

Conceptualization of Learning

My name is George Ellington, and I am an educator. I believe absolutely in the value of lifelong learning. Whether intentionally or not, we acquire new information and experiences, new skills and ideas every day of our lives. This acquisition—this learning—empowers us with the skills and knowledge we need to define our own lives. It strengthens and enables us, illuminating disparate paths that we might explore in life while entrusting us with the capacity to understand the world around us and to strive to better care for that world and for the lives that inhabit it.

As a teacher, I work within a traditional, well-defined setting—the college classroom—which is constructed along cultural, institutional, and financial lines. Learning in a classroom is often perceived in a limited way in terms of goals to achieve, tasks to perform, or grades to attain. In particular, there is an emphasis on “passing the test” or “making the grade,” yet this simplistic adherence to the expectations and assumptions of what “formal education” might be allows lifelong learning to suffer, which is an unbearable shame, because every learner is a builder, a creator. Every student is much more than the subjects we teach. What my students learn on any given day should enhance their experiences in life, rather than just prepare them to pass exams or land a good job, even if that is all they really want to begin with when they step through the doors of our college.

You see, at its most simplistic interpretation, language learning is a very practical, almost utilitarian endeavor. Better English skills will help my students achieve goals that might have a very clear monetary value, such as finding a better job or achieving a promotion at work. Better English skills might enable them to expand their social interaction, meet people, form relationships, fit in with the English-language dominant society around them. Better English skills might mean getting into a university and attaining a degree and access to the profession of their dreams. And yet English language learning is much more than this. Our students are growing through this learning process, acquiring a more complex, more insightful sense of themselves, of who they are and how they fit into not only our local society, but the world around them. Learning is critical in this ongoing and enlightening process.

Conceptualization of Teaching

A teacher is an advisor and facilitator. She offers advice based on her education, training, and experience. She presents problems and poses questions to stimulate thought. A teacher is a designer and composer. He creates simulations, tasks, and goals to help the student acquire new skills, commit useful information to memory, and engage actively in the learning process. The best teachers are the best learners. They are people who know how to learn, who over decades of experience with education (as teachers and students) have come to understand the process of teaching and learning. They have important insights, some of which they have learned from their own teachers and others they most certainly have developed through their own experiences.

In this increasingly connected yet informationally overwhelming world, we are surrounded by data and information. Any person placed into this infinite universe of questions and answers, of enigmatic concepts and complex quasi-truths is always fighting an uphill battle. From the perspective of numbers—of the sheer quantity of things to learn—it is a battle that can never fully be won. There are more thoughts than one could ever think, more books than one could ever read, more ideas than one could ever understand, and more knowledge than one person could ever possess. One of the first objectives of teachers must be to determine what is important to learn and in what order.

In regards to language learning, this simple task can seem insurmountable. A language is representative of our entire communicative world. A native language is so innate, so deeply embedded in our minds that accepting that there even *are* different ways that a language can be constructed can be quite difficult for learners to comprehend. An English language teacher must be familiar with this process of learning a new language—with its challenges and benefits—to appreciate the perplexity that language learners face as well as the joys of achieving their linguistic, personal, and social goals. Languages can seem so huge that a learner can often feel overwhelmed. A language teacher must work to make this task seem not only possible, but readily attainable. A language teacher has to make something immeasurably complex and dynamic, into something simple and constant enough that it will not intimidate his students.

There are a lot of complex emotions involved in language learning, and the complications they cause can be just as significant if not more so than intellectual or academic problems. A native language is an important and intricate component of a person's identity. It is the medium used not only to communicate with others, but also to think. Learning another language involves a great deal of personal growth, even including for some the development of an alter ego in the target language. It can also involve a lot of social growth, as students must learn to take risks and not be ashamed of their mistakes, especially as regards speaking. A teacher must try to give as much individual attention to students as possible, and try to make her classroom into a safe place where students can practice without fear, and thereby slowly become comfortable with speaking in real world situations.

Implementation of my Philosophy

My focus in language instruction balances the needs of learners for greater fluency and increased accuracy. The importance of fluency (over accuracy) is often overlooked in English language instruction in schools in non-English speaking countries. In my experience too many corrections can adversely affect fluency and deplete students' motivation to learn. Through persistent correction of form, students may begin to feel as if they just can't do anything right. However, the instructor must also provide sufficient feedback on formal issues of language (correct syntax or lexicon) so as to avoid the fossilization of errors in language production. At the same time, students should be instructed in how to be more aware of their language production and how to correct their own mistakes. Self-correction should be encouraged and actively developed from the very beginning.

Communicative confidence and competence are the ultimate goals of my instruction. For example, in terms of pronunciation, most students will always maintain a non-native accent, and there is nothing wrong with this. A foreign accent need not inhibit communication. If my students are understood by *and* understand the speech of native English speakers, and are able to communicate to the *students' own personal satisfaction* in day-to-day situations, then I would consider our work together to have been a success. I encourage them to communicate with me and with one another throughout the class sessions. I respond directly to their speaking skills, guiding their pronunciation to greater fluency, but always with a focus on effective communication rather than mimicry of native spoken English.

Language learning in my courses is also defined by the needs and experiences of college students. I believe it is important in a college preparatory language program to create materials and organize activities that replicate the goals and activities of introductory college courses. Language can be taught through a variety of topics and activities. However, our students, to be better prepared for college courses, require exposure to academic subjects and tasks. I have

therefore composed textbooks that teach English to ESL students through the study of such topics as Literature, Psychology, Anthropology, Political Science, and History. My students listen to college lectures, take extensive notes, discuss their learning and share their opinions in groups, compose essays, respond to the verbal and written ideas of others, and give oral presentations on complex subjects. And all not only to improve their English language skills, but to build their confidence and competence as college students.