

# Re-examining the Basics: A Series of Questions Relating to TESOL

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Abstract:

Even for long-time teachers of English as a second language, it can be useful to periodically go back and think on some of the more fundamental questions on teaching in the classroom.

These questions will allow teachers to reflect and rethink how they teach, improving the overall quality of their class. This paper looks at a series of fundamental TESOL questions including how to teach vocabulary in a more interesting way, teaching grammar in a formal way, learning blocks and how to deal with them and the issue of student motivation. The answers seek to outline the issue and provide possible answers/approaches to dealing with them, with an aim of improving the quality of ESL lessons.

**Key Words:** [Vocabulary] [Formal Grammar] [Learning Blocks]  
[Motivation]

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## 1. Question: What are some ideas that teachers could bring to the classroom to make the learning of vocabulary more interesting and rewarding?

Answer:

Having a sufficient vocabulary is one of the most important parts of speaking any language. However, it can be one of the most gruelling and often boring parts of the learning process. It is important for the teacher to keep students motivated through making vocabulary study more enjoyable and rewarding.

It is generally accepted that new vocabulary should be introduced by showing them used in action/context for students to see how they are actually used.<sup>1</sup> The old-fashioned style of writing the new word with a translation in your own language next to it and nothing to show it in context is almost always inadequate for student retention. I have found that it always helps to make the learning of vocabulary in class a much more active process. Giving students easy to understand and relate to examples of how to use a word

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or the use of reading/listening to show the real-world application of the word are good ways of introducing new vocabulary. Another, very basic but effective way of livening up vocabulary learning is just by using gestures. They are often a great way of helping students visualise the word and context. Teachers can also have students come up with their own gestures to explain the meaning of a word back to the teacher or each other. The simple use of gestures makes vocabulary learning a little more fun whilst also providing students with a visual cue that they can think back on when having to use new words. These few ways of introducing new vocabulary to the class, followed by a follow up practice/revision activity can make it much more rewarding and useful for students.

One such activity could be the Odd One Out Game. A staple of many ESL classrooms, this game can be altered and adjusted to fit any level of student. Students are provided with four words connected by a common category, for example countries, fruit, animals. Students then choose the word that is different from others and then describe why that word is different.

This activity is good for making the students think about all the words and come up with good explanations on the differences between them. No matter what four words the teachers use, there are almost always multiple answers, and students often come up with surprising answers that even include differences in spelling, grammar or pronunciation. These kinds of answers that cross over into other facets of language learning only serve to make this activity more rewarding.

Another activity which I have personally found to be quite useful for vocabulary practice or test study is the information-gap crossword. While a traditional crossword can also be interesting for a class, the information-gap version challenges students to think on and use vocabulary. This is a pair activity that has two versions of the same crossword, with student A's crossword having all the 'across' answers and student B's having all the 'down' answers. Rather than just telling their partner the missing words straight-out, the students must take turns at describing and explaining what each of the words are. The teacher can include some descriptions and hints for the students to read to each other or have them come up with their own. Students can use the word in a sentence, describe a situation where it is used, give their partner the first letter, or a range of other useful hints that benefit both students A and B. Both the speaker and the listener must draw on their vocabulary knowledge to get the answer. This activity also helps with spelling. A crossword, with its set number of often intertwined boxes, forces the students to aim for proper spelling as incorrect spelling may affect surrounding words and make this activity all the more rewarding.

These are just some of the many ways teachers can turn the gruelling task of vocabulary study into something much more enjoyable and rewarding for their students.

**2. Question: The debate on teaching grammar in a formal manner in an ESL classroom has raged on for decades. What is your opinion on this matter, and what do you class as ‘a formal matter’?**

Answer:

Grammar is the structural rules of a language, and while they are subconsciously understood by native speakers, it can be quite difficult for other learners to grasp the meaning of these rules entirely. Teaching grammar has traditionally been the backbone of any English language lesson, and for years it has been taught in a formal manner in classrooms throughout the world. This ‘formal manner’ refers to teaching grammar directly as the main topic of the lesson. The teacher will teach a set lesson using a textbook and focusing on one or more grammar points, such as past tense, present perfect, articles, etc. The students will then be required to memorize, practice and produce using this grammar. They may do audiolingual drills, grammar translation into their own native language, fill in the blank exercises or a number of other activities designed to instil the grammar pattern into their minds. This is still the preferred method for teaching grammar across many countries, where students of all ages will have either part of the class or entire separate classes devoted to formal learning of grammar. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, there was a shift towards a more communicative way of teaching and an indirect acquisition of grammar. In this approach, a teacher focuses on showing the function of the language and how that it is used through interactive activities, group work, role-plays, discussions, and so on. The idea here is that these activities allow students to indirectly acquire grammar understanding as a native speaker naturally would without having to be directly taught them. Supporters of this approach say that it will increase the communicative competence of students, which is one of, if not the most important part of using a language. Some teachers believe that formal grammar teaching still has a part in today’s ESL landscape, while others believe it should be removed entirely.

In my personal experience in both teaching and learning a foreign language, I believe the best teaching method lies somewhere in the middle of both these approaches. As a means of communication, language should be taught in a communicative manner. I have seen many people who have a very good functional knowledge of how English grammar works, however can barely communicate using it. This is very prevalent in Japan, where most educational institutions still adhere to the traditional formal manner of grammar instruction and are only now just starting to move towards a more communicative/active learning approach. I still believe grammar instruction is needed in the classroom, however, in a somewhat of a less direct, formal manner. My own experience teaching has almost entirely been done with the communicative or content-based approach. I have found this to be a successful approach, however, there are always times when the students cannot

quite grasp the grammar idea themselves. This could be only 1-2 students or the entire class, and it may be due to the complex nature of the pattern itself, such as gerunds, or due to confusing exceptions to the grammar rules, like nouns acting as adjectives. When this happens, I have found it useful to stop and provide students with a simple handout or discussion on the grammar pattern with examples that they can come back to whenever they need to go forward with learning the grammar in a more communicative way. I found these kinds of outlines to be very useful in my own time learning of foreign language, as I could keep referring to them until I had the grammar internalized and could communicate using it without thinking about it. However, it is important to note that in some instances, such as Japanese junior and senior high schools, grammar patterns will have to be taught in a formal manner, as the main aim of learning English is a less communicative one and more geared towards passing grammar heavy examinations.

Just like the language itself, ideas and strategies on ESL teaching are constantly evolving and with this, the role that the instruction of grammar plays. It is up to the teacher to be as flexible as possible and to find the best way of imparting knowledge of grammar to their students that will allow them to use a language for what it is meant to be used for, communication.

### **3. Question: What are some of the typical blocks which may prevent language learning?**

Answer:

Language learning students at all levels will be confronted with some sort of 'block' during their studies. These blocks can be from internal factors, such as shyness, fear of making mistakes or motivational issues, or from external factors, such as issues with the classroom, teacher or the other students around them. These blocks affect each student differently, what is a big problem for one student may be little trouble for another and vice versa.

Initially a student's personality and reason for study can both become a block to language learning. These factors are linked directly to motivation. An outgoing and confident student will find it easier to use and communicate. Whereas, a shy, self-conscious student will not have the courage to use the language hindering their ability to learn. Also, if a student has no interest in learning a language but must do so anyway for school, business or some other reason, they will have no motivation to learn. These are very obvious and straightforward blocks preventing learning, however, they must be addressed and overcome to form a good foundation for continued language acquisition.

One of the largest blocks preventing language learning that I have encountered, especially in English learning in Japan, is the 'fear of failure' mentality.

Classical English teaching methods place a lot of emphasis on grammar patterns, vocabulary as well as reading and listening skills. In Japan, the focus is often placed on accuracy and memorization for examinations, with actual conversation falling to the wayside. This association with 'English = Exam' where failure is not an option leads to students becoming afraid to actually use the language out of fear of making mistakes, when in reality a large part of language learning is all about making mistakes and learning from them. Students don't volunteer to answer questions, will be nervous during presentations and may be too scared to even talk to their teacher. This will of course be much worse for an already shy student, as general shyness itself is often another block in language learning. I regularly encounter the issue in class when I ask a student to repeat an answer because I simply couldn't hear it the first time, usually because they say it in such a small voice likely again due to fear, they automatically think that they have made a mistake and either clam up or quickly change their answer even though they were already right. This often continues with the student right throughout their lives into adulthood and either seriously hinders further language acquisition or makes them give up altogether.

Another external factor block to language learning can come from the classroom environment. This can often be overlooked, however, everything from lighting, to temperature and even the technology used in the classroom can impact on a student's learning. As a rule, a classroom should be well lit and kept at a suitable temperature. An overly bright, hot and humid room in the middle of summer or a darker, too warm room in winter will only serve to sap the students' energy taking their focus away from learning. Technology in the classroom has also formed into a new, modern block which may prevent language learning. Of course, when used correctly, technology, such as electronic dictionaries, smartphones and tablet computers, is a wonderful tool to assist both students and teachers. However, its misuse, overuse, or lack of use at all, can hinder language learning. If a teacher or student cannot or does not use a piece of technology correctly, it may demotivate them or the class. Conversely, using technology too much may see students being unable to communicate without them. Their reliance on technology prevents them from learning by themselves. I have seen several students who basically speak through their electronic dictionary. New language learning technology is also constantly being developed, including smartphone applications, online tutoring videos, language games and computer translation. However, the inability or refusal to embrace these new tools can also block a student's learning.

Until these kinds of blocks are overcome by the teacher or student, proper language learning can become an almost impossible task.

**4. Question: The motivation that a student brings to a language classroom can have a major effect on their success. What thoughts do you have regarding this statement?**

Answer:

Throughout the world there are countless numbers of people learning to speak English as a foreign language for a variety of reasons. Some do it for a specific reason, such as for business or tourism, others because they have to as part of their school curriculum, and others purely as a hobby. The reason for their study will be directly linked to how motivated the student will be. The terms extrinsic motivation, referring to external motivation from outside such as exams, deadlines or for reward, and intrinsic motivation, internal motivation where the feeling of accomplishment from learning is enough, are often used when describing the motivation of ESL students.<sup>2</sup> A similar idea, instrumental and integrative motivation, comes from Gardner and Lambert and their often cited 1972 work 'Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning'. Students with instrumental motivation learn a foreign language for some sort of practical reason/goal, for example, to get into university or employment goals such as becoming a flight attendant. Often university students who have chosen to study a language will have this kind instrumental motivation. On the other hand, students who are integrative motivation are learning a language because they see it as a chance for self-growth. They wish to learn about and experience different cultures and customs through talking to speakers of the other language.<sup>3</sup> These kinds of learners can often be seen in local English conversation classes throughout Japan, where people from the neighbourhood, especially retirees, come for the social aspect or to learn more about the world around. Of course, students can have a combination of all these different types of motivation, and throughout my experience teaching English as a second language, I have seen many instrumental/extrinsic and integrative/intrinsic motivated students that come to study English for a vast number of differing reasons. Which type of motivation produces better results for language learning is often debated, with newer models also being introduced to show motivation as a more fluid concept that changes over time.

Whatever the reason why a student studies a foreign language, the motivation they bring with them into the class does have a huge impact on their success. The role of the teacher is to either increase or maintain student motivation. A teachers' attitude, energy and care for his or her students goes a long way to making the class a much more interesting place to be. A confident, energetic and approachable teacher who supports and encourages students through positive reinforcement from the very first class will no doubt make a big difference to the learning environment. Materials and activities should also be relevant, at an achievable level and engaging for the students. Materials that deal with topics that are not relevant to a student will offer little interest for them. Materials

that are too hard will lead to failure which naturally discourages them. Also, if an activity is too simple, it will also have a similarly discouraging effect, something I have personally seen with students who come back from study overseas and find themselves ahead of the other students in class. A teacher needs to ensure the level of challenge keeps the students engaged and enjoying what they are learning which will lead to continued/increased motivation. Of course, this can be a very difficult task when faced with a set curriculum that you must cover in a set time frame. However, a teacher should try and be as flexible as possible to help motivate their students. I have noticed that many of my unmotivated students often come to class feeling this way because they lack self-confidence, often made worse by comparing themselves to those around them. I have found that some extra care and encouragement towards these students can do wonders with their motivation which leads to results, in turn leading to more motivation. However, I have also seen students who have no motivation in studying English whatsoever and do not respond to anything I try to do to change that. So, while it is very important for a teacher to create and foster the motivation that students bring to class, without their cooperation as well it is very unlikely that they will succeed in properly learning the language.

1. Jeremy Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Pearson 4<sup>th</sup> Edition 2007 pg. 229
2. Jeremy Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Pearson 4<sup>th</sup> Edition 2007 pg. 98
3. Patsy M. Lightbrown & Nina Spada, *How Languages are Learned*, Oxford 4<sup>th</sup> Edition 2013 pg. 87

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