

# English for Fools

Teaching a foreign language successfully does not depend only on one's knowledge from books on methodology. Of course, it would be good to be aware of methodology as much as possible, but unless a teacher is creative, he or she will not be able to give a class that extra spark that truly inspires learning. Add a sense of humor, and a tiresome learning process becomes something learners adore.

Students always wait for something new from their teachers, especially on a holiday or on the eve of a holiday.

I am one of the many teachers who enjoy working with idioms and proverbs that are related to the subject or theme of a lesson. It goes without saying that whatever additional materials we use, these materials ought to have a connection with the topic. April 1st, or *April Fools' Day*, when in Europe and America friends play tricks on each other, is one of the best-loved holidays. We teachers ought to take that into consideration. Here is an idea I exercised last year.

I began each of my lessons on April Fools' Day by saying: "Today I will give you some proverbs and sayings about fools." My students were delighted to hear this, as we always have fun with the foolishness of others. I wrote on the blackboard the following proverbs, taken from *The Penguin Dictionary of Proverbs*.

1. Fortune favours fools. [According to the widespread superstition, fools were both lucky themselves and bringers of luck to those they encountered.]

2. The folly of one man is the fortune of another.
3. Children and fools must not play with edged tools.
4. Too much money makes one mad.
5. Much learning makes men mad.
6. Fools grow without watering.
7. Little things please little minds. [First cited in approximately this form in Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), although the thought can be traced back to Ovid (1st century BC).]
8. Once wood, never wise. [*Wood* here means *mad*.]
9. From a foolish judge, a quick sentence.
10. A wise man changes his mind, a fool never. [Some variants have "...but a fool perseveres."]
11. Fools are wise as long as silent.
12. For mad words deaf ears.
13. A fool may give a wise man counsel.
14. He that is born a fool is never cured.
15. A fool and his money are soon parted.
16. There is no fool like an old fool.
17. A barber learns to shave by shaving fools. [The implication is that only a fool allows himself to be practiced on by a learner.]
18. Fools set stools for wise folks to stumble at.
19. Every man is a fool sometimes, and none all the time.

Nineteen proverbs! One of the students asked me why I had given them 19 proverbs, not 20. I asked: "Do you really want me to make it 20?"

Unanimously a positive answer was given. I said: "Ok! Let's make it 20." And I wrote one more proverb on the reverse side of the blackboard because I had purposely filled the blackboard with the 19 proverbs so that there would not be space for Number 20.

We translated the 19 proverbs and tried to find their equivalents in Kazakh and Russian. We were really enjoying finding good equivalents and translating them. I had the students repeat the proverbs after me. They did very well. My students repeated them in English many times trying to learn them at once. Then one of them reminded me about the 20th proverb. Thanking him for reminding me, I turned the reversible board around. The students read the 20th proverb:

*Wise men make proverbs and fools repeat them.*

The room roared with laughter! When the classroom calmed down, I asked the students if my joke had hurt their feelings. I also said the joke was glaring evidence of the 19th proverb. This is how I played a trick on my students in all three of my classes, and I had the same result each time.

### **Additional activities with proverbs**

After the fun of the trick, there still remains enough time to demonstrate other activities to help bring these proverbs to life. Of course, there might be many methods of working on proverbs besides finding appropriate equivalents. One possibility that comes to mind is categorization, i.e., students could try to find

themes that unite some of the proverbs. Two possible categories are *fool as a victim* and *fool as an instigator*.

Another possibility is looking at how each of the proverbs actually describes a fool, for example, according to the Penguin dictionary definition of *foolishness*: *foolish acts, characteristics of fools, the recklessness of fools, the gullibility of fools, the talkativeness of fools, the wisdom of fools, and old fools*. Further, after studying the definitions, students could make up a dialogue or story using the proverbs.

Then, if you have the 20 proverbs separately written on 20 cards or small pieces of paper, you can cut them in half and shuffle the 40 pieces in order to have students find the card that matches their half of the proverb. Thus you will make sure that students master the proverbs, and you will have selected pairs of students for any coming classwork in pairs. If you have a small class, 10 proverbs will work as well.

The secret to being a successful teacher seems to be unpredictability. When students do not know what you are going to do next, they are always alert. To keep their attention, it is good to crack jokes at serious lessons from time to time.

Your students might also enjoy a surprise lesson on proverbs.

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