

in real life with a foreigner differed drastically from what I had learned in school. I soon realized that I also lacked the vocabulary and expressions needed for conversations. I could not hold a real conversation with these visitors /whom I was very interested in and I was limited to answering their questions briefly and quickly going away.

As a teacher of English at the time, I had few opportunities to really practice what I preached. My English skill development was zero during those teaching days, due to my students' much lower level and the complete absence of any communication in English with my colleagues. My students, like me, had only three 45-minute classes of English every week. Most of them were at the beginner level, and over half of them had an alarmingly low level of English. Since they could not understand English when they were spoken to in class, I mostly used very simple English while teaching or sometimes only Vietnamese /in an English class. Second, my colleagues and I did not maintain the habit of using English when communicating with each other in staff meetings or even in some professional development workshops. I felt hopeless when encouraging my students and colleagues to use English, and I began to doubt my ability to even teach English. I observed that I could not make my students speak a word of English in real life. They merely learned what was in the textbook, like I did a long time ago, and it seemed that I could not achieve my goal of really teaching English to my students. What should I do to solve these problems? That question stuck in my mind for a long time.

I started to contact my former college classmates

about what I wanted to talk about. I finally came to understand that frequent use of a language is the essential component to improving that language.

My excitement surrounding my improvement in English dissipated at the end of my program at HP; I would no longer live and study in such an environment, and I had to go back to my country and my previous workplace. However, I needed to maintain my proficiency in English. I decided to create the habit of using and exposing myself to English frequently.

The first thing I did was to begin to use English more often in the classroom. I speak very simple English with beginner students and more advanced English with higher-level students. It was difficult at first because I needed to pay attention and adjust the words or phrases I use according to my students' level. However, I am happy to use English with them, as I now can maintain my English while encouraging them to use English. Thanks to the development of tourism on my island, students have recently become more interested in learning English. Moreover, I have incorporated more games and other communicative activities in my teaching to encourage my students' confidence in speaking English. I have also told my students of websites with English language learning resources for after-class learning, such as ' & learning English, V* % learning English, and & I student news.

Another thing I tried was to gather many students with an interest in English and set up an English speaking club. Many students coming to this club are welcomed and can speak English freely. Although the club does not receive much consideration from my school administrators, I have volunteered to join my students, participate in their meetings, listen to them talk, and give feedback on what they have done. I feel proud that my students have a place to practice English together. I am also comfortable in using as well as maintaining my English proficiency. I can let my English flow out naturally and smoothly without doubting my students' comprehension because I know they are proficient enough to understand what I say. Students joining this club also receive some small prizes when participating in games like bingo, singing contests, listening to English songs and filling the gaps, guessing words in English, etc. Despite the short duration of these meetings, only about 18 minutes every Saturday, the club creates a great English speaking environment for students.

Besides students, I also encourage colleagues to use English as much as possible, such as in staff meetings. They seem to be very excited about discussing teaching problems in English. I find it interesting to see that my coworkers have gradually improved their English due to their frequent use of the language. In addition, they also have a chance to pose questions about English to participants in the English speaking contest held annually for the students. They seem to be excited and eager to join the event.

Finally, for myself, I continue to be in touch with native English speakers as much as I can. American films, TV shows, and how-to clips on the Internet are some resources that help me maintain my English exposure. Additionally, social networks like Facebook, Kahoo Messenger, Skype, Line, and Hangout are very helpful for keeping in touch with my American friends from the days of my program in Hawaii. It is always a great joy for me to reunite with them when they come for a visit. I take them around my hometown and especially chat with them in English. Welcoming them to my hometown, introducing them to my parents and friends, and taking them to many places of interest on Phu Quoc Island makes me feel proud of the beauty of the island as well as my English proficiency. Now I can talk, express my thoughts, and share my feelings and

perspectives easily with my international friends. More than anything else, English allows me to make wonderful human connections.

If I could offer some thoughts for language teachers, they will be these. I strongly believe that the speaking environment of a language as well as frequent use of that language is very important for language learning and teaching. Language learners should use any chance they can find to speak the target language and get accustomed to the habit of using that language. Additionally, learning materials from the Internet should be employed in order to increase exposure to the language. And finally, if possible, learning and living in the country where that language is spoken is another way to improve proficiency in a language. For teaching, language teachers should apply learning activities that encourage students to use the target language frequently. Students can fall in love with a language if they have a speaking environment where they can use it.

About the author:

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