

Essentials for the Teacher's Toolbox

BY JENNIFER UHLER

Every profession has a set of essential tools for carrying out its work. Airplane mechanics cannot repair engines without sophisticated diagnostics, wrenches, and pliers. Surgeons cannot operate without scalpels and clamps. In contrast, teaching has often been perceived as a profession requiring only students, chalk, and a blackboard in order for learning to take place. There might be some truth to this perception of simplicity, but effective English teachers generally rely upon a number of tools—approaches, activities, and basic materials—to make teaching efficient and learning enjoyable.

English teachers often assemble their own professional toolboxes, collecting essentials, both physical and conceptual. The articles reprinted here discuss staples for the teacher's toolbox. Highlighting no-cost and low-cost ways to enhance learning, these three articles provide reminders of the tools language teachers have at their disposal in their everyday work with students.

The first tool that teachers can work with is their enthusiasm and demeanor. Elizabeth Hamp-Lyons takes a closer look at what separates boring teachers from those who develop positive rapport with students. "Your Most Essential Audiovisual Aid—Yourself!" (originally published in 1981) reminds us of obvious tools that are available to teachers. A teacher's physical position in the classroom, eye contact, posture, personal expression, vocal quality, and talk time can be powerful tools that enhance presentation of material and build constructive relationships with learners.

Mac Ramirez recognizes that visual aids can help to recreate real-life situations when the reality of English-speaking environments might be otherwise inaccessible to students. In "The Neglected Tools Can Work for You" (1975), Ramirez outlines easy-to-create visual aids that continue to be effective in classrooms almost forty years

later. Indeed, classrooms have changed: language films have evolved into YouTube videos, newspaper articles can be found on the Internet, and picture slides are more likely to be PowerPoint presentations. However, Ramirez's criteria for selecting and using visual aids are still relevant reminders and should remain part of any teacher's toolbox.

The third selection, by Albert Marckwardt, focuses on a tool that is familiar to language learner and teacher alike. Whether it's a dog-eared copy of Merriam-Webster or an electronic version the size of a mobile phone, a dictionary is important for figuring out and using language accurately. "Getting the Most Out of the Dictionary" (1974) recognizes the many complex questions teachers face about language forms and varieties, and it outlines why the dictionary is a valuable and reliable source of information. In the twenty-first century we have more data at our fingertips than ever before, but, whether dictionaries are online or on the shelf, they remain critical tools for determining pronunciation, meaning, grammar, and usage.

Professional toolboxes no doubt vary from teacher to teacher; teachers have tried-and-true activities and techniques that work well in their own instructional environments. These three selections serve as reminders of universal essentials for teachers to include in their toolboxes. Our physical presence in the classroom, visual aids, and dictionaries are important tools that, when paired with our training and experience as English language educators, help make teaching and learning more pleasant and, ultimately, more successful.

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