

## PURASTAAN KIELTÄ 8 Tea and Cake in the Language Centre?

Last September an engineering student in my English course apparently expected “a piece of cake”. By the end of the semester, though, he wrote that it had after all turned out to be a “very complex piece”, which had “really made [him] think about [his] English learning”. Good then; I appreciated both the maturation in his view and his ability to extend the classic idiom for his own communicative purpose.

Still, since the university spends good money on Language Centre teacher salaries, let’s check that we’re not merely serving up “pieces of cake”. After all, if all of today’s youth speak great English anyway, and can even manipulate their idioms at will, couldn’t we teach less and save on the cake budget? Believe me, that’s a view that’s been aired.

There are high-flyers in our classes, certainly. On the whole, they’re still avidly learning, though, and not running out of things to learn. Being fairly fearless users of English in many cases, they’re also out there learning by doing, being seen and heard, and probably incidentally feeding the popular stereotype of the fluent young Finnish academic. In truth, not all students do that well in English; some positively struggle with it. By no means all feel competent to address me in my mother-tongue. Hence I read in an e-mail from an older student (herself persuaded by the youth-stereotype) that, “tunnen itseni aivan tontuksi nuorten ja reippaiden kielenpuhujien joukossa”; if she only knew it, it’s a younger student whose message title is “englantia lukihäiriöisille/osaamattomille”. The word “paniikki” is a rather frequent visitor in my mailbox too.

Out of a 2009 interviewing experience with 17 informants, witnessed tears and all, grew my commitment to developing and offering the English Activation Course. While students not having the starting level needed for required university courses could be sent back to (evening) high-school – another view that’s been aired – I’d prefer to ask why they’d be likely to do much better in a repeat of something that didn’t suit them the first time around, and rather take my cue from dyslexia-awareness activists who ask if L.D really *should* stand for “Learning Disability” or instead for “Learns Differently”...?

My teaching approach evolves constantly, and meanwhile my reading habits revolve around dyslexia, affect in language learning, and learner autonomy, among others. I favour fluency over accuracy, pairwork over public performance, and holistic over analytic – the latter being clinched when an interviewee told me the end-result of paying attention to blackboard explanations of things like word-order: a jumble of “everything moving, even the teacher”!

Teaching the English Activation Course is unique every time around, as well as being challenging and rewarding; in short, it’s very much my cup of tea. Like the piece of cake I started with, though, I have to say it’s not the classic “nice” cup of tea of Brit-speak, but more – to put it in engineer-speak – of a “complex” cup of tea, that really makes me think about my teaching.

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Heather Kannasmaa on opettanut englantia Oulun yliopiston Kielikeskuksessa vuodesta 1986. Hänellä on pitkästä ajalta kokemusta eritaustaisten ja erilaisten oppijoiden opettamisesta. Hän on erityisen kielenopetuksen kehittämistä sellaisille opiskelijoille, joilla on lukihäiriö tai joilla on muuten vaikeuksia täyttää vieraiden kielten opintojen oppimistavoitteita.

