

How to Overcome the Biggest Challenges

Grace Shim (Teh Hwa High School)

Challenges and obstacles are inevitable when teaching a second language as each child brings his or her own set of knowledge, beliefs, experiences and emotions into the classroom especially when teaching in a foreign country. This essay will talk the greatest challenges that I faced whilst teaching English in Korea as a Guest English Teacher and the various ways I tried to cope and overcome these obstacles. Lack of motivation of students and their fixed preconception of the English language were the biggest challenges I faced. Strategies which I incorporated to overcome these obstacles were such as using positive reinforcements, flexibility in teaching methods and building a strong rapport with students

Coming to teach English as a second language in Korea for me was such an exciting prospect not to mention a lot of nervous anticipation of the unknown. Having been raised in New Zealand practically all my life, I didn't know what to expect of school life in Korea although I did know it that the education system would be quite different to New Zealand. I knew that students had to work really hard and stayed at school through the late hours of night and then go off to cram schools or tutoring. Looking back in the year and a half that I have been teaching at my high school, the greatest challenge I came across was the lack of motivation of any sort to learn or further students' English ability, especially so at my school. The school that I am currently at and have been over the past year is a bit different to other high schools in that it is where students of lower academic ability go to or who have difficult home situations and other issues affecting their learning. Therefore, students' motivation levels seemed to be down in the dumps more so.

Challenges included students' not wanting to participate in activities, refusing to follow directions or guidelines, behavioral problems that took up most of the class time and not wanting to give things a try. Self motivation is what I believe to be the best driver of education, which seemed not to exist in the majority of the students. Every lesson seemed to be some sort of battle to even get students to bring pens and a notebook to class so that some work would be done. Students' self esteem played a big role how motivated they were to learn in class time. For some reason, there just seemed to be no student interest at all in learning

English. Later, I came to see that many students had given up on academic study since Middle School, let alone English so of course, it is no surprise that they would find it a complete bore. Some views of students were also that English isn't really useful and that it would not be of much help. Furthermore, students' innate set of beliefs were a hindrance to getting them to become a bit more open minded about the English language.

I had tried to incorporate various strategies such as applying different theoretical educational principles and lesson types as well as adjusting the level of work given so many times. However, after many failed attempts, one strategy that seemed to have at least shown a bit of a result or change in students' behavior or attitude during English class would have to be the powerful use of praise and positive reinforcement. For example, I tried to create a reward system that was not extrinsically motivated such as sweets and chocolate but rather something that recognized their efforts in at least attempting and giving things a go in class. I gave out reward points to individuals and gave positive feedback such as "Good try, I like the way you have practiced with a nice loud voice" in hope that it would build self confidence in giving English a go even if they believe of themselves to be bad at it.

Added to this, students' English levels were not so clear and I didn't really know what their interests were, it was important to try out various methods of teaching and activities. I tried to use media to my advantage by making Power points that were visually appealing, role plays, dialogues, group activities, task based activities, games and any other type of activity that would get students to speak English even in the slightest bit. I also tried to pick topics that were relevant to teenagers' lives so that it would be interesting or practical conversational English and a lot of pair work to encourage team work.

Furthermore, one of the most useful and effective strategies that I found produced best results were to establish a strong and positive rapport with students. Just as we know, all people need have a sense of belonging and be loved for who they are and so much more our students. I found that showing an on-going interest in students' lives whenever I got the chance, motivated students to participate more in class time. Even if the students never do any work in class, developing a positive rapport with them helps them to realise that you really truly care about them as a whole person and who knows, maybe someday in the future it might spark in them an interest in English and impact their lives somehow in a world where many adolescents are struggling to find their place in an uncertain society.