



VOICES



Alison Schwetlick

Just as teachers use their experience of the world around them in order to improve teaching in their own specific contexts, so the articles in this issue move from the international perspectives of the Scholarship Winners, through musings on town twinning and ELT to gender equality in classrooms and the effect of chatspeak. More specifically still, there are ways of teaching language through literature, presentations using Pecha Kucha ideas from the conference, irregular verbs and punctuation. Finally, the tips for teachers continue with ways to get published.

Similarly, while Sara Hannam takes up the gender issue and Adrian Tennant ponders on the age-old conundrum of the chicken and the egg, Greg Gobel gets to the nitty gritty on punctuation and Sandee Thompson offers reviews on inspiring learners, online courses and language skills.

Meanwhile the Associates, the SIGs and our President, Eric Baber, look back on a very successful conference with an eye to improving it still further next year in Glasgow.

The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language was founded in 1967. Registered as a Charity: 1090853 Registered as a Company in England: 2531041

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Correspondence relating to newsletter content should be clearly marked for the attention of 'The Editor of IATEFL Voices' and sent to PO Box 3182, Pewsey, SN9 5WJ, United Kingdom. The Editor can also be contacted by email at editor@iatefl.org.

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Copy Deadlines

September–October 2011 (222): 1 July 2011

November–December 2011 (223): 2 September 2011

January–February 2012 (224): 28 October 2011

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The handbook can be downloaded from <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/books/>.

When allowed to seat themselves, most often, the students seat themselves in all-male or all-female groups.

Classroom seating

I spoke to 70 teachers about randomised seating arrangements and surprisingly 38 high school teachers thought it excellent practice to segregate males and females so they don't 'fall in love'! Apparently, this also keeps the parents happy! This conclusion was the outcome of discussion with teachers from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Kerala.

Using role-plays to create awareness of gender inequality

Roleplays based on newspaper articles or clips from movies can be used in class to create awareness about gender inequality.

This is an article from a national newspaper:

*Passenger objects to woman piloting plane
New Delhi – A Mumbai bound flight (IndiGo 6E 179) was delayed by more than one and a half hours first due to fog and then by a passenger Pramod Ambalekar, who refused to fly on a plane piloted by a woman. He relented only after he was told that he would be taken off the plane.*

The Hindu Saturday 26 February 2011

The teacher begins by eliciting from the passenger can be convinced of flying with the pilot—for example, the woman pilot is qualified, she has the required experience to fly the route etc.

Role-play cards

- Card 1: You are the passenger. You refuse to fly because the plane is piloted by a woman.
- Card 2: You are a crew member. You are trying to convince the passenger to fly and resort to threatening the passenger.
- Card 3: You are a co-passenger who intervenes because you feel you can convince the passenger without threatening him/her.

Popular movie clips can also be used for role-plays as well as any incidents that happen in the class.

To take this further, we need to have policies that are more inclusive and make teachers aware of the discrimination between the sexes. Also, these differences change across communities, cultures, class and region and an in-depth study needs to be done to figure out how to address these challenges.

(This is a summary of a talk given at the IATEFL conference in Brighton this year. Ed.)

Teachers interested in addressing the gender issue may like to access the following:

Martin N. K, Z. Yin and H. Mayall. 2006. *Classroom Management Training, Teaching Experience and Gender: Do These Variables Impact Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs Toward Classroom Management Style?* Available from www.eric.ed.gov. Accessed April 2011.)

Klein N. A. and L. Markowitz. 2009. "'rewind and replay': changing teachers' heterosexist language to create an inclusive classroom environment' in *American Journal of Sex Education* November/December 2009. Available from www.eric.ed.gov. Accessed April 2011.

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Breathing life into irregular verbs

Joseph O'Curneen offers an entertaining teaching tool.

My quest began in Madrid in the mid 1980s. Time and time again, I noticed how students struggled with English irregular verbs and expressed frustration at the lack of sufficiently detailed and comprehensive lists. All too often they could not find the verb they were looking for, nor the particular information about the verb in question. Their search either ended abruptly or involved time-consuming page-flipping through various different books with uncertain results.

The need for a new approach

The truth is that frequently the learner needs to know several things regarding an irregular verb, such as:

- 1 that it is indeed irregular
- 2 the past tense
- 3 the correct spelling
- 4 if it has a variable spelling

- 5 what it means
- 6 if it has a number of meanings
- 7 if it has a synonym
- 8 if it has a regular form
- 9 where to find an actual example
- 10 how it is pronounced
- 11 how and when to use it

Most of all, the learner wants to be able to use irregular verbs with confidence. Although a certain degree of rote learning from tedious lists is inevitable, especially for beginners and for the most frequently used irregular verbs, there is no reason why intermediate and advanced learners should be subjected to the same ordeal for the verbs they encounter at their level. And yet, if they wish to achieve fluency in the language, they must be able to recognise and use irregular verbs confidently.



Born in Ireland, M. Joseph O'Curneen studied and worked in the US and Japan before settling in Madrid. He established

Kilkenny English Centres which over three decades has provided quality teaching to thousands of students. He is a member of the UK Society of Authors and the Dictionary Society of North America.

The first task I set myself was to search for the most comprehensive list available and, in those days, I found that the vast majority were wholly inadequate. In addition, whatever examples there were in textbooks came across as dull and uninspiring.

Engaging the learner

Yet, time and time again, I was encountering these same verbs, and other less common ones, in my own personal reading, in contexts which were interesting, engaging, even fascinating or amusing. It struck me that the solution was all around us! If learners could see examples of how irregular verbs are being used in contemporary English by native speakers, and better still, if the verb is embedded in a real quotation which is interesting, thought-provoking, or entertaining, then students of English would relate to them more easily and, absorbed by the interesting quotation, would become less conscious of the fact that they are studying.

Compare these two sentences containing the past tense of the verb 'to sleep':

Peter was so tired he slept until noon.

The question was whether pilots would be able to sleep given a planned rest opportunity in their cockpit seats. The Rest Group crew members slept on 93% of the opportunities. On average they fell asleep in 5.6 mins and slept for about 26 mins ...

The first sentence, typical of those found in textbooks, I made up for this article. The second comes from a NASA article on the training of pilots and astronauts. For children or beginners who have a limited English vocabulary, clearly the first sentence is more appropriate. But for adults and adolescents with an intermediate to advanced level, the second sentence is far more stimulating. They are much more likely to remember what the past tense of 'to sleep' is. Admittedly, one would expect learners at intermediate level to have mastered this particular verb by this stage, but it is not always the case, and the principle still holds for many more other irregular verbs which are rarely encountered at pre-intermediate levels.

Having established this premise, I tried this out on my students, and it worked so well that it became clear that there needed to be something more structured. Having discovered that there was nothing of the sort available anywhere, I decided to embark on a project collecting real and lively quotations in order to put together a dictionary which would breathe life into the subject of irregular verbs; would answer as many of the questions listed above for as many irregular verbs as possible; and would reflect the English that students at higher levels would be likely to encounter.

Together with my son, I worked throughout most of the 1990s and into this century reading thousands of articles and putting together a very large collection of suitable quotations. In time, we brought together a team of qualified professionals from Europe and America to review and proofread our work. The result is *Express Yourself Better in English—Dictionary of Irregular Verbs with Quotations*. I

have now been using it regularly in class and find that many of my students reach out for it spontaneously and expect it to be one of the reference books available to them.

Embracing the internet

The experimenting has continued and evolved as the world entered the internet age. From the very early days of the World Wide Web we set up a simple page explaining the concept of a dictionary of irregular verbs with quotations and, without publicising it in any way, we received responses literally from all over the globe positively encouraging such an initiative.

One of the revolutions brought about by, or alongside, the internet is the generalisation of what was once a radical idea: people acquire and assimilate information in different ways and from different angles of interest. Some people will tune in if the information is in a historical context, others if it is related to sports or the arts. But what the vast majority of people have in common is that a story will always work better than a cold, hard fact.

With this in mind, we have recently started up a free-to-use service for ELT practitioners at www.Ring-Rang-Rung.com. This website provides practical tips for teachers, the possibility to download the first 150 pages of the dictionary and, crucially, access to a Facebook page which is regularly updated with new quotations. The practical tips explain how these quotations can be used as class openers, as gap fillers, to motivate discussion, or even other aspects of the language, such as new vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence construction, writing, etc. The quotations may contain rare or uncommon verbs such as 'bestrode', 'throve' or 'slunk', or of course the most frequently used verbs, but we try to ensure that all are thought-provoking, informative, and/or amusing. Teachers are welcome to submit tips of their own and good quotations they may have spotted.

Conclusion

Learning English irregular verbs is not easy and it requires real determination to dedicate time to teaching them in class. In the course of our research over the years we have found methods designed by other teachers which aim to make the whole subject less daunting. They include board games and online self-testing software and we have links to them from the Ring-Rang-Rung website. But we have found that the technique presented here is an effective and engaging one for learners at the higher levels.

If there is one thought I hope you retain from this article, it is that the study of English irregular verbs need not be dull and tedious. With an interesting text they come alive, and you can easily have a discussion in class in which your students will spontaneously use the verbs as they participate. And one parting request: if you do spot a rare verb (or even a common one but you find the quotation too good to pass up), don't abandon it to oblivion. Send it to us, and give it a new life!

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