The difference between ESL and EFL

Almost all the older ESL students who join school have had at least a few lessons of English before joining the school. They come, therefore, with some expectations of how English should be taught. School is not the only place where they use the language.

Of course, there are many different reasons for learning English and many different situations in which English can be learned, so it should not be so surprising that there is a large variety of methods. We cannot expect that one teaching method will be appropriate for all learners in all situations. Despite the large number of different learning situations, however, it is possible to separate out two main categories: learning English as a second language (ESL), and learning English as a foreign language (EFL).

In an ESL situation, the learner is learning English within an English environment and needs to understand and speak English outside the classroom too. In an EFL situation, the learner learns English inside a classroom, but continues to speak her own language when he leaves the classroom. An example of an ESL situation is a Vietnamese child who emigrates with his family to America; he speaks Vietnamese at home with his parents, but during the rest of the day and at school, he must speak English. Until he learns enough English, he will find it very difficult to keep up with his schoolwork. He might even find it difficult to make friends.

On the other hand, a Korean girl learning English in a Korean school must understand and speak English only during her English lessons - perhaps 3 times a week. The rest of her day in school and at home, she will speak her own language. It does not matter if she doesn't know much English or if she learns slowly; this will not affect her day-to-day life in and out of school as it would for the Vietnamese boy.

The teaching situation, ESL or EFL, influences the content and methods of the English language teaching. At ESL Schools, students are helped to learn the general English they need to feel comfortable in school, to make and communicate with new friends and so be able to play a full part in the school's artistic, sporting and social life. Most importantly, hey are also taught the kind of English language and skills that will help them to be successful in
their other classes, history, mathematics etc. which are all in English. This is typical of most programs in ESL situations.

In many EFL situations on the other hand, English may be taught in a traditional way; i.e. based on the learning, step-by-step, of a number of grammatical items in a graded order of difficulty. In EFL classes, the learner has to master the language in his class. He has no chances outside his class. According to this, many things should be considered i.e. choosing the method that allows the learner to use the language both fluently and accurately; the techniques that ensure maximum exposure to the language and the suitable curricula.

**Native, second and foreign languages**

It is useful to distinguish three primary categories of use: as a native language, as a second language, and as a foreign language. English is spoken as a native language in countries like the USA, Britain and New Zealand. English is a second language in countries like India and Nigeria. English is a foreign language in the Arab World.

**How is learning a second language different from learning your mother tongue?**

The differences are due to three main factors: the age at which you learn, who teaches you and how long you have to learn.

Generally, you learn a second language a lot later than you learn the first, and this can give you certain advantages. Firstly, it means that you already have experience as a language learner and that you are cognitively more mature. You also have a metalinguistic knowledge; this means for example that you know what a word is and what it means to make a noun plural. Finally, you have a greater knowledge of people and the world. This helps you to make good guesses at the meaning of the unfamiliar language you encounter. On the other hand, the fact that you are older may mean that you are more inhibited and less spontaneous in using the new language for fear of making mistakes or appearing silly.

The most important teachers of your first language are of course your parents and immediate family. They generally have boundless patience and enthusiasm with your efforts to learn the language, and by intuition offer just the right kind of input to promote optimal language learning. This modulated language input is called motherese, a feature of which is the fact that mistakes
of fact are corrected whereas mistakes of grammar generally are not. This all contrasts strongly with the teaching that many learners of a second language receive in the language classroom!

As far as available time is concerned, you are learning your mother tongue from the moment you are born (some say you start even before you are born!) You are then exposed to language every waking second of your day until by the age of six or seven you have mastered its essentials. That is an awful lot of time on task, and compare it with 3 or 4 hours a week in the typical foreign language classroom!

In summary, everyone learns their first language because they have the best teachers and the best circumstances, the most time and the least pressure and the greatest motivation. Learners of a second language have certain cognitive advantages but none of the others, so it is not surprising how few go on to be as proficient in their second language as in their first.

Teaching ESL Versus EFL: Principles and Practices

English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are quite distinct, requiring the teacher to approach classes differently. The need for different approaches stems from the fact that in an ESL setting the class is usually multilingual and living in the culture of the target language, whereas in the EFL setting the class is usually monolingual and living in their own country. Brown (2001, 116) says “it is useful to consider the pedagogical implications for a continuum of contexts ranging from high visibility, ready access to the target language outside the language classroom to no access beyond the classroom door.” In each case, different resources can be exploited to meet the students’ needs. This article examines how the use of these resources affects four areas of teaching:

- the motivation level of the students, activity selection
- the use of the students’ native language (L1) in the classroom
- ways to approach L1 and target language (L2) culture

Choosing these particular aspects of teaching was because of their practical significance; each addresses issues that will assist the teacher in creating the optimal space for learning in a variety of contexts.
Student motivation

A framework
Student motivation has been analyzed and categorized in a variety of ways, yet the effect that it has on teaching and learning remains elusive because motivation is quite challenging to measure and harness. One useful framework for talking about motivation posits that there are two main kinds: *extrinsic motivation*, which stems from a desire for an external reward, and *intrinsic motivation*, which consists of learning for personal reasons as an end in itself (Harmer 1991). However, the dichotomy between the two types of motivation is not simple. According to Brown (2001, 75), “intrinsic/extrinsic motivation designates a continuum of possibilities of intensity of feeling or drive, ranging from deeply internal, self generated rewards to strong, externally administered rewards from beyond oneself.” Research has shown that students in ESL versus EFL classrooms can be characterized as having different levels of motivation, which could in turn affect how a teacher approaches these contexts.

ESL versus EFL student motivation
In an EFL setting, intrinsic motivation can be low, and English may not seem relevant to the students since it is not part of their daily lives. In many cases, they may be required to study English for a test or because it is a compulsory part of the curriculum (Brown 2001). In addition, EFL settings often involve large classes and limited contact hours, which makes learning English an apparently insurmountable challenge (Rose 1999). What options does a teacher have when his or her high school or university class consists of 30 to 50 students and meets once a week for 90 minutes? Such a course, common in compulsory English study, simply does not offer enough exposure to the language.

In an ESL classroom, students are likely to have a higher *intrinsic motivation* because English is relevant to their daily lives. By being in the target language community, they have more opportunity to use English and see immediate results from using it. The typical students in ESL classes wanted to learn English for personal reasons, such as to communicate with a variety of people from other countries, or they wanted to learn the language for professional reasons, perhaps to get a better job. By contrast, many of EFL students lack the opportunity to experience English in their daily lives, and, although they may want to learn it for the same reasons as those of ESL students, their motivation level can suffer when application in daily life is minimal. In the ESL context, many students had higher integrative motivation, which Irie (2003, 88) describes as “a desire to assimilate into the target language community.” Whether or not they want to assimilate, many of these students have a need to improve their English in order to function in an English-speaking country. In
addition to integrative motivation, many of these students have what Irie (2003) calls *instrumental motivation*, which—like extrinsic motivation—stems from a desire to gain benefits, such as getting a better job or passing an exam. Which motivation is most desirable? If students are motivated extrinsically versus intrinsically, do the learning results differ?

**Theory into practice**

According to Brown (2001, 76), “a convincing stockpile of research on motivation strongly favors intrinsic drives.” He cites the research of Piaget, Maslow, and Bruner to support the claim that intrinsic motivation is more powerful. Indeed, all of these researchers make the case that the intrinsic drive stems from a profound human psychological need to grow. If so, teachers need to know how to apply this knowledge. They can begin by considering the students’ motivation profile when they design a class and can then find ways to boost motivation when they perceive that it is lacking. Age is one factor that can inform a motivation profile. With children younger than twelve, for whom language learning may come more easily, intrinsic drive can be harnessed if good strategies are used to hold their attention. Children can be content to study English for its own sake if learning it is fun and engages them. However, many older students, especially EFL students, may not care if they learn English if they perceive it as having no practical significance in their life. Because such students are statistically less likely to be motivated intrinsically to learn English, teachers need to use intrinsically motivating techniques. These include helping students see the uses for English in their lives, presenting them with reasonable challenges, giving them feedback that requires them to act, playing down the role of tests, and appealing to their genuine interests (Brown 2001). By tuning in to what the students are interested in, the teacher is more likely to stimulate them to respond favorably to activities. Moreover, by giving them choices in how they approach activities, the teacher can help them direct their own learning, pursue their preferred learning style, or simply talk about what they want to talk about. Of course, these tips apply to any teaching scenario, but it is in an EFL context that the teacher may need to make a more conscious effort to stimulate intrinsic motivation.

On the other hand, these same EFL students who lack intrinsic motivation may have high extrinsic and instrumental motivation if their education system emphasizes the extrinsic reward of high test scores. These forms of motivation, while perhaps not as good as intrinsic motivation, can still inspire students to work hard under certain circumstances. For example, in a classroom in Japan, the students frequently speak Japanese for conversation activities in spite of the efforts to convince them to use English. However, when they know they are being evaluated on their oral speech—the main criterion being that they speak only English—they all do so, demonstrating the power of extrinsic motivation.
Yet, when we return to our normal class routine, they frequently resume speaking Japanese. Unless the teacher can inspire it, in the EFL context there tends to be a lower incidence of intrinsic motivation. As Brown (2001) observed, if learners have the opportunity or desire to learn language for its own sake, such as to become competent users of that language, they will have a higher success rate in terms of long-term learning than if they are driven by only external rewards.

Principles for selecting ESL classroom activities
In an ESL classroom, the teacher can use the multilingual nature of the class as a resource in a variety of ways. The fact that the students come from different countries becomes a natural “information gap,” which can be filled by a variety of question-and-answer and discussion activities about the students’ countries. It has been observed that students gain a sense of confidence when they talk about something about which they are authorities, such as their own country. They can also do presentations to teach classmates about their culture. Students are often quite eager to participate in such presentations. The ESL context requires students to use only English when they are speaking to students who do not share their language. In fluency practice activities, the teacher can rest assured that the students will not resort to their native language. Task-based problem-solving activities are especially useful in this case because they engage the learners linguistically and cognitively and require them to negotiate a solution entirely in English. This classroom scenario also gives the teacher an opportunity to sometimes focus more intensively on accuracy in speaking because many of the students have ample opportunities for English fluency practice outside of the class. The teacher can also structure specific tasks that require students to go out and use the resources of a native-speaking environment, such as doing a scavenger hunt or language exchange, or interviewing someone and then reporting back to the class.

Selecting EFL activities
In an EFL scenario, the teacher must deal with the fact that the students are probably not receiving any significant exposure to English outside of the classroom. In a survey of EFL students in Japan, 96 percent claimed they had no interactive exposure to English other than through movies and music. Although movies and music can generate interest in the language and provide useful input, they do not provide the negotiation that two-way communication entails. Because of this lack of opportunity to speak English, teachers need to maximize fluency practice, getting the students to use the language as much as possible in class and reducing emphasis on accuracy. To this end, teachers need to be judicious in their selection of speaking activities to ensure that students
will use English. Activities that lack structure or which fail to generate student interest inevitably lead most students to abandon English. Also, an activity that is interesting but too cognitively challenging to manage in English will cause most students to resort to their native language. Prioritization activities can be a good model of this concept.

**Survival.** Students working in pairs are asked to choose six out of ten people from a list to be the last survivors on earth. They must discuss the qualities of each candidate, compare their importance, give opinions on the candidates, and reach a consensus. When their selection is completed, students compare their choices with those of another pair.

**The Dinner Party.** Students are asked to make a seating arrangement for a dinner party based on descriptions of the personalities of each of the invitees and relationships they have with the other invitees.

In both cases, I observed that 22 pairs of students used Japanese to complete the task. Many of them engaged quite enthusiastically in finding solutions to the problems and precisely because of the compelling quality of the tasks, they discarded cumbersome English in favor of their mother tongue. (See **Role-play** and **Conversation Line** for tips on how to adapt these activities to make them work in a monolingual classroom.)

**Criteria for selecting EFL classroom activities**

To best elicit English from students in an EFL monolingual class, an activity ought to:

- have a visible, clear, and compelling objective.
- have English use built into the logic of the activity.
- not be too cognitively demanding to manage in English.
- be interesting to the students.

To meet these criteria, we often use games in which the rules require students to accomplish a task by speaking English only. Games provide an organizational framework that makes the activity more appealing and accessible to students. When the element of competition is introduced, tension is heightened by the urge to win. In a game scenario, students seem willing to play by the stated rules; they are motivated to use English because they are given a compelling reason to do so. To further their desire to use English, we tempt our students with a prize, which can only be won if all of the rules are followed—the most significant being speaking English for the duration of the game. More than 50 percent of students responding to a questionnaire administered to determine their learning interests and preferences indicated that they want to play English games. Teachers sometimes say of this preference for games that students just want to have fun and don’t really want to work. But it is believed that it is possible for teachers to integrate fun and work by carefully
engineering activities to achieve both. This entails setting a time limit, clarifying the rules, sometimes giving prizes, and generating enthusiasm to play. The next section describes some useful games and why they work.

Sample activities

Guess the Word. In this game, each student is given five to ten cards, each of which has a word with several words beneath it. For example, umbrella—wet, rain, dry. The object is to get students to guess the word umbrella without using any of the words on the card, gestures, or deictic clues. This game is good for vocabulary review and fluency practice—activating the English they already know.

Information Gap Crossword Puzzles. Students working in pairs each get a copy of a crossword puzzle. One student gets a copy with all of the across answers written in and the other student gets a copy with the down answers. This activity is a variation on word guessing, in which one student helps another figure out what the missing word is. The first pair to finish the crossword puzzle wins.

These examples meet the above criteria: the objectives are clear and easy to see, and the tension makes it compelling. Since the object of the game is to complete the tasks in English, using the L1 becomes cheating. These activities do not require analysis, which would encourage the students to fall back on their L1. Lastly, the activities are interesting for the students because they are fun, and they give students a chance to use the English they know to fulfill the objective. Three other types of activities I recommend are described below.

Role-play. If well-designed, role-play gives students a compelling reason to stick with English: they get involved in their role. Roleplay encourages students to use their imagination, which for some can be quite liberating from the rigor of many “analytic left brain” classroom activities. Role-play can be used to improve Survival and The Dinner Party, the two activities discussed earlier. In Survival, characters can represent themselves, explaining why the character should be chosen. In The Dinner Party, students acting as the characters can make their own seating arrangements rather than do the more challenging task of talking hypothetically about the characters. This reduces the linguistic strain, and by having the students assume the role of English-speaking characters, builds English into the logic of the activity. Another way to ensure that students do not lapse into their L1 is to put them into triads. While two students participate in the role-play, the third one has the task of monitoring English usage and keeping track of any L1 usage. The presence of an observer/enforcer can serve to remind students to proceed only in English. Another possibility is to give students a grade for their participation in the role-play.
**Conversation Line.** Students face each other in two parallel lines. They are given a conversation task, such as a greeting followed by questions about the weekend (or anything relevant to that moment), which requires them to talk for about two minutes. Using a stopwatch, the teacher instructs them to switch every one to two minutes, at which point each student rotates one space clockwise. This goes on for about 20 to 25 minutes, during which each student talks to 10 to 15 students. What is noticeable is that some students begin to depart from the conversation model and talk to each other spontaneously in English, often laughing and having a good time. Because they are constantly given a new partner, they are able to maintain English for the short duration of each conversation and do not run out of things to say. If the class has an odd number of students, it provides an opportunity for the teacher to join the line and talk one-on-one with many students. This activity is great for injecting energy into the classroom. A conversation line can also be applied to activities like *Survival* or *The Dinner Party*. Rather than doing the entire activity in fixed pairs, each student could do one part of the activity with one partner for a few minutes and then go on to the next partner to discuss the next item. (At the end, they can compare their final list in small groups.) Because students have a greater likelihood of sticking with English when the exchange is brief, they tend to speak more English.

**Using Dice.** Dice can be creatively applied in a variety of ways, and students love using them. Sometimes, rather than giving students a list of questions to discuss, the teacher can put each question in a box on a board game template (A free download can be found at: http://esl-lounge.com/board_games.html). Somehow, the act of rolling the dice and the resulting randomness of the questions make it more fun for students.

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