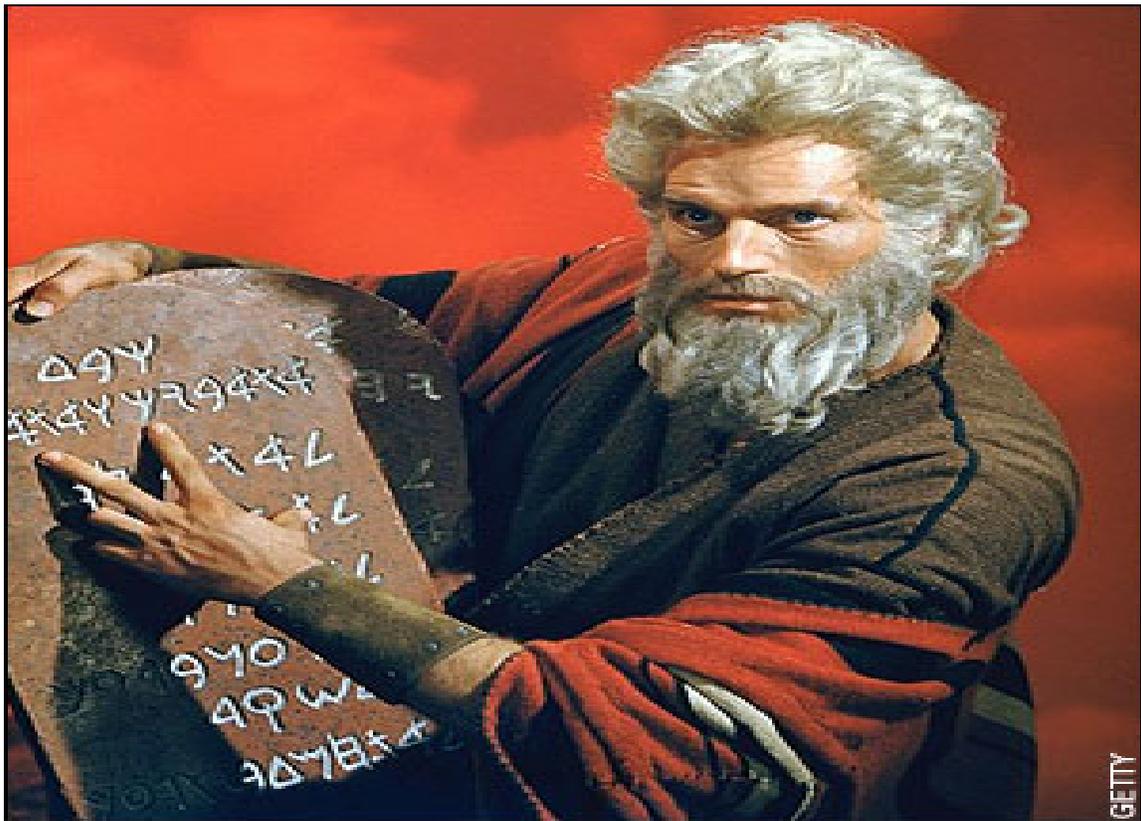


The 10 Guiding Principles of TEFL

An Accidental Manifesto



By Dylan Gates

<http://www.onlinetefltraining.com>

Introduction

Somebody asked me if I had a philosophy about TEFL, a manifesto if you like, perhaps a mission statement, a set of general beliefs about teaching English to speakers of other languages. I laughed and said I didn't really believe in grand statements. Besides, I was watching the Wimbledon semi-final and didn't want to be distracted.

A couple of days later, [I read a blog post](#) and it got me thinking about creating my own manifesto for TEFL. I'm not for one moment suggesting that I have found the secret to successful English language teaching, but I'd like to think that I have found a set of guiding principles that I generally follow when teaching, and suggest that my trainees follow when I am delivering TEFL training courses.

My 10 guiding principles of TEFL

- 1. Learners need to practise using English, not the teacher.**
- 2. The learners are your best resource.**
- 3. Teaching doesn't necessarily result in learning.**
- 4. If there was a magic pill to help learn a language, everybody would take it.**
- 5. Knowing how a car is built doesn't mean you are a good driver.**
- 6. Learning a second language is like building your own house to live in.**
- 7. Speaking and writing are 2 nations separated by a common language.**
- 8. Make grammar presentations as simple as possible but no simpler.**
- 9. Base your lessons around your learners' needs and interests not your own.**
- 10. An empty room with 2 people and something to write and draw on can be the best way to learn.**

1. Learners need to practise using English, not the teacher.

When I started teaching, I loved being the centre of attention, making my students laugh and generally hamming it up. I feel like the actor-director in my own film with a particularly appreciative audience. However, over time, I started noticing that the learners weren't really improving at the rate I had expected. They seemed to be enjoying the classes but a few comments on the 'anonymous' feedback forms were ever-so-slightly critical. "He's a very funny teacher but I am not sure I learn enough" wrote one. Another commented "Good energy but I don't speak too much in class" added another.

*If you find yourself doing most of the talking, you are not letting your learners practise. **Put a sock in it!***

2. The learners are the best resource.

Let's face it, most people like talking about one thing in particular: themselves! We all want to contribute in some way, to express our ideas, views, opinions and show the world who we really are. Using too many published resources in the class results in an over-reliance on other people's words and interests. Most coursebooks are fairly bland, are often Anglo-centric, and don't really engage your average student. The topics are often relevant due to their universality but the specifics aren't. Use these materials as a **starting point** for discussions about your learners' lives.

3. Teaching doesn't necessarily result in learning.

Remember the idiom "*You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.*" I believe the same applies to learners. No amount of explanation, explication and exposition can **make** somebody learn English, if they are not receptive. We are starting to realise that **we teach ourselves** to a large extent. Also, we often learn more from our peers than our teachers! Have a [look at this TED talk](#) and wonder if we haven't got it wrong for the last couple of millenia.

4. If there was a magic pill to help learn a language, everybody would take it.

Learning a language can be a slog, [you feel like Sisyphus, pushing a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down again](#). Yet, I find myself thinking that our belief that learning a language is a struggle leads to it becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. We set ourselves unrealistic targets and compare ourselves to our peers, usually the strong ones, and berate ourselves for our failures rather than celebrate our, often incremental, achievements. Learning a language is a tour not a quick trip. Make sure your learners know that but also praise them for their efforts and their successes.

5. Knowing how a car is built doesn't mean you are a good driver.

One day, I observed a trainee teacher giving a grammar lesson to a group of Advanced level learners. During feedback, he complained that the learners didn't even know what the present perfect was so had spent 20 minutes giving a detailed explanation of when, why and how we use it. When I pointed out, that they had used this tense successfully in his opening activity and less successfully in his final activity, he was lost for words. I asked him if he had known what the present perfect was before he had enrolled on the course and he shook his head. I asked if he was able to use it in oral and written communication before he had enrolled on the TEFL course and he laughed as the penny finally dropped. He offered an interesting analogy, comparing learning a language like driving a car. Certain actions become automatic over time, you do them naturally, without thinking about the mechanics. Isn't that what language learners aspire to? To have tacit knowledge (knowing how to do something through experience and practice) rather than explicit knowledge (knowing how to describe this knowledge / ability).

6. Learning a second language is like building your own house to live in.

When I [explain the concept of interlanguage](#) to my trainee teachers we discuss what happens when you build a house. You lay the foundations, construct a framework, add walls, floors etc, do some internal fitting and then get round to decorating it. Of course, most house owners don't stop there, they make constant adjustments and modifications as time passes. In other words, a house never reaches a state of perfection, it is in a **perpetual state of evolution**. I then ask my trainees when they think a construction becomes a house - not an easy question to answer! Some people think that the construction is recognisably a house when the framework has been erected. Others prefer to wait until the 3D TV has been installed and wifi connectivity in every room. My own belief is that each individual has the right to build their own construction and they determine when they think it is fit for living in.

You can live in a hut or a palace but your learners have to decide what kind of home they want to live in.

7. Speaking and writing are 2 skills separated by a common language.

When I worked as a Director of Studies at a school in London, one of my teachers asked me if she could move a student down a level. I knew this student - but had never taught him - and mentioned that I felt he was a fluent and confident speaker and almost ready to *move up* a level!

"Oh yes, he's very good at speaking, but his writing's terrible and his spelling is atrocious!" she replied.

Learners are rarely balanced in terms of the four skills, just like native speakers. If you have the gift of the gab, does that make you a great writer? Are expert novelists captivating conversationalists?

Communicative competence (a learner's ability to use language to perform communicative acts) needs to be taken into consideration as well as the learner's specific needs. A 'one size fits all' approach to dealing with categorising learners rarely works; they have their own strengths and weaknesses and we have to try to deal with them on an individual basis.

8. Make grammar presentations as simple as possible but no simpler.

Many adult learners believe that formal, explicit grammar study helps them learn a language. As mentioned above, they might gain explicit knowledge of grammar rules but there is little evidence to suggest that explicit learning of grammar results in [tacit knowledge](#), which can be applied in communicative situations. This is an age-old discussion in the field of language learning so I don't want to dwell on it. But, my experience convinces me that **simple, contextual analysis of language** works far better for most students than lots of complex detail. You may impress your learners with your infinite knowledge of the English language but how much of this information will they retain? When I watch trainee teachers drowning their learners in linguistic analysis, I think of the book 'A Brief History of Time by Stephen Hawkings. It has sold over 10 million copies but [how many people have actually read it](#)? And, of those who have, have many actually understood it?

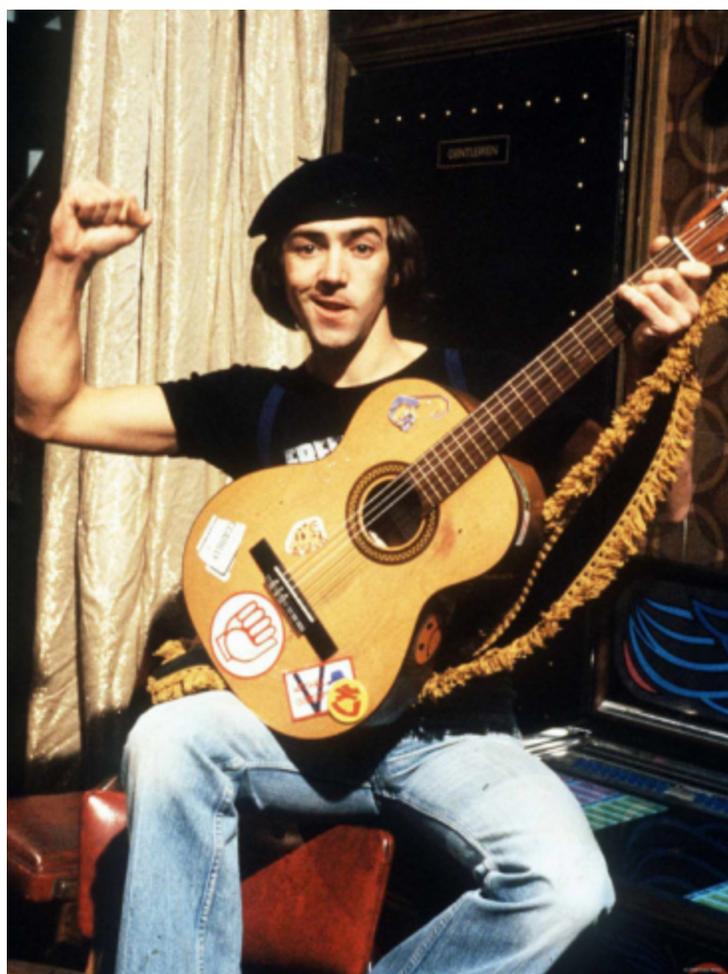
9. Base your lessons around your learners' needs and interests not your own.

A no-brainer this one! Find out what they need and what they like and use this data as the basis for your classes. Over time, you might be able to introduce them to topics that interest you but the bottom line is they will be more engaged, motivated and responsive if they feel that their needs are being addressed. If they trust and respect your judgement, you can make suggestions about what you feel they need and they will be willing to follow your advice.

10. An empty room with 2 people and something to write on can be the best way to learn.

If I had to nail my colours to the mast, I'd define myself as an [Dogme / Teaching unplugged teacher](#). Learning is communicating and communicating is learning. Everything else (coursebooks, technology etc.) can be defined as learning aids but they are not indispensable. Let your learners express themselves, respond appropriately to the content (what they said) and form (how they said it) and work on improving their ability to express themselves clearly and confidently.

So, I seem to have inadvertently created some kind of manifesto. I'm off to buy a beret, grow a beard and learn how to play "La Marseillaise" on my ukelele.



Happy teaching and please join me at
www.onlinetefltraining.com