Teaching Talk: The Essence of Lesson Prep
By Christina Michaud and Marnie Reed

As fluent speakers of English, we know an example of tangled syntax, faulty diction, or (in the words of a colleague) plain old "infelicitous prose" when we see one. Our students typically do not (yet) have these same instincts about language, though, which is of course the reason they produce these errors in the first place. One of our most important jobs as ESL teachers is to bridge that gap: to channel our intuitions about language into succinct, learner-friendly chunks that we can use to help students build up their own linguistic knowledge.

Consider the following hypothetical e-mail:

> Dear professor,
>
> I need your advise. I worried about my grade in your class. My first essay grade was disappointed, even I read many researches on the subject. Please correct up my second essay and give me some feedbacks!
>
> Sincerely,
> _____

Preparing an appropriate, useful, and efficient lesson to address the errors in this e-mail takes several steps.

Teacher Talk Lesson Prep Steps

Step 1: Identify the Errors

Set aside for the moment the obvious pragmatic gaffe: the (hypothetical) student who e-mailed this appeal for help (most likely mere hours before the essay in question was due) doesn't know that this missive is unlikely to be successful, and may in fact be seen as inappropriate or even rude. Still, it's easy enough for us to notice the syntactic blunders here, and we could quickly correct them if we so chose. Our intuitive knowledge of English has gotten us this far, but simply being able to correct a learner's error doesn't yet help us teach the student how to correct this error on his or her own.

Step 2: Analyze the Source of the Errors

Moving beyond instinct, we can use our metalinguistic knowledge of English to analyze these errors. We can then say that the student writer of this e-mail does not yet know (among other things) that
1. *advice* (letter C, sound /s/) is a noun, but *advise* (letter S, sound /z/) is a verb;
2. *worried* can be a past-tense form of a verb, but in this context seems meant as a participial adjective, which requires the copula (verb *to be*);

3. *disappointed* is the wrong participial adjective here—the student is disappointed, but her essay grade was disappointing;
4. *even,* on its own, may be an adjective or an adverb but is not a subordinating conjunction such as *even if* or *even though* (the latter likely the best choice here);
5. *research* (like *feedback*) is an uncountable noun, and so can't be pluralized; and
6. *correct* is a transitive verb, not a phrasal one.

But now what? Lump all these errors into one "lesson," and throw term after term at students? Clearly not. This analysis is necessary for our own understanding of students' errors: now we may notice patterns (points 1, 2, and 4 all have to do with parts of speech; points 2 and 3 both relate to participles; etc.), perform triage, and compare this single student's errors to those of the entire class.

Step 3: Develop "Teaching Talk" About Selected Errors

Given other high-frequency errors with participles ("Teacher, I am always so boring in my math class!"), we may decide to teach a minilesson on point 3, above. While prepping for the minilesson, we will set specific objectives for learners; plan how to introduce the topic; choose contexts for learners to practice these structures; and also practice our "teaching talk"—the boiled-down, clearest, and most succinct reminder for students about the source of the target error.

We can develop teaching talk for *any* topic in the language classroom and for any level of learners: pronunciation topics (e.g., word-level stress, as in *economics* vs. *economist*), vocabulary (*say* vs. *tell*, above, or uncountable nouns, or close synonyms with different connotations), writing (e.g., topic sentences), and grammar (missing copula, participle errors, etc.) all lend themselves well to this approach.

Examples of Teaching Talk

Teaching talk can take different forms. Sometimes, it is simply a short, clear definition of a key term, and sometimes a reminder of the source of an error, an analogy to a similar error learners have already mastered, or even a mnemonic device. Still other times, teaching talk may be in the form of a question.

Error	Teaching Talk
participle errors (*bored* vs. *boring*)	The "-ed" is for me.
confusion of *say* vs. *tell*	Same meaning, different grammar.
mispronunciation of regular past-tense verb endings	Is the final sound of the verb /t/ or /d/? If so, add an extra syllable.
plurals on an uncountable noun like *research* or *feedback*	It's like "money" and "luggage."

Advantages of Teaching Talk

- Consistency across class days, sections, and semesters for teachers
- Transparency for learners, who will encounter the same language repeated in class, reproduced in their class notes, and anticipated on quizzes (where applicable)
- Increased metacognition for learners, who use it as prompts to recall lessons that had previously been taught, mentally run through certain checklists or strategy, and take responsibility for supplying the target form

Developing Teaching Talk

To organize the metalinguistic part of lesson prep, draw a big circle divided equally into thirds. Start at the bottom third of the circle: Recall the error that prompted this lesson, and with that in mind, write a language-based objective for the minilesson. Then, script what learners will be able to say after instruction in and practice with the target structure or pattern.

> **Step 1:** Learners will be able to use past and present participial adjectives correctly:
>
> That movie was really boring.
> I'm always bored in my math class.
> My essay grade was disappointing.
> I'm disappointed in my grades this semester.

Move clockwise around the circle: In the next third of the circle, analyze the source of the error, and plan what to say when introducing this topic to learners and how to organize the blackboard (if applicable).

> **Step 2:** We might say to students: "The '-ed' is for *me*," stressing (with diagrams, board work, cartoons, etc.) that bored/disappointed/thrilled/excited all point to the person experiencing the feeling (often the student speaker herself), while boring/disappointing/thrilling/exciting all point to the external *thing* or experience or person that provoked the emotion. After co-constructing a list of adjectives (contextualized, ideally), our board may look something like this:

Participial Adjectives	
Past Participle	Present Participle
-ed for me (speaker)	-ing for things (experiences, other people)
bored	boring
disappointed	disappointing
(etc.)	(etc.)

Continue clockwise again, to the final third of the circle: By now, we've moved past our initial, simplistic correction of the error, thoroughly analyzed it, considered how to break it down for learners, and arrived at our teaching talk.

> **Step 3:** "The '-ed' is for me," we'd like learners to say, if they're stuck trying to think which participial adjective to use in a given sentence.

Draw a smaller circle in the center of the big circle, overlapping each segment, and recopy the teaching talk into the center circle, because the teaching talk is the essence of this entire minilesson.

Of course, our work as teachers doesn't end here: We still have to come up with contexts for meaningful practice with the target structure, strategies for recycling last week's vocabulary into the practice, plans for homework, and all of this with the daily, weekly, and unit objectives for our students in mind. Oh, and we also have to respond to that poor student, confused about her essay and desperately e-mailing us at 2 am—but this is a great start.

Resources

Reed, M., & Michaud, C. (2010). *Goal-driven lesson planning for teaching English to speakers of other languages*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

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