Belief

Each time that I write a statement describing my instructional philosophies, I realize that my previous ones are not adequate: they are continually evolving. But looking at those statements that I wrote years ago, I find that they all begin with the same sentence: “I believe that the making of a successful teacher requires ‘enthusiasm.’” This belief has been rooted in my mind ever since I set my mind on teaching as a career: I believe that a teacher’s enthusiasm for the subject matter can be powerful enough to spark students’ curiosities and interests. A teacher’s enthusiasm for his profession is what propels him to continue learning and maturing into an expert in inspiring people and helping them realize how to learn. All my teaching practices are guided by such beliefs.

Methods and Practice

Like many other language educators, I am in favor of the communicative teaching approach. But I am even more in favor of a combination of methodologies and implementing classroom practices to specifically adjust to the students’ needs. I think every classroom has a “culture” that is determined by multiple dimensions including the context (i.e., country/region, university/community college/public school), students’ language background, their accustomed form of instruction, and learning purpose, to name a few. Teacher as active members in this culture group can influence the students with their actions; they must also adjust their actions to cater for the needs of the students so that the group work together to strive for an optimal outcome. I have experience with a variety of “classroom cultures” in English as a Foreign or Second Language (EFL/ESL), Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and I have learned that there is no single Golden Rule that should permanently regiment one’s teaching. For instance, the teaching of target language culture is an important element in language education. When I taught my heritage students at the Tucson Chinese School, I encouraged them to invent dialogues and mock interactions in real communicative events such as dining at home and greeting guests. And when appropriate, activities were task-based. These students were able to translate their oral proficiency into performance that required sociolinguistic and strategic competence. But when I taught “culture” in an advanced ESL class, students were engaged in very different tasks: they analyzed the representation of American culture through examining media such as commercial websites, films, and short stories. A teacher working with a diverse student population needs to be acutely aware that every student group is different.

That also means I tremendously enjoy experimenting with different techniques and strategies with my students. I like “taking risks” to try new things even when I know of old tricks that could work sufficiently. My inspirations for classroom activities come from observing other teachers’ classes, from learning from practitioners’ workshops and
presentations on conferences, and from inventing my own techniques based on my understanding of the students’ proficiency levels and the curriculum. For instance, I am a proponent of making use of available technologies in the classroom. For example, I learned a method of using an electronic mode of peer reviews from other teachers and was intrigued enough to incorporate it in my own classroom, and I keep trying different ways of implementing technology-enhanced activities. Although I have a personal preference for using technology, I do not let it restrict other possibilities for the class. In English composition classes that I teach now, I first have students review different types of comments that I have gathered from previous semesters and discuss what kind of comments they find most helpful. We then use the traditional paper-and-pen mode in the first unit to do peer reviews. As we proceed and students get more comfortable with the software, we rely more on the course website and online discussion board. Towards the end of the semester, I focus more on the students’ ability to raise critical questions after hearing an oral presentation. My students, like me, enjoy trying new things throughout the semester.

Student-teacher Relations

Keeping a basis of mutual respect and appropriate boundaries, I like lightening the classroom atmosphere with a good laugh when possible. Apart from that, I pay attention to two things. First, I try my best to give adequate attention and consideration to each individual student: know their names, know their learning styles (or even interests when the group is small). Students are always talented in their own ways, and sometimes, they might just need a little help from someone to realize their own potentials. Secondly, I encourage student-student interactions. I have found that they feel well respected and gain a sense of accomplishment if they are given the chance to take initiative in formulating projects, leading discussions, and presenting ideas in public. While it is probably necessary for a teacher to impart her knowledge from the podium, I enjoy more in my role as an organizer of exciting learning activities.

Teaching and Research

For me, the two cannot be separated. My teaching is informed by my peer teachers, as well as my own research. My knowledge of culture, contrastive rhetoric, computer-assisted language teaching, corpus linguistics all help me to determine my choices of classroom activities, and thus to become a competent foreign language teacher, be it ESL/EFL or CFL. My research is also impossible without teaching practice. As many have said, teaching is a learning process. Indeed, I learn about my students, learn about teaching methods, and I also learn from my students, from seeking answers to their inquiries, as well as from finding answers to my own questions by engaging actively in research.