

# Teachers' Voices



STORIES FROM THE CLASSROOM

Volume 1

# *Teachers' Voices*

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### Volume 1

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2021

**TEACHERS' VOICES: STORIES FROM THE CLASSROOM: VOL. 1**

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First Published 2021

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Cover Design: Rizal/ Nida Zahar Studio

Layout Design: Nida Zahar Studio

e ISBN: 978-983-9411-08-9

Published by

**Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA)**

G-11-2, Putra Walk, Jalan PP 25,

Taman Pinggiran Putra,

Bandar Putra Permai,

43300 Seri Kembangan Malaysia.

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## FOREWORD

### DR SHARMINI GHANAGURU

Reading maketh the man is the saying we often hear. To me, writing unravels character through the voice of the writer. Having said that, this book 'Teachers' Voices: Stories from the Classroom' certainly presents insights of teachers who have been working resiliently in terms of educating our young learners. The stories shared by these teachers are indeed inspiring and heart-warming to say the least. Teaching, to me, is an art. Even if one is considered as a born teacher, one needs to acquire the skills of imparting knowledge and instilling values beyond what is contained within the textbooks. This art of teaching, in my opinion, can be acquired when the individual possesses passion and knowledge which would later be transmitted through his or her teachings in the classroom. As such, the narratives presented in this book indeed make a distinction between educating and learning. The writers are not merely teachers who teach their young learners with essential knowledge but they have been able to educate the young minds with life long learning skills. Here, in this book, not only we obtain understandings of what transpires in the classroom, we also have the opportunity to see through the lenses of these committed and passionate teachers on how they are able to cope and even overcome challenges within the

classroom walls. This book would serve as a valuable resource to all not just those in the education fraternity.

**DR SHARMINI GHANAGURU**

Chief Editor

Institute of Teacher Education, International Languages Campus

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# 01

## **My Story....**

*By Siti Sarah Nabillah bt Mohd Hashim Hasni*

### **About the Author:**



Siti Sarah Nabillah bt Mohd Hashim Hasni, is 30 years old and is an English teacher in Kemaman, Terengganu. Currently she is teaching Form 6 in SMK Chukai, Kemaman since 2017. Her first school was SMK Geliga, Kemaman (2015-2017). She studied at Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Ipoh, Perak (2 years) and University of Warwick, United Kingdom (3 years) . The eldest and the only daughter of her three siblings, she is married and will be expecting her first child soon in January.

Personal quote: 'There is beauty in everyone and in everything.'





***“In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun and snap, the job’s a game.”- Mary Poppins.***

Are you familiar with this situation?

**"Alright, would anyone like to share what do they think about this picture?"**

***Silence... \*sounds of chairs moving and pens rolling on the table***

**"Yes anyone...? Any thoughts you'd like to share on this picture? No answer is wrong..."**

***Still, complete silence....***

Then, the teacher would start narrating what she or he thinks about the picture. Sounds familiar? Well, this situation is quite common from where I come from. It may not be true in all schools, but so far, in my experience, this is the situation that I have to face- What can I do to get students to speak English with me freely? This is where I had to use a bit of Mary Poppin's magic into my lesson.

**"In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun.  
You find the fun and snap, the job's a game."- Mary Poppins.**

She claims the way to get anyone to do anything that they are reluctant to do is by inserting a bit of fun into the activity which has brought me to devise a simple activity that would get students to give opinions in a fun and meaningful manner.

### **'P-GOP'**

'P-GOP' stands for pictures and giving opinion phrases. I am teaching MUET and one of the skills I need my students to excel in is speaking. Some students can speak even without being

prompted while others need the extra 'push'. In this activity, first I would introduce some giving opinion phrases to the students and rehearse with them on how to use it. Then, I would show a slide of few different pictures and have them give opinions on the pictures by starting their sentences with the phrases learnt earlier.

The activity seems simple but instructions need to be clear. I needed to have a practice round with my students first then it progressed into a game we both enjoyed. Students were divided into two teams, a time limit was given and as soon as one student started to give opinions, it was only a matter of time before it became a frenzied session of thoughts exchanging.



Even the shy ones stood up immediately when it was their turn to speak. Regardless of how simple their responses were, an opinion was still an opinion and by reassuring that in them, the level

of response I received afterwards for my other lessons was more than satisfying. Not to mention, in a few instances, it was so much fun seeing them blurting out the first thing that came to their mind. We had a good laugh.

On the same note, my school asked me to share this as an action research and take part in the National Form 6 Action Research Convention in Penang. Alhamdulillah, it won the 'Best Action Research written in 2018'. It was quite memorable. Thanks to Mary Poppins \*wink.





Teaching to me, comes hand in hand with beliefs. My parents taught me that. Whatever your beliefs are, hold on true to them and they will help you become the teacher you want to be. Apart from believing that inserting fun into lessons could encourage positive response from students, I also believe that everyone has potential and needs to be given a chance to prove themselves.

Here is another story to share.

It was an all-boys school. I went there with my best friend, Priya as practicum teachers. It was our first unforgettable teaching experience.

Both of us were assigned classes and a project to work on together - coaching the choral speaking team. The team had not been properly assembled yet, thus we had to carry auditions. What surprised everyone was, some boys who were known to be trouble makers of the school came to the audition and hey, they were very good!



Many teachers advised us not to choose them fearing they may not commit and would cause trouble later. As much as we wanted to listen to their advice, somehow in our hearts, both of us felt that we needed to give these boys a chance. And so, despite the disagreeable remarks, we accepted them.

From that day on, we practiced. Some were good days, some were tough. But not once, we regretted our decision. We just kept pushing on and truthfully, we could see some changes. They showed up for practice and memorized the script. Priya and I even gave solo roles to the boys which they took the responsibility well and delivered their lines perfectly.

Soon, training became easier. Instead of playing too much during training, they were more cooperative and committed. Soon, the boys became the talk of the school and for once, for something positive.

On the day of the competition, fate took a turn as Priya and I could not make it as our training institution had arranged a programme for us to go to - it was compulsory. We both were extremely frustrated as well as the boys. But we had a pep talk few days before the competition and we assured them that they were going to be alright. The boys took the news like men.

As the fateful day came, the boys went for battle and Priya and I went for our programme. We called them before they performed. We wished them good luck. Few hours went by, Priya and I were getting anxious of not receiving any news. Then, as Priya and I were on our way home, we received a call.

We picked it up and it was from the boys- “Miss Sarah, Miss Priya....we won!”. Both Priya and I screamed our hearts out and hugged each other tight. The boys could hear us screaming and we could hear them commenting in the background “why are they screaming lar?”. We could barely say anything intelligent afterwards as we became too emotional. We congratulated the boys. They truly deserved it.



Both Priya and I learnt a valuable lesson that day – not to take students for granted and every student has potential, regardless of who they are.

I am Sarah Hashim, or affectionately known as Miss Sarah and these are my stories.



02

# **Of Clouds And Silver Linings: Covid-19, Teacher And Students In Higher Education Institution**

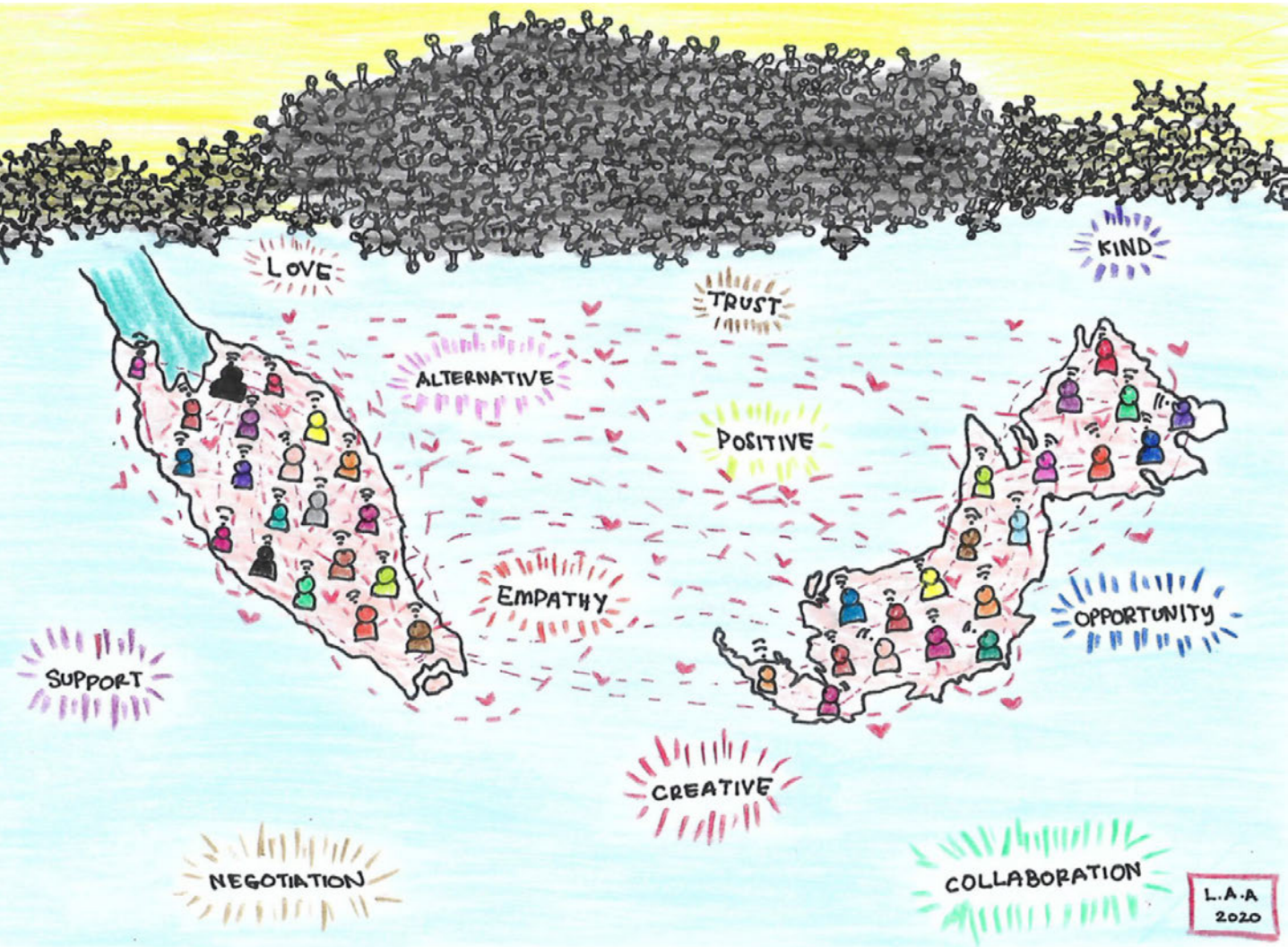
*By Liyana Ahmad Afip*

## **About the Author:**



Liyana Ahmad Afip is currently undertaking her PhD at the University of Queensland, examining English language curriculum reform in Malaysia. She is a lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. She is interested in language-in-education policy and planning. Her latest publication is on Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): Insights into global policy borrowing in Malaysian higher education.





Early this year, people around the world have stumbled upon a deadly virus known as Covid-19 and it has left several dreadful marks in our lives. It is devastating to know that until now, the vaccine is yet to be developed and even if there is a vaccine, there is no possibility to return to the pre-Covid-19 days. Everything seems to be just like a nightmare, but this is the reality that we need to endure. Covid-19 certainly has affected multiple dimensions

of human life when people lost their jobs, they had to control their social interaction, parents had to opt for parental leave due to the schools closure and people have restrained themselves from doing outdoor activities because of their fear of contracting this invisible threat.

Covid-19 somehow proves that nature can also play an important role in globalisation. In my opinion inequality is apparent when we face Covid-19, where students with benefit may have access to education. Although it is not compulsory for the school to give homework to students, it somehow affects the students, especially those who are underprivileged. We have been blindsided by the education technology companies on how technology can help in giving access to education. However, it is hard to ignore the fact that a high-speed internet is a luxury in which not everyone can afford especially for those who are in rural areas. On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, the Malaysian government has announced to provide free unlimited data until the end of MCO. Unfortunately, internet connection is still a major struggle for students to participate in online learning.

I considered myself lucky to be given the opportunity to teach students in higher education institution as these students are the selected ones and not those who I need to give close monitoring. However, learning during Covid-19 was totally a different experience for me that I will treasure for the rest of my life. When the Ministry of Education Malaysia directed the shift from traditional classroom to online learning in order to ensure learning activities were not disrupted, I was happy. At first, I thought that the process will be similar to my experience having online classes with my students. Having online classes or blended learning is not something that is

new to those who are teaching in higher education institution as we are actively using ZOOM, WhatsApp, and our own e-learning platform. Unfortunately, I was wrong! I have never imagined the hardships that my students had to go through during Covid-19 pandemic as the challenges come from various sources.

The first challenge comes from internet connection and the data purchased by the students. Students complained that some of the videos posted by teachers consumed lots of internet data. The students also have problem to answer online quizzes especially when the connection was instable where the system automatically submitted the quiz although they have not answered the test. I also found that students were anxious with the use of e-learning platform especially during peak hours. In order to improve this situation, university should find ways to cope with the demand to use the e-learning platform and upgrade the system. University should also provide training videos for students and teachers so that they are familiar on how to use the platform effectively. As for educators, it is important to find application that does not consume much internet data. For example, avoid from using large size video and use ZOOM instead of Google Meet because Google Meet consumes more data. For assessment, I asked the students to use voice notes in WhatsApp instead of creating a video to reduce their internet data usage.

Next, family commitment can also be a challenge for the students to be committed in their learning. I had students who have to take care of their younger siblings and some have to take care of their parents in the hospital. Students coming from bottom income (B40) families struggle not just with the internet connection, but also with their living condition. Few of my students have to juggle

between their commitment for their class and their responsibility as one of the family members. I remembered several cases where the students had to help their parents doing business at the night market and online business and some were doing casual despatch services during the Movement Control Order period to earn money for the family. I strongly believe that this wonderful attribute should not be ignored. Therefore, the best way to help these students is by giving them flexible time to manage and participate in the lesson.

Finally, I noticed that some of my students have problems with poor time management and are not motivated to participate in online classroom discussion when they are self-isolated at home. One of the ways to avoid this problem is by creating a safe and supportive learning environment. I used WhatsApp as an informal way of interacting with my students and I found that students are more comfortable to have discussion through WhatsApp compared to other platforms. I can also send 'friendly reminder' for students to ensure that they did not miss any deadlines for the assignments.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that it is important for educators to be considerate and have some empathy for their students during this difficult time. It is important for the educators to be flexible and open for negotiation when students have difficulties to ensure that no one will be left behind. Educators need to constantly remind themselves that we want the students to remember good memories of learning and not to demotivate them from learning.



03

## English could be Students' Sweetheart

*By Muhammad Solahudin Ramli*

### About the Author:



Muhamad Solahudin Ramli is a secondary school English teacher in Kuala Terengganu. He obtained his B.Ed TESL degree from UiTM, Shah Alam. He has been in the teaching profession for 10 years, serving three schools. He has been a regular letter writer of the New Straits Times since 2014 with over 150 letters being published. He is actively involved in training students for performances and English competitions. He is also the teacher in-charge of young leaders in school. He can be contacted at [solah\\_owen@yahoo.com](mailto:solah_owen@yahoo.com).



***"The capacity to learn is a gift,  
The ability to learn is a skill,  
The willingness to learn is a choice."  
Brian Herbet***

As American author Brian Herbert says: *The capacity to learn is a gift; the ability to learn is a skill; the willingness to learn is a choice.* Children are gifted and skilled in different ways but their potential will not be discovered unless somebody makes efforts to unleash it. Parents may be children's first teachers, but school teachers will always have that special touch when it comes to developing and polishing a child's talents and abilities. As children realize that they possess certain skills, teachers need to grow their motivation and willingness to learn continuously and consistently in helping them make the right choice. This could be the challenging part of the learning process as children may end up becoming negative individuals as they misuse their learned skills and belittle or bully others who may have difficulties in mastering certain skills. In addition, the overconfidence and the overwhelmed feeling of staying in a comfort zone may result in the unwillingness of improving the discovered skills while denying the fact that learning is a lifelong process.

In the case of learning English as a second language, Malaysian students may be non - and near - native speakers who may have different challenges in mastering the language. Some students may overthink and perceive the learning experience of the language as surreal, stressful and scary considering the fact that it is the world's lingua franca – something that sounds too big and serious. Interestingly, few are excited to learn the language because of

the same fact or status of English as an international language. Regardless of pupils' perception towards English learning, teachers need to standardise the mindset by focusing on the importance of becoming proficient in the language as not only is it a language that is undeniably important for university offers, scholarship and job interviews, but it is also the language of survival. Thus, teachers need to help students overcome fears and anxiety when learning the language en route to ensuring their bright future.

Truth be told, mastering the language is more than just about producing learners who could speak and write well in English. It is also about shaping them into becoming exemplary individuals who are reflective thinkers and wise decision makers.

I design my lessons and teach my students based on three criteria; originality, creativity and sincerity. These three aspects will encourage students to become creative, take risks and enjoy the learning process wholeheartedly as they are mentally and emotionally connected to the English lessons. As Greek philosopher Aristotle said: "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all." This deep thought has inspired me to conduct three meaningful lessons that could eventually be the food for hearts, minds and souls.

For the first activity, the focus was on all three elements – originality, creativity and sincerity. I named it "Weekly Love Letters" and I prepared a basket of red apples (red symbolises love while apples, good health) which were later distributed to each student on the day the project was introduced. By applying this method, students will learn to appreciate and acknowledge life blessings by writing about somebody or something that has

significantly contributed in their lives. The best love letters with the most reflective contents and decorative designs will win prizes. This effort of making students write something nice is hoped to improve their mental health as they learn to look on the bright side. This lesson also teaches them to focus on the silver lining instead of the cloud.





The second activity of journal writing, however, focuses on only two aspects – originality and sincerity. I have practised this teaching method for several years and the students have begun to make it a habit to write for pleasure. Well, as the timeless saying goes, practice makes perfect. This monthly journal writing helps them to express their thoughts and share their stories of life. The fact that their quality of writing would not be evaluated made journal writing a fun homework to which they looked forward to. Metaphorically speaking, reading journal entries is like reading students' minds. This journaling method is a heart-to-heart approach that proves the power of words in helping teachers-cum-readers gain information from students-cum-writers regarding the latter's lifestyles, problems and interests. As a result, the teacher-student relationship will improve.

For the third activity, my students had a good time watching movies that tested their thinking skills and made them develop feelings of empathy and sincerity – the latter of which was expressed during the sharing session. According to Howard Gardner who proposes the idea of multiple intelligences, visual learning helps students to activate their spatial intelligence as they focus on fine details. This has given me an idea to integrate movies into the classroom, especially when considering the fact that today's generation loves to be glued to the screen for enjoyment. I used to show my students English, Hindi and Japanese movies with plenty of life lessons including "Up", "Brave", "Taare Zameen Par" and "Grave of the Fireflies". For non-English movies, the English subtitles help students gain vocabulary. This movie-watching approach helps students reflect on their lives and open up during the post-activity of sharing session. The element of sincerity is beautifully touched as students relate the storylines and issues highlighted in the stories to their personal experiences.



In addition, as a trainer and teacher in-charge of various English programs and competitions, I often offer or choose different students to participate in different activities as individuals' hidden talents always pique my curiosity and I wish to be surprised and mesmerised by what everyone else can do. This is how I encourage the students to become opportunistic and optimistic - by taking the opportunity and facing the challenges while believing that there is no harm trying. This may be their time to shine so they may either take it or leave it – it is now or never. At the end of the day, their willingness to participate and the success of overcoming the stage fright are achievements that deserve to be celebrated and be proud of.

It was a yesteryear belief that teachers were students' heroes and role models. Now, teachers are superheroes who save students from feeling de-motivated and uninspired.



# 04

## **“I really enjoyed the ... lesson”: Teaching and learning practices that engage students**

*By Melinda Kong*



### **About the Author:**

Dr Melinda Kong obtained her Bachelor of Education in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages/TESOL (1st Class Hons) from the University of Southampton (United Kingdom), before getting a Master of Arts in TESOL from the Institute of Education, University College London. She also pursued a PhD in Education at the University of Melbourne. She is currently a Senior Lecturer at Swinburne Sarawak, Malaysia. She has published in the areas of teacher education, identity, and curriculum and pedagogy. Her recent book is entitled “The hopes and experiences of bilingual teachers of English: investments, expectations and identity.” (Routledge). Dr. Melinda Kong can be contacted through [mkong@swinburne.edu.my](mailto:mkong@swinburne.edu.my).

"I just turned 59 and I retired from teaching last year", was how one of my students introduced herself to my class. I teach different subjects within the Master of Arts (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages/TESOL) course, and my students come from various educational backgrounds. Some are fresh degree graduates, while others are practising or retired teachers from various schools and institutions. Many of them study full-time, while teaching either part-time or full-time.

As a teacher trainer, I aim to provide settings that allow my students to pose questions, discuss ideas and explore knowledge through various face-to-face activities during school holidays and online sessions. As I reflect on my recent teaching experiences, I thought about my student with a mask in a bus on his way home in Singapore, attending the online classes that I conduct in Malaysia. In my classes, I carry out activities that challenge students like him and the 59-year-old retiree, to think critically, creatively and innovatively, and also to create sustained interests. In order to have such classes, I adopt teaching and learning practices that include image-texts [defined as aspects of identities and experiences that are utilised as texts (Morgan, 2004)], student-centered activities, authentic learning and assessment activities, and blended learning. Image-texts involve students' attitudes towards their teachers, educators' expectations towards their students, and interactions between teachers and students that can affect their identities. Teachers' and students' own experiences are exploited as resources. Using these image-texts can motivate students, add pedagogical value and affect interpersonal meanings (Morgan, 2004).

In activities that use image-texts, I first seek to understand my Master's students' expectations, as well as explaining clearly to the

students my expectations and the rationales behind my teaching and learning practices. Secondly, I share my own personal experiences of learning and teaching with my students. I discuss my critical reflections on teaching, and ask them to write reflective journals and online reflections as responses. I also arrange students to work in teams to critically reflect on their own learning and/or teaching experiences and find ways to solve complex issues such as how to deal with potential resistance in the classroom. This is carried out so that they can creatively adapt, adopt and extend new and innovative teaching and learning strategies in an increasingly globalised world. Finally, I seek to empower my students who possess identities as non-native English-speaking learners and/or teachers (NNESTs), by challenging stereotypes and increasing their appreciation of their assets. For instance, I discuss the advantages of being NNESTs. My students, especially slower ones, feel supported when I consider their needs and expectations, and use various teaching and learning practices. They wrote:

***Even-though we are weaker students, ... she is constantly encouraging us ... teaching us how to improve from our own standpoint. She doesn't give us unrealistic goals to reach, and we are allowed to be creative. ... She tries her best to meet all the different needs of her students and she strives hard to bring out the best in all her students." (Anonymous student feedback)***

Besides applying the concept of image-texts, I use student-centered activities to help students be responsive to the contents of the lessons through different interactions, for example, academic debates, information gap activities and jigsaw reading (in which students need to interact with each other to complete certain tasks). These

activities not only influence and motivate the Master's students to learn, sharpen their critical thinking and presentation skills, but also become sources of inspiration for their own (future) teaching.

Additionally, I integrate authentic learning and assessment activities that are not only industry-relevant and linked to students' real-life experiences beyond the classroom, but also to help them develop their (future) careers that may, among others, involve communication, teaching and/or research. For example, one of the learning activities in "World Englishes", involves my Master's students conducting research and critically comparing language proficiency and assessment frameworks used in their own schools, institutions and/or industries (e.g. International Civil Aviation Organisation) with internationally recognised and globally used frameworks (e.g. the Common European Framework of Reference). The Master's students are then assessed through their posters in a colloquium where they have to confidently present their critical analysis, discussions and innovative solutions to former Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages/TESOL graduates, practising school teachers and university academic staff.

In light of the current pandemic, in which face-to-face interactions have to be limited, and online teaching and learning is employed at higher institutions of education, collaborative platforms such as Canvas and Microsoft Teams, are used for my students to present their posters and presentations online. I also utilise various online resources (e.g. YouTube videos and Technology, Entertainment and Design/TED talks) and interactions to discuss different learning and teaching issues. For example, in "Methods and Approaches of TESOL", as responses to online materials on technology, my Master's students need to reflect on how to use all kinds of

digital learning environments, and interactive technologies and games in teaching. I give individual and whole-class online detailed constructive feedback, which assists them to be critical.

Although I have only seen my Singaporean student online through Microsoft Teams for the time being, he wrote in his Canvas discussion that he "really enjoyed the first lesson and [my] infectious energy was also very encouraging and it helped [him] to stay engaged and involved with the class". The use of student-centered activities and interactions, even online, has helped promote high-level interpersonal and communication skills among my students. Through blended learning and the incorporation of content and authentic assessments surrounding real-life experiences and identities (image-texts), I "made [my] students engaged [with] ... personal stories". I hope that my teaching and learning practices can assist these students in becoming passionate future-ready learners and teachers who can adapt globally, regardless of their situations.





05

## **Tales Of Resilience From The English Language Classroom: Initiatives To Help My Student Overcome Stage Fright**

*By Yuen Ling*

### **About the Author:**



I am just an ordinary English language educator who has a strong belief that “to teach is to touch the soul”. I believe the power of education; to lead, to educate, to influence. I received certifications as followed:

- Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert (MIEE) 2020/2021
- Google Certified Educator Level 1
- Apple Teacher
- Wakelet Community Leader
- Edpuzzle Coach
- Quizizz Certified Game Changer
- Google Classroom Malaysia Trainer Level 8
- Assemblr Certified Educator



In year 2016, I was just transferred to the school to teach English. I encountered a child with stage fright. I inspired him to join the storytelling competition. I spent years helping him to conquer his fear. Here is the story of us.

"The champion of the storytelling competition 2017 goes to..... Chia Xen! Let's give him a big round of applause."

"The champion of the storytelling competition 2018 goes to..... Chia Xen! Let's give him a big round of applause."

"The grand finalist of the Malaysia National Storytelling Competition 2019 goes to..... Chia Xen! Let's give him a big round of applause."

Every one gave me a big hand for being the winner of the storytelling competitions. Many people came and shook hands with me, many of them congratulated me and they were so proud of me. Yes! I made it. However, the audience would never know or could never imagine the child (me) telling stories confidently on the stage used to be a child with stage fright...

Once I told my story, my legs started shivering.

Once I told my story, my hands shook uncontrollably.

Once I told my story, my spectacles dropped.

Once I told my story, the microphone dropped.

Once I told my story, I couldn't have eye contact with others.

Now, I am the spotlight on the stage, and behind the scenes, there is a teacher as well as my coach, my inspirer who has sacrificed time, energy, money and many more for me.

Bringing me to every class in the school to tell the story in front of my schoolmates and making me to tell stories during the

assembly in order to boost my confidence talking to different people, she even brought me to the neighbouring school, standing on the canteen bench, to tell the story during recess in front of the students that I was not familiar with. That was UNUSUAL and UNFORGETTABLE. In the class, she asked my classmates to distract me by doing funny facial expressions while I was telling my story. If I laughed or not able to keep eyes contact with them, I had to repeat the story all over again. Yes, my coach, Miss Shee is so special. She has her own training methods.

For the first year, I didn't get to compete in the real arena because I was not ready. In year 2017, I endured all the hardships and transformed into a confident storyteller in front of the public. My success wasn't an overnight thing. It has been built by YEARS of hard work (LOTS of hard work). I was trained by her from 2016 to 2019. It wasn't easy. Hardship indeed. But one thing for sure, I am willing to learn sincerely from Miss Shee and I have learned a great deal from her in the training process. From her, I learned that I should not give up easily. I like her because she is always proactive, passionate and positive.



Besides the stage fright, I always have problems in pronunciation and enunciation, wrong stress and intonation in storytelling as I am under the Chinese education system. Do not expect me to speak like a native and have British accent, what I have is just Chinese slang. =) That is another big challenge Miss Shee has got to work on. She trained me patiently DAY AND NIGHT. Daytime, we had training in school. She used up all her free slots as well as her recess time to train me. While during night-time, I practised at home and sent the recorded videos to her via WhatsApp especially when she was away for some courses in KL. She was so busy with the piling workloads, yet, she would give me feedback and guidance over the phone no matter how busy she was.

On top of that, she would fork out her own money to buy costumes for me based on the story theme. I have different costumes like the wolf costume, the elf costume, the robot costume and so on.



For every competition, she would be by my side and gave me motivation. On the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2018, she sacrificed the chance to follow the contingent to attend an event just to accompany me to attend the storytelling competition held on the same day. She could have just left me to go with another teachers but she didn't. She insisted to accompany me because she knew that she is my booster. Without her, I would feel a lack of confidence to proceed. She rushed to attend the event after the competition.

Luckily, I didn't let her down, I was the champion in the storytelling competition at the zone level for 2 consecutive years, in 2017 and 2018. I won the first runner-up (year 2017) and the second runner-up (year 2018) at the district-level storytelling competition.







In 2019, a drastic setback happened in my last primary school year. I failed to get any place in the storytelling competition at the zone level because there was a technical problem while I was telling the story. I could not accept the fact that I lost in the storytelling competition. When I encountered a major setback, my teacher was the saddest person. She was so upset but she kept her sadness to herself. Instead she motivated me to be strong and bold.

Eventually, I got another chance to participate in the National Storytelling Competition in Kuala Lumpur in the same year. It was a long day and we had a tedious journey; she was by my side from morning until night as we departed from Perak at 5.00 a.m. to KL and reached home at 11 p.m. It was a Saturday, her rest day. I didn't see her complaining on the extra miles that she went

through in her life but I saw her smiling face with tears of joy when I succeeded.

I made a significant result at the national level and I was one of the 5 grand finalists and I won the first crystal medal. It drew a remarkable end for me right before I left primary school. I am just a Kampar Boy but because of Miss Shee, I felt confident enough to compete with those English-speaking background city students. Miss Shee has helped me to win many trophies over the years. My English language teacher, Miss Shee, you raise me up!





06

# Teaching and Learning Practices in and beyond the Classroom Walls

*By Asma Tayeh*

## About the Author:



Asma Tayeh is currently a Ph.D. candidate at University Putra Malaysia and works as a full-time lecturer at a private college in Kuala Lumpur. She has been teaching General English, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and Business Communication for almost 10 years. Additionally, she actively conducts training on effective communication and presentation skills for professionals and working adults. Her field of expertise is ESL communication strategies (CSs), speaking skills, and task-based language teaching.

***“Knowledge of languages  
is the doorway to wisdom”  
Roger Bacon***

Teaching will always be a soulful calling in my life. I have been teaching undergraduates a wide range of English subjects for almost 10 years. I always believe that for students to be proficient and competent in the English Language, they should master four imperative skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Additionally, students should participate proactively in classes. This would encourage students to apply the lessons imparted, practice them, and even provide constructive feedback immediately. One should actively use a language regardless of place and environment to establish the capacity to perceive and comprehend the language. Hence, language instructors should creatively design and improvise lessons to engage students and promote proactive participation in and out of classrooms. This would ultimately encourage the optimum use of the language. In this article, I have shared several personal teaching practices that language instructors may consider adapting or adopting to execute language activities inventively. In the teaching of reading skills, undergraduates often encounter the art of scanning and skimming when it comes to tackling long passages and comprehending it efficiently in a short period.





Nonetheless, reading does not only focus on lengthy passages and tests students' comprehension but it also highlights word stresses with the correct intonation. Therefore, how can you fascinate students to participate and identify the importance of reading with the right intonation? You should emphasise the importance of correct syllable stresses and intonation via YouTube, especially videos on choral speaking and poem recital. Students should realise that even one word from a line in a stanza will create an impression if it is stressed accurately and expressed emotively. Besides, speaking skills are also part and parcel of this activity. You may assign students to download a simple poem based on the theme that they had chosen from. Next, ask them to review the content of the poem. Students can then opt to practise on their own or rehearse it in front of you to ascertain correct pronunciation and suitable non-verbal elements. Then, students should recite their poems passionately among their classmates. This technique

will not only help students achieve accurate pronunciation and intonation but also indirectly boost their confidence.



Additionally, you can also assign students to do character impersonation, perhaps in a group of three to five students. Character impersonation is a form of a role-play whereby students imitate the actual characters of the chosen scene. Besides, you may also set specific themes to choose from the innumerable collection of English movies. However, be sure that the scenes are based on specific requirements. For example, students must only select British English movies or scenes from the Harry Potter sequels. Students will then have to imitate the characters from the scenes. This includes accent, emotion, tone, and props, and costumes. Students will have fun and enjoy the activity because



it does not only encourage script memorisation, but they will also have to act accordingly with costumes and props. This will be an intriguing activity. Additionally, you may assign these two activities as assignments that require an in-class presentation. To make it even more thrilling, three best performers with the highest scores will perform at the end of the term and stand a chance to win prizes.



This is done to sow the spirit of language learning and to provide opportunities for students to exhibit their talents. On the other hand, choral speaking will also inculcate intonation and reading English with fun. These activities integrate speaking, reading, and writing skills. Besides, it is tricky to teach speaking, in comparison to the other major language skills: reading, writing and listening, specifically when the communicative activities are not designed creatively and resourcefully. Students should be participative to ensure they actively utilise the forms and phrases taught. Therefore, it is crucial to design activities that keep students on their feed to employ the acquired input. On the other hand, for students with lower proficiency, the focus should be on achieving fluency first and accuracy will be developed gradually from there. There are a few communicative activities that you can incorporate in their speaking classes. For example, newscasting activity, which focuses on both listening and writing skills too.

So, how can we integrate these three skills into a single activity? You may begin by sharing videos about how a news anchor delivers the news content. You may want to highlight the pronunciation, voice projection, and some other non-verbal elements such as eye contact, body language, and hand gestures. The following steps can be considered for newscasting activities to promote communication. First, decide the theme or type of news to be reported. The topics may vary between politics, sports, natural disasters, education, humanity, festivals, and patriotism. Second, share with students several videos on tips to be a great news anchor. Third, ask students to select videos from YouTube based on the chosen theme. Then, the homeroom teacher should consult the selected video to assess its relevance and viability for a class presentation. Next, students should transcribe the language used

in the video into a script and practise it. Finally, students should apply their listening and writing skills. As students write down the script, they will indirectly acquire new sets of vocabulary, names of places, form, and structure, and creative media writing. All these steps are embedded in one activity. This activity can be carried out individually or in pairs. To make it more engaging, you may assign them to design a TV frame in which they will present behind it as a makeshift live on a TV channel.

To recapitulate, it is strenuous and challenging to design creative and engaging class activities that excite students and encourage active participation both indoors and outdoors. Nonetheless, language instructors can spice up and conduct competitions. For example from a mini classroom activity like theatre to an English day stage performance, which comes with rewards and attractive prizes for their hard work. Active student participation will not only provide them with opportunities to practise the language learnt but will also imprint profound moments to be cherished forever. All in all, teachers should be the vessels of imaginative learning and inspire students to aspire.





07

# Understanding Tenses on Timeline

*By Muhammad Amzar Zamir Bin Abu Bakar*

## About the Author:



My name is Muhammad Amzar Zamir Bin Abu Bakar. I'm teaching English Year 5 and 6 at SK Lembah Subang. I have been teaching primary level for only 16 months. However, I used to teach tertiary level students for about 3 years. I graduated with Master of Applied Linguistics from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). I did my bachelor studies in Human Sciences (English Language and Literature) at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).



I'm teaching at SK Lembah Subang, located in Ara Damansara, Petaling Jaya. I have spent about a year plus at the school and I'm familiar with the language proficiency in this school. I can say that it ranges from above average to weak. I noticed some problems in their English language learning. One of them is that they have problems in deciding the appropriate tenses to express their ideas. Kids always have a lot of imagination and they have their own unique way of expressing them. Their overall English language proficiency ranges from average to below satisfactory and English is not a subject that they look forward to the most. I have been thinking of some of the possible ways to spark their interest in the subject and I have always been confident in my knowledge. Being a graduate from Universiti Putra Malaysia with a Master of Applied Linguistics, I always believe that I could show these kids something that would be a benefit for them.

I remember reading grammar notes on the website called *englishpage.com*. They have this explanation of how English tenses work with a representation of 'motion' on a timeline. I was really inspired by that and I was thinking that I had to put these kids on some serious drills. My education philosophy is that when you say something, you have to be able to justify it. So when you learn English grammar, you should be able to justify the grammar rules, and this timeline is going to do just that. So I took my class as the sample to do this experiment and I started teaching them tenses by giving a lot of explanation with examples, classification of words (according to their parts of speech) in a sentence, exercises, justification of their answers through verbal question-and-answer, and labeling of the timeline.



Timeline: Simple Present Tense – to express habitual actions that has happened some time in the past, in the present when a particular action is expressed and will happen in the future.

Sentence example: “Maryam goes to school by bus.” This sentence indicates the action of going to school by bus on a regular basis that has happened a while ago, and still happens by the time this action is spoken and is not going to stop some time soon.

I must say that the kids are still trying to grasp what is going on with the timeline and they are quite nervous when it comes to labeling the motion on it, but we had a good start. In general, these kids can justify their answers and be able to correct their mistakes. But it seems like they are still in the phase of trying to figure out how the timeline works. I always convince and tell them that it doesn’t matter how difficult the learning is or how many times they have failed.

My teaching approach is always lenient and friendly with the kids. Instead of using the word ‘teach,’ I use the word ‘share’ because my learning experience has a lot to do with traditional learning with very minimum feedback from the pupils. Time has changed all that. I want them to try so I can’t scare them. I’m a friend to them. I can be funny and goofy with these kids. When I’m not teaching, I’d ‘annoy’ them sometimes too, but that’s how we get along. We can ‘high-five,’ we motivate each other, we try to

build confidence and we create positive vibe inside the class. I might chew these kids out for taking their eyes off the prize but I'll do anything to fulfill their education needs.

Besides this challenge, kids at the school have been quite reluctant to speak in English to the extent that they don't even want to try. I have been trying to carry out differentiation techniques to make them comfortable to speak such as the pupils with weaker English proficiency would only have to say words or phrases instead of elaborating longer and complete sentences. Some of the kids respond very well but for others, I could see that they are a bit afraid to speak their mind out in a language that they don't feel very comfortable using.

I did this mentoring thing where I appointed more proficient speakers to be mentors and to lead a discussion on a topic that I provided. These mentors were given a set of questions and they will have to be expressive and not shy to speak their minds to make the members of the group feel comfortable. I did this because I thought that it would tear down the 'social barrier,' and that the kids would find it easier for them to express themselves knowing that it's their friend who's asking them questions. A word wall was also provided for the kids to refer to in case of difficult words encountered. The implementation of this activity was a bit difficult because some of them would eventually always resort to using their mother tongue. However, the bright side of it was that they talked a lot more. Some of the kids had to really push themselves to make their points clear.

I still carry out this type of speaking activity to these days though it has been difficult because I'm thinking that the pupils would

somehow be inspired to have the kind of speaking proficiency that their mentors have. So I'm making it easier by teaching them simpler vocabulary with much more familiar topics of discussion. Maybe in the future, I could improvise and adapt this activity to become something like a group counseling session but only this time, I'll invite somebody that's close to the pupils such as one of their family members so that they would support them in the speaking activities. This is because family members are expected to not want to lose face. Therefore, they are going to do whatever it takes to support them hence, save face.

I'm a huge language person. I think about a lot of things from language perspectives. I try to explain why people say things the way they do. For example, Africans have difficulty sounding the schwa /ə/ and /ɛ:/ ('wotah' for 'water') because they probably don't have those sounds in their whole phonetics. My brother sometimes says "P. Lamree" instead of "P. Ramlee" probably because the /l/ and /r/ sounds are produced with similar manner of articulation (alveolar) which explains the slip between these two sounds.

I'm always driven to find out the causes of problems in language learning and will be motivated to suggest solutions especially in the local English language learning landscape. I'm always looking forward to working in a team of language experts to overcome problems that are rooted in the language learning. But I think I have got to spend quite a few years doing the groundwork, getting some experience as a teacher before that could happen.

Teaching these days is really a massive responsibility. The first few weeks I spent at the school, I was freaking out a little bit, but I started to understand that it takes great patience to deal with the

children. I dealt with a different type of 'clients' when I taught at private colleges. Primary kids are a whole different ball game. I never thought I would sing in front of a big crowd but I did. They laughed at me, but I laughed too. I never thought that I would dance in front of a lot of people but I did that too. When teaching kids, you have to think like kids so that you know what to expect out of them especially with the less proficient ones and in a way, guides you to manage your expectations.



08

# When Teaching is Actually Learning

*By Kalai Vaani Rajandram*



## About the Author:

Dr Kalai Vaani Rajandram is a Senior Lecturer in Taylors University. As an English Language and Literature major, she has taught various ESP and EAP courses, as well as, British, American and Malaysian Literature. Her research interest is in teacher education. She is currently looking at the use of Digital Ethnography in the teaching and learning of language and literature in English.



I embarked on this arduous task wanting to revolutionise the way we teach Malaysian Literature in English to young adults today. The pandemic threw a massive curve ball at me as I was assigned to do just that. Not only was a robust online platform pivotal to the success of executing the unimaginable, but also exercising a sustainable teaching method that would promise returns, left me with sleepless nights. I knew what I wanted; I knew what the students needed; thus, this 14-week journey began like an adventure would, not knowing what to expect. It was a journey that propelled me into a realm where the constructionist's exploratory mind was required.

Three novels, two short stories, three months. I used this opportunity to try my hands on Digital Ethnography, specifically Netnography. Netnography, introduced by Kozinet (2010), is a study of online communities and how they engage and interact with one another. In doing so, it is suggested that these communities gave us insights into their shared practices, beliefs and values. An analysis of their narratives were supposed to enable us to capture particular nuances, patterns, underlying tensions and philosophical trends to surface. Emulating Kozinet's form of Netnography, I treated my students in the online classroom as an online community and I was set to study their narrative responses to the selected texts using solely a social media platform called Goodreads.com.

Staying loyal to Kozinet's process was effortless as the students obliged, willingly. The steps were recursive following a pattern which began at having a focus, identifying a community, engaging and immersing into the empirical material, analysing and iterating of interpretation, and finally, presenting the findings. The journey unfolded. Students read the text on their own and would log into

Goodreads.com, where I had formed a private forum for them to share their narrative responses to these texts. There were passive phases, where I would observe them interact, engage and review each other's comments and there were active phases, where I would further their discussions to obtain their perspectives on gender, identity and culture in these text. This exercise focused on not only what they said, but also how they expressed and verbalized their points of views in relation to the selected texts.

The constructionist philosophy that this study was founded on, enabled the optimization of findings. Therein, lay the excitement of going into uncharted territories. I was reminded of Turkle's analogy of Papert's constructionist "child" that enjoyed novelties, but remained in touch with situations. This "child" was better at pointing out what he understood while still in context. He gained understanding from singular cases as opposed to Piaget's "child" who extracted, applied general rules and recited what was experienced in retrospect. I was Papert's "child". The exercise in co-construction of meanings required the diving into unknown situations, adopting different perspectives, and putting on different lenses if the Constructionist Learning Theory was to be adhered to.

The student's narratives were rich and thick in descriptions about their perception of gender, identity and culture which came through via their interpretations of these text. Left alone in their virtual worlds, they interpreted these texts based on their lived-experiences. There was a clear demarcation between what was shared realities, multiple realities and social realities. The online platform was a window to their realities to which they let me in. It triggered their etic and emic consciousness, to which I had a glimpse of their relationship with Malaysia as both, insider and outsider. What

particularly stood out was their idiosyncratic use of language. The online platform put them at ease. Hence, their narratives were not filtered from the “noise”.

The use of emojis to heighten expressions and enhance sensory words were in abundance. The lingo did not perturb the content, in fact, it suggested that these students were identifying with one another and forming an identity as an online community. The use of Manglish in the text were seen by the students as a preservation of Malaysian culture and identity. They, too, resorted to using it, suggesting that they too, were not too concerned with “colonial hang-ups” when it came to expressing themselves. What can be seen through their threaded responses over a period of time, was the forming of a cultural diffusion of sorts. This was where, like a popularity contest, certain viewpoints gained followings, while other viewpoints got tossed out. Similarly, they learnt from each other to use certain words, expressions, abbreviations, and made connections and associations which were aligned to group-thinking. Hence, the forming and sharing of similar ideologies ensued.

There were two key findings from this endeavour. We experienced first-hand what co-construction of meanings were like. The negotiation of meanings moved us away from, polemical and pre-set theories, British and American literary standards, and authoritative readings and interpretations. This encouraged new thematic implications, necessitated orientation to reality, aligned meanings to local relevancies, highlighted how place and space is contested today and promoted the recognition of newer forms of social cohesion. Secondly, new teaching strategies were derived. As an educator, who wore the researcher’s hat in this exploration, I learnt to adopt to receptive practices, adapted to the strengths of my students, adjusted to

new teacher-student boundaries and activated in my students the awareness of local relevancies as part of our social realities today.

Netnography has taught me the importance of situated-ness, contextualization and the acceptance of multiple realities. I have not only observed, but participated in a study environment that has gone beyond the four walls of the classroom and yet, learnt, and taught, nonetheless. This method of teaching and learning has not shifted my paradigm, but instead re-affirmed my constructionist position that meaning is *making things* in learning.



09

## Using Board Game to Gamify the Classroom

*By Wong Kian Yong*

### About the Author:



Wong Kian Yong graduated from IPG Kampus Gaya in 2017. He holds a Bachelor of Teaching English as Second Language (TESL). In 2017, he won the Gold Award for the Creative Student Teacher Showcase. He is currently teaching in SJK(C) Lih Jen, Pokok Mangga Melaka. He enjoys teaching English to young learners and applies 21st Century pedagogy in his classroom teaching and learning process.

The Movement Control Order started from March and had been extended for a few months where the government decided to postpone reopening the school until Covid-19 pandemic situation is safer and under control. All teachers within the nation had tried a variety of ways and methods to ensure that the pupils can have access to home-based learning at their home. Our school started to use WhatsApp application to send homework to the pupils in the beginning. Then, all the teachers took effort to learn more about Google Classroom and we decided to utilise it and had online lessons using Google Meet.

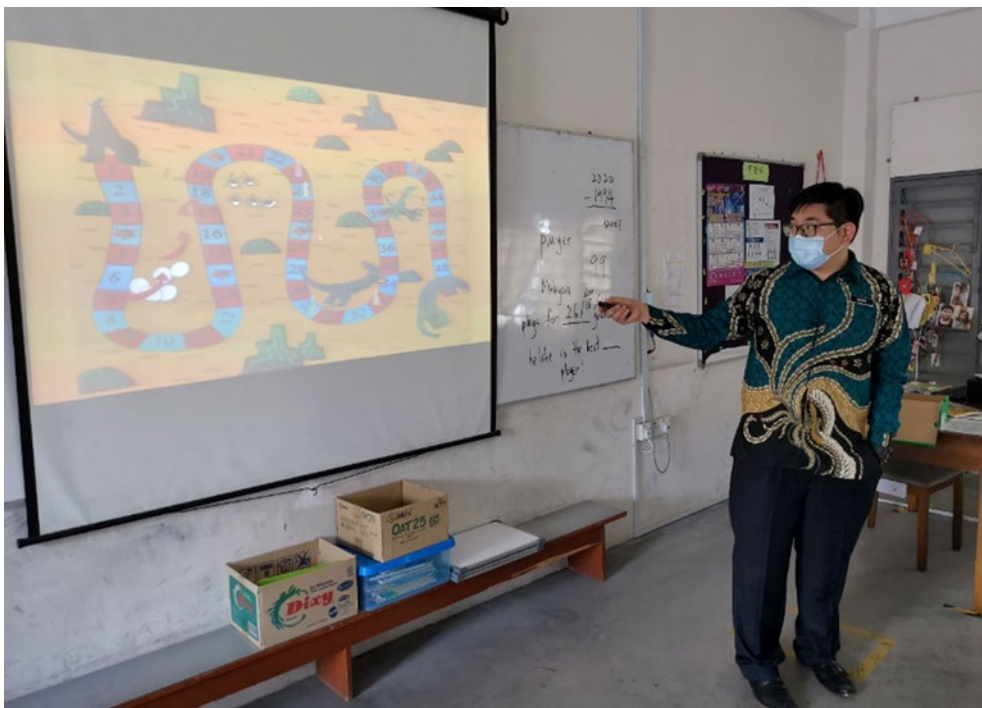
After some time had passed, the government officially announced that all schools would be reopened on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July. Pupils could return to school as usual, but they needed to follow the standard operating procedures (SOP) strictly. They had to adhere to the new norm when learning in school. My Year 4 pupils returned to school, but I noticed there were some differences in their learning behaviours. I observed how they learned in the classroom and made some notes. I found out that they were demotivated and lacked the interest to study in the classroom. As I checked their homework, I realized that most of the pupils did not put in much efforts to complete their homework and some decided not to submit their work. Having not attended school for nearly 3 months, I believe that the pupils' habits and attitude towards learning in the classroom had been severely affected.

I set out to try to solve the issue. What could I do to help my pupils to be interested and motivated in my English lessons? Henceforth, I started to check for any approaches that can be used to support my pupils and gain more interest and motivation from the lessons. I decided to implement the concept of gamification



in my English language classroom. I began to add some elements of gaming in my lessons to gain the students' interest and focus. This led me to develop a board game where pupils could be given an opportunity to move forward based on their performance in the lessons.

First and foremost, I set up a token system where marks will be given based on the pupils' behaviours. Pupils were assigned in groups with 100 points as the starting mark. Positive responses were rewarded while marks were deducted for negative behaviours. Positive responses such as answering questions in the class, paying attention in the class and submitting homework on time would be given 10 marks to the respective student group. On the other hand, negative behaviour such as talking in the classroom, not paying attention, not submitting homework on time would deduct



10 marks from their groups. The pupils had to compete to score as many marks as possible to be in the top 3 groups every week. On every Friday, the marks would be accumulated, and the top 3 groups would be given an extra opportunity where they could spin the wheel two times to move forward in the Board game.

I had chosen a dinosaur-theme board game and assigned a colour piece that represented each group. The application 'Wheel of Names' acted as a dice where the numbers 1 to 3 is written on the wheel and each group was given a chance to decide how long they wanted the wheel to spin. After it stopped spinning, the number on the wheel would be the number of steps that the group would move forward in the board. The board game would be displayed in a PowerPoint and pupils could witness the movement and progress of each piece themselves. The group that reached the finishing point would win presents for their hard work.



After the board game gamification idea was implemented, I could slowly see some improvement among my pupils. They were always aware that their behaviours would either help or slow down their progress in the board game. Some even reminded their friends to behave well to gain more marks in the lessons. The numbers of homework submitted on time had also been slightly increased. I could see more positive attitude in the learning progress. The pupils were more than willing to think and answer questions in the class. They were motivated when having an English language lesson. Each group would try their best to compete with one another to be among the top 3 groups. The learning environment became more engaging and motivating. Something which amazed me was that the pupils remained quiet and focused when we played the board game together on Fridays. Some even started to ask me if they were going to play the board game during other days of the week. Based on these responses, I could see that the pupils were excited to play the game.

In a nutshell, using gamification in my class had improved the positivity in a learning environment. I personally hope that the board game idea is able to sustain the pupils' interest and motivation to perform better in the future. Although the Movement Control Order had created some issues in learning, I believe all problems could be resolved with some persistence, determination and positive thinking.



# 10

## **Waves Never Rest....**

*By Asshadwi Paneerselvam*



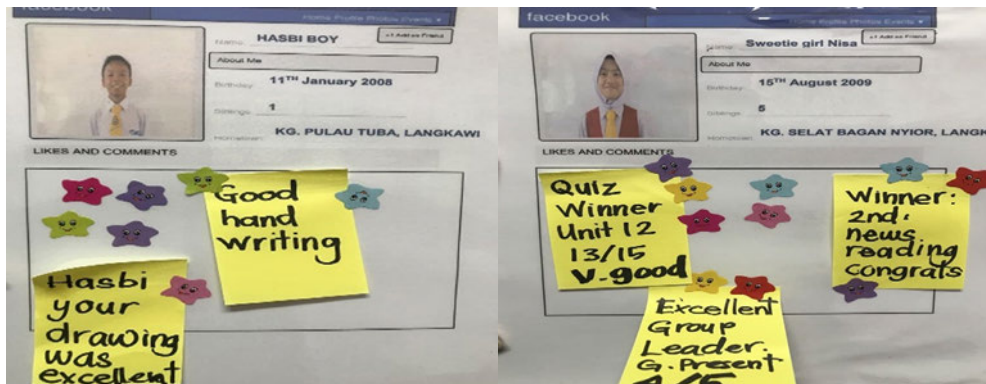
### **About the Author:**

Asshadwi Paneerselvam, is an English teacher in SK Selat Bagan Nyior, Pulau Dayang Bunting, Langkawi.

Rubbing the cold hands, she looked at the letter in front of her. There was a sudden rush of energy after reading the name. She grabbed her phone and typed to check on it. Never even in the wildest dream would she put herself there. The moment she entered the small fishing village in the Dayang Bunting island, she knew it is going to be hard. On the first day, she saw the kids lining up at the corridor holding back to call her teacher. Aye aye, here is the story of my kids and me, their English teacher.

Seeing English as the most difficult thing in the world, my pupils brought me to stumble on where and how to begin. I needed some time to work beyond from what I have been taught, from what I have seen before. Yet I did not want to surrender easily. I started slowly, I built in things carefully, sometimes I fail, the other times I saw changes. I cherish every moment that i went through.

I made my first move by slowly telling my pupils that learning English is not that difficult, instead it is actually fun. So, I introduced songs in lessons. To be honest each of my lesson has got either a song or a rhyme. The happy birthday song which is very familiar to them, I made it as a greeting song. I changed the lyrics like good morning to you... good morning to you... good morning to teacher... good morning everyone.... That can sound like something simple but I have seen how excited my kids were even now while singing the song with some funny gestures. I included some music in every lesson, I created lyrics with some well-known tunes to make the lesson interesting. We clap and play with the tambourine and sing some songs. Slowly I could see some positive changes. They always look forward for English lessons.



Then the 'Post It' project made my pupils to take the effort to write something in English. It was hard and tiring at the beginning yet after some time we saw some great changes. The project is all about sending notes or messages to any friends or teachers in the school. They write their messages and put them in the post box. Then, there will be two delivery boys or girls each week to send out the letters each week. I was the one receiving letters at the beginning and after some time my colleagues joined in as well. I asked my colleagues' help to write a reply letter to let them be excited and to continue this project. I have seen my kids coming to me to ask how to write sentences, how to describe someone and to write the messages. I saw they were really into it.

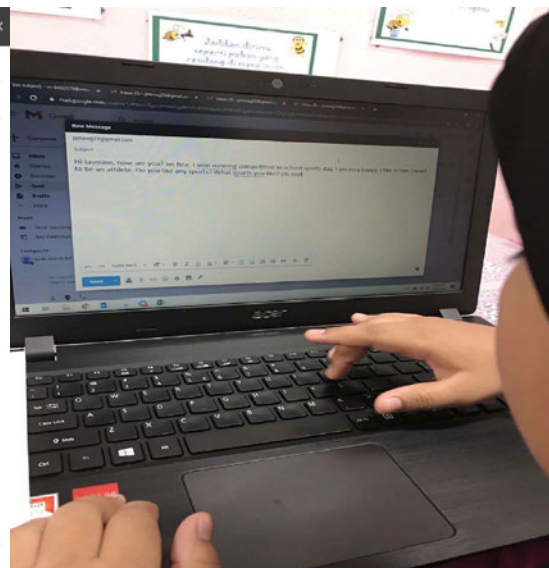
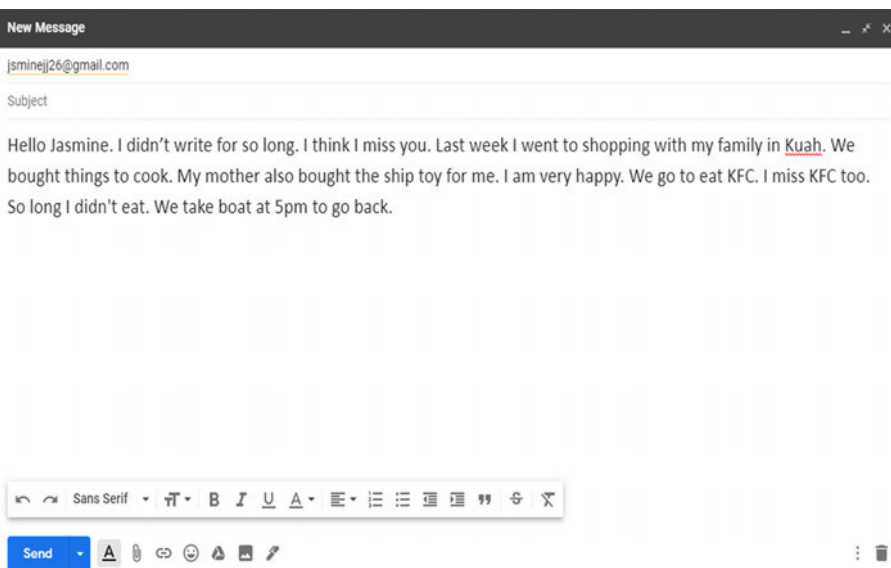
As a continuous effort on that I asked my year 5 and year 6 pupils to write emails to a pen pal. They write and receive replies from the same person who is their teacher and I bet they did not figure it out till the date. A pen pal in disguise this initiative made me to understand more about my pupils.

Meanwhile, we have station games and treasure hunt in our HIP activities. I also invited the parents to come and join us. Parents



who have very less exposure to English still gave me some hope to continue teaching my students. All the while, whatever I have been doing was to only keep the kids to start to think that learning English is not that hard as they think. However, I was not satisfied when they were still shy to talk. They prefer talking in native language although I talk to them in English. So, I put up a special corner for news reading and radio announcement in my classroom. Trust me this worked like magic. I usually prepare the text and give them some time. If it is news reading, I record and play it during class or radio announcement where the whole school gets to hear it. They really enjoy it.

Then, the idea of rewarding has been always a tough thing to me. Being in a rural school, most of their school supplies are given by fellow colleagues as rewards. Thus, I had to come out with something exciting and simple. So, I brought in the Facebook into the classroom with a reward system. Each student has their own profile in a corner of the class. I just put up their pictures with their identification (ID). After my lessons, I just give the pupils who were able to finish the task a 'like' emoji. Sometimes, I give everyone mostly for speaking lessons just to encourage them. When we do group works and gallery walk I ask them to give 'likes' to their friends too. At the end of the month, we see who has the most number of 'likes' and reward them. The winner could get a picture in a Facebook frame and the picture will be in the display in wall of fame which is accessible to all the pupils in the school. This really worked because they enjoy the system. The winner gets to eat a fancy meal. I go for meals because my kids have very low access to fast food so I treat them with their favourite food usually.



The next thing I am still working on is coming up with English room. I include games, simple stories, quizzes, reading materials, CDs and YouTube videos. This is the space where the pupils can get to use all of these during their free period or English lessons. This is like a mini English library. We have got few tabs in school, so I just place them in the room and let the kids to scan games like Quizziz and play. Putting up pupils' work and results, rewarding the visitor with highest number, monthly contests are among the few activities. I hope I will get this done by the end of this year. I am sure this is going to be one of the best spaces that my school has.

For some of you reading this, all of the above may seem to be very simple. But for me to be with these kids who were not engaged to English when I first came here, I can see some positive changes in them. I just want the best for my kids. Lastly, this may sound familiar but there are times I feel down and want to

give up. I just remind myself that I am here for a purpose and I cannot defy it. This makes me to keep moving. Being an island teacher, the waves always remind me to not to rest or stop no matter what. Happy teaching!



# 11

## • ROAD • FOREST • PIZZA •

*By Chok Sze Jin*

### About the Author:



Sze Jin has more than 15 years of teaching English language in primary and secondary schools in Sarawak. She is passionate in helping young people in the language production skills. She believes classroom learning will be much more interesting when the oral and written literacy is improved. She is also a member of Toastmasters who values leadership and communication development. She is the author and owner of Pizza Pizzie Fan Deck, a writing tool proven to help improve narrative writing in SPM examination. At home, she enjoys reading and creating picture story books with her two boys and a baby girl.

The masculine turbo engine began to rock and roll on the timber track. The old ragged track was built for trucks transporting timbers deep in the Borneo Rainforest. When we came to a bottleneck, the masculine Ninja King was summoned to pull over to a standstill, like a school kid who committed a crime. In allowing the gigantic timber truck to trudge through the woods, the small vessel of ours was enveloped by black fume released from the monster. *"It's not a dream"*. I was on the dusty trip to my first teaching posting in Belaga, Kapit, the interior part of Sarawak State, in the century old rainforest of Borneo Island.

School days were never the same ever. No high-heel knocking on tiled floor, to establish my authority here. Few days after my



arrival, I've charted my handbag in the cupboard because it was a luxury, not a necessity anymore. One day, I anticipated my last lesson of the day. Lesson began with little expectation; this was to avoid disappointment. Indeed, only half of the 1H class turned up for school that term. Some of them had received study allowance and never returned. They were my Penan students. This indigenous people have a typical physic. Broad forehead, wide flat nose and petite body to contour the half nomadic tribe.

However, little did I know a disaster awaited me that day. When I stepped into the class, a blood stain was sighted on the floor in the middle of the classroom. Merang and Rodin had already shifted to the other corner of the class. The students said in unison, *anjing mati* (dead dog). I was petrified!

"Where's the dog?" I asked in panic. The class gave a silent treatment. "Alright. Let's wash the floor." I said. The class stared at me in confusion, as always.

Unfortunately, there was no bucket to carry water. Minutes later, the *Pakcik* came back in the nick of time. So I quickly got Jonathan, the class monitor to borrow a bucket from him. Every cloud has silver lining. The Special Ed room was just next door to supply the water. Without any instructions given, tables were moved to ease the washing. Students lined up outside the classroom. Winnie, Rose and Yahya cleaned the floor and others took turns to carry buckets of water in and out of the classroom.

*"Splash, Swipe, Splash, Swipe"*

Finally, the floor was cleaned and the lesson was able to resume. Therefore, I decided to give some homework. After writing questions



on the blackboard, I stopped to supervise student's work. To my utmost bewilderment, there was an empty circle in Merang's and Rodin's book. Before I could ask, I laughed heartily to the crime I committed. The culprit fell to the hole in the middle of the class blackboard, with a size of a basketball. For I skipped my sentence over to the other side of the hole, it created a Black Hole effect. My Penan students duplicated me. That day, I failed my blackboard skill terribly.

When the evening breeze blew, dried wind knocked up the sleeping dust again. Unsure of how many times this phenomenon replayed by itself. Everyday was just another episode the forest symphony at play. One morning, I was awoken before the rooster crowed. Thinking about my family made my heart empty. The smell of home cooked food brought growling to my stomach. Then I pitied my Penan students who were clueless what a pizza was. When the creative side got to thinking, *"how could I incorporate a pizza into my teaching?"* Somehow, this thought drifted away. Whenever weekend, Darfrina and I would try our gourmet skill on Ibanese and Chinese cooking. After meals, we had our hobby to keep us really occupied. Her collection of Judith McNought brought her to the realm of beautiful romance, which later infected me. In the mean time, I finished my second knitting project just in time for Christmas present.

"After reading and knitting, what's next?" I murmured. Perching on the sofa, I browsed through a recipe book. For the second time I was triggered by pizza.

"Why not you innovate a pizza tool?" asked Darfrina.

Slowly and gradually, the six diagonal cuts of pizza prompted the idea of my first innovative teaching tool. Excited like a kid, I sat down in my teacher's flat and began drawing pizza. The idea of *Pizza Pizzie Fan Deck* modeled the shape of a pizza; two diagonal lines and a horizontal line to form six slices of triangle. It functions as a fan deck when six slices are joined with the tiny punch eyelet at the edge. When opened, six distinct coloured cards which are made of wipe-clean material, spectrum a peacock tail. It is kept in a recycled pizza box and can be used repeatedly, irregardless of time and space. As the users hold the fan deck in the palm of the hand and flip through the cards, it reminds them to begin writing a story with an end in mind. The six slices of pizza contain secret recipe which guides students into writing an interesting narrative type, effectively and successfully.

Unfortunately, before the project was completed, I was transferred to Samarahan Division. Those years, I taught the top Form 5 class for 3 consecutive years. The challenge of students narrating story as well as teachers' yearning for a good piece of writing frustrated me. I continued to fine tune it. Long story short, finally *Pizza Pizzie Fan Deck* was born out of sheer desperation. That very year, I made a deliberate attempt to finish what I have started. In April 2019, I tested *Pizza Pizzie Writing Fan Deck* with my two Form 5 classes. When SPM result was out, English Papers caught everyone's eyes. We struck seven As plus! It was the best record so far.

"Mdm Chok, you should go for Creative Teacher's Showcase." a dear colleague of mine approached me one day. It was MELTA conference at Riverside Majestic Hotel, Kuching. Without hesitation, I submitted the proposal. All good work was paid off, it won

the heart of judges, Bronze Award! The tales of resilience was recognised. As I reflected, sometimes the most scenic roads in life are the detours I didn't mean to take. I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have surely ended up where I intended to be. The dusty road, the forest and pizza remain intimate in my heart.





# 12

## **Well done! I am proud of you, my little ones**

*By Evon Wong*

### **About the Author:**



Evon Wong is a preschool educator teaching in Graceful Hands Kids Learning Centre, Kuala Lumpur. She has 9 years teaching experiences and possesses a Master's Degree in education and is currently a PhD candidate. Evon is a homeroom teacher of 5-year-old. Her interest is in child language development and art. By involving children to art making activities, she believes it is conducive to children's various development such as language, emotional, and cognitive development. Hence, during language lessons, besides assigning worksheets to children, she enjoys including art activities which children are introduced to a breadth of learning areas that will implicitly improve children's language learning.



At this unprecedented time, which movements were outright restricted during the MCO, it has made students to learn via digital gadgets, even the little ones as young as 3 years old. As these pressing tasks come unplanned and under the dearth of training, it has been rather challenging for educators, especially the early childhood educators. It is agreed that young children learn better with concrete and physical objects due to their age and level of cognitive development. However, this unprecedented time has put young children as well as early childhood educators to a whole new learning era which digital gadgets played a significant role throughout the learning process. The little ones have been required to maneuver over the online learning platform(s) with their little hands.

It is a class of 5-year-old. Initially, it was rather a struggle in handling a 5-year-old class at the beginning of online learning. I even doubted the feasibility of conducting online lessons for young students having considered their capability to participate in online classes. The dearth of physical demonstration of activities had got students puzzled and confused. Unlike in a physical classroom, having lessons in an online classroom restricted the range of activity I wanted to do with my students. Besides, to have all eyes and

ears of the students from the screen was exceptionally difficult at the beginning. Due to the unfamiliarity, we (the academic staff) spent extra hours in front of the screen in order to get the hang of the technology to provide an effective and fun online learning experience for the children. Undeniably, the concentration span of students in my class sometimes disheartened me. Also, due to the lack of assistance, unlike in a physical class, where teachers can hold their hand to execute certain activities, students often gave up participating in the activities. For instance, students refuse to write or copy words from the screen due to their incapability of holding a pencil.

## **The Upsides**

***“Even if things don’t unfold the way you expected, don’t be disheartened or give up. One who continues to advance will win in the end.” - Daisaku Ikeda***

There was a day, a thought struck my mind. I questioned myself how university lectures was being conducted online and how the contents were presented online. I pondered if the similar tactics could be implemented to my online classes with the children. However, due to the attention span and the learning nature of children, the presentation of my lessons has to be informative, precise but presented succinctly. There are always the downside and the upside of something. Although lacking of physical interaction could hinder the performance of a child, with a little help of the interesting visual aids and settings of online learning platform, the online learning experience was enhanced that students even went berserk with the new learning environment. For instance, students were having group writing (sentence building) by utilizing the pen function and shared screen

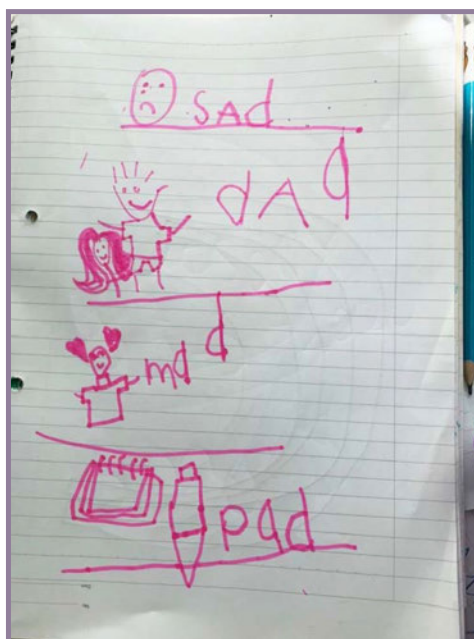


of the online learning platform. With the help of the online learning platform, children were given opportunity to explore fields that beyond the physical class. Besides, in several learning topics/ lessons, parents were asked to involve in accomplishing certain learning projects. Due to the involvement of parents and the facilitation of teacher, students were given more opportunity to take charge of their task. This allows children to develop the sense of autonomy. The involvement of parents allowed them to have better understanding of their child's development and their flow of learning. This was where the Zone of Proximal Development had been brought in. Students are allowed to extend their skills and knowledge under the observation or assistance by parents and teachers which enable them to progressively extend the zone of proximal development.

I have learnt that an interesting visual element does the best job in engaging young students' attention. Also, I've learnt that one of the upsides of having an online class is the lack of peer distraction. Students were able to pay attention to the lesson on the screen (similarly to watching a video) without being distracted by his or her classmates but the ground rule is the lesson slides got to be interesting. With the help of technology, I was able to insert background music or sound effects during certain lessons which thrilled the students. I am grateful to receive feedback of how my students were looking forward to the lively lesson each day.

Distance learning or an online learning environment requires students to be autonomous, self-regulated, and independent. Although lacking of physical and social interaction throughout the learning process, children have learnt to work independently during

the online classes with the facilitation of teachers. Students were given opportunities to not to depend on teachers. They were aware of the preparation of each class, got required materials ready and have taken up a more active role in the learning process. Also, “learning from home” has given teachers a better understanding of a child’s everyday life at home and tackle their emotional needs meanwhile supporting their learning. Astonishingly, students have become more independent and autonomous in completing their tasks and given projects. Various skills of children have been honed over the time and the bond between us has grown stronger. I am very proud of them.





# 13

## **Mutual Love, Respect and Happiness in Training the Debate Team**

*By Kangga Manogaran*



### **About the Author:**

Kangga Manogaran hails from Taiping, Perak. Apart from teaching Form 5 English, he enjoys writing ghost stories for his blog. Kangga is afraid of supernatural entities and paranormal occurrences. In short, he wouldn't last ten minutes in his own stories.

During my first year of teaching in 2015, I was given all the classes with the most unmotivated students. I tried everything I could to make them interested in learning English but nothing worked. I felt like such a failure.

Then one day, a letter from the local education office arrived instructing all secondary schools in the district to prepare a team of five to participate in the local interschool debate tournament. Being both the newest and the youngest English teacher, it was my prerogative to accept duties that senior colleagues did not want. Fortunately for me, the school already had a debate team and I just had to train them. These kids were all from the so-called 'front classes' and could speak English fluently, but they had never won any competition before. However, they were interested to represent their school again. Thus, my journey as a debate coach began.

Later at home, I sat down in front of my computer to research the motion. It then occurred to me that I had no idea how to debate. A few days later, I met the students for practice. They seemed to know a little more than I did since they had been in competitions before.

I muddled along and we achieved a certain level of success when we emerged as that year's second-runner up. On our drive back to our school, the team captain suddenly said; "Sorry, sir." Only then did I realize that I was being quiet throughout our drive, leading the kids to assume I was upset. And yes, I was upset, but not at the kids. I was upset that I was unable to train them better. Compared to the other team coaches, I was the least experienced. My Chinese-educated kids also went up against a team of English-speaking students from a renowned Methodist school. The gap in

their proficiency levels was simply too obvious to ignore. I was still touched by the kid apologizing for something that was clearly not his fault. At school the next day, my principal, one of the strictest person I know, congratulated me on the debate team's best achievement in years. This was the first time she actually said something kind to me, with a smile too.

The following year, the students and I learned from our mistakes and we worked hard to correct them. We trained as if our lives depended on it and made it to the finals against the same Methodist school but only emerged as first runner-ups. I was more determined to win next year's tournament. As happy as I was, I also knew at the back of my head that the Form 5 debaters will be graduating this year, meaning I would need to train an entirely fresh team.

Come 2017, I handpicked new debaters with zero experience, but incredible enthusiasm. We had the misfortune of going up against our usual rival, the Methodist school. We lost, and since this was a knock-out round, there was no second chance. Imagine the humiliation of going from first-runner up to getting booted in the first round. It was unbearable to say the least.

In 2018, I approached the head of the English panel and explained how I no longer wanted to coach the debate team since we keep losing. Nevertheless, no other English teacher wanted the job and I was stuck with the same kids that lost last year and caused us great humiliation. Yes, I was blaming them. And, yes, I can be horrible sometimes.

Despite my emotional inner-drama queen mode, I still had to maintain a mature façade since I was the adult in the team. As

unenthusiastic as I was, I must admit I was really puzzled by the debaters' excitement. Were they really so thick skinned? Unlike me, they seemed unaffected by their disastrous performance last year. It was clear that they were not going to let their past failure determine their mindset this time around. Or perhaps they were well aware of their loss and they were channeling that rage as motivation to do better this time around. Regardless, just seeing how their sense of self-worth was untouched by their previous failure left me ashamed that my students were more emotionally mature than my adult self. As a result, I pretended to put last year's loss behind me and coached the kids to the best of my ability, all while doubting if they will even make it pass the first round. Surprise, surprise; our team emerged as that year's district champion.

At the state level competition, my kids only got fifth placing. However, that experience opened my eyes to how other district champions presented themselves. I also noticed they were all trained by coaches with legitimate debating backgrounds. I realised that if my kids were to be at par with these other teams, they needed to be trained by professionals. I arranged for them to attend debate workshops over the next two years to get proper training. They would then come back to me, versed in the intricacies of debate which they were kind enough to teach their coach.

I learned some valuable lessons on how to maintain my sanity, professional integrity and enthusiasm rather than how to produce winners. That is not to say that I am no longer competitive. I still am, but my priority now is as a teacher first and a coach second. At present, my debaters' academic, intellectual and emotional maturation precedes the importance of winning competitions.



I no longer need the validation of winning competitions for me to know my debaters have developed. The greatest important feedback I have received is when former debaters contact me on social media to tell me that their debating experience helped them ace scholarship interviews, do presentations at university and think critically when doing assignments. This is the best validation a teacher can get.



Picture 1: This is how most of my students are at the beginning – reading off cue cards with not an ounce of spontaneity.



Picture 2: After a few years, the debate stage becomes their natural habitat. Seen here is Shuqi Yeap delivering his closing speech while his teammate Neesha Ng is laughing at his jokes.



Picture 3: Watching your own kids debate is nerve-wrecking. So, this is me (the bald one) judging others' debaters while my own students are debating in the room next door.



Picture 4: The most difficult thing about training debaters is getting them to ask points of information. They are terrified they might ask something silly. But that too will soon pass.



# 14

## **Learning Vocabulary incorporating “Word Lists”: An action research carried out among Vocational Undergraduates in an ELT classroom in Sri Lanka**

*By Dilini Ranasuriya*

### **About the Author:**



The writer Dilini Ranasuriya is an English Language lecturer attached to a vocational university and is passionate about enhancing the four skills of English Language. The research interests of the writer are designing materials in English for Specific Purposes, Code Switching and enhancing speaking of vocational sector students. The writer is engaged in teaching English for undergraduates who seek employment in a variety of vocations. The e-mail address of the writer is [dilini\\_ranasuriya@yahoo.com](mailto:dilini_ranasuriya@yahoo.com).

Vocabulary is one of the major challenges that my student face in terms of learning English. This experience emerges from a vocational university in the Sri Lankan context. The target group are undergraduates of Bachelor of Technology in Mechatronics who come from diverse backgrounds in terms of education and that is to say majority who enter the vocational university are school dropouts while a minority have completed all 13 years of schooling according to the Sri Lankan education system and they lacked English language proficiency and suffered in the four language skills. It must be added that the target group study for a vocational degree and for them English is pretty much essential especially at the work place. The work place or the "industry" seeks individuals who are skilled yet there is a demand for individuals equipped with strong English Language proficiency. Add to all of this within the classroom I found teaching difficult as many did not understand my words and they did not know basics such as making simple sentences.

There I sat brainstorming as to what change I could do in my passive English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom and then one day I realized that all this is due to one issue and that was lack of sufficient vocabulary. If I do not teach vocabulary, they will not be able to make sentences; will not be able to communicate. Hence, I came up with a plan to introduce 10 words each week.

## **10 Words a week plan**

I decided to carry this plan for a month. So it will be four weeks and 40 words which would be a sufficient number for a start. In the first week, going through some newspapers, story books and manuals, I gathered 10 words that are being used day to day.

First, I explained each word and its meaning. I distributed these "Vocabulary Lists" amongst students which carried 10 words and their meanings. The lists were introduced on Monday and they were asked to go through them during the week and by Friday they are to be given a question paper on the words and also mini viva session. The class consisted of **20 students** and the chart below displays the number of words students knew at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> week.

## Week 1

Description	No of students familiar with List 1 words
Those who knew 0 words	12
Those who knew at least 1 word	03
Those who knew at least 3 words	01
Those who knew at least 4-6 words	02
Those who knew at least 6-8 words	01
Those who knew at least 8 -10 words	01

Observation in the first week explained that many did not know the words even after explaining them and hence needed further help. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> week, 10 new words were introduced along with



the 10 that was introduced in the previous week. With this the teacher went through the words in List 1 and then with the new set of words thus altogether 20 words were explained . It must be mentioned that special attention was given to words that most were not familiar with in List 1. Just as in the end of Week 1, Week 2 ended with a question paper and a mini viva session on the words and the progress is as follows,

## Week 2

Description	No of students familiar with List 1 words	No of students familiar with List 2 words
Those who knew 0 words	02	08
Those who knew at least 1 word	03	04
Those who knew at least 3 words	05	03
Those who knew at least 4-6 words	04	02
Those who knew at least 6-8 words	03	02
Those who knew at least 8 -10 words	03	01

As seen, there was a progress in knowing the words of List 1 and also the minority now have grasped the art of learning the words

and thus the awareness of words in list 2 were pretty much better in comparison to when words of List 1 were introduced in Week 1. This followed for another 2 weeks in the same manner paying less attention on words that the students were now familiar with but focusing on words that needed attention while adding the new list and the progress was as follows,

### **Week 3**

<b>Description</b>	<b>No of students familiar with List 1 words</b>	<b>No of students familiar with List 2 words</b>	<b>No of students familiar with List 3 words</b>
Those who knew 0 words	02	05	06
Those who knew at least 1 word	05	05	04
Those who knew at least 3 words	04	03	03
Those who knew at least 4-6 words	03	03	03
Those who knew at least 6-8 words	03	02	02
Those who knew at least 8 -10 words	03	02	02

## Week 4

Description	No of students familiar with List 1 words	No of students familiar with List 2 words	No of students familiar with List 3 words	No of students familiar with List 4 words
Those who knew 0 words	00	03	04	05
Those who knew at least 1 word	03	03	04	04
Those who knew at least 3 words	05	06	03	03
Those who knew at least 4-6 words	04	03	03	03
Those who knew at least 6-8 words	04	03	03	03
Those who knew at least 8 -10 words	04	02	03	02

Although this method showed a very slow progress, when closely analyzed, it was seen by around 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> week that many knew at least one word off the list unlike in the 1<sup>st</sup> week where 12 of them did not know a single word.

This is my solution to the passive ELT classroom and I am not going to end there, seeing the overwhelming enthusiasm of my students I am going to continue this practice till my students have achieved a good amount of English Vocabulary.

# *Teachers' Voices*

## STORIES FROM THE CLASSROOM

This is a compilation of stories from teachers depicting the real-life experiences in classrooms. The fourteen stories in this collection have only one common setting: teachers and students in a classroom. Yet these stories are diverse in nature as the writers (teachers) take us through their teaching experiences in these different classrooms. Each story unravels a new insight and perspective. All in all, the stories subtly express useful teaching techniques and helps reader to realise that the teaching - learning challenges are merely opportunities to achieve success. A must read for teachers and future teachers alike.



e ISBN 978-983-9411-08-9

