that is why, again and again, I give up a day of my life to be with students.

*Notes*

1. The formulation of this paper began during the plenary address given by Dr. Anthony F. Gregorc at the TESOL Convention in New York City in April 1985. Dr. Gregorc's inspiring talk forced me to ask myself his question: Why am I [teacher] giving up a day of my life to encounter you [student] ?