

# 'ACTIVATE YOUR ENGLISH'

## and the question of ' The Missing Element'

by JOHN L. NORMAN - Director AYE

**Activate Your English**, our intensive English summer school courses for teenagers, began in 1983, based at Fairfield House, Stanhope, in North East England and run by John and Susan Norman, both experienced teachers.

In general, then there were three three week courses each summer, all with a different focus and with progressive levels from lower intermediate to advanced. Age groups from 14 - 18 were taught and the structure encouraged students to return and progress through the different levels. Many students returned 3 or more times and we began to build a large network of ex-students, teachers and families, mainly from Northern Italy, which exists to this day. Indeed, some of our ex students are now considering sending their own children for the AYE experience !.Recruitment is largely through this network and a list of recommending teachers with whom we have worked for many years.

Following the closure of Fairfield House in 2005, it was intended to end AYE but the response from many friends caused us to rethink that decision. Thus, in 2006 we moved the venue for our courses, altered the format to two weeks, and refocussed one of our courses to English in Action,( that is more of the English of everyday life and less of the classroom,) while retaining the essential features of AYE.

We are now based in St Chad's College, a constituent College of Durham University, which is located 75 metres from the magnificent Durham Cathedral and across the Palace Green from Durham Castle.

It would be hard to find a more inspiring, and indeed secure location, and students react well to this historic but friendly and comfortable venue.

We are often asked how do we ensure the success and substantial progress of our students. In an article of this length, it would be impossible to answer that question by outlining all the activities of AYE courses. Instead, it may be that sharing our **primary goal** and **operational principles** would be at least as illuminating.

From the start of AYE our **Primary Goal** has been -

**'To activate and enhance the students passive knowledge of English and assist them to develop the skills and confidence needed to communicate effectively and fluently in English'.**

We have always been clear that our role is different from that of secondary school English teachers in Europe. Their role is to **teach** English, often starting with beginners, in all its

complexity, while ours, with students who have a good grasp of the basics , is to **assist**

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students to use their knowledge in the real world - **in effect to turn their academic knowledge into a living language for communication.** We aim to complement the study of English and the work of teachers, by providing what frequently they cannot- for reasons of curriculum, exam pressure, time limitations and teaching traditions - that is, an opportunity for students to experience English in Action and so grow in confidence and fluency.

To ensure that we achieve our primary goal, we apply **five operational principles**, as follows -

### 1. **Aye courses must offer students Freedom from Fear.**

We believe that strong self confidence and high self esteem are the third determinant of educational achievement. Our many years of experience have taught us that the one factor which holds many students back is **the fear of making mistakes** - especially in public and with strangers. Students fear being corrected and admonished in class, of being made to feel foolish and silly, especially if their colleagues laugh at them. The result is that they don't try to speak or volunteer answers.

We work hard to change this perception by **reframing mistakes as opportunities for learning - after all mistakes do not prevent communication.** We never correct students in the first few days of a course, even if they have made serious errors. As confidence grows, then we begin to correct major mistakes and work towards student self correction, which is the badge of progress. The net results of this policy are remarkable, as we see students, afraid to utter a word at the start of a course, communicating fluently and confidently with strangers or performing in a final course presentation, after just two weeks.



### 2. **That all AYE courses use a range of teaching strategies and methods which are 'brain friendly'.**

That is reflecting new understanding about how we learn - creative, proactive, varied, fun, interactive, and above all, representing **'high challenge and low threat'**. Some school experience is the absolute opposite of this and students thus begin to doubt their ability to achieve. They settle for less and are frequently undemanding of themselves. Whether in day to day class work, interviewing strangers, competing in a scrabble competition, writing and performing poems and songs and indeed devising and presenting a final public performance, which is a feature of every course, we set high levels of challenge to every student. I cannot count the times I have heard a student say 'I really didn't think I could do that ' - thus, after a little initial encouragement, giving them the chance to surprise themselves - and frequently they do just that!. See their comments following last year's Shakespeare course on the website ([www.whitfieldplace.co.uk](http://www.whitfieldplace.co.uk))

**After all, ' a person's reach must exceed their grasp or what's a heaven for?'**

### 3. **That all AYE courses should be content focussed.**

Yes, of course, they are English courses but we are also keen to share our delight in literature, drama, history - the best of English culture. Principally, however, they are courses in which skills and ability to communicate in English become the means not the only ends. In truth, a focus on the project, challenge, or task has a remarkable effect. Students are diverted from the sometimes dreary business of learning English as the demands of the task at hand take priority. They often simply forget that they are exploring, coping or creating in a foreign language as they concentrate on trying to face the challenge. For a short period, speaking and working in English becomes natural and we know we are succeeding when we see the evidence of students beginning to think in English.

This does not mean that we do not offer 'English lessons' but we do so when the need arises and as part of the process of induction and activation.. Sometimes such sessions are remedial, for example, when we have noticed that many people in the group are struggling with futures, or word order or pronunciation etc. Similarly, if the students are about to be sent out into Durham to survey tourists or local people, we will do a session on listening, questioning and interviewing - thus, this kind of input is demand led and has immediate relevance.

### 4. **That all AYE courses should involve the frequent use and application of the students new communication skills and confidence, in 'the real world.'**

This principle self evidently follows all those above. So often, in the world of schooling, students who have acquired new knowledge in a variety of subjects, are left asking the questions, 'So What?. What's the point of that? What's the relevance of that?' Often the answer is no more than that it provides the tools to climb the next step in the academic ladder - a rationale, which although valid, is often not enough to motivate or assist students to develop ownership of new knowledge.

**So, for us, application and use is vital .** Our 'real world' is both the world of the course and the world outside. Whether students are using their English to ask for food in the dining hall, or respond to a teacher's question about football or politics or in lessons, workshops, projects, sports, presentations and performances, or outside college in shops, coffee bars, on excursions or meeting charming new friends from different countries etc etc, they must use and apply their English to survive, explore, impress, discover, create etc etc - in short to communicate in their new world of English. We, the teachers, although often fluent in their native Italian, only speak, teach, share, reprimand, excite, enthuse or simply chat in English etc, except in situations of pastoral need. **Thus day to day, the students experience every aspect of using their English and gain useful evidence of their progress.**

## 5. All AYE courses include student self evaluation and monitoring of progress.

Many students in school have little opportunity or indeed encouragement, within the general curriculum, to identify their own learning needs or goals and monitor their own progress. Assessment is traditionally teacher led, as you would expect. The result in many cases is that students become disengaged and have little ownership of their learning. Within the special circumstances of our summer schools, we are able to adopt a somewhat different approach.

At the start of each course, within our general goal and specific aims, students have the opportunity to identify their own learning needs - usually expressed within broad categories such as confidence, fluency, vocabulary, listening etc. Using a simple literal grades +/- system, they identify some important learning areas and their current performance level in each. After all, determining their starting level is vital if they are to be able to identify subsequent progress. **To put it another way, to know where you want to get to, and if you have reached that point, you need to know where you are now.** Their involvement in this process develops ownership and the concept of personal responsibility for their own learning - a notion that sometimes comes as something of a shock to students who have tended to blame teachers or parents for their own failings.

Then, every four days, in small tutorial groups, students are encouraged to re-evaluate their level in their chosen skill areas. They do so based on evidence of a particular event or experience- for example understanding the guide on an excursion, asking for something in a shop or being more confident during a presentation. Keeping careful records of their regradings after each tutorial, we then come to their final tutorial where students are able to identify their current levels, for comparison with their starting grades and the final grades they had hoped to achieve. Finally, using the data they have collected about their own performance, students write their own report, to which their tutor or course director adds comments, to take home to show parents or teachers.

Some students, especially those who are less mature, find this process strange and difficult. Admittedly, it is hardly rigorously scientific being entirely based on personal, experiential data **but it embodies some important and positive messages.** It is interesting to recall how many ex students tell us that this simple approach to self evaluation has remained an important part of their thinking in education, work and indeed life. It should be noted that this simple system of self evaluation and its attendant tutorials, also provides a useful opportunity for social and pastoral monitoring.



These then are the **five operational principles which inform all AYE courses.** They are hardly radical or ground breaking but they do provide a useful framework of educational values which ideally could be applied to any educational context. It would be fair to say that, unlike much day school teaching, we are not constrained by exam pressures or the demands of the syllabus. Yet we do need to be aware of the commercial pressures which demand that our courses are successful and effective. Ultimately, they are the principles of good practice and they work - assuming, of course, the involvement of multi-skilled, experienced and inspirational teachers who share and know how to apply these

principles. Approximately 2500 students and 76 courses would appear to be a convincing testimonial!

**So, finally, I hear you ask, - 'What is the missing element?'** We have well motivated students who have chosen to attend a serious learning course rather than the average fun filled jamboree English Summer Schools. They are growing in confidence, have the skills to communicate, the vocabulary necessary, supportive teachers who have prepared them well, they can listen and respond without panic and are not tongue tied at the prospect of making mistakes. However, increasingly, we are aware that something is missing.

It has always been clear to us that the standard of school based English teaching across Europe, and especially in Italy where the majority of our students come from, is generally high. Students at all intermediate and advanced levels usually have a good grasp of basic grammar, an extensive vocabulary and good listening skills. Similarly, they understand many English idioms and know the simple rules of pronunciation. We enhance and activate their often passive knowledge of English, address some of the more common problems such as word order, tenses and emphasis, and practice some sounds which are particularly difficult for Italian students like 'th'.

We know they will lack confidence in actually speaking English for reasons of infrequent practice or because sometimes they have been largely taught in their own native tongue, a problem which is fairly common anywhere in the world. Sometimes the models of speaking and pronunciation they have acquired are less than accurate or fluent, perhaps because their own teachers, who provide the models, are a little rusty themselves.

We also know that sometimes they have little experience of the joy of playing with a language - of singing, making rhymes, doing puzzles or jokes, creating wholly alliterative sentences, building a word circle or an assonance pyramid etc etc - all wonderful ways of developing confidence but maybe seen by some teachers as frivolous and not part of the serious business of language learning!

All this we know from our many years of experience and it is for these reasons that AYE exists. **The Missing Element is CLARITY OF ARTICULATION.** Traditionalists would describe the production of vowel sounds as annunciation and of consonants as articulation. However, for the purposes of this paper, we shall use the term articulation - that is the physical process for the production of sounds.

Without this quality, despite growing confidence, appropriate vocabulary and some idea of emphasis, students speakers of English produce language which sounds mumbled and confused - somewhere between Inuit and Maori! **And bearing it mind that our primary goal is that our students should be able to communicate confidently and fluently, poorly produced, mumbly and unclear English, which the listener cannot understand, massively inhibits effective communication!** In short, if people cannot understand our student speakers, then all the hard work and learning counts for nothing - it doesn't add up to a row of beans!

So, is this a new problem? Hardly -it has always been a problem but for some reason it is a **worsening problem** which is difficult to explain. The fundamental differences between English and some European languages, especially Italian, are well known and understood and have always informed some of the activities of AYE courses.

Broadly speaking, Italian is a mid-mouth produced language in which many sounds are lingua palatal - that is produced on the hard or soft palate and the blade or tip of the tongue or some combination of these in contact or association. What was called laziness or inagility of the tongue tip in particular ( an accusation which caused me as a young drama student nearly to die of shame!) does not greatly inhibit clear articulation and communication in Italian.

In English speaking, however, this weakness is fatal to clear articulation, especially for medial and final consonants without which English becomes a jumble. English is a front-mouth produced language where many consonant sounds are lingua - labial - dental - that is produced by the tongue, especially the tongue tip, the lips and the teeth or some combination of these in contact or association.

If you doubt me, try it for yourself - run through the five main English vowel signs and the 23 English vowel sounds and feel how and where they are produced ( mainly from formations and positions of the mouth and tongue ). Now do the same for all the consonants. As you do so, the absolute importance of agility, accuracy and energy in consonant production becomes very clear. (for those of you familiar with this material, please excuse my deliberate simplifications ) Try some key words like 'plight' - what you get without energy on the plosive p and accuracy on the final t is something like ' **igh** ' which as we all know is an unusual breed of yak from Outer Mongolia !

**Thus** - ' What is your plight, ( troubled situation) sir ? ' **becomes** -

' What is your unusual breed of yak, sir ?'

Not exactly a masterpiece of communication but a good illustration of the problem caused by weak articulation. Try some of these with your students using the 'igh' base - they're fun. (I made that one up, of course - sorry - didn't want to keep all the fun for myself!)

As mentioned previously, we at AYE have always been aware of this problem and have included practical work on articulation, as well as breathing, resonance and projection, especially where we are preparing students for a final course public presentation or performance. One of our main aims on such an occasion is that the audience will be able to understand every word spoken by our students.

However, the pressure of performance, shortness of breath and perhaps even anxiety in remembering text, can significantly reduce the quality of articulation. Thus, such preparation is essential and makes a tremendous difference to the quality of the students performance.

More recently, however, we are finding that in day to day, on course speaking

with teachers, fellow students and college staff, the problem of weak and lazy articulation is becoming more acute. This, of course, reduces effective communication but also has a worrying secondary effect. If every time they speak in English, someone says -' sorry I didn't understand or could you please repeat that ,' the confidence which we have worked so hard to build, drains away very speedily. If their every experience of speaking English feels like a failure because they were not understood, then we are running fast to stand still or even go backwards! I cannot overstate the vital importance of this simple set of skills. **The best analogy I can provide is about training a chef with knowledge of hygiene, flavours, ingredients , recipes etc but omitting to teach how to operate the oven!**

There may be many reasons why this problem seems to be increasing and I cannot pretend that I know the answer. I can only offer some of the following possibilities.

English teachers who used to find time to work on this vital skill, now are under too much syllabus pressure to include it.

The number of English teachers who are aware of, and include this skill, in their lessons is reducing as teachers retire and are replaced by teachers who adopt a more academic approach which downgrades active speaking communication skills.

That teachers whose own articulation is rusty are not providing good models to help their students improve and are not teaching enough in English..

That more students are having corrective dental work which fills their mouths with metal and makes precise articulation difficult.

That the influence of the internet has reduced the amount of time that students actually spend speaking English with real people rather than writing silly comments on Facebook and the like.

That the influence of the mid atlantic drawl and speech style in films, music, tv etc is spreading. Its message that it's cool to drawl is persuasive.

Even, that young people are increasingly passive and find those who try with energy and commitment, a bit nerdy! It's interesting to note that if you ask teachers the question, ' is there the same problem in Italian ?' , you will receive widely differing answers, from ' not at all' to 'absolutely - standards of spoken Italian are falling every day'.

There may be many other reasons of which I am unaware. There may be reasons specific to the Italian cultural scene. However, if we are unsure of the reasons, then I trust we can, at least, agree that the time to address this problem is now.

We are often asked to share some of the teaching methods and ideas which we have accumulated over the years. In respect of this particular problem that would mean, games, specific exercises, tongue twisters, puzzles, songs etc etc - all very simple - all very effective and including 'placing' exercises - the most difficult of all.!

I am therefore offering two workshop events **in January, one in Milan and one in**

**Conegliano** which I have called '**SPEAK - SURE**'. Each workshop will last two and a half hours and is free of charge to any English teachers who wish to attend. They will be very practical and fun and I hope give teachers some new ideas and approaches for dealing with the problem of articulation. They may also give you the chance, if you think you need it, to polish up your own articulation and tell me the reasons why you think this problem exists. I'm happy to listen. The full details are attached below - please come along whether you are new to AYE or an old friend. While these first two workshops will be free, subsequent events of the same type will be charged. I look forward to meeting you.

I am very hopeful that this short paper provided some useful information about **ACTIVATE YOUR ENGLISH** - who we are and what we do and focussed your attention on a specific pedagogical problem. I am immensely proud of what we have achieved over the years and the success of our many students in learning to activate and use their English. Our success would not have been possible without the special contribution made over the years by Susan Norman, my original partner, Glenn Sweet, our Director of Studies, and Morena Santandrea, our Principal Agent in Italy, and many others too numerous to name. I trust that in drawing attention to a particular problem in this way, I may guarantee the continued success and influence of

**ACTIVATE YOUR ENGLISH**



**John. L. Norman.** M.A.Ed - Director of Activate Your English

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Copyright - John. L Norman - Director - Activate Your English.  
email - john@whitfieldplace.co.uk mob - 0044 7831 403164

