

TEACHING
IN A
NUTSHELL

UNIVERSO
LETRAS

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Introduction

When I first thought about writing this book, I had serious doubts about how to approach such a task. Would it be too difficult to handle, or would it be something that other English teachers could benefit from? The latter question reminded me of a friend I met a few years ago who told me that if everyone shared what they know with others selflessly, the world would be a better and warmer place.

From that perspective, I started outlining this project, which is divided into two parts. The first part includes a series of essays that are written from the most personal, sincere and humble perspective that I can ever offer as an English teacher. Some essays are meant for new English teachers, while others are meant for both new and seasoned ones. The sole intention here is to share a fresh angle on the issues and realities all English teachers must face or have faced at some point in their careers, such as classroom management or developing their own teaching style, among other interesting topics to analyze.

The second part deals with the pedagogical and linguistic aspects all English teachers need to keep in mind and master when it comes to teaching an effective and fruitful class. Such aspects include strategies to teach all the language skills, rubrics to assess in the English class, a comprehensive look at all the elements of language and even ideas on how to plan an English for specific purpose course. The main goal of the chapters found in the second part of this book is to share relevant

concepts, ideas and resources, which are shown in a straight-forward and practical fashion.

After over twenty years of teaching experience, I have finally taken the plunge to write something that I would have liked to read when I was a student teacher. A book where I can find some straightforward ideas on teaching English along with highly detailed teaching strategies to improve my teaching performance.

If you are simply looking for teaching tips, ideas, strategies, and the like, please feel free to skip part one. However, if you would like to read about some not so technical aspects related to teaching English from a rather sincere and open-minded perspective, you may start from the first part, whose essays can be read in any order.

Let's inspire our students! Let's inspire the world!

PART 1

Yes, I do.

In Charlemagne's words: *"to know two languages is to possess two souls."* A bilingual person is someone who has complete control over the contexts and complexities of two distinct realities, two different worlds that let us see everything through a different lens that allows us to observe everything from a unique perspective, which will help us absorb the best of both worlds. The remarkable thing about being bilingual is that it allows us to reason differently and come up with solutions to problems in divergent and creative ways that give you a significant advantage over other people. Plus, if we add to this the fact that English has become the Lingua Franca of the world, then we can say for sure that bilingualism is a powerful tool we have at our disposal.

Besides the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of speaking English, what does it really mean to speak that language in a Spanish-speaking country? Well, you guessed it! You can be an English teacher, of course. This is where the power of this language is palpable more than ever if our goal is to spread the English word. Being an English teacher is a fascinating adventure that must lure you in and drive your passion; otherwise, you will never be the teacher that your future students deserve or one that you would have liked to have. Teaching this beautiful language is fascinating. Over the years, an English teacher will become a great connoisseur of history, philosophy, geography, or politics, among many other interesting topics thanks to the cultural connotation of this profession that will help us learn a lot about the cultures that speak English either as a first or even as a second language.

Being an English-speaking person, you will find, hopefully, a wonderful job as a teacher (more on that later) in which you will put into practice your art and skills for the benefit of your students. I firmly believe that those of us who teach English have a sort of superpower, a gift that has been given to us. Therefore, we should use it responsibly it for the well-being, not only of ourselves but also of others by being the best teachers ever.

Mixing the idea of teaching a language with the concept of superpowers may sound crazy, but if you are reading this, chances are, you also believe it and if you do not yet, I hope that by the time you finish reading these lines, you will end up being a believer, someone who believes English can open not only our minds but also our souls and that the key to being a fantastic English teacher does not lie in your perfection or mastery of the language but in your vocation. You may have dozens and dozens of certificates and degrees issued by the best universities in the world, but if you do not have the vocation to teach, you could never be a good English teacher because the main fuel of this career lies in the love and passion for this noble and beautiful profession.

Should I certify my English level?

You should definitely get some international English certificate that shows your level of English knowledge to potential future employers. In such a dog-eat-dog-world, it is no longer a necessity but an obligation to have as many certificates that allow you to get a better job as possible. There are several options to choose from, such as the IELTS (International English Language Testing System), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), the B2 First, the C1 Advanced, or the C2 Proficiency. The question is, which exam should you take?

First, we have the IELTS certification. which is divided into IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training. The first option is for those preparing for higher education or for those who need to register professionally in countries such as Australia, the UK, the USA, or Canada, among others. The IELTS General Training is for those who wish to study in a university in English-speaking countries or wish to immigrate to countries such as Australia, the UK, Canada, and New Zealand. Both types of IELTS tests can be taken in their paper-based or computer-based versions.

Then, we have the TOEFL which, like the IELTS, is a requirement to study or work in countries like the USA, Canada, the UK, and Europe. Unlike the IELTS, the TOEFL has only one version and its structure is rather different in its approach to test your level of English with an academic English focus to prove that you can perform in universities and in any work field. The TOEFL can be taken in its paper-based version or its TOEFL iBT (internet-based) version.

As you may have noticed, both tests are highly recognized world-wide and will place your level of knowledge of English within specific scales. The IELTS works with the IELTS 9 band scale, whose results are shown in nine bands, of which band eight and nine should be our aim as English teachers because they show a very good and expert user level of English, respectively. The TOEFL works with a score that goes from 0 to 120 points and in this case, the ideal score for us would be 95 or higher, which can be interpreted with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale as C1 or C2 level depending on the exact TOEFL score.

It is important to notice that the results of both tests (IELTS and TOEFL) are valid for two years only, which could be a problem depending on your needs. For example, in Ecuador, English teachers are required by law to have an English certificate that validates, at least, a B2 level on the CEFR scale, so getting a certificate that expires in two years is not an ideal solution. Here, the ideal thing would be to take a specific exam to validate our knowledge such as the B2 First, the C1 Advanced or the C2 Proficiency because their results do not expire and have the same validity worldwide as the other certifications detailed above.

To close, if you asked me, I would encourage you to challenge yourself by taking any of the available official test options that certify proficient English levels as soon as possible so you can validate your English level. However, if you fail the first time, just don't give up and keep trying because all that constant process of test preparation will make you a better and more reliable teacher.

Our students, their universe

How old are you?

This is a question you will always have to ask your students (at least on day one) and it will determine your class average age. Depending on where you teach, you will have to work with children, adolescents, or adults.

Working with children is ideal because, as research has proved, they have superior cognitive advantages thanks to their brain's elasticity and rapid neural formation. This advantage helps them absorb any foreign language faster thanks to a lack of inhibitions that make it easier for them to deal with making mistakes or sounding "foolish" when learning English.

Then, we have adolescents, who are going through social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development changes that make them a unique human group to work with. Therefore, we should be more inclusive and creative than ever when working with them. This can be achieved by including activities in our classes that appeal to as many senses as possible to fight short attention spans, which is natural at their age.

Finally, we have adult groups. Adult learners can easily learn faster than their teen peers because they are good at explicit learning, which is learning in a class under the command of a teacher. This happens because they have polished and improved attention and memory capabilities that enable them to learn more rapidly.

But I speak Spanish...

If you teach English in a Spanish-speaking country with little or no presence of the English language outside the classroom, you will understand how disadvantageous this is for our students because they need to be exposed to it as much as possible. It is crucial to walk on their shoes for a moment or two so we can relate to what they feel, their fears, inhibitions, and frustrations. Typically, you will have students who simply dislike English because of previous experiences with, in plain words, boring teachers who drowned their curiosity and passion to learn another language. You will also have students who are too afraid of uttering a single word in English because they are afraid of sounding different or wrong and would rather remain completely silent the whole class. Regardless of what our students think about English, our goal as their teachers is to help them overcome any obstacles as the wonderful language Sherpas we are.

Once again, we must go to any lengths to inspire our students with a mixture of vocation and tons of creativity to rekindle their learning spark that is innate to all human beings, which is there, waiting to be brought back to life. Yes, it is their universe, but they are our students, so we must gently lead them to a collision point where theirs gets melted and intertwined with the marvelous universe of bilingualism.

My class, my teaching

One of the most important aspects you will have to deal with in terms of English education is crafting your own teaching style, which will (honestly) take you some time to develop and master. With time and practice, lots of practice, you will understand that you are the lord and master of your class. Therefore, your goal is to create your own teaching style, along with your very own techniques and strategies to guide your students. There is nothing more erroneous than following the pre-established guidelines printed out in some teacher's guidebook that tells you exactly what to do in the class, ignoring your own individuality, that of your students and that of your social environment. So, how can we develop our own teaching style? The answer is not that simple since it implies trial and error. First, you must pay attention to the teaching methodologies that best suit your needs, to name a few we have the CLIL approach or the communicative approach, among others. You will need to see what works best with your own English language skills and build on your strengths and weaknesses so that you can improve your own weaknesses and exploit all your strengths. For example, if you notice that listening is your strongest skill, then you can try to develop your own activities to put them into practice with your students such as listening to various audio sources, which could lead to speaking activities based on the vocabulary and/or grammar they just practiced.

But what about our weaknesses? All of us, at some point, have struggled with a language skill. That is undeniable because no one, native or

not, knows all the aspects of a language, which is a window of opportunity to further expand our knowledge with constant practice. So, let's say we notice our weakest English skill is writing. What to do? Read, read a lot, read every day, read every moment you can. Reading will help your brain identify and internally adopt all those patterns and writing structures that allowed the authors of those texts you were reading to express their ideas the way they did, and then you will write better every day. Once you have improved and mastered your linguistic weaknesses (you will), you can apply the same process with your students. For example, you can assign reading tasks that can turn into writing workshops by applying the same grammar structures used in the pieces of text your students just finished reading.

The examples above are simplified versions of what you can do when you focus on both your strengths and weaknesses, embrace them, and master them as the fruits of your efforts that will pay off in every single class of yours. However, we must remember that unless given the freedom to work with our own teaching programs, we (in most cases) will be forced to work with a textbook that obviously follows the author's teaching style, which puts us in a predicament: should I follow what the book asks me to do step by step or should I follow my instinct and apply my teaching style based on the linguistic objectives of the class I am about to teach? A Solomonic answer would be to do a little of both, so you may choose certain key points and activities from any grammar book you are working with along with your own strategies and activities.

As you may have already realized, developing your own teaching style is not an easy task because there are many factors to consider, but with great effort, good results can be achieved. If we keep in mind that our main goal as English teachers is not only to teach grammar structures and vocabulary but also the cultural aspects of such a beautiful language with grand passion, we are bound to succeed. We must inspire our students to learn so that once we have shown them the right path,