Teaching a Man to Fish

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You are probably familiar with the Chinese proverb "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." I would like to talk about developing student self-reliance through teaching survival English.

First, I would like to introduce myself and give you some of my background so that you can see my roots. In 1977 I graduated from BYU in home economics education. After teaching home economics for three years, I was called on an LDS mission to Hong Kong. One of my assignments there was to teach English in the Vietnamese refugee camps. Near the end of my mission I was transferred to the Thailand mission to teach English and cultural orientation to Vietnamese, Khmer, Laotian and Hmong refugees preparing to enter western societies. Since I have been home from my mission I have taught ESL in elementary school, high school and adult education programs. You can see that I come to ESL with a very home- and community-oriented frame of reference.

Many teachers that are trained to teach English as a Second Language are trained to prepare students to enter a university. There is a place for such programs. The Linguistics Department at BYU is geared towards training teachers in this way. There is also a need to train teachers to teach survival English.

My definition of survival English is "the English necessary to live within an English-speaking community." Before presenting any material a teacher should always ask himself, "Will this material help my students to live more comfortably in our community?"

While planning lessons for survival English, there are three basic principles to consider. I will discuss each of these principles in more depth.

1. Use the "real thing."
2. Give the students confidence.
3. Teach the students how to use basic resources.

Use the "Real Thing". I like to use realia within the classroom. I often substitute at Provo High School’s adult education program. I always like to have the teachers tell me in advance what the topic of the lesson will be. Then I set to work gathering food packages, a suitcase full of
clothing items, cleaning supplies, medicine bottles or whatever is appropriate for the topic of the evening.

I feel that handling real items is a critical element of teaching survival English. For example, often students do not have practice reading labels from actual packages. When I first returned home from my mission, another sister requested that I visit a refugee family in my hometown. After introductions and small talk, the mother came to me carrying an aerosol can. The sons translated as she asked if the can contained bathroom cleaner. Bathroom cleaner? No, it was leather cleaner. How had she picked up the wrong item in the store? She had gone shopping in our large, well-stocked supermarkets. Not being able to read English she picked up the first aerosol can that she saw, not realizing that many different products come in aerosol cans. This is just one of many different examples that I could cite of problem situations resulting from lack of practice in survival English.

One of my responsibilities in the adult education program at Provo High School was to develop learning kits for practice with survival English. One of these kits contained fifteen to twenty prescription medicine bottles with all of the cautions common to such medicines. The students enjoy practicing English with the real bottles and I am often amazed at misconceptions had by even advanced students.

Another way to use the "real thing" in the classroom is to take the students out into the community. We sometimes do not realize that places we accept as part of our everyday lives are new and strange to newcomers in our culture. I have taken students on fieldtrips to the dentist office and the fire station here in Provo. Many other places would be good sites for fieldtrips, such as employment offices and the emergency room at the hospital.

Sometimes it is not feasible to take the students to the "real thing" in the community so sometimes we need to bring the community to the students. One way this can be done is by having guest lecturers come to class. When the child restraint law passed the state legislature, I invited an employee from the county health department to visit our classroom. He showed the different types of car seats and how to use them. He also showed a film stressing the importance of using child restraints while travelling. This experience promoted much discussion among the students. Hopefully, it influenced them to be among the few residents of the state to follow the child restraint laws.

Another way to bring the community into the classroom is to bring tapes of actual radio spots or telephone conversations. Of course there are commercial tapes available for classroom listening practice, but I have found
that bringing self-made tapes heightens student interest because they have a need to relate to the community around them.

Advertisements or community information can be taped directly from the radio.

When Joan Morley spoke at I-TESOL several years ago she suggested taping actual telephone conversations. At that time I purchased a wire-tap device which I have found very useful in obtaining clear recordings of two-sided telephone conversations. Of course, when making a recording it is necessary to inform the other speaker of your intent to tape the conversation. In order to not cause the speaker to alter his natural speech I have finished the conversation first, then asked for permission to use the completed tape. One of the best resources of listening practice material through the telephone is pre-recorded messages such as those used by many businesses. These businesses include theaters, points of tourist interest, bus companies, etc. The extension service, which is sponsored by the county, Utah State University, and the U. S. Department of Agriculture, often has tapes of various homemaking and gardening messages which can be accessed over the telephone.

Give Students Confidence. When I am teaching survival English I am often surprised at the complexity of the dialogs presented in the beginning level textbooks. While a textbook is a good resource for ideas, I almost invariably simplify important utterances to create what I call BASIC frame sentences. I capitalize and underline "basic" here because I want to stress how simple these sentences can and need to be.

For example, when planning to teach the topic of housing a teacher needs to think to himself, "What utterances related to this topic do my students absolutely need to express?" A student will probably need to speak with a landlord and various repairmen. He will likely need to tell about broken appliances or fixtures in his home. Thus, a basic frame sentence for housing could be:

The _____ is _____.

The student could learn the vocabulary to fill in the blanks. In this case, he could create the following sentences, among others:

The heater is broken.
The stove is broken.
The refrigerator is broken.
The window is broken.
The pipe is leaking.
The toilet is leaking.
The roof is leaking.
The faucet is leaking.

So the learning of one basic frame sentence with accompanying vocabulary allows the student express many needs.

I use the following basic frame sentence for teaching the lesson on emergencies.

Please send _____ . I need help!

The vocabulary used to fill in the blank would include "a fire engine," "an ambulance," "the police." If use of the articles seems too difficult for the students I teach them to utter the expression without them. In fact, all that the student really needs to know how to do is to dial the telephone number 911, and say, "Ambulance!" or "Fire!" It would be advantageous if his basic frame sentences also included passive vocabulary such as "name," "address," and "phone number," so that he could respond to the dispatcher's questions. However, the telephone call could be traced through electronic equipment if the caller could be trained to stay on the phone until help arrives.

How does the use of basic frame sentences help the students to gain confidence? By learning a very simple utterance, rather than trying to memorize a long dialog, I feel that a student can remember how to express his need when he is faced with an urgent situation.

Often a young member of the family acts as a translator for his parents or other older relatives. However, sometimes the older, often less-fluent person is left to face an emergency alone. Even if a young person is there to translate at the doctor's office, for example, the older person feels more comfortable if he has a basic understanding of the English being exchanged, rather than having to depend solely on his child's translation.

When I first thought of the concept of creating basic frame sentences, I tried to think of sentences for each topic covered in survival English classes. For the topic of food and shopping I came up with the following sentence:

a
I need ______ .
some

I envisioned that the students would use names of grocery items to fill in the blank, creating "I need some milk," "I need a loaf of bread," "I need some onions," etc. As I contemplated this basic frame sentence longer, however, I
realized that it was completely unnecessary. Students would generally not need to express their needs at a supermarket; they would simply obtain the desired items without using any language. (Of course if the supermarket is disorganized they might ask for location of items, i.e. "Where is the _____?") The moral to this story is: if you are going to create basic frame sentences, be sure that the student needs to use them.

**Teach Students How to Use Basic Resources.** Many basic resources are available that native speakers of English often take for granted. These include the telephone book, bus schedules, the library, and the newspaper. Often examples how to use these resources are available in textbooks that we use with the students. However, how much more meaningful would our lessons be if we used actual bus schedules from UTA or the Provo phone directory?

I teach students how to use the different parts of the phone book. They are often familiar with the white pages (only needing practice using alphabetical order), but have not used the blue pages which contain government listings and other valuable information. Students also need practice using the yellow pages. Suppose as a new member of a community that you need to find a family doctor. Where would you look in the yellow pages? Under "Doctors?" No, the listings are under "Physicians."

A few months ago a friend was complaining to me that he had a meeting in Provo at the same time that his wife had a doctor's appointment in Orem. How could they do both, given that they only had one car? "Take the bus!" I suggested. "There is no bus from where I live," was his answer. I knew where he lived and I knew that several buses pass by there each hour. "She wouldn't know how to make a transfer to get out to Orem," was his next excuse. I was surprised. This man came from a large city in Latin America where mass transportation is probably common. He was well-educated and had nearly perfect English. I am not acquainted with his wife and I may be making a false assumption that her English is as good as his. However, even if her English is at a lower level, she should have still been taught how to read a bus schedule in order to survive more comfortably within the community.

When teaching ESL in an elementary school in Salt Lake City, the other teachers and I made sure that the students had an opportunity to go to the city library, which was within walking distance from their homes, to obtain library cards and books. We felt that this was important because if the children checked out books the parents, often too busy to use the library themselves, would have books in the home. They would need to answer the children's questions about the meaning of unfamiliar words. Hopefully, this would help
their English skills in an indirect way.

The newspaper is a wonderful resource for an English teacher. Of course, many reading activities can be drawn from its pages. I particularly like to teach use of the want ads during a unit on housing. In order for the students to successfully use want ads we need to teach them the abbreviations used, which I myself am often at a loss to decipher.

Other Resources. Many other resources are available in a community that can aid the teacher of survival English. Of course these will vary with the community, but the teacher should become aware of as many resources as possible.

City government is a good resource. We have taken our students on field trips to the fire station. Paramedics have also come to the classroom to give basic first aid demonstrations. Students that are in the senior citizen age group might be interested in participating in various services offered by government to senior citizens.

County governments offer the health departments and the extension service. Health department personnel came to our class to give the lecture on child restraints seats previously mentioned. The extension department was able to obtain seedlings of Oriental vegetables that had been developed for the Utah climate. Receiving the seedlings was an extremely popular activity with our Indochinese refugees.

Other government agencies are both resources and entities with which to interact. If our students do not work with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, they must work with Job Service. And most must deal with the IRS. Helping students to deal with common government forms is part of survival English. Agencies such as the IRS are usually willing to send out a worker to teach students how to fill out their forms.

The telephone company has a telephone that they loan for educational purposes. It has a real dial tone, buttons or a dial that really work and a busy signal. People that have lived in a foreign country know that one of the most frightening settings for using the target language is over the phone, since visual feedback is no longer present. Most ESL students need much practice with telephone conversation and need to be taught common telephone etiquette expected in our culture.

Utah Power and Light or other power companies offer consumer services that could be useful to the students. These include cooking demonstrations and demonstrations on improving energy conservation in the home.
Local dentists, doctors and the hospital are willing to come to class or to give tours of their offices. Students should be taught how to find the emergency entrance to the hospital and how to fill out the forms required there. They should also be taught other options for emergency care.

Utah Transit Authority is a good resource for students to learn about. Besides providing bus schedules, they also have a computerized telephone system that provides information about bus arrivals.

I have found that Deseret Industries and other thrift stores are excellent places to find copies of used magazines reasonably priced. Magazines are good sources of pictures for a picture file, especially magazines like *National Geographic* which could provide pictures about the homelands of the students, a good starting place for a discussion of cultural contrasts. A good friend of mine, a master teacher, drew upon such pictures as well as other pictures depicting different cultures in order to have the students "teach" her about their homelands. While she was learning culture, the students were highly motivated to speak English.

Adapting textbook lessons requires time and extra effort, but also rewards the teacher with higher student interest, motivation, and progress in adapting to the community.