

# Helping ESL Learners to See Their Own Improvement

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## Introduction

On a short-term proficiency level course, it is unrealistic to expect ESL/EFL students, especially beginners, to make rapid strides in their language development. Yet, the enthusiastic students who enroll in such programmes believe that the few hours spent in the classroom will metamorphose them into fluent speakers and writers of English. Having invested a substantial sum of money on the course, they expect results; they expect to speak and write fluently. But when at the end of the course they find themselves struggling to converse and write in English, a pall of gloom sets in. At times, they vent their frustration on their teacher, accusing him/her of not having done enough. Although as teachers, we might be aware of the progress made by each student, it is imperative that we make these improvements perceptible to the students as well. But how does one make the students see the advances they have made in the language learning process?

## The Problem

"I have been here for four months and I don't think I have really improved", said the student looking at me rather accusingly. He was referring to his spoken English; and I had been in charge of the speaking component of the Diploma in Oral Communication course run by the Department of Radio, Television and Cinematography. I spent the next ten minutes giving him a detailed account of the areas in which I thought he had shown improvement. I pointed out that he was now able to correct some of his own mistakes, had begun to use contracted forms, and had started pronouncing words which he had earlier mispronounced, correctly. At the end of what I thought was a well-constructed argument, he remarked, " You may see some improvement, but I don't see any". The remark stung. I looked at the student and said, "Your improvement may not be obvious to you right now, but it certainly will be later on. When you return to your hometown, your friends will definitely notice the difference. They will comment on the improvement." When the unconvinced student left the room a few minutes later, I began to ponder: "How does one show a second language learner that his speaking skills have improved?"

## Possible Solution for Oral Communication

The following year, the Department ran the Oral Communication course again and I was reassigned the task of teaching the speaking component. I began as I had done in the past. At the end of the first class, the students were informed of their first assignment; they were asked to come prepared to talk about themselves for two minutes the following day. No specific guidelines were given as to what was to be included in the talk. The next day, the students looking somewhat nervous, took turns in introducing themselves to the rest of the class. Most spoke for less than a minute, and none exceeded the two minutes that had been allotted to them. As I had done in the previous years, I recorded all the talks. But this time, however, instead of erasing the tape after I had listened to it, I preserved it. While listening, I noted the errors that each student had made and this helped me to finalize the areas I should focus on. The students were not given an opportunity to listen to this talk.

During the next fifteen weeks, the participants worked on various assignments; the performance of each student on each assignment was discussed in detail in class. A week before the semester end exam, the students were given their final assignment. They were asked to come prepared to talk about themselves; this time, the duration of the talk was increased to five minutes. The talks were as usual recorded and this time several students exceeded the five-minute mark. The following day, I made each student listen to his first talk and compare it with the final one. Many laughed when they heard their first version; in fact, very few remembered that they had given such a talk in the first week of the semester. As they listened, students were quick to pounce on grammatical and pronunciation errors made in the first talk. They were both shocked and amused by the number of "silly errors" they had made. After listening to the two talks, there was a consensus that the second talk was a tremendous improvement on the first. All students concluded that the Oral Communication course had indeed helped them become better speakers of English.

# Solution for Writing

In 1994, while at the University of Georgia, I was hired by the American Language Program to teach grammar to ESL/EFL learners. On the first day of class, I asked the students to write a one-page essay about themselves. The following information was to be included in the essay:

- Their name
- What they would like to be called in class
- Family background
- Hobbies and interests
- Why they wished to learn English and
- Their future plans.

The students spent about 45 minutes writing a paragraph or two. At the end of the class, I collected the essays, read them, noted the errors and filed them away. I did not make any corrections on the essays themselves.

As the quarter slowly began to wind down, a few students complained that they failed to see any improvement in their grammar. This time I made no attempt to convince them that it had improved; instead, the following day, I gave them their fourth and final quiz. I returned the essay that they had written on the first day of class and asked them to do the following:

- Circle all the grammatical errors
- Correct the errors, and
- Rewrite the essay so that it is an improvement on the original.

Most students were able to identify and correct many of the mistakes. A few were able to identify many of the errors, but were unable to carry out the necessary corrections on some. When it came to rewriting the original essay, the lazy ones reproduced what they had written nine weeks earlier with the mistakes edited out. Others attempted to bring about wholesale changes. Whatever the route taken, the students in general were of the opinion that of all the quizzes, this was the most enjoyable and relevant. Their ability to correct their own mistakes, they said, made them aware of the progress that they had made in the quarter.

## Conclusion

Convincing ESL/EFL students that their English has improved is a difficult and at times a thankless task. Unrewarding as the assignment may be, it is nevertheless essential that teachers present evidence to the students, which documents their improvement. This can be achieved when the teacher armed with the students' first and last assignments asks them to compare the two finished products. By juxtaposing the two, the students can determine for themselves the progress they have made.

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