

Learning With and From Peers

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Introduction

In the *Cambridge Online Dictionary*, a ‘bond’ is defined as a close connection joining two or more people. Many would argue that students can learn better when their teacher and classmates support them; therefore, bonding should be created between the teacher and the students and also among students.

Bonding can be created through telling humorous stories, having motivating sessions, encouraging student sharing, and applying the principle that teaching is also learning. I usually use these approaches in the English Department when I teach undergraduate students in courses such as the speaking classes or the seminar class for the undergraduate thesis.

Humorous stories

I usually make use of the first day of class to create bonding between me, as their teacher, and my students. Bonding can be created on the first day by using humorous stories related to the students themselves. When I taught speaking class for the first semester students, I asked some of them questions about the English lessons in their high schools. After introducing my name and calling each student’s name from the attendance list, I usually ask the students to tell in English a funny experience from their high school. I give them the following instructions: 1) Mention first your name, your high school, and the town or the city you are from, and 2) tell a funny experience from your high school. In turn, I also tell a humorous story related to the students. In this way the bonding between my students and I can be created from the very beginning.

Throughout the semester, telling humorous stories or funny experiences can be used to encourage students’ participation in class. Once, I had the chance to teach a speaking class where all students were the ones who had failed the earlier term. Fellow teachers had characterized these students as quiet. I told these students that the first time I listened to a

native speaker, for the first ten minutes, I only understood the words, “had a heart attack.” Based on this phrase only, I had asked one question to the person I was talking to and then asked another question based on my limited comprehension. I said to the students that I had managed to have a conversation with the person although my comprehension was limited. I told the story in a funny way and the students laughed. Laughing together makes a teacher appear to be on the level of the students. Because of the idea of the teacher being at the same level with them, the students, especially the weak ones, gain confidence and do not hesitate to participate; they become less afraid to make mistakes. Laughing together is a good way to maintain teacher-student bonding.

Motivating session(s)

Students in that same speaking class, fellow teachers told me, were often absent. They were in the fifth semester, but they were still taking the speaking class of semester three. I decided to ask each one of these students why they had enrolled in the English Department. It turned out that each of them had his or her own goal in their lives that had nothing to do with studying English. So, after all students had spoken, I asked them how English could be useful in their dream profession later on. During that discussion, each of them realized how they could use English in their dream job. They did not say something explicit about how they liked my class, but none of them were as absent during the semester as they had previously been. All of them passed the speaking class. A motivating session in the first class meeting can be used in teaching to help learners, especially if many students are not motivated in studying English. Throughout the semester in that same speaking class, I allocated several minutes to relate the topic discussed on that day with the students’ dream jobs. I asked them to describe more specifically what they could do in their work later. I asked two or three students to give more information during each class meeting. In a semester when there were fourteen meetings, in a class of fifteen students, each student could relate the topic discussed with their lives at least twice in the semester.

Teaching is learning

Besides bonding between teacher and students, the bonding among peers is very important, especially if there is a big English proficiency gap between the strong students and the weaker ones. Once, I taught a speaking class in the second semester, and two out of the seven

students rarely talked. If I asked these two students to talk, they just smiled or shook their head. In that kind of situation, I decided to pair the talkative and the quiet students.

Before pairing the students, firstly, I emphasize to the good students that learning and teaching are two sides of the same coin. Teaching is learning. Giving the chance to the strong students to teach the weak students will make the strong students even better students. I tell the strong students that the weak students might ask them questions that they had never thought of or tell them problems that they have never had. Therefore, in trying to answer the weak students' questions or by listening to the weak students' problems, the strong students will obtain something valuable from the weak students. In that way, the strong students will not hesitate in teaching the weak students. In other words, a helpful, give-and-take atmosphere is created instead of a competitive one; teaching (read: *giving*) is learning (read: *taking*). To the weak students I emphasize that learning from their peers is fun because learning with peers will enable them to tell their difficulties and problems within the new language freely.

Secondly, I explain to the more proficient students that their being strong students actually lies in their ability to make others improve and to help others to be stronger students. It is actually part of the strong students' responsibility to make the weak students successful in learning. I tell these same students that their being successful rests on their effort to make the passive students talk. If the passive student does not want to talk, the more proficient student should ask him/her questions to help him/her speak. For example, if the task for a class is telling an experience, and the weak student just keeps quiet, the proficient student should ask the partner questions like, "Do you want to talk about a good experience or a bad one?"

After this question has been answered, the next question asked could be, "When did it happen?" Usually after two or three questions are presented, the weak student tries to talk. When he or she is quiet again, the good student could help by asking questions at the point where the weak student got stuck.

The next point I explain to students is that they can question me if both in the pair do not know how to express in English what they want to say. I explain that they are allowed to express themselves in Bahasa Indonesia if need be. For example, a student might ask: "How

do you say ‘ _____(Indonesian)’ in English.” Then, I ask the more proficient student to tell his/her experience and ask the weaker student to ask questions related to the peer’s experience. We usually practice this until the weak students are ready to talk without the step-by-step questions.

In final exams, when I ask students to pick their own speaking partner, they often choose the same partner. This indicates that pairing the weaker and stronger students is helpful. However, I do think that this approach would not be successful without explaining to the more proficient students first that helping their peers is an advantage for themselves, that helping weaker students makes them more creative because they have to look for solutions to problems they never think of.

Another good way to encourage students to talk with each other is by asking them to share their difficulties and personal problems— not only the ones related to their study, but also the ones related to other areas of life. Before this sharing, I also suggest that the students consider an issue that is not too private, and that they should not simply gossip about something they have heard in class. Through this experience I find that the students often share similar difficulties, volunteering to follow up by saying “I have a similar problem to you.”

Through such pairings, less proficient students are encouraged to talk; they even begin to not hesitate to raise their hands to ask questions in class, although there may still be grammatical mistakes in their expressions. In such a situation, more proficient students become ‘the milestone,’ while the weaker students can be inspired by them. This method encourages the weak students to ‘do a little more and walk a little farther.’ If ‘the distance’ is too far, the weak students might be in despair.

The principle of learning through teaching also works for students taking the seminar class in which they have to write a proposal for their final projects. In a class of about fifteen students, each student has his or her own topic, but I usually group them according to the topics that are ‘thematically close.’ For example, students who want to write about grammatical errors in writing or speaking can be in one group. I then ask the members of each group to read each respective proposal within the same group, to write comments and critiques for their peers, and also to share related literature. In this way, in general, they are encouraged to help others

(a way to create bonding); in particular, they learn to be more critical toward their own proposals later on.

Conclusion

To conclude, bonding is necessary not only among peers, but also between the teacher and the students in a classroom. Bonding will occur if the students feel relaxed, gain each other's trust and develop the idea that students of varying proficiency levels all have something to gain from interacting with one another.

About the author

Julia Eka Rini has been teaching in the English department of Petra Christian University in Surabaya, Indonesia, since 1992. Her main research interests are language acquisition and translation. Her papers and articles are mostly directed in these two areas. She has been a professional translator and simultaneous interpreter since 1984.