

Alex Barrett
Teaching
Philosophy
Statement

Teaching English is my life, but learning has always been my passion. My style of teaching is constantly being developed as I learn through professional development and by engaging and listening to my students. Finding out how my students learn is, to me, a large part of what it means to be a teacher.

I once saw a sign in a café in Japan that said “Speak in your own English”. It was such a strange place to encounter this sign but its message stuck with me ever since. It encapsulates my core belief in English language teaching, that each student must find their own voice, their own English-speaking identity. Too often English is presented as a static object, or fixed destination, when in reality it is fluid and itinerant. I have seen students become so frustrated with English learning because they seemed to never be able to use English in the way they thought they were supposed to. My goal as a teacher is to help students avoid or overcome this frustration, to teach them that language learning is a lifelong journey, and to help them speak in their own English.

Motivated students have an easier and more fulfilling language learning experience. My classroom endeavors to instill motivation through community building, confidence growing, technology enhancement, and relevant language application. All of my classes have displayed incredible cultural variety, even when the students shared a first language or nationality. The range of identities among my students sets a foundation for a rewarding language learning experience. Therefore, in my classroom, I enable my students to share their own stories. It is easy to get subject material from textbooks which may be loosely relevant to many of the students in class, but it is much more satisfying if that material comes from the students themselves. By using learners’ lives as curriculum, my students have learned about and connected with each other on a deeper level. This has helped to establish relationships within my class which foster a sense of community and facilitate language exchange and learning.

Having this level of independence in expression can be scary and debilitating for some students, especially those who have deferred to the “authority” of textbooks in the past. Therefore, I design activities that provide learners with confidence, for example by giving each student the opportunity to teach their peers. I use activities in my class where students can work individually on a feature of language and then report what they have learned in small groups. This allows them to both develop independent learning and thinking skills, and also gives students the opportunity to take on the role of the teacher. By doing this, students are not told how to speak, but learn the most successful communication strategies for different situations and different people. Through adapting activities that put students in charge of their language learning, they access their inherent pragmatic competence; they make the language their own.

In my mission to develop independent thinkers, I also emphasize the importance of diversity awareness and inclusivity. This does not only mean the sharing of cultural knowledge between me and between my students, but that we can take advantage of the global stature of English to absorb culture on a much larger scale. Using technologies like social media or immersive multi-user virtual environments, I like to put my students in the global arena of English learning where they can actively use their language skills to share things about their own culture and learn new things about other cultures. Exposing my students to global Englishes also gives them insight to new and different models of language use, which helps them become more comfortable and confident with their own English. The connectivity that technology offers us helps demonstrate the value of the language my students are acquiring.

One of the most important aspects of my teaching is to make English relevant and useful as immediately as possible. I know this because in my own language learning experiences I always lost motivation when I was being taught something I knew I would not use. That is why I always try to include material that my students are likely encounter in their lives. For my students in America this could mean incorporating excerpts from DMV writing tests, credit card applications, or citizenship exams; for my students abroad, it could be TOEFL material or listening texts with different English accents. When my students encounter something in class that they know is directly applicable to their life, they are highly motivated to learn it. That's why the integration of language learning with life skills is part of every course I teach.

What I have described above is not an easy thing. It is not easy to take responsibility for one's own learning. It is not easy to create community from diversity. Nor is it easy to find your own English, especially in a climate with so many prescribed standards. Language learning is rarely thought of as an easy journey, but it can seem easy with the right motivation. I believe that my learner-centered, global-community style of teaching English motivates my students to acquire the academic and social language skills they need, and enables them to speak in their own English.