

Shaking Up

Larry Ferlazzo connects the community organizing concepts of irritating and agitating to English learners

During my pre-ESL teacher career as a community organizer

assisting low-income people to build power and make social change, an organizer asked me this question: "Have you ever called people apathetic when they don't come to our meetings to talk about the things we want them to talk about? That's being a bad organizer." In other words, organizers who focused on what they, the organizers, wanted were unsuccessful. They were blaming that lack of success on what they called apathy in others.

We called this the "irritating" approach, one that tended to cause displeasure, annoyance, and frustration to the people we were trying to organize. We viewed irritation as telling people what they should want to know along with telling them how they should learn it.

We would contrast this with an "agitational" approach, one that would, as various dictionaries define the word, "stir things up" and "arouse interest," with the goal of "putting things into motion to produce changes."

We viewed agitation as challenging people to reflect on their own knowledge, lives and experiences; their visions for themselves; what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it (few wanted to be told and most wanted to do). In other words, we focused on people's self-interests.

Teachers can often be more irritators than agitators. We have our textbook and curriculum to get through. We have our lesson plans from previous years all ready to go! I would like to share a few ideas on how we can more often be agitators, and not irritators, in teaching English to second-language learners.

Relationship Building

During my organizing career, we often would say that "organizing" was just another word for "relationship-building." You could quickly identify what people's self-interests were on the surface, like getting a better job or owning their own home. But to build

long-term power for social change it was necessary to go deeper and find out what family or personal experiences drove people to want to make those improvements. This important knowledge could only be learned in the context of a genuine relationship.

We can begin to build relationships with our students and identify their self-interests in several ways. If we speak the student's L1 or if an interpreter is available, we can have short conversations with them to learn about their hopes, dreams, and interests. A short written survey can also be useful, but only if the information in it is used to initiate further conversation. In a situation where I cannot speak the student's L1 and they are beginning students, I have asked them to begin journals or do projects where they paste or draw pictures communicating similar information. I have found that making personal visits to student's homes to be the most effective tool towards relationship-building. Not only is the effort appreciated, but one can learn a great deal about a person from what is in their home and from talking with family members.

Learning English is just a means to an end for our students. We can learn through building relationships what these "ends" are for each of our students —



Illustration by
Clarissa Butler

the ESL Classroom

do they want to learn English because they have a specific career in mind, because they want to use it to create a better life for their children, or for other reasons?

We can use the knowledge we learn from these interactions to frame the content and character of our classes in a way that will develop a community of learners, not one where the expectation is that students are just empty vessels waiting to be filled-up by the teacher. We can also encourage the same sort of interaction between our students.

Building on Prior Knowledge

In organizing, our goal was to first learn people's individual stories and then have them share those stories with others. Out of that sharing would come a different interpretation of those stories, which would then lead to collective action.

Our students have an enormous amount of knowledge from their previous life experience. A challenge to us as teachers is to figure out strategies to help students tap into that prior knowledge, have them share it with each other, and help them develop a different interpretation of it so they can advance their understanding of that experience to another level.

We can have our students write down and draw or paste magazine pictures illustrating English words they know. Then, using what is called the "inductive model," we can have them categorize those words and challenge them to identify other words that fit into those categories. We can then model writing sentences using some of those words and help students develop additional sentences. Students can then categorize those sentences and turn them into paragraphs.

We can use K-W-L charts where students first list what they know about a particular subject, then have them list connected questions about things they want to know (for example, prior to a field trip to a grocery store a student would probably know that they have to pay for items, and might want to know the English word for the person they pay and want to know how they could figure out how much items cost before they got to the cashier if it only had a bar code on it). Finally, they can list the answers they learned to their questions.

Students can also use their previous experiences when teachers use Freirian exercises. For example, I recently showed my students a picture of a man on a street corner holding a sign begging for food that his children needed. I asked students to describe the picture, asked them what problem they thought was represented by the picture, and then asked them to share if they or their families had ever been hungry and unable to feed themselves. We then discussed what they thought caused the problem, how they responded to the problem, and what were other possible responses to the problem.

Identifying What Students Want to Learn

Again, successful community organizing is based on responding to people's self-interests. Even within the curriculum confines that some ESL teachers might face there are many ways we can do the same with our students.

We could ask them what kinds of things they would like to be able to talk about in English. We could try out various kinds of teaching techniques and tools, and ask them to evaluate which ones they think are most effective for them. We could ask them if the pace of the class is too fast, too slow, or just right. We could ask them what they want to learn.

Much research has shown that one of the best ways students can learn to read is by regularly reading books and stories that they are interested in reading (free voluntary reading). This is a challenge for English Language Learners, especially beginners. One way to respond to this challenge is to help our students take advantage of the thousands of free audio and animated stories, using both fictional and expository text, available on the Internet. I have gathered links to many of them on my website www.bayworld.net/ferlazzo/english.html.

Language, however, is a social construct, so it is critical that we don't just put students in front of computers and assume that will take care of things. We must also create opportunities where they can discuss what they have read and demonstrate both verbally and in writing that they are using the strategies that good readers use.

Other research has shown that one way students can learn to write effectively is by regularly writing what they want to write about. One way to do this is to have students keep journals where they can write about their lives or choose pictures from magazines to cut out, paste and either describe or write stories about them.