

# Making English creative and easy

ENGLISH  
FOR MORE  
OPPORTUNITIES

What a teacher needs is some ingenious ideas to make a language lesson fun and interesting.

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**E**NGLISH grammar can be a dry subject to many students, but with a dash of creativity even the most mundane activities and tasks can be made interesting.

Budapest International Languages Institute director Julia Dudas argues that creativity is important in the classroom and should be encouraged even within a rigid curriculum.

"Creativity depends on the teacher and handling subjects such as grammar does not mean it should be rigid.

"The teacher can encourage students to write a poem using a sentence structure beginning with 'I like, I love, But I don't like, I hate' and asking the students to fill in the blanks with their own experiences or images.

"The end result will be the active usage of the language while being creative at the same time," she said.

Dudas from Hungary was among the international speakers invited to share language teaching ideas during the ninth Malaysia International Conference on English Language Teaching (MICELT) held in Ipoh last week.

The event was organised by Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and ELS language centres, and allowed participants, mostly English language teachers, a platform to exchange ideas and practices for a better learning environment.

Conference chairman Assoc Prof Dr Arshad Abd Samad said in his welcoming address that since the English language was evolving, the teaching approach and materials should also reflect those changes.

"Not only do we need to meet the needs of students to equip them sufficiently before they head into the world, but we also have to ensure the world's needs can be catered through the students," he said.

Among other notable speakers and topics brought up during the three-day conference

included Prof Marc Helgesen from Miyaki Gakuin Women's University, Japan, who spoke on self-assessment and "Happiness 2.0" and how positive psychology played a role in teaching.

"Research in positive psychology focuses on the behaviour of happy, mentally healthy people and one example is how happy people are those who remember the good things in their lives.

"Through the use of a journal, English teachers can even teach grammar, by tapping into these behaviours," he said.

Prof Helgesen asked his students to keep a "happiness journal" where they write down good things that had happened to them throughout the week.

"The language goal is on the use of grammar such as past tense, but the theme is on positive well-being, or happiness.

"These are language functions that English teachers deal with in their classes anyway, including teaching their students present continuous tense for being mindful of the good things that are happening in the present moment.

"There is no harm when teachers use questions such as 'Who is your favourite movie star?' or 'What is your favourite sport?' to teach the same lessons, but student will be more engaged in the lessons if they talk about positive emotional experiences.

"We are still using the same language function and vocabulary but plugging these items into a deeper, more meaningful context for them," he said.

Prof Helgesen said studies in neuroscience have shown that when a person is happy, the brain produces hormones that boost their learning process, making them stay on a task longer and become more motivated.

"Any content that is engaging for the student peaks their interest, making a difference in the learning process. Being happy helps them to learn.

"Another activity that English classes often



**Language boost:** Participants looking at some English reading materials during a break outside the conference hall.

teach is the letter-writing format. In the classes I teach in Japan, I ask the students to write 'gratitude letters' directed to the people that have made a difference in their lives.

"Students will often choose their parents as recipients and I often ask them to write one letter in English, which is for me to grade and another one in Japanese, for their parents to read.

"Needless to say the response from parents has been positive. The letters enable students to actively use the language in an engaging context," he said.

Another speaker, Prof James Dean Brown from the University of Hawaii offers options for language teachers to assess their students which are based on real world language learning needs.

"Teachers usually opt for testing systems such as multiple-choice questions due to practicality reasons, but they need to understand that these tests often distract the students from the actual learning process itself.

"Students easily become focused on passing the test itself rather than learning the language for use in a realistic context.

Prof Brown said teachers need to integrate assessment into the learning process and not to see it as a separate entity or an afterthought.

"Assessment is about feedback, not just numbers and one of the options is for the students to have their own portfolio, where they can submit their work on a weekly basis.

"This indirectly creates a record of their achievement and become part of their learning.

"In writing courses, students could choose three out of five essays they have written to be put into their portfolio, be it physical or online and gain feedback from an audience, usually students and teachers from other classes."

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