

Teaching English in Taiwan University Using English made "E.Z"

國立中山大學 全英授課工作坊

如何在台灣的大專院校系統中用英文授課



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In a workshop conducted by Dr. Steve Wallace to discuss the challenges faced by Professors when using English in the classroom. The attendees were treated to a rapid and intense course in how to be better professors and utilize the "little" English they can speak to dive into the deeper ends of teaching and just start teaching using English. In Taiwan, most people are well versed in writing and reading in English but when it comes to speech most people lack the confidence to express their thoughts and knowledge in English.

In fact, assimilating English as a language of instruction in Taiwan Universities, has been slow paced due to a number of various challenges ranging from lack of confidence by the professors to students lacking the interest to take up courses taught in English, for fear of not being able to understand what professors are teaching.

Dr. Wallace however, approached this problem in a rather unique way, putting emphasis on the professor's manner of teaching rather than the professor's ability to speak English. Dr. Wallace views' teaching as a performance rather than just spewing knowledge using jargons that oftentimes fall on deaf ears resulting in students zoning out and falling asleep.

Citing and quoting Nobel prize laureates who rose to the occasion by modifying their lessons to make them more relevant to their students for purposes of easy understanding and engagement. Dr. Wallace gave vivid examples of how these Nobel prize laureates and other renowned figures would grace the stage and inspire their audience with their manner of teaching that more often kept their students engaged during their lectures.

To further grasp how a professor can segue from being a quintessential professor who lulls students to sleep into becoming one who constantly catches the attention of his students. Here are some intriguing easy to apply steps that can be of major help:

1. Teaching is a performance and change of voice helps the students listen to the professor's lecture.

The easiest way for a professor to make his English understandable is by changing his voice. To understand this we look at the earliest proto-version of the professor who are one or two men or women across primitive cultures who were preserved in the tribes not because they could kill animals or fight wars but because they had knowledge of nature and environment and they could explain things to the next generation. These proto-version of the professors could be medicine men, witchdoctors or sages depending on how a culture refers to them. The interesting thing about these primitive cultures is how these medicine men and women communicated.

In South America for example, there's a tribe of Indian whose medicine man communicated their knowledge through singing.

They had songs which had the whole history of their tribe and they would sing their songs up to 12 hours at a time. They have learned these from previous generations and the songs have information on where the berries are, what time of the year they should move or where danger is. All of these are in their songs and part of their tradition is to sing these songs to their next generation and that's how they teach.

The key point in singing is the voice. When the voice changes its tone like a song it is much easier to remember. And this follows an interesting study at the University of Michigan, where they interviewed what they called "persuasive speakers and non-persuasive speakers."

Persuasive speakers would change people's mind and non-persuasive speakers would not change anybody's mind. The study wanted to know what was the biggest difference between these two groups and what the study found was the differences in the tone or the range of voice. Those speakers who were rated as unpersuasive or boring would use a monotone voice and those speakers who used the full range of their voice were rated as far more persuasive. So the first principle of voice, is changing the tone from high to low alternatively.

Research on high tone has also shown that the high tone indicates emotion and feeling. When you want people to feel something you use your high tone and at the same time when you want people to trust and believe in you, you use the low tone especially at the end of the sentence, this gives you credibility and trust.

A classic example of speech associated with high tone is the famous speech by Dr. Martin Luther King "I have a dream" speech. When you listen to the speech, it is surprising how high it is. It starts very high and goes even higher and the crowd gets ecstatic and emotional. Dr. King's tone is connected to that emotional change in the crowd.

Akin to Nobel prize professors, many of their students commented that when their teachers were teaching it was like watching a performance, their teachers used enthusiasm. Even very serious researchers would try hard to be interesting because it's not enough to have a lot of evidence if your students are sleeping. So as a professor the number one goal should be to not let students go to sleep. Learn to vary your inflection.

2. Use simplified language so students can follow him.

Julius Robert Oppenheimer was a top scholar but was able to make adjustments to his teaching so as to be relevant and to be understood by his students. Oppenheimer was an American theoretical physicist and professor of physics at the University of California, Berkeley. He started teaching at UC Berkeley as a full professor when he was 25 years old and he finished his PhD when he was 19 years old. When Oppenheimer started teaching at UC Berkeley he had a problem, his first semester in class he had 60 students and they were very excited to learn from the very young Oppenheimer.

But at the end of the semester, 50 of the students dropped the class and only one completed the course. The reason for a sudden drop of students' numbers was because Oppenheimer was not really used to talking to people. He was used only to read textbooks, he was too smart and was talking over everyone's head.

Oppenheimer felt very bad about this and he went to his chairman and said; "Sir I need to take a break from teaching because I need to learn how students talk, they don't understand me and it's my job to become better at teaching." His Chair agreed and Oppenheimer would walk at UC Berkeley at night after class and would go to the clubs with a notebook and sit in the pub, listen to students talking and when the students used special words he didn't know he would write them down trying to understand their humor and vocabularies.

Oppenheimer after months of field research wrote his lectures using the stories he thought the students would like and using the vocabularies his students were familiar with and he became the most popular professor at UC Berkeley.

This is a good example of how teachers or professors can change. But the interesting points about this story is that Oppenheimer did not expect that because he is so smart, students need to learn to understand him. Oppenheimer believed it is his duty as a teacher to speak the language of his student, be relevant to his students and thus he made the adjustments to accommodate his students.

3. How signposting can help your students follow your lecture.

Signposting is particularly important in a non-native English speaking environment. Signposting means the professor is telling his students where he is going using words. This is so that the student can follow the professor. The professor is careful not to jump around. If the professor jumps he will jump leaving the class confused.

For signposting the professor gives hints and points to the students of where he is going. For example, here's some way to signpost that you are shifting to a new topic: first, second, next, after that, etc. A point to note is the difference between the North American style (first, second, third...) and British (firstly, secondly, thirdly...) choose one style and consistently use it.

Another kind of signposting is the Adverb. An adverb gives information about a verb and adverbs are very useful. When a professor uses an adverb he/she tells the students what he/she thinks about something before telling the students about it. For example an attitude adverb "Fortunately" The students know that it's a good thing and they are prepared. When "Especially" is used the students know it is special. The professor is telling his/her opinion before the information comes.

The basic idea is to show or to let your student know when the teacher is shifting to a new topic or concept. There are various signposts but to mention just a few we have:

- i) Categorizing and Classifying sign posts.
- ii) Explaining processes sign posts.
- iii) Adding more information sign posts, etc.

4. How confidence helps students appreciate a Professors' lectures.

Body language makes the professor look confident. Examples of body language actions are:

i) Gestures.

When a speaker uses open arm gestures he shows he has nothing to hide and 60% of the audience feel that he is a good guy and they tend to like him. Closed palm makes the speaker look like he is in control but he is not likeable and when a speaker uses a lot of finger gestures no one likes it.

ii) Smiling.

People like people who smile. Professors need credibility and goodwill and smiling makes a professor sound like a nice guy.

iii) Eye contact.

If a professor looks at his students the students will look back at him and this is the only way for the professor to know his students are paying attention and not ignoring him.

iv) Formal dressing.

One researcher at the University of Michigan researched how formal dressing influences credibility. The researcher had his graduate student go to a road intersection everyday and he would have his student dress in different clothes everyday and walk down the street illegally when the stop sign said don't walk. The researcher would count how many people would follow the graduate student who is crossing the street. The weird thing is that 60% of people followed the graduate student across the street when he was dressed in a suit and a tie. As people we tend to trust people who dress up.

International Business Machines - IBM has done extensive research on dress. IBM wanted to know the best combination of cloth which will persuade people to buy. IBM found that the IBM blue that is a shade of navy blue, white shirt and red tie was the best followed by dark grey, these were the best colors to have when you are speaking.

In Kaohsiung it might be hard to wear a jacket because of the weather but wearing a tie is the easiest way to "cheat" your way through because you look smarter. Wearing a tie gives you credibility and you need to use it to your advantage.

Michael Faraday had an interesting quote that helps to explain the importance of how the speaker looks and presents.

"[Lectures] depend entirely for their value on the manner in which they are given. It is not the matter, not the subject, so much as the man."

So Faraday in a sense says; what you talk about is not as merely as important as how you talk about it. Referring to the presentation of your topic as a professor.

Here are Four 4 P's that a Professor may consider for gaining confidence when he is presenting:

i) Pretend you are confident. There is a really important relationship between our thinking and action. Changing our actions tends to change our feeling to follow.

ii) Predetermine your mind to success. If you imagine failing you make yourself nervous. It's better to imagine everything going well.

iii) Practice: the best way to present is by presenting and it's important to take every available opportunity to present.

iv) Prepare: When preparing for your presentation in English it's better to prepare outlines that will guide you on what to say and you can practice based on your outline. Avoid apologizing for the mistakes you make because you are cutting your credibility.

5. Answering questions from students.

In some cultures it is good to ask questions. In Taiwan it is not very likely to get questions from students. The one thing that most professors are probably afraid of is that they will be challenged by their students or the students will ask them questions that they particularly don't have an answer to. How do they handle such a situation especially when they are using English as the language of instruction?

A good example to follow to understand how to handle a similar situation is by looking at Richard Buckminster Fuller. Buckminster Fuller won more honorary PhDs in American history. He invented the geodesic dome and many other inventions.

One interesting thing about Buckminster Fuller is his philosophy of teaching. He believed students should only get good grades by challenging him and finding errors in his thinking or finding errors in their own thinking. Buckminster's idea is that a scholar is not someone who knows the answers but someone rather who is asking questions and if you have all the answers then you are probably not a scholar.

Buckminster's model helped students to come up with errors, ask questions and then engage. His class was lively and he called his model "Mistake Mystique".

In conclusion, teaching is a performance and changing your voice makes it much easier for students to listen. The professor should strive to simplify his language and utilize signposting to help students follow his lecture. Confidence by the professor helps students appreciate his lectures. Questions and answers help create interaction and keep the students engaged during a lecture. It is hard to improve our English in a very- short period but it's easy to fix these things even as we steadily work towards improving our English.