



## The Advantages of Lying to Your Students

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The title of this essay is provocative but the contents are mundane: it is simply a proposal that, through a series of classroom activities, we can promote more reflective, analytical and critical study skills. 'Lying' can also lead to dynamic classroom exchanges, collaborative learning opportunities and a clearer understanding of non-verbal clues (such as body language and facial expressions) and the important role they play in communication. 'Lying' is an emotive term. In these classroom activities, students are aware of what is going on and are participants in the process. Outright deception is not involved.

### Dictation

A few years ago, I was doing some dictation to a class of 25 university students. They were not English majors and neither their levels of motivation nor their levels of communicative proficiency was especially high. The sentence being dictated was:

*Another way of saying the greenhouse effect is 'global warming'.*

Halfway through the dictation, I substituted—on a whim—'global warming' with 'hotto motto' (a national lunchbox company had just changed its name to 'hotto motto'—it had been in the news but was not yet widely known). Twenty-three of the 25 students wrote 'hotto motto' without demur. Two looked up with quizzical looks and questioned what I'd said. This led to a discussion in which students became aware that they should pay more attention to what is being said to them.

A word of caution is necessary at this point. The purpose of this exercise is not to make students look foolish or belittle them, so it is recommended that teachers do not embark on this kind of work until they have developed a good rapport with the class. Also, it is generally the case that some students will pick up on the error. To use these individuals as a 'foil' to correct the 'error' can effectively deflect the directness of any implied criticism. In many cases, students laugh at their own lack of attention. With discretion, it should not be a problem.

How outrageous should the 'lies' be? This depends on the class and the kinds of reactions that the teachers wish to engender. As a general rule, on the first few occasions, they should be outstandingly obvious. Once students become accustomed to the

genre, 'lies' may be less obvious. This continuum can engender a different type of classroom language and behaviour. At the very least, however, 'lies' should not be obscure; students should either know the correct answer as a result of earlier studies or should have a reasonable chance of guessing what is true or not.

The real benefits of this activity become apparent on subsequent dictation activities. Students become much more alert and proactive in assessing whether there are discrepancies in the material being given to them. In my classrooms, they sit at tables in groups of four in order to encourage a collaborative learning atmosphere and to reduce stress levels of individual students. Thus, when they encounter something that they deem 'dubious', two possible scenarios ensue:

- ◆ Extroverts will challenge the teacher outright, almost always with the phrase, 'Really?' repeated several times while simultaneously studying the teacher's face for any visual clues as to whether he/she is telling the truth.
- ◆ Quieter students tend to consult each other before expressing their doubts either verbally or through quizzical or dubious looks.

In both cases, it is productive to throw the question back to the students. Ask them to consult their classmates around the table and come to some kind of consensus, an activity which promotes a degree of analytical reflection. At this stage, appropriate language may also be taught, including expressions such as 'I don't think it's true', or 'That sounds strange' etc., though with lower level classes, 'Really?' is overwhelmingly the phrase of choice.

### True or False Statements

This is a well-established teaching idea but it follows similar principles to the above and works well. Students are given a series of statements and are informed that some of them may be true and some may be false. How many are false is not specified. An example is given below.

*Which of the following sentences is/are not true?*

1. Arctic ice is melting.
2. Tropical rainforests are being cut down faster than they are being planted.
3. On average, Europeans live longer than Africans.
4. Birthrates are falling around the world.
5. The population of India has passed ten billion and is increasing.

6. Global spending on weapons has increased dramatically.
7. More than 50% of politicians are women.
8. Methane is produced by farming, cattle and cars.

Based upon what they have studied, students (in groups) will identify which sentences are false and then correct them. They first try to base their answers on memory and previously studied information, then, rather than have the correct answers confirmed by the teacher, are encouraged to search their textbooks or their notes for confirmation. By promoting a mood of enquiry among the group and allowing them to confirm their beliefs through their own resources, students develop a sense of autonomy and achievement which are the hallmarks of a 'good learner'.

#### ***'Call My Bluff' Panel Game.***

Based upon a popular TV show, three students provide definitions or make statements about a topic. Two are false, one is true. The rest of the class has to identify the true version. Three students are given cards. Two have false statements, while one is true. For example:

Hokkaido is about half the size of Switzerland

Hokkaido is about the same size as Switzerland.

Hokkaido is about twice the size of Switzerland.

Each student reads their card aloud and the rest of the class/group has to identify which is correct. Students themselves know whether they are telling the truth or not, so this adds an aspect of fun to the exercise. Then they have to persuade the class that their version is correct. Students discuss the validity of each answer before coming to a group decision. I would like to have students make their own quiz questions but attempts to do so, so far, have not been successful as there is a tendency to produce statements that are either far too difficult or far too obvious. Depending upon class levels, however, I feel that this is an area worth exploiting.

#### ***Anywhere in the class.***

As students become accustomed to these activities, deceptions can be gradually made more subtle or sophisticated, demanding more knowledge and/or analytical thought. In this respect, students should be forewarned that, each week, a false statement may be embedded anywhere in the class: in a handout, a listening exercise, a quiz or a graph.

or (if you are interested in improving students' spelling abilities) as a deliberate misspelling on the blackboard. Students must identify the statement and report it to you at the end of the class or in an e-mail.

#### ***Why Lie?***

a. In some areas of their studies -- but particularly during dictation or when copying material from the blackboard -- students tend to work on 'autopilot'. There seems to be a psychological separation between the process of writing and the content of what is being written. To help students to overcome this and to concentrate more on the content of what they are doing, inserting demonstrably false material helps students to pay attention to meaning and not automatically absorb and copy everything in front of them.

b. This kind of activity helps to sharpen students' critical faculties. It helps them evaluate the authenticity (or otherwise) of what they hear. Also, the language associated with doubt, speculation, agreement, disagreement and assessment empower students with valuable discussion strategies.

c. Some students—especially those from a Confucian educational tradition-- are accustomed to believing that their teachers are 'infallible'. That the teacher invites challenges to his/her credibility creates a new class dynamic. The opportunity to challenge their teacher is a refreshing experience for many students. Also, I make genuine mistakes. When students uncover these, I feel we have both achieved something. Furthermore, this activity can be a gateway to introduce students to the idea that some 'facts' that they meet beyond the classroom, in newspapers or on TV, for example, may not be true. It can help them to understand that a healthy skepticism is an important part of the learning process both in the classroom and beyond it.

d. It is fun. Students enjoy trying to catch their teacher or their classmates in a lie. Trying to keep a straight face amidst a mass of disbelievers merely adds to the fun.

PS I hope you were paying attention. For example, 'misspelling' in line 3 above was misspelled. There may be others....

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*This article is based on a presentation by the author at the JALT 2009 conference in Shizuoka, Japan.*

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