

Defining, Creating, and Maintaining an Engaging Learning Environment



8th International Conference on TESOL

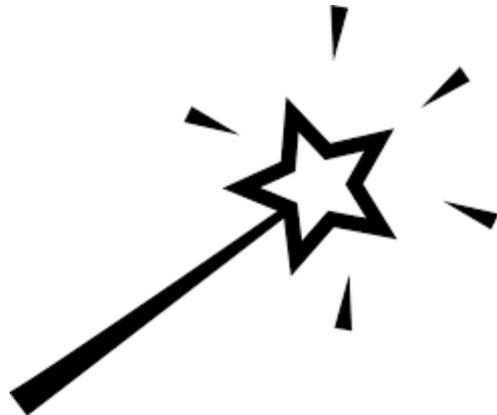
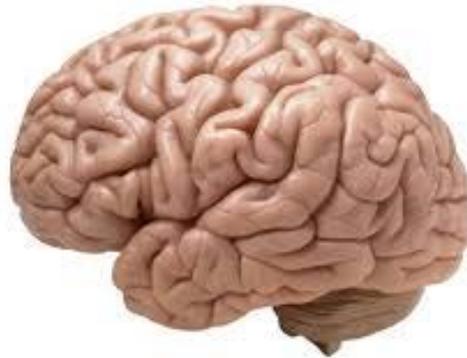
ELT in the 21st Century: Challenges & Opportunities

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August 10, 2017

Ladders, Brains, Fish, Magic, and Pennies



Agenda

1. Think about what kind of environment we prefer for learning new skills.
2. Review brain-based research on learning.
3. Reflect on what we have control over in the classroom and what our challenges are.
4. Think about engaging and motivating our students.
5. Celebrate our power as magical designers of learning!
6. Questions and comments.

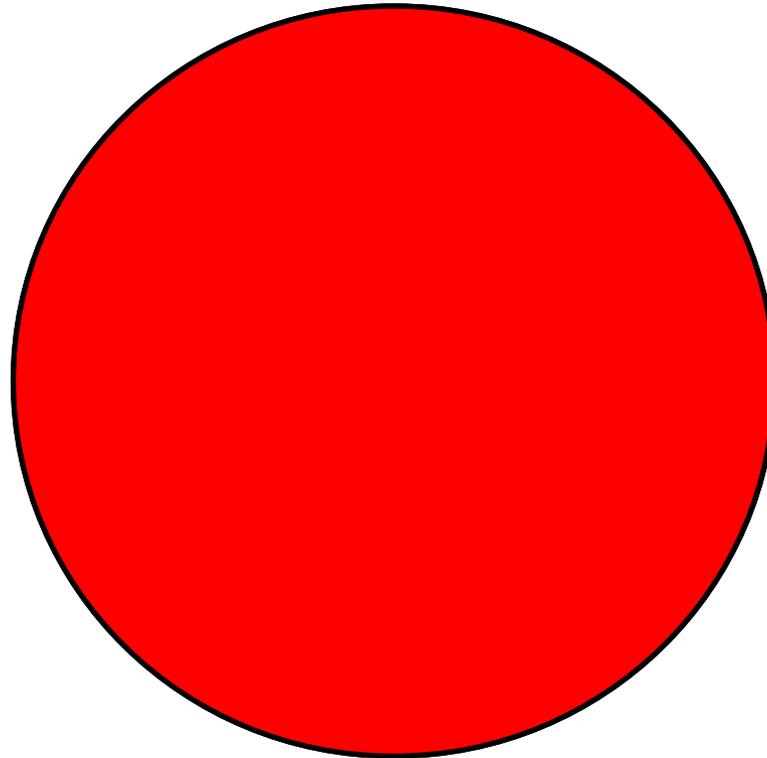
Written Reflection



For 5 minutes, think about how you learn new skills and write a few sentences of reflection.

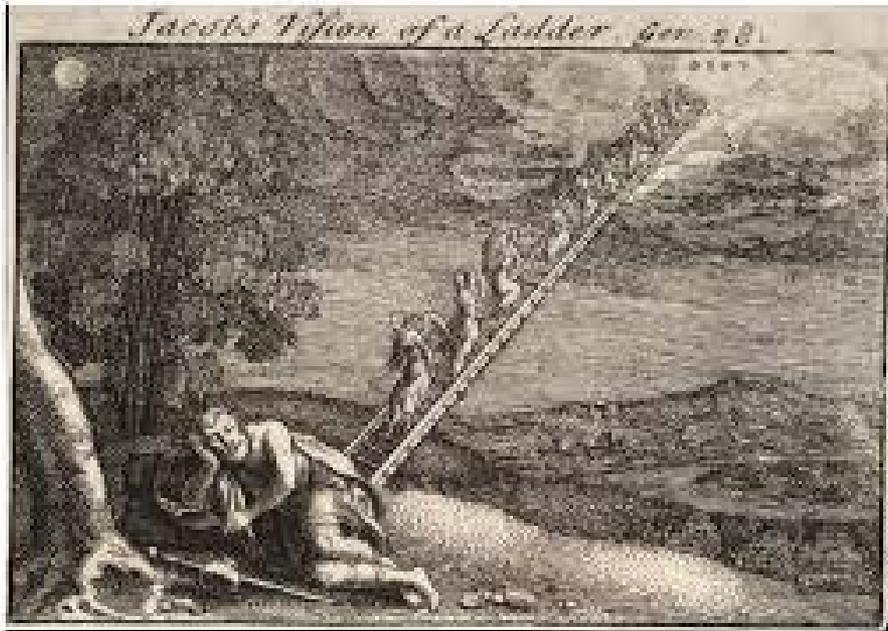
- What kind of environment do you like to be in?
- Do you like to work alone or with others?
- Do you want to know why you need this skill or do you trust your teacher that it is needed?

5-minute Timer

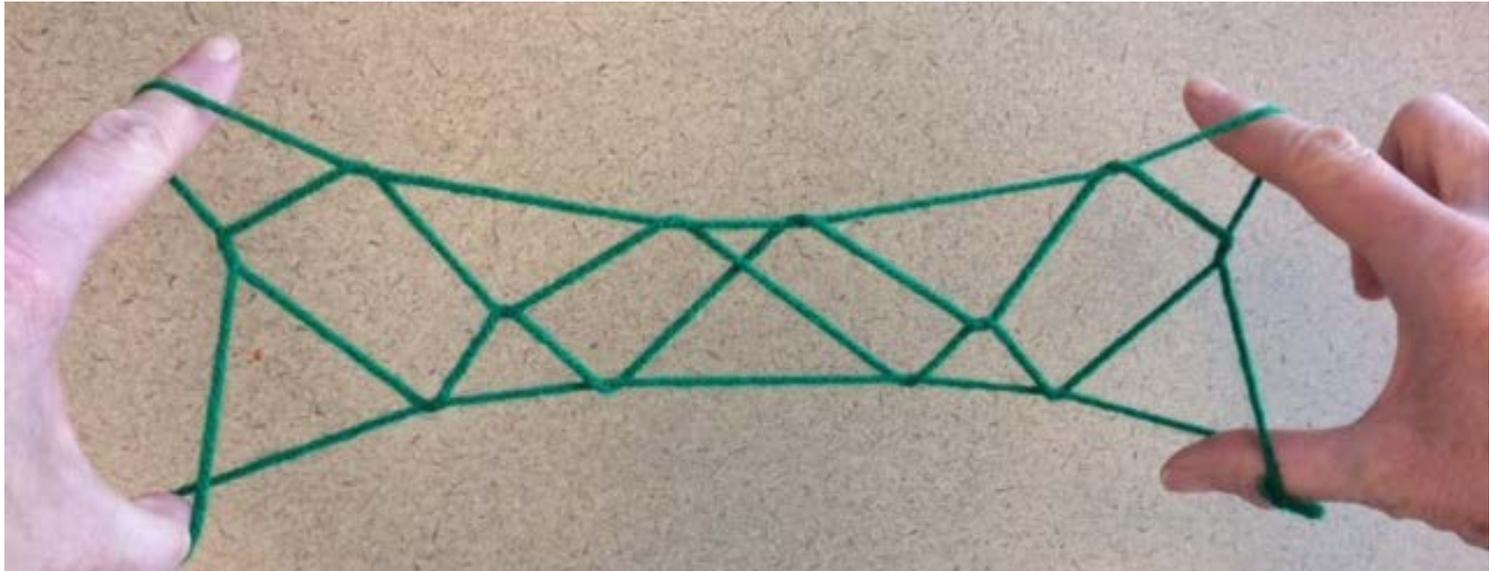




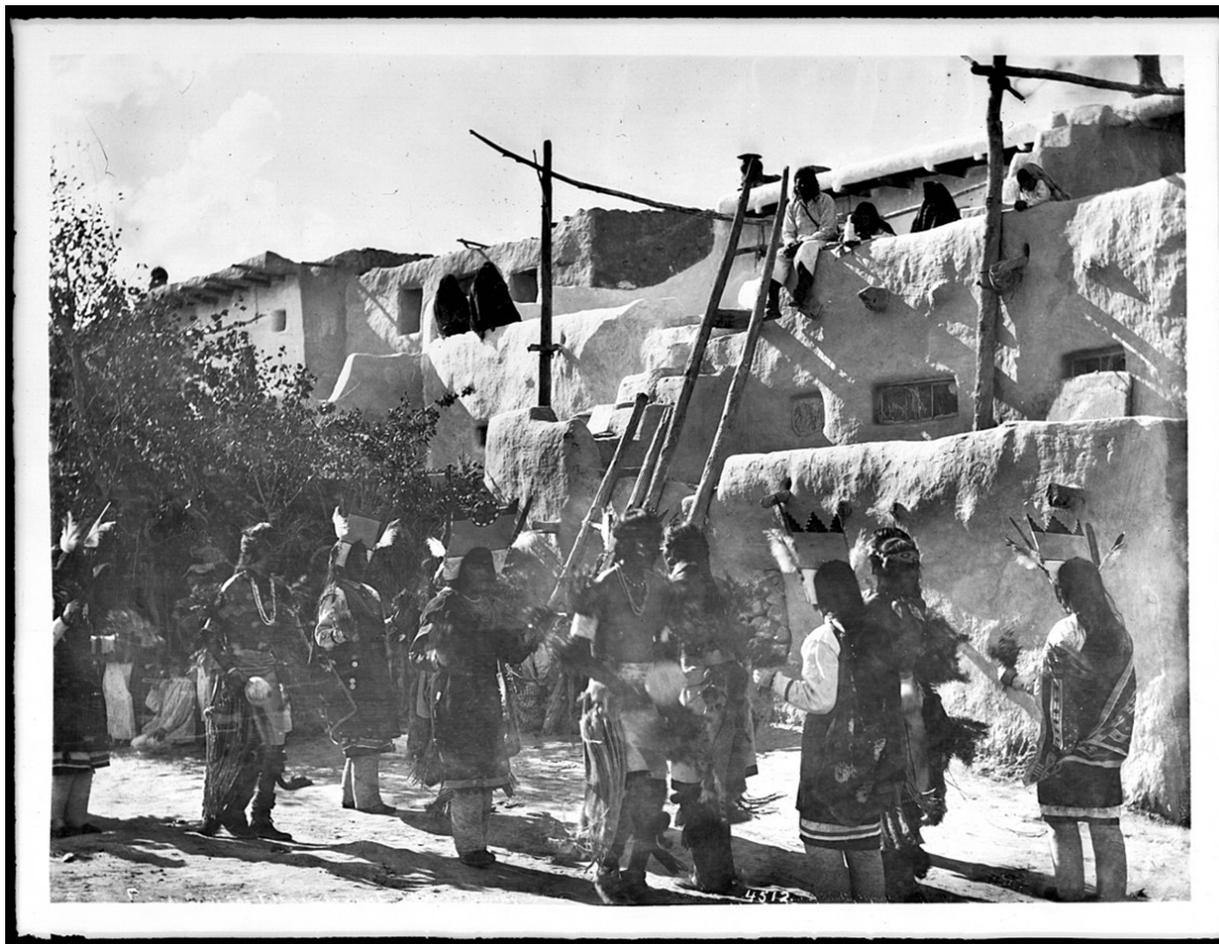
Let's build a Jacob's Ladder



Yarn Ladder



Why Ladders?



Part 1. Directions

1. Start with the string across both of your palms in the open position over your thumb and pinky in a long loop. Use your pointer finger to pick up the string from each of your palms.
2. Next, drop the thumb strings. Reach underneath with your thumbs and you pick up the last string with your thumbs. Now, with both of your thumbs, reach over the first string and pick up the second string.
3. Then, drop the pinky strings. With your pinky fingers reach over the last string and pick up the next closest string.
4. Now, drop the thumb strings. Now, you have what's called “cat's whiskers”.
5. With your thumbs, go over the first two strings of the cat’s whiskers. Pick up the third one. Try not to pull too tight. You want a little tension, but not too tight.

Part 2. Directions

6. The next step is tricky. Using your right hand, lift the string from the outside of your left-hand pointer finger and place it over the left thumb. Now, you've got two strings over your thumb. Take the bottom string and lift it forward over your thumb. Now, repeat that on your right hand. Take the string from your forefinger put it over your thumb. Take the bottom string the other way over the thumb. You should now have one string over your thumb.

7. You'll notice you have made two triangles right there next to your thumbs. This is the part where most people mess up. Very carefully drop your pinkies and turn your hands to face away from you while letting the string that's on the back of your pointers slide off.

8. This will be the new string on your pointers. Do this very slowly. Drop the pinky and at the same time turn your hands away letting that outer string slip off.

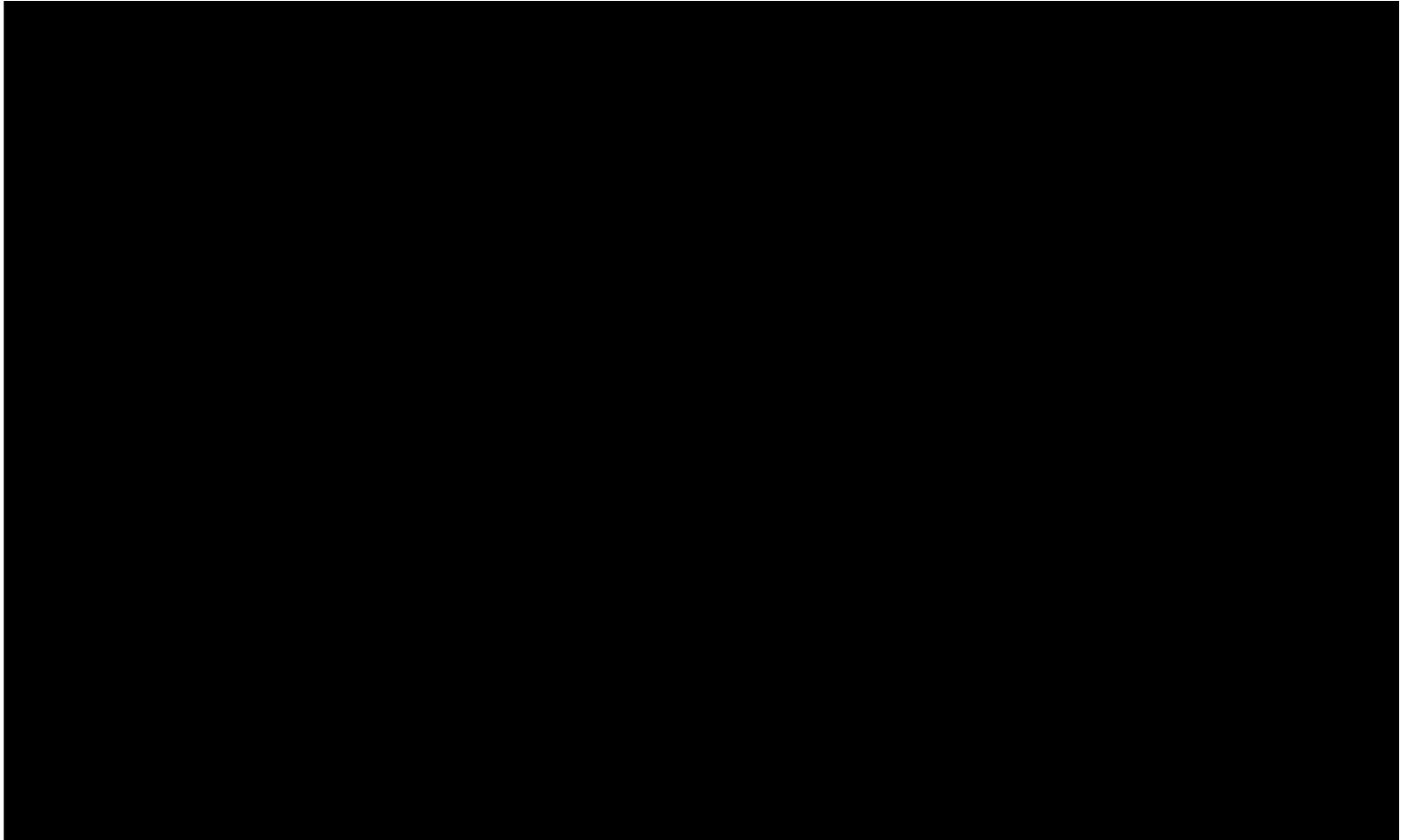
And there you have Jacob's ladder! Transcript adapted from MomsMinivan 2012

Emotions

- Frustrated
- Bored
- Anxious
- Empowered
- Annoyed
- Exhilarated



Watch the Video



Reflection

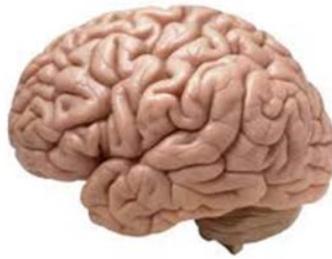
- What emotions did you experience while learning this technique?
- What strategies did you use to learn this technique?
- How do you think learning this technique corresponds to how your students learn new material?
- Did what you wrote in your reflection match to what you just experienced?



Brain Research

- Brain based learning theory is that learning takes place when two neurons communicate. *As long as the brain is not banned from fulfilling its instinctive processes, learning occurs.*
- “Genetic and environmental factors and the connections among cells created by an individuals’ experiences influence learning”.

(Monghaddam & Araghi, 2013, p. 55)



- “The brain learns best when it processes cognitive, affective, and psychomotor information simultaneously”. (Jensen, 2005, p. 89)
- “Students learn from their whole experience...so learners must be overexposed to content with context, submerged in learning, involved in talking, listening, reading and discovering.”
(Moghaddam & Araghi, 2013, p. 56)

12 principles of Brain-Based Learning

1. All learning is physiological.
2. The brain is a social brain.
3. The search for meaning is innate.
4. The search for meaning occurs through patterning.
5. Emotions are critical to patterning.
6. Every brain simultaneously perceives and creates parts and wholes.

12 principles, continued

7. Learning involves both focused attention and peripheral attention.
8. Learning always involves conscious and unconscious processes.
9. We have at least two ways of organizing memory.
10. Learning is developmental.
11. Complex learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat.
12. Every brain is uniquely organized.

(Caine & Caine, 1991)

There is no “perfect” teaching methodology!

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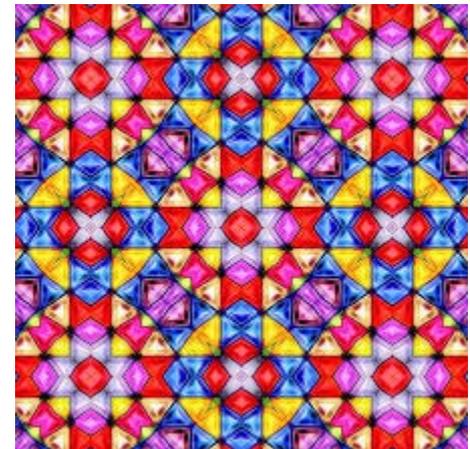
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“Educators need to recognize the differentiation of instructional methods to address the learning needs of a diversity of learners.



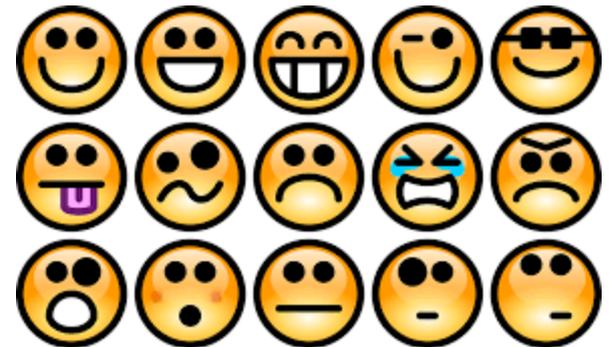
Hence, providing learners with greater choices and pathways of learning in alignment with students’ intelligence levels makes learning more meaningful and authentic.”

(Laxman & Chin, 2010, p3)

WE can set up a challenging yet non-threatening learning environment

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#5 Attention is selective!

Use surprise in your classes.

“...mind and emotions are not separate but rather, emotions, thinking, and learning are all connected.”

*Emotion drives attention and
attention drives learning.”*



Moghaddam & Araghi, 2013, p. 57)

Definition of an engaging learning environment based on brain-based learning:

To engage is to capture the attention of our students in a non-threatening way by creating a stimulating and challenging learning environment where students see the connections and the practical applications.



Challenges to Teaching in Vietnam

1. Exam oriented education system which is a barrier to teaching of communicative language.
2. Not enough teaching time for English
3. Large class sizes
4. Unequal English levels.
5. Inadequate facilities and/or equipment
6. Not beneficial for students
7. Student attitudes and motivation depends on major – some students don't think English would be important for their majors and future careers. Some lack basic English knowledge.

(Nguyen, Fehring, & Warren, 2015, pp. 35-36)



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Make Learning Meaningful

H.D. Brown contends that *“all that all learning circumstances can be **meaningful** providing that learners have a capacity to relate the new learning task to what they already know and the learning task itself is **meaningful** for learners.”*

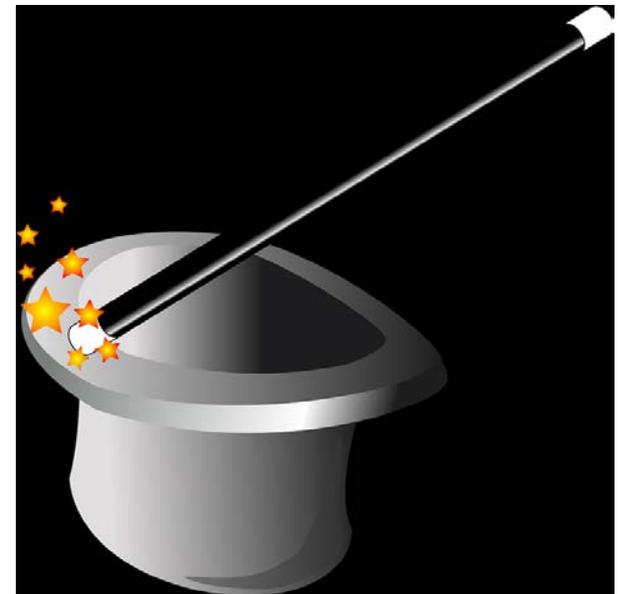
(Monghaddam & Araghi, 2013, p. 60)

Our students want to learn...let's use our teaching magic to help them!

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Learn another language!

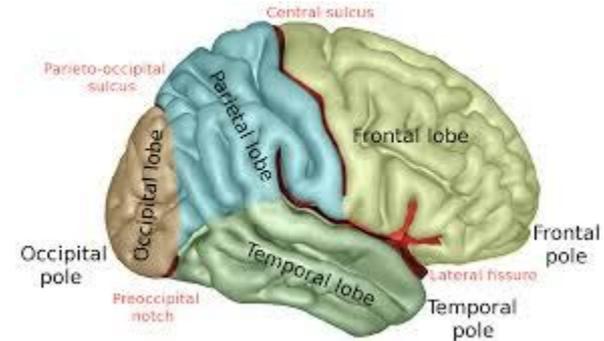
According to the Government Decision 1400, “by 2020 most Vietnamese youth who graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities will gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently.

This will enable them to be more **confident in communication**, further their chance to study, and work in an integrated and multi-cultural environment...which serves the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country”.



Our students are unique in their needs and motivations

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Solutions to improve motivation to study English from VN teachers

- Find out the reasons for the poor motivation and explain to them the importance of English.
- It is *“not only the responsibility of the teachers but also the university’s managers and leaders to conduct activities that aim to increase students’ awareness of the importance of English”*.
- Have meetings, seminars, career coaching sessions conducted by university admins, staff, or it can be done informally through regular talks or advice from teachers.

(Nguyen, Fehring, & Warren, 2015, pp. 38 & 42)

More ideas from VN teachers

- Use different methods to reach students of varying abilities.
- Try to make the class happy and interesting.
- Use games or songs.
- Use a learner-centered approach to reduce the teacher's lecturing time and increase the students' talking time.
- Let the students design the tasks.

(Nguyen, Fehring, & Warren, 2015, p. 39)

Use Industry & Govt. Sources

Secretary General Le of ASEAN said:

“English is an indispensable tool to bring our Community together enabling us to interact with other ASEAN colleagues on our formal meeting as well as day-to-day communications. Through English, we are raising awareness of the ASEAN region”.

(Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015, p. 43)



NFL 2020 Project

N.H. Nguyen, Founding Director and Senior Advisor said:

“the workers [Vietnamese] do not have the language skills needed to communicate effectively in an international working environment and that soft skills are needed such as the ability to work together, decision making... presentation skills, how to speak up and also critically think.”

(Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015 p. 44)



How I Encourage Motivation

- Invite 1-2 guest speakers from various industries each term
 - Students take notes and recreate the lecture afterward.
 - They prepare questions ahead of time.
- Do a career project that includes interviewing a professional about his/her job.
- Use current articles about skills needed in the workforce.
- Make lessons relevant to the students by having them find the materials themselves.

Global ideas to increase motivation

- Relate school learning to real people, things, social situations, families, local histories and geography.
- Find out what intrigues the students and excites them to investigate.

“Engaging students with content while giving them knowledge that they themselves are interested in creates ‘happy knowledge’ and when they feel happy, they enjoy. When they enjoy, they engage. When they engage, they learn”.

(Aboudan, 2011, p. 131)



Let's bring some magic to the
classroom!



Make it a challenging environment not a punitive one

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Create a family environment

- In Vietnam, the teachers and the students said the class was a like a family. Students were encouraged to establish a positive attitude toward taking risks.
- Students were encouraged to make decisions, reflect on and evaluate experiences. And think critically.



Students organized mini-conferences, wrote bulletins, formed English speaking clubs, acted as tutors for other students at the university and tourist guides, worked at international fairs and served as volunteers, and worked in teams.

(Dang, 2006, p. 606)

Check out [TED.com](https://www.ted.com) for ideas that are
worth spreading



Teaching and Learning Should Bring Joy!

- “You won't like them all, and the tough ones show up for a reason. It's the **connection**. It's the relationships. So teachers become great actors and great actresses, and we come to work when we don't feel like it, and we're listening to policy that doesn't make sense, and we teach anyway. We teach anyway, because that's what we do.
- **Teaching and learning should bring joy.** How powerful would our world be if we had kids who were not afraid to take risks, who were not afraid to think, and who had a champion? Every child deserves a champion, an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”

(Pierson, 2013)

I will choose

JOY

Thank you for your attention!

A penny for your thoughts...



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