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This is going to be one of those articles that comes straight from the heart. I have been teaching English to people from other language and culture backgrounds for about 27 years, and everywhere I've been, no matter how well or poorly administered the programs, no matter how enlightened or otherwise the curricula are, I have encountered at least a few teachers who seem to have different purposes than mine for being in this profession. These individuals seem to enjoy most finding arcane student errors to hold up for ridicule in daily conversations about how tough it is getting students to learn and make progress, and how tough our job as teachers is, because of the refusal of the students to make sufficient effort to learn what we are obviously teaching them.

To my mind, teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. If the students are not learning, we are not teaching. Holding up their errors to ridicule and making jokes about their incompetence in conversations with our fellow teachers are actions that bespeak a teacher-centered rather than student-centered philosophy of education and learning.

What is in your heart today? Are you angry that you became a teacher? Are you frustrated with your interaction with students? Is administration pushing you to comply with an assessment regime that saps time you could be using to develop your instructional plans?

In my heart is a sense of joy that I feel when I am interacting with a group of students. This joy is what drives me to improve my teaching skills. Currently, I am striving to generate more opportunities for students to discuss in English their learning experiences and how these can be improved. Also, I want to see beyond errors and discover learned principles that students are applying perhaps too widely, which result in the errors. In other words, what are they getting right, and how can we build on that?

Like Wanda Lincoln, the Chicago substitute teacher and author of books on creativity said once, in a workshop I was lucky enough to attend in Quito, Ecuador (an enlightened administration sent nearly the whole teaching staff for this two-day event), "Teaching is not a game of 'keep-away'."

That's all I've got to say right now. I am disappointed when I hear teachers laughing and feeling superior at the expense of students and student-errors. One of the worst offenders is a teacher who actually mimicks student speech in an exaggerated way, Jerry-Lewis style, as if that were an acceptable joke format in today's world.

By Robb Scott

2009 ESL MiniConference Online



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