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# ENGLISH TEACHING

## AN INTERVIEW WITH Prof. Mark Newell Brock



Prof. Mark Newell Brock is an expert in the sphere of English teaching. He has been teaching and training teachers in Macau, Hong Kong and U. S. A. He started his teaching profession in the States in 1980 and then taught in a secondary school in Hong Kong for two years. In the scholastic year 1989-1990, he offered his first service in the University of Macau. For the following twelve years, he had been training English Language teachers in Hong Kong City University. After that he was invited to be the instructor to train teachers in Inter-University Institute of Tennessee, U. S. A. and was the coordinator of the English Language Course for Master Degree. For the scholastic year 2002-2003, Prof. Brock worked as the coordinator of the English Language Course for Master Degree in the University of Macau, and has now returned and is serving in his alma mater in the company of his family in Athens City, Tennessee, U. S. A.

**Q. You have visited many schools in Macau and have observed many teachers giving English Lessons, what is your general impression on English teaching in Macau and the performance of the English Language teaching?**

A. Under such an unfavourable situation, the teachers are supposed to be doing fine. Macau teachers often have to face many challenges in teaching.

The number of students in some classes is too big and that makes it difficult for the teachers. Many teaching problems arise from big classes. The aim of English teaching is not just to help the students to pass the Examination of Grammar but to encourage the students to utilize the language for communication. Therefore a teacher will never have enough time to offer to the students and sufficient time to nourish the capacity of using the language fluently in a class of fifty students.

The teacher is unable to give enough concern and chance to the students for the practice of the subject and this is very important for language learning. English is not only one of the subjects to be learned in school. One of the main targets for English learning is to use it as a tool for communication. Teachers should offer to the students chances to practise the language and to communicate with people. But it is difficult to arrange activities of such practice in a big class.

Generally speaking, all the teachers are doing fine though they are under such unfavourable conditions.

**Q. Are there any other difficulties in English teaching in Macau?**

A. Giving too much importance to examinations makes the teachers put too much attention to certain items and quite unwilling to teach something which will not appear in the written exams, e.g. aural practice and conversational skills. For the time being, grammar still takes a vital position in the school examinations of Macau and this deeply affects the teachers' choice of teaching materials and their contents.

It is much easier to check a grammar test than to evaluate communication skills. It is very difficult to grade an oral examination. I don't mean to suggest to count communication skills as the sole content of assessment, but to include the oral performance as a section of the appraisal. Some of the Macau schools are trying hard to move towards this direction by adding communication elements in evaluating the capacity of the students. No doubt that grammar does hold a very important place in language learning and I do deem it a must to have the grammar well acquired. However, besides grammar study, we have to show the students how to make use of the grammar knowledge to communicate with people. We should not just place emphasis on the application of grammar rules but to direct the students to integrate them into practical usage, while combining with the knowledge of other spheres to transmit information. Thus the students will be more willing to take the active move to participate in the teaching activities organized by the teachers. Having more opportunities to communicate with others means that the teacher is not the only person who talks in the class. Therefore, in classes with a big number of students, the teachers should try to offer more occasions for the students to express themselves because they don't have many chances to speak. On the other hand, a teacher having a big class may find it hard to handle the loudness of the communication and difficult to arrange group activities. Nevertheless, the students need to grasp more than the fundamental grammar, and we have to help them to acquire the ability of synthesizing the applied grammar into other knowledge so that they are equipped with the capability to communicate meaningfully in English.

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**Q. Is it possible for a teacher to elevate the communication ability of the students of a big class?**

A. Yes, of course. For the primary and secondary level, the first thing a teacher can do is to speak in English as much as possible. To improve the English standard and acquire an ideal English Language capability, the simplest thing that a teacher can do is to talk in English as often as possible, trying not to use Cantonese even in the handling of classroom affairs or classroom management. All these classroom operations offer to the teacher chances to communicate with the students in English. Besides allowing the students the opportunity to listen to the teacher's speaking in English, we have to let them listen to others talking in English also. If situation permits, make good use of the resources of videotapes, recording tapes, guest lecturers or speakers and internets etc. Since the students do not have much chance to speak in English in a big class, audio-visual activities will come to be very important. At present, many English lessons are still mainly taught in Cantonese. I think that the teacher should avoid speaking Cantonese during English classes to allow the students to develop their listening and communication comprehension in an English speaking atmosphere. Many Macau English teachers are trying to speak only in English during lesson time and they can well make it. However some English Lessons are still mostly imparted in Cantonese. I think this situation needs to be reformed urgently.

**Q. Why is Cantonese so commonly used in English Language teaching?**

A. I think there are three reasons for this phenomenon. The first is that the teachers themselves do not hold a high level of the English Language. I believe that the Macau Government has organized many training programmes to elevate the English standard of the teachers and the Macau teachers have many chances to attend these courses. These are precious occasions and I suggest that the teachers should make good use of these profitable opportunities to raise their English level. Some of them keep adopting self-study while others even tour around the English speaking countries in the summer vacation at their own expenses in order to improve the Language. Some may take active participation in training courses arranged by their own schools or other organizations. For a teacher, raising his/her English standard is something most important. It is because when the English capacity is incompetent, the teacher would not be using English in classroom teaching and that causes the students unable to acquire the appropriate English usage in school.

Another reason is that the content of the curriculum is too plentiful, the schedule is too tight and the teacher has too much to cover. These make the teacher find that he/she would not be able to finish the program if it were to explain it in English. This phenomenon is caused by too high a demand and too plentiful material to be imparted. One of the means to solve this problem is to start adopting a flexible learning program from the lower primaries.

The third reason is that if the teaching process is all in English, the students may not fully understand what is taught. If I were to find many pupils not able to understand the English explanation of the lesson, the first thing I would do was not to explain it in Cantonese but would consider how to improve my way of teaching so that they could absorb the content. If the students fail to follow what is given, why must we keep moving on when our pupils are still lagging behind? Schools often expect the teachers to cover a lot in a scholastic year and the teachers find that they won't be able to finish the set syllabus with the English medium so they teach in Cantonese. However this brings out the serious mistake of disregarding the chance of offering the English interpretation and usage. Of course the students can never be able to develop the capability of understanding and expressing themselves in English because they know that sooner or later the teacher will clarify everything in Cantonese. When learning a language, we need to use it to communicate. That is why we have to offer an English speaking environment in the classroom. But this is not often found in Macau schools. Though some schools are exercising this practice, the majority, more than half of them, the medium in English teaching is not English but Chinese.

**Q. You suggest to practise English speaking in class but that would slacken the flow of the syllabus and some parents may protest against the diminished contents. How are you going to tackle the problem?**

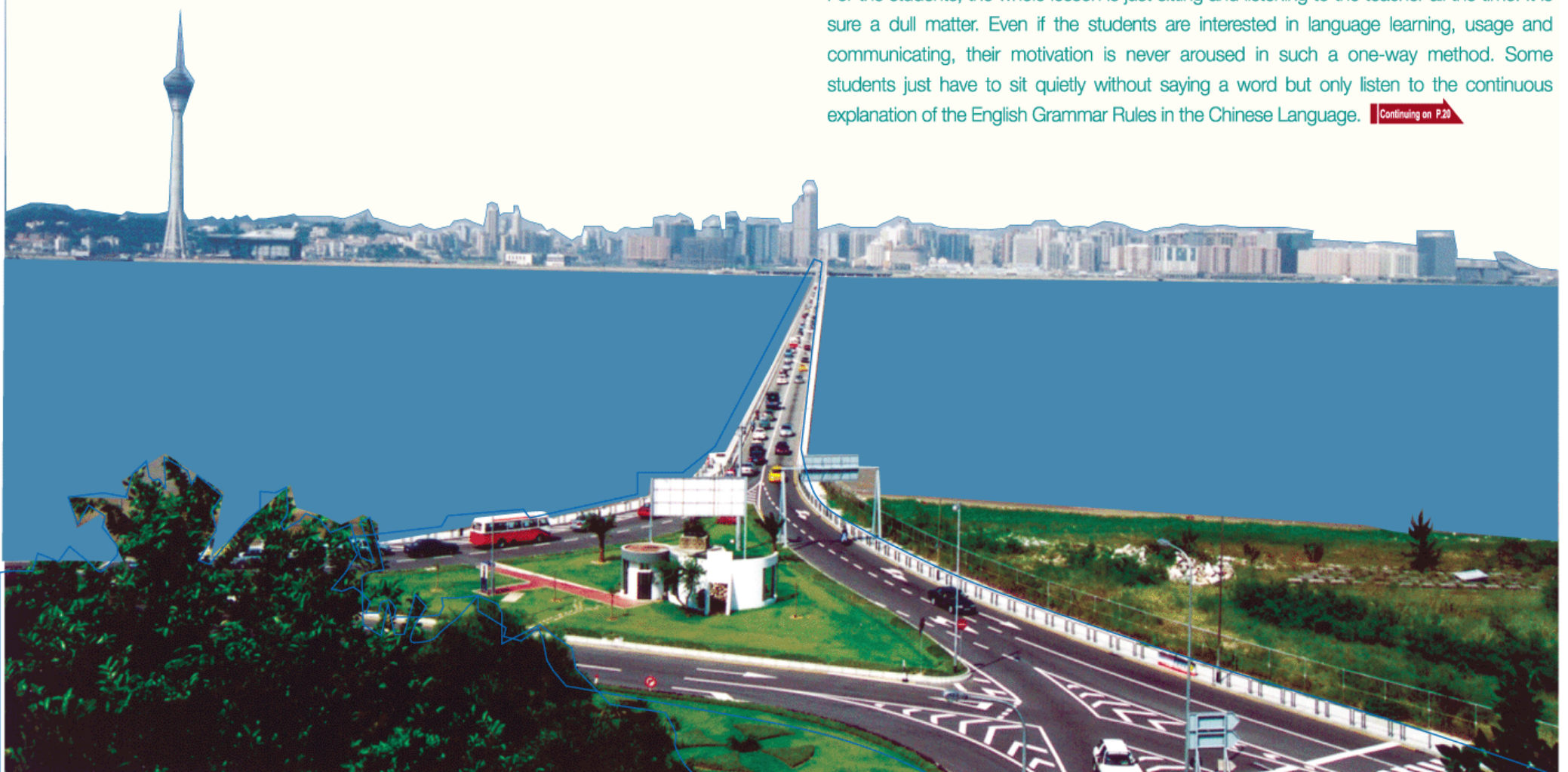
A. The public should hold practical expectations. The only chance for the Macau students to have contact with the English Language is during the English classes and the time for it is not much at all. The parents should not expect their children, who have a contact of only five to ten hours a week, to have the capacity of the English Language the same as that of a native speaker, at the time of their graduation. I think it is reasonable for the Macau public and schools to see their secondary graduates having a moderate English standard. That is, they are able to express themselves and communicate with others in their daily life.

**Q. I have heard some students say they are not interested in English. What are the elements contributing to this thought?**

A. The main reason for students to dislike learning English is that they don't like the English lessons and they dislike the experience of attending the English lessons. There are many reasons for this situation. One of them is that the students do not know why they have to learn English.

Everybody knows that Tourism and Gaming are the pillars for the future economic development. I hope that while tourism and its related business keep flourishing, all will find that a decent English capacity is a must for people in these walks of life and more students will be able to observe the urgency of English learning.

Another reason is that the lessons are always started with a very heavy mode of explanation. For the students, the whole lesson is just sitting and listening to the teacher all the time. It is sure a dull matter. Even if the students are interested in language learning, usage and communicating, their motivation is never aroused in such a one-way method. Some students just have to sit quietly without saying a word but only listen to the continuous explanation of the English Grammar Rules in the Chinese Language. Continuing on P.20





The third reason is that the students have never experienced success since their first contact with English. For them English is really too difficult and to get a passing grade is even harder. At this, the teacher has to reconsider and rearrange the teaching plan to assist the student to find it possible to be successful in class. One who always fails or is always about to fail in a certain subject will never have interest in it. We have to help the students to acquire a sense of accomplishment, to let them know that they can understand English and can communicate with others in English. If English lessons are tedious, no one will care to learn it. If a student always fails in English, he/she will hold a negative attitude to this language and will not like to learn this subject.

**Q. You have been conducting training courses in Hong Kong and Macau. What is the difference in English Teaching between these two places?**

A. The number of students in a class in Macau is a bit bigger than that in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong there are around thirty to forty students in a class but in Macau I met classes with over fifty students.

Another obvious difference is that during classroom teaching, Hong Kong teachers practise English utilization more than Macau teachers. Therefore Hong Kong students have more opportunities to get in touch with English. I think the category of the English Programme set by the Education and Manpower Bureau of Hong Kong gives heavy attention to the nurturance of the technique of communication. Though some people doubt the achievement of this English Programme and believe it to be not successfully implemented. But all the Programmes, Teaching Materials and Assessment of Hong Kong carry a great weight in the development of communication skills. Since many schools of Macau are using the Hong Kong programmes and Teaching Materials, they may well introduce this superiority to Macau.

Macau schools have a variety of teaching materials which is very abundant when compared with those of Hong Kong. The main reason is that the majority of the schools do not have to take the public examination and follow the strict demands of the government. Therefore a variety of programmes and materials can be adopted making it very different from Hong Kong.

**Q. You have been working in this field of Language Teaching over twenty years. From your experience, what is the best age for a child to start learning a foreign language?**

A. In Language Teaching there is no fixed rule stating when to start learning a foreign language. Some consider it the earlier the better while others take an opposite opinion and believe that the most suitable time is when the students are attending Primary Three or Four. It is because the students should hold a solid foundation of their mother tongue first. I can only say that different scholars hold different ideas. However, there is a point we should note. If we start learning a foreign language at an early age (e.g. kindergarten stage), the focus should not be laid on writing but on developing the child's listening ability.

**Q. Mr. Edmund Ho, the Chief Executive of Macau, SAR, said that the economic development of Macau depends mainly on Gaming and Tourism. How does this policy affect the foreign language learning in Macau?**

A. If everybody hopes Tourism to become the chief economic resource, the majority of the employees of this service must be equipped with the ability to communicate in English. To learn English does not mean just to serve the tourists from the English speaking countries. Even tourists from Japan, Korea or other countries will utilize English for communication.

It is because those belonging to the service industry need to be equipped with the ability to talk and to communicate with the travelers in English. I presume Macau students have to be nourished with the fundamental capability of utilizing English in their daily life and in contacting with people.

In the future, all those who work in the Gaming and Beverage & Food services will have to be equipped with the ability to communicate in English. That's why I suggest to include this requirement into the future curriculum of the Macau Learning Programme so that our graduates may possess the fundamental capability of communication.

**Q. Besides the fundamental capability, are there any other important elements that the Programme Development officers have to consider?**

A. Multifaceted and Pluralistic curriculum offers to the school sufficient autonomous space, allowing the school to decide what type of items best suits the students. However, the negative view of this system is that the level of the English Language of the graduates from different schools will vary from one another. Of course there will be difference in learning systems in any place of the world. Some schools may hold a better coordination while others are stronger in another field. But, as this variation among the schools of Macau is quite serious, it is disadvantageous to some of the students.

**Q. What are the strategies of teaching and learning English? Which are more efficient?**

A. There is no miracle at all in English Learning. There are many different sorts of strategies to learn English: vocabulary learning, grammar practising, phonetic exercising and communication models etc. All these are helpful to English Learning. It is most important that the teacher knows different students prefer different learning strategies. Therefore, the teacher has to adopt multifaceted and pluralistic teaching methods and not just stress on grammar or vocabulary learning. Take the videotape and cassette into the classroom to sing and play games with the students, to offer to them a multifaceted method and chance of learning English.

**Q. The last question: What is your expectation for the English teaching and learning in Macau? If you were to come back to Macau after a few years, what changes would you hope to see?**

A. We learn a language because we need it to broaden our sight and experience the world around us. What I care to see is that all the English Language teachers will hold a professional standard. This means every English teacher will have a full mastery of the language, having the capacity to communicate and express himself/herself. In classroom teaching, the teachers should be able to organize various teaching and learning activities in the English Language.

As for the curriculum and text books, I hope to see that they can offer different learning methods to allow the students to participate in various teaching activities so as to make a lively application of the language and not the monotonous models of every move being led or planned by the teacher. For assessment, don't put a heavy weight to a certain section of the English programme but make an overall appraisal of the core potential for reading, listening, writing, expressing, etc.

Finally, for the students, I hope they will understand the importance of English Learning, be happy to learn it and be able to discover the fun in learning the language. These will enable them to communicate with others in their daily life.

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