

## **Chapter 3    What Does a Conversation Class Look Like?**

### **Questions to consider before reading this chapter:**

1. Have you ever taught speaking? What was the context? (When? Where? To whom? Why?)
2. If you have taught speaking, was your teaching experience in #1 positive? Why or why not? Were you successful at teaching speaking? Can you think of specific examples of students whose speaking skills were better after taking your course?
3. Before you read the chapter, make a list of the top ten obstacles to teaching speaking “perfectly”.
4. With regarding to teaching speaking, can you think of problems related to the students’ ages? To their students’ countries or cultures of origin? Write down your thoughts before you read the chapter.
5. How would you deal with student errors in your speaking class? Can you imagine how different groups of students (older versus younger, male versus female, one culture versus another) might react to error correction?

## **Web Cases**

Here are additional cases of teachers' stories as they taught speaking or conversation in ESL/EFL classes around the world.

### **Web Case #1**

#### **Teaching Public Speaking in the United States**

##### **Graduate Students; University**

##### **Agnieszka Sypniewska**

I currently teach advanced business English courses in the Master of Science in International Business program at Florida Atlantic University. The majority of our students are either immigrants or international students. For this reason, some of the courses are designed specifically for second language speakers to adapt their language proficiency to the business environment. I teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Business Purposes, and Business Communications Applications. The average class size is about 16. The students range in age between 25 and 40. Since Florida is near Latin America, approximately 90 percent of the students are Hispanic. The remaining 10 percent come mostly from Ukraine, Russia, Japan, China, and Nigeria.

The Business Communications Applications course refines students' written and spoken communications skills for both academic and business purposes. One of the major skills that this class concentrates on is giving presentations. Most of the international students are new to public speaking and, therefore, experience significant difficulties in this area. To help my students convey their ideas, I teach them how to organize their thoughts; how to support their arguments with detailed information; how to develop their message with appropriate choice of words; and how to enhance communication with appropriate use of body language, voice inflections, gestures, and facial expressions.

A large part of the class consists of cultural training. In order for students to master public speaking skills, they need to understand American culture better, especially the corporate business environment and its basic requirements. For example, many of my students find the American business notion of being very direct and straightforward to be shocking.

Two other problems have surfaced in teaching speaking to these students. One is teaching the students to be concise, to-the-point, and bottom-line oriented. The other problem is that many of my students have only a very vague idea of how to be persuasive and convincing. For the majority, the biggest challenge here is to use appropriate body language, facial expressions, and vocal variations to enhance their communication.

After having taught this course for almost two years now, I have observed that my students make the most significant progress if I back up my teaching with extensive cultural instruction. I try to explain to them how Americans think, how they process information, what they find attractive or unattractive, what catches their attention, and in which ways this attention can be maintained. What makes the biggest impact on my students is contrasting American mentality with their own to illustrate the differences. I notice that this kind of comparison is the most memorable and serves as a bridge between cultures.

However, one piece of advice cannot be overlooked. Maintaining the students' self-esteem is the key to their success. Speaking in a second language, especially in public settings, can be a very intimidating undertaking. Providing positive and well-balanced feedback with strong emphasis on their strengths seems to be the best solution. Since students fear embarrassment, developing their sense of comfort is the first step to helping them work on their second language speaking skills.

## **Web Case #2**

### **Teaching Conversation in Greece**

#### **Adults; Language School**

#### **Mario Dubielzig**

I taught conversation classes for three years in Athens, Greece. Athens is a bustling city of 5 million inhabitants with a vibrant nightlife. Greece has one of the largest foreign language markets in the world; in fact, most students learn two to three languages. Our college had around 1,000 students, most of them adults, with the majority of the classes being EFL classes.

English is a must here, and there are probably few countries where learners take exam prep classes as seriously as Greek learners do. While such high learner motivation would seem to be a plus, the downside is that English is often learned for the sole purpose of getting the proficiency certificate—a fact that usually reduces teaching to a cramming of grammar and vocabulary, without students being able to become fluent speakers of English. However, conversation classes in Greece tend to attract mostly students who are interested in improving their speaking skills, so a voice teacher in Greece should expect a different type of student in a general English class, which is often solely for exam preparation, than in a conversation class.

Greeks like to talk, so it is not difficult to make the average Greek speak. Students are happy to share their views and engage in discussion. The problem is not to make students speak but to “shut them up.” For a conversation class teacher, this is definitely a great plus! Although most students are not used to the teacher trying to limit discussion, they adapt easily. I remember my best teaching moments in these conversation classes. The students tended to be advanced learners of English, and consequently our discussions were incredibly stimulating. In fact, this “work” virtually did not feel like work.

Unfortunately, this is only part of the story. Greece is a much politicized country. Students don't shy away from expressing their political views. Xenophobia is also widespread. Discussions get easily hijacked by students who want to voice their beliefs, often reiterations of the propaganda disseminated by the media. When I first encountered such a situation, I outright confronted these claims without being afraid of open conflict in class. I still remember innocently broaching the topic of burning the national flag as public protest. Not one of my students had an understanding of it. I argued against—but to no avail. Emotions went so high that I had to resort to a completely unrelated listening exercise. (Teaching point: Always have a “Plan B” ready!)

As I became more experienced in handling such situations, I tried to gently steer conversations away from controversial issues, or I simply ignored remarks that I did not

like. This always evoked a conflict in me. Shouldn't the passing on of teacher's values be part of language teaching? I believe it should, but it is important to remember that you can't change the fundamental beliefs of your students. The director of studies once told me, "Who cares what they believe? I thought you were too experienced to let such stuff get to you." Does experience in the profession mean one should stand above touchy subjects? I do think that sometimes it is vital to develop a thick skin to survive as a teacher—especially in a conversation or discussion class where ideas and opinions can ebb and flow so rapidly. However, I don't think this means that we should forego our own moral beliefs just because they may not be well received by our students. Perhaps we can open some eyes.

Classes of beginning students face limited English proficiency, and topics tend to be more mundane. In most of my classes, my students' proficiency level was high enough that they actually could engage in real conversations about controversial topics. My challenge was to choose appropriate topics and maintain an even flow of language for all students in the class. All things considered, I will always fondly remember my time as a conversation teacher in Greece.

### **Web Case #3**

#### **Teaching Speaking in Namibia Children; Public School Rebekah Richey**

For the past several years, I have taught in pre-schools in Namibia for a couple of weeks in the summer. I have found that successful teaching of these children in Namibia requires a combination of understanding how children learn, understanding the culture and background of these students, and knowing lots of good teaching techniques.

Teaching literacy skills in Namibia is a challenging but extremely rewarding job. Teaching in Namibia, a large country (about the size of Texas and California combined) in southern Africa with a population with 2 million, is vastly different from my many years of teaching in the United States, but in so many ways, teaching children is teaching children. My most recent experience was teaching at a new public school in Five Rand Squatter's Camp, which is an informal settlement of approximately 3,500 people.

To understand teaching children in Namibia it is imperative to know more about the country and culture. The people live in homes they construct out of corrugated cardboard and tin. There are no sanitation facilities. People have to pay for water, which they must carry from water taps around the camp. They do not have electricity; they cook their food over a fire. Children have many chores, so time for homework before it gets dark is very short.

A substantial number of the children have not attended school until this year because it was too far to walk and families could not afford to pay the tuition. Children are now able to attend school in their neighborhood provided that their parents can afford the \$350 to pay for tuition, school supplies, and uniforms for one child to attend school for a whole year. Our HUGS foundation helped to raise monies for 14 children to attend school, for the first time in most cases.

The people in Namibia speak many different languages and dialects. At our school, all eight of the teachers and an acting principal spoke in English. They could speak Afrikaans and a few of the other dialects related to the Oshiwambo language primarily spoken by people originally in the north of Namibia. Some of the teachers of young children had to speak in Afrikaans or in one of the languages of the children, if they knew a bit of it. There were five or six different languages spoken by the children, so teachers used Afrikaans, Oshiwambo, or Kigali. It seems that English might be the language that would be used to help communication between Namibians of various languages and different geographical locations within that country and Angola where a number of refugees came from.

Music works well in class. I brought CDs of the wonderful Ella Jenkins, who has many recordings that have rhythm, lyrics, and tunes that children love. She uses a call and response method and has recorded songs she collected in Africa as well as in the streets of inner city Chicago and places in China. I wrote the words on large chart paper I managed to find. I would point at the words and Ella's singing would call to the children that here were words for them to "read" and sing. I also used songs about nursery rhymes, and I used pictures when possible. The music of Ella Jenkins, nursery rhymes, poems, or picture books with simple phrases provided the content of much of what I did with the children.

Teaching strategies that I have developed from years of teaching ESL students in the United States worked well in Namibia, too. I used simple songs and rhymes from my work with children, kindergarten, and pre-kindergarten to provide models for children to speak/sing in sentences.

I write the children's names on sentence strips (cardboard or index cards) to use in taking attendance, working on letters and sounds, comparing patterns in words, counting syllables in words, breaking words into sounds (segmenting), and blending the letter sounds. The children and I sing each morning (in tutorial, first grade in the United States and in Namibia) to each child using the tune "Where Is Thumpkin?" Whether it's to Indileni or Michael, we sing, "Where is Indileni? Where is Indileni?" She replies, "Here I am. Here I am." We sing to her, "How are you this morning?" She says, "Very well, I thank you." We go to the next child. Their names are on the board so that they are seeing their names. We look for similarities, differences, and patterns in the words. We identify sounds that are the same in words also.

The first grade teachers did not have books but used a version of phonics to teach reading. They put sentences on the board for the children to copy. Each year we bring or send books to our friends there. This last summer we were able to catalog more than 600 books in this new school so the children will be exposed to English through reading and building vocabulary and understanding of words/concepts through picture books.

Puppetry was one way that I encouraged learning English, fluency, and beginning conversation. For example, we developed props and made puppets for teaching teachers the story of "The Little Red Hen." We wrote out the script, modeled the puppet show for the teachers, and then gave them the puppets and coached them in presenting the play to us. These preschool teachers took this story back to use in their curriculum, which focused on bread for the week. We tried to bring in active learning: dramatic reading and storytelling, and songs and poems related to the curriculum topics and concepts being taught.

This last summer, I made puppets to act out “Brown Bear, Brown Bear,” a story by Bill Martin that young children in any culture or country love to read. They turn the pages of the book to prove that what they have said following the pattern is correct. I wrote the sentences of the story on strips and had the children help me hold them up while other children took turns holding the puppet as we read and acted out the story. These young children in Namibia did not know all of the names of the animals in English, but most of the animals, except the bear, were familiar to them. They see cows, horses, goats, chickens, and pigs in their community. Taking pictures of the animals that I saw there became a project to add content to the curriculum. Whenever possible, I tried to use examples and experiences from their cultures to engage the children and to help them make the connections that we know are so crucial to building comprehension in children.

After several days of reading and acting out the Brown Bear story, we were ready to begin the innovation that I had begun creating with the photographs I took of the 30 children who held their names on a sentence strip so I could keep track of the students in the two different classes in which I tried this project.

The book encourages children to try a question we could use in a conversation: “Blue horse, blue horse, who do you see?” Following this pattern, I created a book using the pictures of the children who would read it and ask the questions. “Michael, Michael, who do you see? I see Likke looking at me.” Then this produced “Likke, Likke, who do you see? I see Indileni looking at me.” Since we included the teacher’s picture, one of the children’s favorites was “Teacher, teacher who do you see?” The teacher always got to read that page and look lovingly at her children as she did, she said, “I see beautiful children looking at me.” One of the teachers who was rereading the book with her children looked up and smiled the biggest smile filled with pride because her children were reading. First graders in Namibia are learning sounds, but students aren’t really expected to be able to read yet.

I wanted to use simple stories, songs, and rhymes to give children, as well as their teachers, the sense and evidence that children could begin reading. Memorizing the words and matching the verbally spoken or sung words to the printed text is a beginning to reading in any country and in any language.

We then count syllables in the word write the word, and notice letters and patterns or compare it to other words as we are listing them. I do different things on different days such as having children identify beginning or ending sounds, vowels and middle sounds, patterns we see in the words (e.g., ham, jam). Some days we take an object that is good for practicing decoding (/t/ /u/ /b/), and then we make a list of words that rhyme or are in that word family. We may make up sentences using the word. In Namibia and with ESL children in the United States, we may have several children make up a sentence about the same word before we go to a new word so the repetition is there. Children who are not ready to make up their own sentence will have the opportunity to copy another child’s sentence.

Many of the techniques that I use with ESL students in the United States worked well in Namibia. Teachers have to realize, however, that Namibia is a very different place, and adapting some techniques is hard. It is also very important to make the activities meaningful for the students regardless of where they live.

Finally, teaching in an EFL setting sometimes requires a great deal of creativity on the teacher's part to deal with the unavailability of certain supplies. One of the most important qualities of a good teacher—but especially for an EFL teacher—is flexibility.

#### **Web Case #4**

#### **Teaching Speaking in the United States International Students; Community College Susan Reynolds**

I teach at a Florida community college that has three programs for adult non-native English speakers: English as a Second Language (ESOL), a non-credit program for residents; English for Academic Purposes (EAP), a college credit preparatory program; and Language Institute (LI), a small English language institute for international students. LI has six levels of study; however, with limited enrollment, it is difficult to offer classes at every level. Often LI students join classes in the ESOL and EAP programs. When a separate LI class is available, it is frequently a mixed-level class.

Teaching an LI class is different from the other programs because LI classes tend to be much more relaxed. The class size is about ten, with a mix of students from all over the globe. Students are required to study more than 20 hours of English per week. When a separate LI class is formed, they have all their classes together. This constant togetherness helps to bond the students as a group.

In the speaking class, the curriculum focuses on listening skills, speaking ability, and pronunciation. In this class, the students want to speak and take a break from their other subjects, which are taught separately. Since students are often extremely interested in news and current events, I have found that connecting their textbook units to current real-life events (most often Internet news) will stimulate class discussion much more energetically than focusing on the book topic alone. In addition to using a news item as the speaking topic, comparing U.S. customs and daily life activities with other cultures usually guarantees lively class discussions.

In our program, speaking class also includes computer lab time once a week for pronunciation practice. Students use various software programs to practice specific sounds through a variety of activities, modeling and self-recording.

My best class was a small group of eight students from Europe, South America, Asia, the Middle East, and the South Pacific. They were extremely curious and more interested in learning about each other's cultures and traditions and comparing them with their own or with U.S. culture than in learning anything else. I was often in awe of their enthusiasm and curiosity about everything and how this pushed them to improve their English.

A mixed-level class can be challenging for both the teacher and the students. Students naturally compare their ability with that of their classmates. For teachers, it can be difficult for grading. I focus on getting my students to expand their individual speaking/listening ability—in other words, I want the students to compare themselves with themselves and not with that of their classmates. They should focus on improving their abilities regardless of their initial proficiency.

This general philosophy has practical applications. If a student has a strong skill in speaking, I help the student focus on developing an area such as using correct word forms. If a student is quieter but has a strong vocabulary, I help the student push him/herself to speak in more detailed and complete answers. This strategy helps with grading as well. I can more easily grade the student's individual level and see his or her effort in improving speaking.

Two pieces of advice I would give are for teachers to be respectful of students and their cultures and to keep an open mind. I have heard comments from students who get frustrated with teachers who treat them as children or with teachers who know nothing about a particular culture but assume certain points which are often based on inaccurate information. Students are proud of their culture and want to share it with others. It is the action of discovering the differences and the similarities that makes learning interesting for all involved.

**Web Case #5**  
**Teaching Speaking and Listening in Vietnam**  
**Undergraduates; University**  
**Brad Baurain**

I taught in the Foreign Languages Department at a university in Dalat, Vietnam, for three years. Dalat is a beautiful medium-sized city in the southern highlands, that draws many tourists, both Western backpackers and Saigonese looking to beat the heat. The department had about 1,000 students, most of them English majors studying for future jobs as teachers, tour guides, and businesspeople. Speaking and listening classes there are taught primarily to second- and third-year students, who have intermediate-level English skills.

An average class had 50 - 60 students; however, because speaking and listening are difficult to teach with such a large class, the department had wisely adopted a "half-and-half" policy. That is, I taught half the students for half the morning, then repeated the two-hour lesson with the other half of the same class. These students take almost every subject together, so the spirit of camaraderie in most classes is high since they know each other before arriving in my class. It was up to me as the teacher to join an existing community.

Because I taught only half the students at once, I was able to arrange for a change in the typical room arrangement—packed-in student desks facing a teacher's desk on a raised platform. With the help of the "class monitor" (a student leader/liaison), extra desks were stacked in the back while the needed number of desks were arranged in a friendly, U-shaped curve—which is more desirable for a group speaking class. This made an enormous impact on classroom dynamics, as I was able to descend from the platform and monitor more conversations more efficiently. In addition, the "speaking space" in the middle was used frequently—getting students up out of their seats seemed to double their energy levels for participation. With this one change, this university class was potentially more conversation-like and less lecture-like.

Since my students learned grammar at other times, most of my classes were devoted to activities and practice, giving them a chance to use all they were learning

elsewhere. Getting students to talk was not a problem, but getting them to listen to one another often was. They regarded only me and cassettes as worthwhile listening sources, so I became very intentional and creative in building listening accountability components into the speaking activities. This was critical to add student-perceived validity to pair and group work, a necessary component in such a large class. I found that what the students loved best were role-play and performances, and during such activities even the shyest students would throw themselves into their parts.

Assessment was an ongoing challenge. The entirety of students' marks depended on the final exam, typically a brief oral interview. In just seven to eight minutes, an external examiner would give a grade for the entire semester. This made students understandably nervous, even to the point of nausea, a state that did not help them succeed. I could do nothing about this demotivating situation, which was in part created by the departmental need to process large numbers of students in a short time, so I focused on making my everyday classroom an encouraging place in which students could develop their language skills.

No situation is perfect, and many issues are out of teachers' control. I could not control the final testing format, but I did control the day-to-day activities in my classes, and that is where I focused my attention and teaching energy. Lasting far longer than the memory of a bad exam will be your students' understanding of how much you cared about them.

**Web Case #6**  
**Teaching ESL in the United States**  
**Adults; Community College**  
**Wayne Neuterman**

I'm currently teaching a class four evenings a week, three hours per session, at a community college in Florida. My class consists of fifteen adult ESL students who have been placed at the low-intermediate level of proficiency. Their first languages include Hungarian, Korean, Niger, Spanish, Arabic, and Russian. Although we cover all aspects of English, the one thing that my students have consistently expressed is their desire to improve their pronunciation. Their inability to make themselves understood with native speakers is a source of great concern to them as well as a powerful motivator.

During the first week, I did not force the issue of having students talk and did not have them read aloud. Because several seemed somewhat inhibited, I did not want to put undue pressure on them. Classroom topics were limited to information about the students or the course expectations. In hindsight, this transition period of "no pressure to speak" turned out to be a good move because of what happened in the next week.

During the second week, I resorted to two icebreakers to speed up the process—two short articles from the book *More Discussion Starters* (Folse & Ivone, 2005, University of Michigan Press). The subjects of these short pieces were the death penalty and false accusations. I divided the students into groups of three or four and asked them to discuss their opinions on the issues raised in these activities.

I did feel some apprehension about starting with heavy topics. Amazingly, this first subject of the death penalty brought the students out of their shells. However, it was

the second follow-up article about a man who had been wrongfully accused of rape that brought about a full venting of emotion! From that point on, there was no hesitancy in attempting to speak. “The cat was out of the bag,” for everyone knew how everyone else sounded, and everyone knew that “they were all in the same boat”—that is, they all were clearly in need of a lot of speaking practice.

It soon became obvious to me that, no matter what the first language or cultural background, these students are “tough”—they want to be understood when they talk, and they not only do not mind being corrected, they want to be. I wonder if this toughness is not in fact further developed in our monolingual society, which my students have found is not very sympathetic to non-native speakers’ language difficulties. Several of my students told me that they have a very difficult time in the workplace because of their speech, and one even confided that he was given three months to improve his pronunciation as a condition of employment. Therefore, whether we are going over a grammar point or discussing a current event or reviewing how to write a check, whenever I hear an utterance that I have difficulty understanding or that I know the average American would have difficulty understanding, I put the word or phrase on the board. After we complete or come to a pause in our topic, we then go over the correct pronunciation. I pronounce a word or phrase as it should be pronounced, and—often to their great amusement and nods of recognition—how they are most likely to hear it on the street as it is said in rapid, informal everyday English.

I have taught other subjects to American students, but the level of appreciation I see in my adult ESL students is unlike anything I have witnessed among my American students. As my ESL students leave class, each student thanks me individually. I have even been given gifts ranging from a handcrafted artifact from Egypt to a VHS tape of *The Gladiator* with Spanish subtitles from a student who said I remind him of a gladiator when I try to teach him English!

### **Web Case #7**

#### **Teaching English in the Czech Republic**

#### **Adults; On-the-Job Classes**

#### **Kerry Purmensky**

In northern Moravia in the Czech Republic, I taught integrated-skills conversation classes to adults. The city was small, with a population of about 35,000, and I was contracted to teach EFL in two factories run by U.S. companies. There were four native language speaker teachers from the United States, Britain, and Australia. There were also three native Czech speakers who worked with the lower-level students. My classes were small, ranging from one to five students, and most were conducted before or after regular work hours.

My students were usually in management or middle-management positions, and many were attending language classes for the first time. Other than the required Russian classes that they all had to have when they were younger, this was the first time for many of them to be in a second-language classroom. Except for two students, all my students were close to their forties in age.

I could see that my challenge was going to be teaching listening and speaking. Having gorged on a diet of books, workbooks, and worksheets, my students were happy enough to fill in blanks and write short answers, but few had any interest in participating in class orally. Even the students with university level English did not seem that interested in a participatory classroom.

After pulling out my bag of tricks for encouraging participation—introducing culturally based topics, role playing, dialogue pairs, and sheltered conversations—I still faced a quiet atmosphere each day. I was going to have to try something different. The older students especially seemed intimidated by the idea of talking in class, and making mistakes in front of their younger peers.

I decided to let the students show their knowledge in a different way—they became my Czech teachers. I would use the lesson at hand to ask my students very casually how I ask for help in a given situation or what I should take to visit a family in Czech. Everyone would have a different opinion, of course in Czech, but then they would have to try to translate, making for a lively and fun atmosphere. It helped me to learn the language, and it helped the older students demonstrate their knowledge in a comfortable way. Once they started getting more comfortable speaking in conversation, it spilled over into their feeling more comfortable speaking during the lessons.

For older students, who have a lot of pride and sometimes a strong fear of looking “dumb” in speaking a second language, I think finding a way for them to show their superior knowledge and background gives them a more powerful edge in the classroom, making the risk of speaking a second language seem less risky. And as for me, being a visitor to the country, I never learned a native language so quickly!

**Web Case #8**  
**Teaching English in Argentina**  
**Teenagers; Volunteer Program**  
**Erica Reynoso**

In 1996, I served a mission with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Argentina. As part of my volunteer service, I taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a small village called Candelaria in the northeastern province of Misiones—a ribbon of rolling hills nestled between Paraguay and Brazil. I taught a group of twenty amazing teenagers.

We met weekly for six months in a small but solidly built concrete church house in a classroom with a blackboard—a step up from the “stick and dirt” method I had previously made do with. I started off with the basics—the alphabet, colors, shapes, and names. It helped that I broke the letter names into Spanish sounds. (I speak both English and Spanish.) For instance, in Spanish A sounds like ahh. I had them write in their books that in English A sound like ei in Spanish, B sounds like bi, C sounds like ci. This way they would be able to practice the sounds on their own. We sang lots of songs, played lots of games, and told lots of stories that related to the most important things in their everyday lives—their families, friends, hopes, and dreams. It was encouraging and quite common to have the students see me walking around town and start singing the ABCs to me.

Language and culture go hand in hand, so I also integrated American culture into the lessons since students wanted to know all about what kids their age in the United States do for fun. They were surprised to find out that there is a rich medley of cultures in the States—they had assumed that being *estadounidense* (a person from the United States) meant having blonde hair and blue eyes. They were surprised when they found out that their cinnamon-skinned, brown-eyed teacher was as “estadounidense” as apple pie. Oh yeah, we learned a lot of idioms, too.

After six months, the students were reading chapter books in English. We took turns reading aloud. The students encouraged one another, and there was seldom anyone making fun of other students since they were all trying out this new language adventure together. I noticed that the same enthusiasm they had for the EFL lessons began to spill over into their regular weekday studies.

When most people think of Argentina, they think of the capital city of Buenos Aires which is touted for being the Paris of South America, but Candelaria is located in the northeastern province far away from the fast life and skyscrapers of Buenos Aires. This area, in contrast, was populated mostly by poor homesteaders who worked in either the lumber or farming industry. I admired them for sparing their children for a few hours from the family chores in order to allow them the luxury of EFL lessons.

Living, teaching, and working with my students and their families in Argentina was amazing. I enjoyed my time there so much. The funny thing is that I think that I learned more than I taught anyone.

## **Web Case #9**

### **Teaching English in Taiwan**

#### **Adults; University**

#### **Ya-Chen Chien**

I am a Taiwanese national. Having just received my doctoral degree from a U.S. university, I came back to my hometown of Taipei, Taiwan, to teach. Taiwan is in eastern Asia just off the southeastern coast of China.

This year, then, is my second year teaching university students in Taiwan. Last year I taught a group of sophomores who were pre-service EFL teachers. This year I'm teaching two aural-oral training classes for seniors who did not pass the intermediate level of the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) (equivalent to TOEFL® paper-based test score 500 or 173 for the computer-based test).

Teaching speaking to these two groups of students is vastly different. The class size of the EFL teacher group was smaller with around 20 students. They were highly motivated, and they knew what they wanted. For example, they specifically asked me to plan extra oral activities so they could have more opportunities to practice speaking English in class. I ended up teaching them how to debate in English. I taught them some argumentation skills so they could effectively persuade the judges and the opposite team. They worked very hard preparing for the debates, took them very seriously, and got really emotional in the end when we announced the winning teams. For them, one hour of speaking class a week was clearly not enough.

The classes that I am currently teaching are large classes with 40 students per class. These students seem very shy and quiet. If I throw an open-ended question at them and even intentionally to increase my wait time by counting to three, it is still very likely that no one will answer the question. Or it is just as likely that one person will answer my question in a very tiny little voice that I can hardly hear. The rest of these students will just look down and avoid eye contact.

Some of them tell me that they were afraid of learning English because they are so frustrated that they haven't been able to pass the English tests. Some mentioned that they were interested in learning English and used to like the language but after the university made passing GEPT a graduation requirement, they started to lose confidence in learning English.

Now my job is to encourage these students, to motivate them, and to provide them with a safe English-speaking environment in which they will talk and not be afraid of making errors. To this end, I put the students in groups and engage them in task-based activities that require everyone's input in completing the tasks. This is working out much better since previous group discussions about open-ended questions never seemed to work, as no one wanted to initiate the talk. My students have told me that they like board game activities where they have to take turns answering questions. With this group of students, I need to make my instructions clear, making sure that every student has something different to contribute to the group. I have to give them a purpose to speak in English. It is amazing to me that two groups of students at the same university with the same entrance requirements can have such different attitudes toward learning English, but it is most definitely an important factor for the teacher to know and to take into consideration when planning the class.

### **Web Case #10**

#### **Teaching (Oral) Phrases and Sentences to Korean Kindergarteners**

#### **Young Children; Private School**

#### **In-kyung Stoakley**

Before moving to the United States, I primarily taught kindergarten for four years in South Korea. I didn't teach at one school but rather traveled from one kindergarten to another, up to twelve schools per week, and brought a lot of material to each class. Each class consisted of fifteen to twenty students plus their regular teacher, who helped me. These classes met twice a week for 40 minutes each time.

The purpose of the classes was to teach only speaking through exciting learning opportunities. To make the children eager, I changed my voice tone, taught dramatically, and created my own materials, including a puppet theater and games. It is very important, I learned, to be energetic and have an energetic class/curriculum. To do this, I used storybooks, puppets, songs, chants, and games or activities.

The storybooks were based on folk tales from around the world, and the children often asked me if they were true. When and when I said yes (even if they weren't!), the children got really interested in the day's lesson. I used two types of storytelling methods, reading from a bilingual book or acting out the story using puppets. Either way

the stories were the basis for one or two phrases that were to be learned by the students that day.

The children loved the stories because they knew that they were going to be using them for role-play later on in the lesson. I found that when young children used puppets to practice speaking English, their anxiety and apprehension decreased, which allowed them to speak freely. Whatever the children said, they did not feel the puppet, rather than they themselves, was doing the speaking.

This storytelling activity with puppets is similar to using games at the end of a lesson. Since the students knew there would be a game, they paid close attention and practiced along with me because they did not want to lose. They would—even while I was storytelling—begin to practice the sentences/phrases which were easy to learn since I repeated them and gave cues that these were sentences and phrases to learn. I quickly learned to alter some factors in TPR (Total Physical Response) games and activities that would keep the best speakers from always winning because the lower-level students stopped trying when they felt they could not succeed.

I'm Korean, so the children were comfortable with me, but this may not be true for some non-Asian English teachers. However, this discomfort will change after a short period, depending on the amount of contact the foreign teacher has with the children. For example, at each school where I taught, they had "Foreigner Friday" where a non-Korean teacher would visit the school with me. At first, the children were shocked and even cried! This situation happened the first couple of classes, but after a while the only time the children cried was when the foreign teacher left the class. They loved learning from him. Why? Because the teacher entertained them while teaching by high-fiving the students, played with them, taught fun songs and chants, and did funny things like paint his toenails and fingernails different colors when he was teaching colors.

In a nutshell, be patient as it will take time for the children to get used to you. To keep their attention and greatly improve their learning potential, you need to limit the amount of information taught (two or three short sentences per lesson), keep each segment of the day's lesson to ten minutes, and be as lively as possible. Be sure to link a game to the lesson very regularly; if it is competitive, be sure to skew some variables to ensure that everyone has a chance to win or do well, even the less proficient or really shy students.

### **Web Case #11**

#### **Multilevel Conversation Classes in the United States**

#### **Adults; Private Language School and Community College**

**Kim Hardiman**

I currently teach intensive and semi-intensive (four-six hours a day) English classes at a language program at a university in central Florida. I also teach ESOL classes at a community college. The students range in age from their early twenties to their late forties and fifties. Class sizes tend to be smaller at the language school, while the community college classes are larger. In these programs, each class focuses primarily on one skill: speaking, listening, reading, writing, or grammar skills.

My favorite class is the conversation class, which is an elective. Sometimes it is challenging to teach a multi-level conversation class; however, I encourage the advanced students to help the low-level students. The beginning students realize that they must practice speaking English; they know that using non-verbal gestures or their native languages when they need to ask for something is not sufficient.

Some of my advanced ESL students have observed and participated in regular university classes such as business and American history. This experience heightened the curiosity and motivation level for both groups of students and reinforced their communication skills. As an added bonus, they develop new friends. Some students felt a sense of accomplishment when they practiced their English skills with American students. Other students felt lost and overwhelmed.

The local businesses often send their employees to our school to improve their speaking and listening skills. Some of my students are professional pilots and skydivers; they need to learn how to ask questions and listen to specific directions in English for their flying and skydiving lessons. Learning a new language is like flying an airplane or walking through a jungle. You have to take several paths and wrong turns before you can complete your journey. If you don't use a map, you will get lost. If the students don't use a dictionary, they won't understand the meaning of a new word.

My classes are generally student-centered while I act as the facilitator to guide them and keep them motivated. I really believe that motivation is the key to a successful conversation class. Some students bring in a negative attitude because they are experiencing culture shock and boredom. Some of the Asian students are afraid of making mistakes, and they refuse to speak English unless it sounds perfect. In contrast, the Hispanic students are not afraid to meet new people and practice their English skills.

I try to break down barriers by using nontraditional methods of communication. As a former art, dance, and tai chi teacher, I've taught my students how to use their artistic, musical, abstract, creative, and interpersonal skills, in addition to their analytical, internal, concrete, and personal communication styles. Students often feel frustrated when they come across a high-level vocabulary word, especially used in a metaphorical context. I encourage my students to brainstorm and analyze metaphors before I tell them the answers.

My advice to new teachers is to be creative and let students discover their own conversation styles through group communication activities inside and outside the classroom. The emphasis is not on using perfect pronunciation or grammatical syntax, but rather on the acquisition of everyday conversation skills. The best conversation classes in an ESL setting are outside the traditional classroom: eating lunch and dinner at ethnic restaurants, dancing and singing in multicultural festivals, exploring the city through scavenger hunts, interviewing people as newspaper reporters, talking to elderly people in nursing homes, and participating in fund-raising events to help victims of hurricanes.

My teaching philosophy is to encourage students to take risks, be creative, and get actively involved. I have discovered that meaningful, fun, and creative activities often reap great rewards and reduce language and communication anxieties among learners regardless of age, gender, or nationality.

**Web Case #12**  
**Teaching English to Women in Canada**  
**Adults; Needs Centre for War-Affected Families**  
**Julie Bell**

In Manitoba, we and our students are very fortunate to have a program for women who would otherwise fall between the cracks. The program is called CBLT or Community Based Language Training. Women who come to these programs fit some or all of these criteria: They have small children and no childcare options; have been through a trauma, often war; face a huge barrier with public transportation; and/or have trouble sitting through a class.

The program therefore provides transportation as well as childcare and runs only two or three times a week. The women come from a wide range of countries. Currently, my students are from Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, China, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Liberia. The class can be as large as fifteen, and volunteer support is needed. The program is continuous intake.

There are many barriers to learning that must be faced. The fact that these women have young children and need transportation is, of course, dealt with. Additional barriers may include trauma headaches, mental illness induced by war trauma, loss of children to Child & Family Services (due to mental illness), and the death of family members. Some of these women are holding a pencil for the first time in their lives.

In one class, a group of Kosovo women refused to even take off their winter jackets. They were all recently widowed and emotionally scarred by the war. One brilliant teacher took these students to the kitchen each class, and they had conversation over a nice cup of tea. Now some of them have made great progress and are attending mainstream ESL classes.

The program is aptly named Community Based Language Training, for the classes do provide a community for these women. Many barriers are reduced by the camaraderie in these classes. Many have lived in refugee camps for years, and now have a sense of safety in Canada they have not experienced in years, if at all; learning often flourishes.

The content of the class centers around the needs of the students. For example, my current class consists of women who all want to learn to drive. The program is often developed as an emerging curriculum around such English for Specific Purposes (ESP) needs rather than around language or other issues.

If I had to give one piece of advice to teachers, it would be to be sensitive to your students. In my situation, asking questions or conducting surveys or doing games where husbands come up could lead to many tears. I've seen it happen in my own classes. There are many potential problems, but a little thoughtfulness and planning can ensure that the classroom is a safe, warm environment ripe with learning!

**Web Case #13**  
**Teaching English in China**  
**Children; Private Boarding School**  
**Ian Pilcher**

I am currently teaching at a private school located in Jiangsu province in eastern China. I teach six and seven year-olds in the elementary part of a boarding school. Three other teachers and I work with the children, and we rotate the students with different teachers at different times on different days.

My schedule is six days: Monday through Saturday afternoons. An interesting thing with scheduling here is that the schedule changes practically every other week. Parents complain about different things, such as the amount of snack or lunch time their children have. When this happens, time is then moved or taken from the academic parts of the day; most of the time it's taken from our English class because we're not that highly ranked on the priority list.

In any given class, the maximum number of students we have is eight, which is an outstanding number that allows for a great deal of interaction. In my program we do not teach English per se. Instead, we create play episodes that are supposed to be fun and filled with English so that the students learn by modeling. It is very much a "learn by doing" curriculum.

My experience in class changes from day to day. There are times when everything runs smoothly and students' interest is maintained, but other days when motion and commotion seem to rule. Perhaps at any given moment three or four of your students are paying attention, two are talking to each other, and the remaining are either fighting with each other or running in the hall. I would consider that to be a good day. On the bad days, you have to improvise. Perhaps your lesson did not interest the students, or perhaps they have been so bored in their regular Chinese classes that they need to let loose in English class, which is already less structured than their other classes.

My students are trying hard, but English is difficult for them. I have noticed that one of the most prominent difficulties that they have in learning English is the concept that the sound of a word is made by the combination of several letters and not the combination of a few syllables. When they first begin to learn English, they are still thinking in Chinese characters, which represent syllables. Thus, when a new English word is said and they try to model it, it comes out sounding like Chinese syllables instead of individual English sounds.

A clear example is with English words that end in a consonant sound, especially the sound /k/. When my students say any word that ends with a /k/ sound—common words such as *like* and *book*—they often add a sound to the end of that word that sounds like an *a*. In other words, they create a new syllable, so that *book* sounds more like *booka* and *like* comes out as *likea*. To help them with this obstacle, I often will say the word once or twice slowly and then have them repeat it with me several times very quickly so that they do not have the opportunity to add the *a* sound.

It is often very difficult and frustrating to teach here. After a lesson, you're not sure if you've really helped at all, but there's nothing else that I would rather be doing than spending time with these students. At this private school, the students live on campus, so they only get to go home every other weekend. Some of the other teachers

and I like to go to their dorm rooms at night to see them before they go to bed, so in some ways, we are their extended family. We know that these children must miss their families, and being there for them—being *more* than their teacher in the classroom—makes for a much stronger bond between us and our students.

## Chapter 3 What Does a Conversation Class Look Like?

### After the chapter:

**All of the activities for Chapter 3 are based on the “Additional Class Cases” posted on this companion website.**

#### **Activity 1. Writing Your Own “Issues for Reflection”**

Choose one of the web cases of teachers in ESL or EFL speaking classrooms. Write an “Issues for Reflection” similar to those in the book. Include at least three points in your assignment.

#### **Activity 2. Considering Your Personality and Teaching Ability**

Of the web cases, in which three classrooms do you believe you would be an effective teacher? In which three do you not believe you would not be an effective teacher? Present your two lists. In 150-200 words, explain your lists.

#### **Activity 3. Presenting Solutions**

Of the thirteen cases here, which three teachers do you think have the toughest jobs? Can you come up with some solutions or suggestions to help the teachers and their students work on speaking?

#### **Activity 4. Learner Characteristics and Teaching Speaking**

Of the web cases, point to certain cases that mentioned learner characteristics, such as age or first language. What was the problem and how did the teacher deal with it?

#### **Activity 5. Error Correction in Teaching Speaking**

In which cases did the teacher mention errors? Do you agree or disagree with the teacher’s comments?