

“I am so-so”

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It's Monday morning and I'm beginning my first class of the week. I want it to be a nice, positive experience for both teacher and students. I ask my class “how are you?” in my most enthusiastic voice. In return, I receive a barrage of ‘bad-uh’ and ‘I am so-so’. It's not a good start to the week. We've all been there, right?

I am now in my third year in Korea and it's taken me a while to realize that things don't change unless you make them change. We have the power to improve things, rather than simply tolerate them. Rather than being permanently negative (and unwittingly rude), our students often haven't been given a suitable alternative. I am guilty of saying “we don't say so-so” or “it's rude to say ‘bad-uh’” but then failing to provide them with more appropriate language. As fellow British teachers would attest to, when we ask “how are you?” we certainly don't expect a negative answer like ‘BAD!’ in response!

This year, I set out to improve my students' responses to the basic “How are you?” question. I printed and laminated a happy smiley, a ‘meh’ smiley and a sad smiley and stuck them to the board. Each week, I introduce a new, more natural phrase, either by eliciting it from higher level students, or by modeling it myself. I use body language and intonation to help the students understand how I'm really feeling, and the underlying message behind my words. I invite a student to stick the phrase on the board where he or she thinks it should go: near the top for “I'm great” and near the bottom for “I'm bad” phrases. I then drill the phrase two or three times, and ensure that students attempt the appropriate tone, facial expression and gesture.

It has been a successful endeavor! Now, instead of hearing “I'm so-so”, I get “I'm not bad” with an accompanying wiggle of the hand and instead of “Teacher! I'm bad-uh!” I hear “I've been better”. My students are now less likely to offend or irritate native speakers with their inappropriate responses, and their greeting response vocabulary has increased.

Give it a try! Mondays needn't be so 'bad-uh' after all!

