

ENGLISH
TEACHING TODAY
BOOK 1



BEING AN *ENGLISH* TEACHER

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF ELT

J E R E M Y H A R M E R

BETTERLATE
PUBLISHING

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INTRODUCTION

Being an English Teacher is the first book in the series *English Teaching Today*. The series has been written to bring methodology writing up to date, not only because education is now frequently conducted online (especially since the global health pandemic of some years ago) but also because of advances in digital development, such as the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI).

Many of the publishers who once commissioned and produced training manuals, and then brought out continual updates of them to take account of shifting pedagogic practices, new materials and technologies, no longer do so. This means that teachers do not have up-to-date methodology texts to consult. Yet at various stages of their training and development, they need something contemporary to guide them; that is what this series and this book are designed to provide.

Being an English Teacher, Book 1 of the *English Teaching Today* series, provides a template for essential teacher qualities, and discusses how we can develop and grow at various stages of our careers.

may vary depending on the culture in which the learning is happening.

- **FAIRNESS:** Students know at once if teachers have favourites or give their attention to some more than others. Students can feel a real sense of grievance if they have been treated differently from their classmates, though they may not show this overtly. The main point, however, is that everyone in the class needs to see that if A does something, they should be treated in the same way as when B did exactly the same thing. Fairness is also about a teacher's reactions and responses to certain recurring events. The teacher should not treat something as a major problem in one class, but laugh it off the next time it happens.
- **PRESENCE:** At a conference at Moravske, Slovenia, in March, 2025, the educator Uwe Pohl discussed teacher **presence**, which can be loosely described as 'the way teachers are in the classroom'. It is tied to their facial expressions, how they dress, how they hold themselves, where they stand or sit in a classroom, and, as I see it, the aura they have. A word of caution, here, however. There is no one way to be; there is not one type of aura that everyone must aspire to. We all have different 'presences'. The important thing is that we consider our own special-to-us presence. What do we want students to see when we arrive in the classroom? Most teachers are unlikely to be the same in the classroom as they are when at home with friends and loved ones. That's because, in class, we need to present our 'teacher self' – the professional face or presence that we adopt when working with students.
- **ATTENTIVENESS:** As teachers, it is tempting to focus almost exclusively on our own behaviour, language, techniques, etc. in the classroom. Yet one of the greatest qualities a teacher

than changing the student (however desirable that might be). Accordingly, try to avoid commenting on the student, and focus, instead, on what has happened.

- **DON'T STAND BACK:** As Robert O'Connor says, a natural reaction to problem behaviour is panic. But if you lose your nerve and wait, stand back tentatively and try to make things happen from there, it is probably not going to be successful. Much better is to get physically close to the problem (though not so close as to present an apparent threat), engaging with it directly so that you can deal with it head on, trying at all times to be calm and authoritative.
- **INVOLVE THE GROUP:** When problems occur, remind the group of the norms you all agreed to and try to get the whole class to respond positively to what has just occurred.
- **PRIVATE CONSULTATION:** Sometimes, engaging with an individual disruptive student in public is counter-productive. In such cases, it may be better to take the student to one side (after the lesson, perhaps), and ask them what's going on, or explain to them, calmly and reasonably, what is OK and what is not OK. Sometimes this can lead to a breakthrough, especially if you uncover some reason for what is happening.
- **INVOLVE OTHER STAKEHOLDERS:** If things are consistently going wrong, or when the disruptive behaviour is extreme, it might be time to involve other people. Ask your **co-ordinator**, the principal, or the person in charge of pastoral care (if your institution is lucky enough to have such a person) for help. If you are teaching **younger learners**, talk to the student's parents or guardians. When such encounters go well, they can have a tremendously positive effect, though as any teacher of young learners will tell you, dealing with parents is

the same way, making sure that they do not rely on the technology to such an extent that it shuts down their own cognitive development? How do we guide them to use AI (which they will do anyway) sensibly and intelligently?

- **EXPLANATION AND DISCUSSION:** We need to have a discussion with our students about attitudes to AI. This could be a fairly basic conversation with students at lower levels of English. In such cases, the best course of action might be to carry out the conversation in the students' L1 (if possible). The most important thing is for them to understand our views on using this kind of technology. We can ask them for their opinions and talk about when they use AI outside the classroom. That can lead us towards coming to joint conclusions about the pluses and minuses of AI use for language learning. Possible positive conclusions coming out of such discussions might be that it can help with information and facts, with grammar and vocabulary questions, with preparation, and with helping us to write better. On the other hand, students might agree that relying on AI is likely to make their learning slower in the long term since they won't have to think so hard or focus so much and, as a result, they may not remember the material so easily. Added to that is the fact that AI is not always reliable, and anyway, lessons are less fun if everyone is buried in their devices.
- **DEMONSTRATION AND TRAINING:** I saw a teacher recently doing his best to train his students in how to get the most out of using AI. He did this by showing how he had used AI himself to create mock Cambridge Advanced English (CAE) test-practice material, and the number of times he had to go back and ask it for another version because either it hadn't properly understood what he wanted or because he hadn't described what he wanted accurately enough. He asked his students to help him make his descriptions more accurate and

this, the situation becomes more complicated. Let us, therefore, try to pin down what we know in a bit more detail.

5.1 WHO SPEAKS ENGLISH AND WHY?

English is the main or administrative language in about 58 countries around the world, even where it is not the most commonly spoken language of those countries or even the official language. The six countries where English *is* the main language of the majority of speakers are the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland. In many countries in the West Indies (e.g. the Bahamas, Trinidad and Grenada), English is the official language, but other languages, including creoles, are more widely spoken.

About 1.38 to 2 billion people on the planet 'speak English', but what does that mean? Does someone who's picked up a bit of English on the street speak English? Well yes, in a way, but not really if we consider the role of language for effective communication. The consensus now is to say that 'speak English' implies a minimum B1 level of English, measured by the 6-level CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference), and possibly B2 if we want to be really sure. (C2 is the highest level.)

Until the 17th century, the majority of English speakers lived in England and surrounding areas since English had not yet spread geographically. The vast majority were **native speakers**. This is generally taken to mean people who are born into a household where English is the dominant (or only) language, and where it is often – but not always – the language of the society around them. However, these days, the concept of being a 'native speaker' is problematic. In a bilingual household, for example, where one parent speaks English and the other speaks a different language, we have to ask ourselves of which language the child is a native speaker. Is the child perhaps a native speaker of both? What about