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**TASEL (Teaching using Affirmation for Students of the English Language):**  
**the four languages of affirmation in the ESL Classroom**

What are the changing English language needs of our student in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This important question becomes even more crucial in light of technological teaching tools, electronic communication and the impersonalization of the mega-classroom (more than 15 ESL students). And what about the role of the teacher in this world of bits, bytes and back-biting?

Interestingly, researchers have found that one of the most important characteristics of successful classroom teaching is not how well we use PowerPoint, not whether we are hyper-computer literate or not even whether we know what the WWW really is. The characteristic of successful classroom teaching is how we as teachers connect with our students. (Crabb, 1997). So, in spite of the advance of technology, it is the humanity of the teacher that seems to be essential for a successful classroom.

How can teachers “connect” with their students? Since students usually respond positively to acceptance and affirmation, how can these be communicated in the classroom? If teachers want productive students who reach their potential as language learners, how can teachers feed the inner spirit of their students to enhance the learning climate? How can classroom teachers affirm their students in the midst of reading, writing and grammar lessons?

We propose that Teaching using Affirmation for Students of the English Language (TASEL) is a possibly answer. Specifically, we propose using the four languages of affirmation in the classroom, just as family consultants have recommended them parents in connecting with their teenagers and children. The four languages are words of encouragement, physical gestures, quality time and acts of service. (Ideas taken from Chapman, 2000).

The first language of affirmation is *words of encouragement*. Just imagine you have a writing class that you are just not connecting with. Students come tardy, are absent, hand in assignments late and look bored. (Not at SQU of course). Our first reaction is to criticize, condemn, demean and use negative words to whip the class into shape. Does that work? Most of our students are making the transition from childhood to adulthood,. They are experiencing emotional, intellectual and social changes as they find independence and self identity. So a better way to motivate young people at this stage in life might be using positive words of praise and affection.

Words of praise recognize students’ accomplishments and commends them. All students do something right. We need to look for this and reward students with verbal praise; however, we have to remember to practice praise with sincerity (“flattery will get you nowhere”) and to praise specifics. Instead of saying “What a great essay” while handing back papers, teachers might say, “What a great introduction. It really caught my attention.” Specific praise rings true. Another aspect of giving praise is “When you can’t praise results, praise efforts.” Like saying, “ I really appreciate the effort you put into that outline. It really shows improvement.” By rewarding effort, not just perfection, our students are focused on the goal of improving instead of their present failures.

Words of affirmation may seem inappropriate in a classroom setting. Yet, we have found that students respond to words like, “This class got the best marks I’ve ever seen on a first quiz; what a great bunch of

students you are,” by doing even better. Speaking words of encouragement in the presence of others seems to speak louder than in private. When we read students’ work aloud as exemplary, those students often seem to perk up and do better and better.

The second language of affirmation is *physical gesture*. While physical touch is a powerful tool to communicate affirmation to someone, cultural norms often limit the contact between a student and teacher. If a pat on the shoulder seems inappropriate, then other physical gestures can be used to affirm. For example, we can look at our students’ eyes when they come into our offices (for the ninth time) with questions. Our body language signals the importance of the person and the question. If we put down the work we are doing, look up and lean forward, students feel affirmed. Contrarily, if we stand or sit with our arms folded while talking with our students, the message is one of anger or displeasure. We have found that just acknowledging students when we see them in the corridors with a wave or even a smile, seems to light up their faces and affirm them.

The third language of affirmation is *quality time*. This means giving a student our undivided attention whether it is during class, after class or during office hours. Quality time involves focused listening. Some tips for making “time” into “quality time” are: maintain eye contact and observe body language as mentioned in the preceding paragraph, do not try to listen while doing other things, refuse to interrupt, express understanding and ask them to share their perspective concerning problems they might be facing in the classroom, the dorms, or the university. The point is to show that we understand what they have said first and then ask if we can share our perspective using “I” statements rather than “you” statements. For example, “I feel upset when you do that” rather than “you make me angry”. Another point is that a “know it all” attitude will often shut the door to communication. Quality time means taking time; it is a powerful way to connect. It means taking the time to understand students’ perspective and interests. The result is a more student-centered classroom.

The fourth language of affirmation is *acts of service*. Teaching, by its nature, is a service-oriented vocation (and pays accordingly). One way to connect with our students is to freely offer help – and this without resentment. Of course we need to choose our acts of service wisely. Virtually rewriting a paper for a student only creates dependency and helping with answers on a test would be unethical. A good rule of thumb is to help students with the things they can not do for themselves. By modeling and training, we can guide our students to independence. Rather than saying “What I’d like is ....”, we could ask students, “What is it that you’d really like.” Students may be wishing we would go over a grammar point more explicitly or go over their essays one-on-one, but we will never know how we can really serve them better unless we ask.

In summary, the ability to read the emotions of our students and to communicate acceptance on the verbal and nonverbal level will help us truly connect with our classes. Students need to be affirmed, and we can do it using the four languages of affirmation.

Chapman, Gary, (2000). The Five Love Language of Teenagers. Northfield Publishing: Chicago.

Crabb, Larry (1997). Connecting, W Publishing Group: Nashville.