



**\* Forum \***

## **TESLing Abroad: A Learning Experience**

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### **A Foreword from the TESL-EJ Forum Editor . . .**

Many times, we tend to think that the world (and TESL) is very much what we see around us. In the best case, when we attend conferences abroad, we conclude that language teaching is what presenters of different nationalities show. However, two recent experiences have made me think that that idea is completely wrong: a conference in Slovakia and a long conversation with an African teacher.

The first proved to be not only interesting but also worthwhile because of the experience of living and sharing points of view with teachers of limited means (\$35 US covered the cost of the conference proceedings, lodging, and meals for two days [1]), but with many hopes and much interest in improving their teaching and daily work. Additionally, the chat with an African teacher showed me that will and faith are the most important tools for most TEFL/TESL instructors.

A few days after these two experiences, Ted O'Neill, the guest editor for this issue, sent me a message: "Is it true that the TESL-EJ Forum is really trying to get open and serious opinions from everywhere in the world?" I immediately agreed. He mentioned that he would love to have the opportunity to tell the international readership about the TESL conference in Cambodia.

So, this all is what this Forum is about. An opportunity to share, learn and, overall, to see how people work in realities very different from ours.

Many thanks to Ted who has not only done a fantastic job in collecting and preparing these writings, but who is also a very enthusiastic about his English teaching.

As always, we would also like to extend the invitation to submit ideas and possible themes as well as responses or comments about this or any other topic since we all make the TESL world live.

### **Note**

[1] Thanks to the Slovak Association of Teachers of English (SAUA/SATE) for three great days full of learning experiences.

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## TESLing Abroad

### Teaching and teacher development in Cambodia

This winter, like the past two years, I finished up preparations for my presentation and packed by bags to attend the Cambodia TESOL Conference in Phnom Penh, Cambodia [<http://www.camtesol.org>]. When I tell friends or colleagues about my plans they ask, "Why are you going to Cambodia? To see Angkor Wat?" Or, just ask "There is a teaching conference in Cambodia?" in an unbelieving tone. In fact, CamTESOL is a large conference that always features a good group of plenary speakers and a growing number of participants. Last year, just over 700 hundred teachers participated and this year just over 800. But, that still doesn't really answer why I should travel from my university in suburban Tokyo to join them. The real reason is the energy of the participants and the feeling of being involved with a growing and driven profession that I experience with this group active teachers and trainees. Presentations at CamTESOL are always well attended and participants, many of whom travel from rural schools, really engage with the presented ideas and each other.

At the 3rd Annual CamTESOL Conference, 24-25 February 2007, I gave a short presentation and asked teachers to contribute entries on their teaching and teacher development in Cambodia for this Forum. Several themes can be seen in the writing of these teachers: peer and near-peer support is very important, pride in being a teacher, care for students, and a commitment to professional development. The following contributions are from nine conference participants: a teacher-trainer, several trainees, and two teachers.

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#### *How I Acquired and Developed My Teaching Skills*

Meng Seng Heng  
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I have been teaching English since 1994 and have experienced many different teaching styles and methods. When I started teaching, I used the grammar translation method. Every time I used the same technique: reading texts and translating them into the Khmer language for my students, who copied them in their notebooks. I did

not have clear aims or objectives for my lessons and only followed the course book page by page--it seemed as if I taught the course books not my students. The students learnt by rote and were passive. I talked a lot and did not provide opportunities for my students to talk. It seemed that I came more to learn or to review English myself rather than specifically teach the students. I did not know how to set up tasks or different activities for my students, and they did nothing during the lessons. It was easy for me to teach by using the same technique--following the course book all the time--but my students and I seemed not to improve anything. I reflected that my teaching method was only one-way communication and my lessons were not effective.

In 1995, I attended the English Language Teacher Training Course and on-the-job training programs with the Cambodian Secondary Teacher Training project in Cambodia; it was very interesting and useful. The training programs consisted of 3 blocks with 10 weeks for each block.

In Block 1, I learned about English language upgrading, since the teacher trainees' level of English language was poor. At this stage, the process of teaching and learning were very new to me when compare to my teaching style. My teacher used the communicative approach in her teaching and all the trainees were very active and improved quickly.

In Block 2, the training course was focused on teaching methodology and teaching practice in real schools. We learned how to teach speaking skills focused on a grammar point and how to prepare lesson plan to focus on 3 Ps: Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) by using our own ideas rather than following course books. I learned how to put a grammar point in context to make it meaningful, and ask students to use grammar immediately rather than to explain the grammar for the whole session. I learned techniques of teaching, how to set up tasks, how to use different activities, how to prepare lesson plans steps by step. We did peer teaching for part of each lesson and gave feedback to each other. I taught real classes at school and everyone observed me.

Finally, in Block 3, the training course was focused on teaching all skills, and we did teaching practice in the schools. We learned how to teach speaking confidently, listening accurately, reading effectively and writing properly. We learned how to set up different tasks and choose appropriate techniques and activities for the students to use their critical thinking, rather than to translate into Khmer.

During the teaching practice, it was a bit hard but interesting to me. I was nervous and worried about using the new methodology in the right way. I was concerned about my teaching skills and my English. I also worried about what questions my students would ask me and how to conduct the lessons properly. However, I have learned a lot from my students, my colleagues, my trainer and my self-reflection. I am very open-minded to listening to others and received their feedback in order to improve my teaching skills. Every time I taught I tried to take note of things that blocked me; after my teaching I completed a self-reflection. Why didn't the activity work very well? Why could my students not do the tasks properly? Why could they not speak accurately? After pondering these points, I then made some changes for the next lessons and implemented it again. Through this routine, I could apply the way of teaching and learning skills for my personal development after the training program.

At the same time, I did self-study by reading and listening to cassettes. I read a lot of course books many times that I needed to teach and prepared lesson plans on my own. I looked at each unit and identified objectives for each part, then set up extra tasks and activities. Sometimes, I used the articles in the books but I changed into the new techniques. Eventually, I could use the appropriate techniques and different activity. Before I started teaching, I needed to listen to the cassettes at least 5 to 7 times to make sure I understand the meaning and vocabulary clearly. I listened and followed the instructions in the books and then tried to adapt the tasks I was happy with.

When the methodology training programs finished in 1996, I became a teacher trainer at the Kandal Regional Teacher Training Centre. My responsibilities are to conduct training of trainers programs and to observe teacher trainees and give oral and written feedback in English for Pre-Service and In-Service teachers, from whom I can learn more about teaching.

Throughout my career, I have always liked taking risks. As I remember I was really lucky when I worked with the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) Education Services in 1998. The CfBT provided lots of variety training programs services to organizations and companies in the public and private sectors. I worked with many professional native teachers and I started teaching new different skills. Everything was new and sometimes over my ability. I pretended to be confident, tried to think about the objectives of each task and listen carefully to my trainees. I needed to do a lot of research, reading, and get support from my colleagues on contents and concepts. However, some of the skills training programs that I conducted were not effective because they did not apply to the trainees needs. Even though I failed in my tasks, I was not a failed person because I started learning and improving my teaching style step by step at this stage.

I continue in my development and attend different skills training programs and conferences for teachers in order to keep learning and improving my teaching more. Among many conferences, I attended and conducted workshops for the CamTESOL conferences. I prepared and created different topics on methodology every year for the conferences. I do not give up when I am faced with something difficult, but instead I try to find a way to open the door. I believe that we grow through new challenges and I am not afraid of this learning process, as it has improved my skills enormously.

What's next? At the moment I am also teaching Khmer language to the foreign students at the International School of Phnom Penh (ISPP). I can see lots of interesting, new and different styles of teaching. Most of the teachers try to use new different techniques that I never know before and stick with their students. They design a lot of interesting materials to conduct activity and play a lot of interesting games to lead to the lessons. The students are very active and they use their critical thinking to discover the concepts of the topics.

In conclusion, I feel very happy with my job as a teacher trainer since I have improved my teaching skills a lot through experience. I am also able to set up aims and objectives, set up tasks and activities, and use different techniques properly. I am able to conduct my lesson more lively using the communicative approach and by the end of the lesson the trainees are able to apply the skills and use the language themselves. I

strongly believe that better teachers lead to better students and it this ambition to be a more effective conduit for students' learning that has fueled and sustained my hunger for improvement and personal excellence.

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During this two-year course, I learned an introduction to learning and teaching, methods, visual-aids, and pronunciation.

For methods, I learned how to teach, how to do lesson plans, how to make lessons more interesting, how to organize games, how to use student-centred teaching, how to motivate students to do pair- or groupwork or to share their ideas, and know how to cut down teacher talk time and to increase student talk time.

For visual aids, I learned how to draw pictures, how to use pictures to teach and make them attractive and suitable for the lesson. For pronunciation, I learned how to pronounce correctly, to know stress and their syllables. I am sorry that I can only listen to the teachers, however; we have don't have enough materials, documents to do research, or computers for accessing the Internet. We learn many theories but little practice because of we lack materials. We need more course books and equipment that can help us improve our learning. This course could get easier and easier.

I think while we are learning, if we have enough resources, we can learn easily and effectively, so when we finish this course and go to teach, we are hopeful that we can educate the next generations successfully and they will become good people--an important resource for our society as well as our potential.

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Hello everybody! I study at the RTTC: Introduction to Learning and Teaching, Visual Aids, Pronunciation, all four skills, how to design tasks, and how to make lesson plans.

Studying here, all the trainees are very active and busy (including me) because the teachers always use Teacher Centre for tasks like: group work, pair work, partial class activity, whole class activity and individual activities. The trainees discuss lessons and solve problems together. I take an English course in the evening at a private school and research some documents on the Internet, listen to the news on radio, practice English with friends and teachers both in the class and at the center where I stay with some trainees.

I am very happy to study here because I get a lot of knowledge and information.

From the teachers especially I know a lot of the ways to teach students, how to be a good teacher, how to build up confidence, and how to motivate students. I hope when I graduate here I'll become a good teacher of English.

The reason that I want to be a teacher of English is because I like English and it is the most important language for communication and for the technology in the world. Moreover, I want to share my little knowledge with poor children, to help the people who want to know English, and especially to help Cambodia.

Nowadays, I want to study more at university to improve my English. I think my English now is not good enough. I need more support and resources to study at university. At the end, I hope that the government, national, and international organizations will provide more aid and resources to education in Cambodia to develop teaching and learning processes to work well.

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Ms. Rachany Nov  
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I would like to discuss the courses I attend at RTTC: Methodology, Introduction to Learning and Teaching (ILT), Visual Aids, and Pronunciation. I have to take these courses over two years to get a Certificate of Teaching.

First, Methodology refers to the ways of teaching and techniques a teacher uses to help students to learn English well and effectively. In Methodology, I learn about giving clear instructions, peer teaching, monitoring, organizing a class, teaching new language, teaching four skills-listening speaking writing and reading, preparing lesson plans, testing and professional development.

Second, in Introduction to Learning and Teaching (ILT), I've learned about how to be a good teacher, to deal with students, to teach in large classes, to use English in the classroom, to make students feel confident, to build a good learning environment, to praise students, and to manage the classroom.

Third, Visual Aids are the things which we can see, which we can use to help the students understand such as whiteboards, pictures, posters, photographs, maps, flashcards, or realia. It can also include television, slide projectors, and overhead projectors, but these are not found in many schools. Through this course, I can learn how to use the blackboard or whiteboard, planning the board, good use of the board, making structures clear on the board, planning substitution tables, and using tables for practice. Besides all of these I can know about drawing faces which are happy, sad, laugh, cry, show surprise, are angry, etc., as well as stick figures, animals, buildings, and transportation. Moreover, I can also teach flashcard activities: Introduction to New Vocabulary, Quick Reveal, Slow Reveal, Cards in Order, Jumbled Cards, Random Order, Remove and Remember, Numbers, Words, and Guessing Game. Visual Aids can help students understand new word from pictures more easily than listening to the explanation using words alone.

Fourth, Pronunciation is also important for every teacher. In this course, I study sound, diphthongs, intonation, and silent consonants.

Studying in all of these courses is not enough for me. I need to develop myself more than this. I must continue to improve my English and my teaching skills by reading newspapers or magazines in English. I also try to speak more with my colleagues in English. When I teach my students, I have to speak in English because it is good for both teachers and students. I have to know more information about teaching and choose some good books related to teaching. In addition, I can search in the library or on the Internet. Consequently, I will have enough knowledge to teach my students well and effectively.

In conclusion, I am very happy and proud that I can have the opportunity to apply for this job. Teaching is not easy but if I have enough confidence, I hope I will do it well. When I become a teacher, I can help my students to be successful and develop my country.

Khoem Rithy

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There are many professional courses available in our school. My course is English-Khmer Specialist. An English-Khmer Specialist has many subjects to study, because we study both English and Khmer. For Khmer subjects, we study Khmer Methodology, Career Ethics, Education, Sports, Agriculture, and Computers. All these subjects are taught in the Khmer language.

For English, we study Methodology, Introduction to Learning and Teaching (ILT), Visual Aids, and Pronunciation.

For ILT, we learnt: How to build confidence, the characteristics of a teacher, the best way to learn English, motivation (making students confident), using English in the classroom, classroom management, dealing with students, classroom language, and teaching in a large class.

In Visual Aids, we learned how to use equipment or materials in a lesson to help students understand more easily. We learned how to use whiteboards or blackboards, simple drawing, and how to use flash cards. I think that using materials in teaching new words is very important for the teacher because it cuts down on teacher talk time and interested students talk time. It is more interesting for students to look at something instead of just listening. It makes the lesson livelier.

Pronunciation is a very difficult subject for all of us. We studied phonetic symbols, syllables, voice and unvoiced sound, stress, intonation. What's the difficulty? Since it is not our native language, so we needed to be careful about speaking. Moreover we don't have enough equipment, such as TVs or stereos, when we need to listen to voice or stress. We have nearly no equipment for this subject only personal dictionary.

There are sixty-one trainees in our classroom, so it is very hard to listen to the trainer while he pronounces the words. It is nearly the same for other subjects; the most difficulty for us is lack equipment or documents to search and study. Sometimes we need to collect money to buy equipment.

However, all the trainees try to study hard because they want to be effective teachers; we are so happy in our studies; we can share group work and present the group's ideas and receive feedback for improvement. Sometimes we need to do pair work to discuss ideas with our partner to get the objective. Playing games is my favorite activity in this course--to create good relationships with friends, to have good communication and have a happy time. Moreover, we get encouragement from the trainers to build up confidence to do activities more actively.

I'm very happy and very proud that I can attend this program because I can meet good teachers and good friends from different provinces. They are friendly and lovely. I hope that after I graduate from this school, I will be come a professional teacher that I can educate the next Cambodian generation to become good human resources in Cambodia.

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I was a former primary teacher at Sras Kheang Primary School, Kampong Speu Province, but now I am a teacher trainee as a teacher of English at the Regional Teacher Training Center in Kandal Province, Cambodia. Now I would like to describe some details related to what I have learned, how I have learned in the RTTC in Kandal Province, Cambodia, and why I want to become a teacher.

There are a lot of things I have learned at the RTTC for my teaching skills, but the important things most related to my profession are Introduction to Learning and Teaching (ILT), Visual Aids, and Pronunciation. For ILT, teachers use many strategies and methodologies in teaching, such as posters for group discussion. The teacher usually uses English in explaining, talking, and especially in connecting to students. Furthermore, the teacher usually prepares and copies good documents for students and always lets students share their ideas with the instructor and with the class. Whether the ideas are correct or incorrect, the teacher never blames, gives dirty looks to students, or punishes students. Moreover, the teacher often teaches students how to solve problems. For Visual Aids, the teacher always teaches us how to prepare steps of a lesson, and how to use materials that are suitable to the lesson and situation. We have learned peer-teaching, and how to manage the class. The teachers and students use their abilities to spread their knowledge to achieve good quality in teaching and learning.

For the third course, we studied pronunciation. We studied how to pronounce, to stress words, to mark the syllables of words, and to write phonetic symbols. The teacher and students always join together to set up new strategies and methodologies to succeed in teaching, but unfortunately, however, although the teachers and students tried very hard as described above, we do not achieve suitable abilities because we do not have enough materials that fit our learning. Sometimes in learning and teaching, we need computers, CDs, videos, LCDs, and new equipment that serve the lessons. However, we don't have these things, so some activities can't work. It is very difficult in teaching to get good quality and effectiveness, so why do I want to become a teacher? And how do I continue to develop my self as a teacher?

These problems are not easy to answer, but for me the reason to become a teacher is because I want to help in developing the educational system in Cambodia, especially in rural areas, such as my village. I also want to become a teacher because I think that education is very important in developing the economic, human resources, social morality, and culture, too. Especially, I want to see the people in my country live in happiness, freedom, and independence.

Every day, I develop myself as a teacher by improving my knowledge, studying more about teaching techniques, finding new experiences from well-known teachers, reading educational magazines, studying part time, and working as a part-time English teacher to improve my teaching skills. Moreover, I always read books related to methodology from other countries, and I hope that in the future I can improve my experience, and also my knowledge about Non-Government Organizations, educational discussion that are managed by society, international organizations, and foreign countries.

At the end of my essay, I feel I am happy that I have an opportunity to describe my experiences related to my learning and teaching. I still hope again and again that in the future I will have a chance to get new and good experiences in teaching and learning from social and international communities that pay attention to the educational system. Thank you!

Ms. Chea Siren  
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First of all, I would like to say that I am very glad that I have a great honor to show everybody my background and some things related to my studies. I graduated in 2004 from Chompu Van High School, and I am a former student of Asean University. Now I am a first-year teacher trainee (2006-2007) at RTTC in Kandal province, Cambodia. My specialty is English-Khmer. Now let me answer the questions, "How do I learn? What do I learn? and, Why do I want to become a teacher?" At the Regional Teacher Training Center, there are a lot of trainees who come from other provinces, but in my specialty there are only two classes (A and B). In this course, I have to study a lot of subjects, but the subjects related to and very important for my skill are Introduction to Learning and Teaching (ILT), Visual Aids, and Pronunciation.

For ILT, the teacher discusses the way to teach, and how to build confidence to be brave. My ILT teacher is a very good teacher, he always speaks English in class, and is easy to understand. In particular, he lets the students discuss or share ideas by working in pairs or groups, and giving presentations. The students write all the answers on the board. The teacher uses a student-centered strategy. It means that the teacher gives only the introduction and explains the points that students do not understand. He communicates well with all the students. He is not only friendly, but also helpful.

In Visual Aids, we study techniques to make objectives and to achieve success. In this subject, we learn how to teach new vocabulary, how to draw pictures, and how to make the pictures more interesting and understandable, even if they're not great.

Finally, there is Pronunciation. This subject is very important, too, because the instructor teaches us how to pronounce words, where the stress is, and how to write phonetic symbols. According to these points, I can read the text well, but I also meet some obstacles, because we lack resources. We need modern equipment to make our studies go smoothly; sometimes while we are studying some ideas don't work because of this problem.

There are a lot of reasons why I want to become a teacher. First, I think that being a teacher is good for a woman like me. I also like standing up in front of students, and there are a lot of people who respect me. Second, I want to help my mother by using my knowledge, even though the teacher's salary is very low. But, I want to show her that her support now has a good result. I don't want to make her feel hopeless, because she wants me to become a teacher. And the last reason is I want to help my country, because it is developing. If it can develop fast will depend not only on technology but also on human resources. So, when I become a teacher, I will transfer my knowledge to the next generation. When my country is rich in human resources it will develop fast like other countries in Europe, or the USA, Canada, Australia and so on.

In the essay above, I showed that the RTTC is a very good place for me and I am very lucky that I passed the exam to become a teacher and study here. Last of all I would like to say thanks to all. Good luck!

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*The Importance of Learning Names and How to Do It*

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One of the objectives that I set myself for the first week of class is learning the names of all my new students. At the moment, I'm not teaching very many classes. I have about fifty students in all, so five days is a reasonable amount of time to get most of their names down.

It may only take one or two tries to get the name of that beautiful girl in the corner or that wisecracking boy in the back row. Yet, learning the rest can be difficult. Some teachers see hundreds of fresh faces each term, and most of them are likely to have rather unmemorable names.

Learning all their names is important for several reasons. The most obvious one is simply to show that you recognise your students. How would you feel if you were called "You-over-there-in-the-corner" for ten weeks? Learning someone's name shows you care, and that's part of developing a good rapport with your students.

Another reason has to do with classroom management. Most teachers take some class time to lay down some laws (or establish a "learning contract" as some would have it) on the first day of term. Those laws are a lot easier to enforce when you can call students by name. It makes them pay attention. It makes them listen up.

Imagine you're explaining something and there's distracting chatter coming from one

corner. You unexpectedly raise your voice slightly and call, "Borey!" The entire class falls silent, and twenty pairs of eyes turn to the source of the chatter.

Borey remembers your laws, and now he is trembling at the threat of your wrath. He appears confused for a second, then gathers his wits and looks to his friends to supply the answer, but you pre-empt this rescue by looking directly at him and saying, "Please pay attention, Borey. I asked you . . ."

You repeat whatever question it was that you asked in the first place, and if Borey is sharp enough to offer a good answer, you turn the situation around by giving him due praise. Being singled out is generally sufficient chastisement.

So learning names is important, but how do you do it? Years ago, I made the mistake of endlessly asking my teenage Khmer students to tell me their names whenever I called on them to answer a question. This usually led to this sort of exchange (S. = Student, T. = Teacher).

- T. Now look at the first question. [Reading] "The movie Titanic is very \_\_\_\_\_ (excite)." You over there in the corner. What's your name?  
 S. Exciting?  
 T. No, what's your name?  
 S. Excited?  
 T. No, no, you were right the first time. But what's your name?  
 S. [Confused, desperate, fearful expression] I don't know, teacher!

Now, this may be a particularly painful moment. But it's one that happens with shocking regularity in Cambodia, even at pre-intermediate levels, where the children have heard the question a thousand times.

It's not that the teacher is speaking too fast. It's not that he or she has an unusual accent. It's just that they're children, and they tend to tune out, and then they allow situational cues to dictate their responses. That in itself is an important skill for language learners, but over-reliance sometimes leads them astray.

Abandoning that method, I took up two other techniques for learning names. One is not to point at random students to answer questions, but to pick up the register and call names at random. When the person answers, I take note of the name and face.

The other technique is to do the rounds of the classroom during the final twenty minutes. This is typically when students are doing some productive activity such as speaking. Most teachers go around to monitor their students' progress and offer assistance anyway, so it's easy to take the register along and interrupt them for a moment.

First, I try to guess their names. It's easier to remember them that way. The point is, after all, to add their names to your own active rather than passive vocabulary. Most of the time, I get them wrong, and after two or three attempts at it, I give up and ask them to tell me. But doing this day after day does seem to speed the process along.

I'll just mention one other way some teachers in Cambodia learn their students' names. This is to have them choose English nicknames. I find this rather patronising.

How would you feel if your Spanish teacher required you to refer to yourself as "Jose" or "Garcia" for the whole term?

We demand a lot from our students. We want them to learn a new language. The least we can do is learn their names.

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*The "Unforgiven"*

In Sophal

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"If I could turn back time, I would . . .," this quote is often heard in Cambodia. It shows a person's regret for his actions. I never thought this would apply to language teaching, but later I found out that it did.

In any classroom situation, there is always an assessment of some sort. The most used in Cambodia are midterm exams and final exams. Basically, students are assessed, their scores are entered into a spreadsheet, added up and evaluated. Then, comes the scary part. After the final exams, several students fail. What is worse, they come and beg to pass. I once asked a student what she would do if she failed and she replied she would pass. It seems that there is a certain mentality that failure is impossible. One way or another, they will have to pass.

It seems to me that students see their grades more important than what they actually learn. They would copy, ask each other so they could gain points on their exams. Usually, exams are times when students unite as one for a common cause: passing. You can blame the students, their upbringing, society, etc but you may have overlooked the exams.

Exams are very unforgiving in nature. Once a student fails or makes mistakes, they do not have a chance to improve themselves. You always hear teachers say "You learn from your mistakes" but you do not have a chance to learn from them if you are taking an exam. What is worse, tests and exams are the one of the most effective means to spot mistakes. Because of this, from a student's point of view, it is necessary to cheat because, Time does not turn back and you cannot undo what you have done. You are condemned to your results.

This draws some more questions: What is teaching all about? Isn't it about learning? If it is why aren't students allowed to make mistakes when they could learn from them? I believe that students should be given a second chance. After each assessment, teachers should give them a chance to redeem themselves. They should provide feedback on the student's strengths and weaknesses. They should also strengthen the student's weak points. Isn't testing about finding the strengths and weaknesses of individual students? Isn't teaching about making students learn?

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