

# Re-educating our hearts: Reflections on teaching low-performing English language learners

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## ABSTRACT

This short article discusses my experience in teaching low-performing English language learners at the National University of Singapore. Specifically, I detail some simple strategies in teaching music students in the university who are required to take English language courses with objectives that do not match their real needs. While recognizing recent work in the field which argues that sociocultural dimensions have been largely ignored in motivational studies in English language learning, I found myself drawn slowly back to intrinsic motivations of students because other possibilities of change seemed closed to these students. My humanistic, individualist approach to teaching the music students also led me to re-evaluate my own teacher identity, ultimately arguing that self-awareness of one's identity is necessary if one is confronted with extreme conditions of learning most of which are beyond the control of the individual learners themselves.

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**KEYWORDS:** *intrinsic motivation, teacher identity, empathy, supportive environment, low proficiency*

## Introduction

This short paper arose out of my experience in teaching a fundamental English language course to students of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YSTCM) of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The YSTCM was founded in 2001 and has since then been training young brilliant student musicians from 14 countries and offering these students "an exciting 21st century Asian context" in which it is dedicated to "train and educate instrumentalists and composers to take advantage of professional and artistic opportunities anywhere on the planet" (<http://music.nus.edu.sg/about/welcome.htm>). There is no doubt about the students' capability in music; they are some of the best in the world.

However, these students were selected mainly based on their musical talent and not on their English language competence. Although there is now yet another proposal by the university's English language centre to create a separate English language programme for the students, the past and current practice still is such that these students are placed in English language courses whose benchmarks are intermediate adult English learners with at least twelve years of formal instruction in the language. Therefore, it is no surprise that some of these students have been

categorized as Level “0” language learners by the university, a category which in fact emerged from this “music problem” since NUS has never had any group in the past whose proficiency was not even enough to qualify them for the most basic English course in the university. Hence, when I was told that I would teach a batch of students from YSTCM, I knew I would be teaching a very different group.

### **The practical challenge**

Since I was aware of the students’ limited English language proficiency, I initially drew on time-tested methodologies: drawing, miming, graphic explanations to explain the given set of materials, etc. My initial approach was simple and based on “production-driven language learning” which “focuses on learning things to say in the target language” (Orwig, 1999, n.p.). Indeed, it worked quite well especially during the first few sessions of the semester. However, it became less and less helpful as we moved along the semester. Their ‘authentic’ language responses to questions and activities in class were extremely limited; everyone struggled to learn vocabulary and grammar and how to put them in good use. As language methods failed to bring about light in the classroom, I had to draw on other resources to teach. Since it was difficult to change the mindset of my students within a short span of time, I decided to change my own mindset instead to adapt to their needs. Could this be a more effective way of dealing with the students?

### **The theoretical problem**

In the course of my teaching the music students, I found myself slowly drawn towards the more individualist, humanistic way of dealing with students; that is, while the current literature reminds us (correctly) that the English language learner is a complex person sporting different identities and whose learning is enabled or constrained by social and institutional factors (Pierce, 1995; McKay & Wong, 1996; Gao, 2006), I saw myself drawing on individual motivations of students which some scholars (again, rightly) have recently found to be very inadequate in explaining why some English language learners are successful while others are not (Pierce, 1995). My music students, after all, are “standardized students” (Williams, 2005) whose success depends on institutional and social conditions (such as standardized literacy tests which are sometimes irrelevant to the learners), and not simply on their own motivations to succeed.

In the following sections, I will outline some of the basic practices I engaged in as I changed my perspectives on teaching the music students. These are reflective, personal points but interspersed with relevant academic literature. They are not revolutionary; in fact, they are simple and perhaps commonsensical. But that is the point of the article—that drawing on the simplest but the most humane teaching practices could prove to be helpful in solving the learning impasse in the classroom. I believe that this writing approach is necessary to maintain the ‘groundedness’ of my experience with the students. Nevertheless, the brief

'academic' discussions are meant to continue the 'conversation' with those who experience similar challenges as well.

## **Towards a new mindset in teaching low proficiency English language learners**

### *Build a supportive environment: Re-visiting intrinsic motivation*

A few weeks after the start of the English programme, some students approached me after class to discuss their "need" to pass the English exams. During the discussion, I spoke of the need for self-reflection and intrinsic motivation towards language learning. I felt that a positive attitude towards language learning is crucial in attaining success towards one's learning; that is, I felt that if the students' *perception* of English language learning improves (or becomes more positive), they would definitely become more successful language learners. After that talk (and a few other similar personal conversations thereafter), I observed marked improvement in the students' attitude and their eagerness to learn. This might sound too mundane, but since then they had stopped asking for breaks in-between lessons and, instead, asked much more questions in class.

Letting students ask questions may derail one's set lesson plans, but that is the point—to allow the students to dictate some parts of the lessons in order to motivate them to use English more frequently. In the process, this provides the teacher the opportunity to showcase more open and accepting attitudes towards the students who seemed to have internalized other people's view of them as 'bad' English language learners. Under those circumstances, I found *acceptance* to be an effective tool in eliciting responses from the students. This is because of the knowledge that the listener in this context (particularly a significant person, for example, a teacher) accepts the students as part of the English language community which in turn will help students to realize that they are being valued by others. This will then lead to students feeling even more assured of their worth and encouraged to make further contributions in the classroom.

Hence, in order to build participation in the classroom, it is important to note that the teacher is only trying to help "each person find the best meaning in what he or she is saying by paying close attention, asking clarifying questions, and offering illustrations if the student gets lost in abstraction" (Palmer, 2007, p. 83). Knowing that the student's intended meaning is not compromised will help to enhance a person's self-worth.

Of course, this approach does not mean that everything goes well in class. To be sure, this seemingly 'psychological' approach to motivation works against recent beliefs that language learning is a conditioned reality. That is, one may be motivated to do well in class but the student's social background, educational experience, and so on, may still prevent him or her from learning the language successfully. This point cannot be more true with the music students. The conditions within which they learn English are extremely constraining. In the words of Pierce (1995), the students' social investment in English language learning is much higher than the rest of the students of the university.

For example, as part of the university's aim to standardize the linguistic ability of all its students, the music students had to be pushed "up" to at least the minimum university level of English language proficiency which is to write academic essays of an expository and argumentative structure. Failure to achieve this minimum requirement in the university would result in their loss of scholarships in NUS. Their image of an English language classroom, thus, was one of a place which could prevent them from pursuing undergraduate work in Singapore and ultimately be sent home in shame. Hence, these students "almost had nothing in common with their English teachers, except for the desire to pass the courses" (Tupas, 2007, p. 35).

Consequently, the students' investment in the English language is not an investment that is made out of choice but rather an investment that is socially-conditioned (Tupas, 2007). As language teachers, do we endorse the institution's demand which is to produce homogeneity among its students as it supposedly brings about positive linguistic results, or should we resist it as it once again brings us to a disciplinary system of learning which some educators have tried to remove ourselves from?

Indeed, any form of personal motivation is not a guarantee in successful language learning. But this point seems to open up exactly the same possibility of intrinsic motivation. If most doors are closed to the students, one opening could simply be the 'humanistic' approach to their learning which I described above. Again, it will not solve everything, but building a supportive environment for the students could help them gain confidence and realize that they too have the power to change their conditions and become successful language learners.

### *Empathise with students: Re-evaluating grammar teaching*

To enter the students' world, it was essential that we understand the fear within our students' hearts (Palmer, 2007, p. 47). This means "entering empathetically into the student's world so that he or she perceives you as someone who has the promise of being able to hear another person's truth" (Palmer, 2007, p. 47). During this period of struggle as a language teacher, I felt that the students had no immediate interest in other academic subjects except music. Hence, as a language teacher, I decided to take a bold step: remove many basic grammar texts. In its place, I started adapting and simplifying articles of music composers to suit the music students' level of linguistic competence. Pictures of the composers were also incorporated to stir their interest. Students involved themselves in these activities more than they did in earlier lessons as my simplified and creative texts stimulated a desire to learn more about English because the students also wanted to learn more about the composers. From there, these adapted articles not only served the students' grammar needs but also acted as a springboard for vocabulary and reading comprehension needs as well. Here, I started to show much willingness to enter my students' world of learning, a world certainly different from mine.

In a sense, this builds perfectly upon the earlier point about intrinsic motivation in the midst of constraining social conditions. Because the opportunity to experience 'success' in learning English is crucial in determining a student's

desire to learn the target language, it is vital that the teacher helps to “cultivate learners’ intrinsic interest and positive attitudes and beliefs associated with the target language” (Gao et al., 2007, p. 149). This example is best seen in my attempt to contextualize the teaching and learning of English within the much more familiar topics and practices of learning music. As I witnessed in my own classroom, once students experienced ‘success’ in class through the manner by which they understood and discussed a short write-up of a music composer, interest was then stirred towards the target language. Grammar teaching was never the same again.

### *Prepare to change: Understanding teacher identity*

It must be clear by now that as I faced the many challenges of teaching the music students, I was myself also changing my perspectives on a variety of issues concerning the teaching and learning of English. Perhaps one thing right that I did was to consciously prepare for changes to my own identity as a teacher. This does not mean losing my ‘old’ self in the midst of such transformation; it means that I needed to make sure that I understood what was going on so I could respond to and/or resist the possibility of change. If one is not aware of the possibility of change in viewpoints and identity, there is a high probability that the teacher, first, becomes agitated over what is happening in the classroom and, second, be carried away by an avalanche of transformations to do with social and institutional pressures.

As earlier mentioned, the university’s main goal was to align students along the singular objective of making them write competently on ‘academic’ issues or topics. The teacher then faces a possible struggle with his or her identity. Alignment, according to Tsui (2007), is a process in which

participants in a community become connected by bringing their actions and practices in line with a broader enterprise. It is through alignment that the identity of a large group such as an institution becomes the identity of its participants (p. 661).

Therefore, what this means in my context of teaching the music students is that while their needs would undoubtedly require an EFL teacher, the institution demands that the teacher take on an ‘ESL teacher identity’. This would pose a struggle for me as an English teacher because my ‘new’ classroom identity did not really mean I changed my own beliefs about what needed to be done because I knew part of the problem was institutional and social, not individual. Tsui (2007) again helps articulate this problem better: the more the teacher “was under pressure to align with the goals of the institution” “the less ownership [s]he had of the meanings of what [s]he was doing” (p. 677). Thus, this “interplay of identification and the negotiability of meanings could generate identity conflicts” (p. 678). Consequently, the English teacher would have to recognize these conflicts and learn how to reconcile these two identities so as to form her own identity as a language teacher in the classroom. In my case, my ‘new’ identity was that of an ESL teacher teaching students with EFL needs, thus the necessity to confront

the institutional and social constraints squarely (partly) through an individual and humanistic approach despite what the literature says about its weaknesses (Pierce, 1995; McKay & Wong, 1996).

## Conclusion

My experience in teaching music students has taught me one good lesson in class: students become silent in a language learning environment not because of “stupidity or banality” but because of their “desire to protect themselves and to survive” (Palmer 2007, p. 46), and because the “adult work” (in this case, the institution and society in general) has caused them to feel alienated and disempowered (ibid.). This distinctive environment of teaching and learning has brought me face-to-face with the reality that our students are, above all, people and not numbers on a progress sheet. Hence, to be faced with a situation such as this, it is not the students only who need to be educated but, more importantly, it is we, the teachers, who “must reeducate our hearts” (Palmer, 2007, p. 86).

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