

Oh teacher, oh source, ignore not the learner resource.

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Abstract

Teachers in large class environments may have status as the dominant source of knowledge and language. When provided with tools for empowering learners through interactive language learning, teachers may feel challenged as roles change and language demands expand. Language development tools to create an interactive learner-centred class room include teachers' own language learning, the use of specific task types, and class room techniques which build English language confidence. To build confidence to change from the 'guru' fronted environment requires cultural sensitivity, techniques and tailored approaches in teacher education. This paper will draw on research and experience in rural Malaysia and wider settings to suggest a framework for developing interactive language acquisition within a nationwide teacher education project.

Introduction

It is well known that the dynamics of a large class require particular skills of a teacher. The large number of interactions will be channelled by the individual in control in order to achieve the expected behaviours. The teacher is then in charge of managing up to fifty behavioural patterns and may be sanctioned with great control, in order for a large school to operate in an orderly way. As such, teachers in large classes often adopt an authoritative managerial stance to operate as quickly as possible, within well defined periods. The teacher needs to settle the class with clear transitions. She - for most teachers are women - will be trained in the importance of clear transitions (Bower, 1987). Teachers know that an authoritative clear voice is useful (Maley, 2000) and that learners need to pay attention, often in the face of much extraneous noise. Through all the noise and small classroom spaces the teacher can draw on the perceptions that others have of a teacher's role.

The Teacher as Source

In Southeast Asia, the teacher has status and respect for her classroom control. The title 'teacher' - 'cikgu' in Malaysia, 'guru' in Indonesia or 'ajarn' in Thailand is one of respect - albeit without matching financial reward. The cultural milieu of the teacher is one of being respected and listened to. The teacher operates with community sanction and with community expectations of closely managed and well controlled large scale learning in small scale spaces. She is a planner, a manager and a provider of tasks especially when the system, as in Malaysia, requires a weekly plan to be submitted in detail. As a planner, the teacher will focus on objectives and assess the progress of individuals and of the class as a whole (Parrott, 1993:5). The form of product will often be predominant over process. Within a clearly defined hierarchy, the demands of detailed pursuit of written objectives and products may take precedence over other important aspects of teaching, namely the structuring of learning.

Increasingly we read of learning organizations and facilitating learning. The buzz word is close to superseding the term 'teaching', yet the two go hand in hand especially if we consider that a critical role of a teacher includes being a diagnostician and a facilitator of learning. If we embed these roles in the well researched needs for interactive language learning (Burton and Clennell, 2003, Hall, 1994; Oxford, 1990) there is cause to examine the process of change from teacher - fronted manager to classroom learning facilitator.

To facilitate learning, classroom interaction needs to provide greater opportunities so that learners attend to, internalise and produce meaningful language. Opportunities to engage in meaningful output are necessary for language acquisition (Pica and Doughty, 1985; Newton, 1995; Swain, 1993). A variety of opportunities for meaningful output, that is use of language, can only occur if the teacher adds the roles of diagnostician and facilitator to the control-oriented managerial roles. In order to develop the latter a number of changes need to occur. We now turn to the changes which will position the learner as a resource. These will be described in the context of the Malaysian Schools English Language Project, a C/BT nation – wide project in its second year. This project has 32 teacher trainers working throughout Malaysia in semi – rural districts. The roles of these DELCs are :

- To promote teaching & learning of English at District level
- To devise strategies for improving teaching and learning of English as one of a team of DELCs
- To devise strategies for improving motivation among teachers & learners in the district
- To design & develop ideas for classroom activities & resources for the District & nationally
- To facilitate in-service training and transfer of experience for local teachers
- To find ways of extending English beyond the classroom.

The DELCs work in local centres in groups no bigger than 24 with both primary and secondary Malaysian colleagues developing classroom skills through training, group work, observation and follow up sessions. The change is seen as successful if confidence is built and classroom practices change. Evaluations point to such a process at work .

Change begins within

Intrinsic with changing class room roles is the motivation to change. At present, a major change in the Malaysian school system is a return to wider usage of English (Straits Times, 2003). Maths and Science is also being moved from the national language, Bahasa Malaysia to English. There is a nation-wide top-down development for greater use of English in school with a strong government commitment to language usage change. C/BT's project in partnership with the Curriculum Development Centre of the Ministry of Education is one of a number of initiatives.

Teachers are now faced with external motivation to use English more widely within schools. However, community usage of English is only common in cities, so that the situation is more akin to English as a foreign language than may be stated in documentation. Motivation in English usage in a classroom is often extrinsic and not always a powerful enough force to create widespread English language usage, even within an English language classroom. Teachers as well as learners are more likely to use English in a more interactive way, if they are intrinsically motivated (Dornyei, 1998).

Intrinsic motivation to use English as a formally acquired language will depend on a variety of factors but one oft -neglected area is that learning the language can be enjoyable and fun. Central to this is the understanding that the transmission mode of teacher-fronted dominance does not have to be the sole method of learning. There is a need to accept that the teacher does not lose her status by creating enjoyment of classroom learning. For teachers and learners to learn English in an enjoyable way a number of interdependent tools are needed:

- An awareness of how we learn
- Acceptance of a change in the teachers' role
- Alternative learning arrangements
- Adoption of varied task types and techniques

Developing An Awareness of Learning

An awareness of how we learn will inform our teaching. Such awareness may often be mediated by our past learning experiences or by training in a method. (Farrell, 2001; Shulman, Sixth International Conference on Language and Development. Paper *Oh teacher oh source, Ignor@ not the learner resource*. Tashkent, Uzbekistan October 17-19.2003

1987) The four decades old concept of approach, method and technique (Anthony, 1963) has stood the test of time but it can be seen to focus on teaching and less on learning. Understanding learning principles includes accepting the importance of varied learning styles. One may find veracity in what Richards terms the 'Science Research' conception which prioritises understanding the learning principles, developing principled tasks and activities and monitoring learners' performances (Richards and Renandya, 2003:24).

It is on the first two aspects that much of the training in the Malaysian Schools Project focuses though opportunities to work with learner-centred tasks. The teacher training involves tasks which parallel classroom tasks. Teachers are drawn to reflect on their own classroom processes through experiencing tasks which are based on how learners interact to learn language. Tasks and activities require a change in awareness of what can work in classroom and to do this, trainers model the structured procedures of organising interactive learning skills, then follow through with classroom tasks and observations.

Interactive learning tasks require teachers to don the diagnostic and facilitator hats while working within the cultural safety of being a respected classroom manager. Once a teacher sees that control is not lost and prestige is not lost, then learning through providing opportunities for meaningful pushed output will flourish. Teachers may then see an increase in the enjoyment level for them and learners, as learners play with language. At its best, through the training, teachers are drawn in to reflect on 'why and how' enjoyable learning makes a classroom buzz with excitement. Initial evaluation of courses suggests very positive responses to training which empowers alternatives to repetitive use of the teacher-fronted transmission mode.

Acceptance of changes in the teacher role

To create the excitement of a learner-centred class room, requires changes in teachers' roles (Nunan, 1991). The teachers' role as the dispenser of knowledge producing an output is well known. Traditionally, learning in the European context was organised in teacher dominant ways.¹ 'The master teacher told the students what to do, showed them how to do it, and the students imitated the master' (Stone and Morris, 1972:7 cited in Wallace, 1991). This may have worked in a static society but the 'craft' model of teaching is limited as societies change. As Malaysia proselytises a knowledge-based economy with dynamic change, one could question the utility of the still widespread craft model of the highly respected 'cikgu'. One cannot deny the skilled management required and evident in many classrooms, but turning some of the talk and interaction over to students is necessary for language acquisition.

For a teacher to go through the process of empowering learners requires an acceptance that an important role is being an enabler of student learning. It is critical to also reflect on ones own English language level and modes of learning. Colleagues in the CfBT project find it is useful to build in reflective tasks so teachers see that the old adage 'I taught them but they always forget' encapsulates a teaching centred view and its products. Learning goes beyond the master teacher dispensing her book-based knowledge and requires listening to students and letting them listen to each other. To change classroom dynamics to this requires an increase in self confidence through greater language proficiency as well as an acceptance of varied learning arrangements.

Providing language tools for changes in the teachers roles

The language tools for a change in the teacher's role are critical as motivation and building confidence in an acquired language feed on each other. The CfBT/Curriculum Development Centre project in Malaysia has chosen to use the presentation of pedagogy as a

¹ *The Thai word for teacher indicates a similar conception of master-student learning based on the historical concept of teacher-monk and novice monks. The Thai word for teacher is identical to that of learned monk. Sixth International Conference on Language and Development. Paper Oh teacher oh source, Ignorance not the learner resource. Tashkent, Uzbekistan October 17-19.2003*

medium of building confidence and skills in English language. The approach is derived from practicality as well as principle, and recognises that many rural teachers have relatively low levels of English language proficiency. Courses therefore focus on the language for instruction, transition, group management and learner talk facilitation. Without the acquisition of specific classroom language, teachers will remain bound in textbook-centred grammar translation – a common mode identified in C/BTs large scale needs analysis (Hall and Dodson, forthcoming).

Teachers will only move from the safety of teacher fronted book-based teaching if they are confident and motivated to do so. As such the training asks that teachers reflect on their own learning about what works and what doesn't. It is important that training goes beyond modelling to experiential knowledge developing in a practise and a reflective cycle (Wallace, 1991).

The reflective cycle of change is within the in-services courses, as there is little time for reflection during the norms of teaching. The Project teacher training also focuses on tasks which are enjoyable and fun as motivation is clearly linked to the pleasure of playing with sounds, symbols and meaning. To play with a new language needs learning arrangements that motivate both learners and teachers to change the 'teacher as omnipotent guru mode', to greater interactivity with varied learning arrangements.

Accepting Alternative Learning Arrangements

Learning arrangements to provide productive language development are often seen as unworkable in large classes. The dynamics of moving from teacher fronted mode to alternative learning arrangements may begin by pointing out the benefits of group work especially as in many cultures, students are very anxious about making mistakes in front of others (Kam-yu, Wu, 1993). A useful tactic apart from teaching cooperative learning directly (Jacobs and Hall, 2003) is to sell the motivating points of pair work and group work and to build from structured pair work to more open groups:

- Explain that pair work and group work provide students with a chance to speak without teacher correction
- Clarify that the communication difficulties which students have with each other parallel listening and making sense of a message as all people do
- Make the purpose of the activity clear and point out the accountability of the talk. This makes it clear that well organised group work is not the teacher shirking. it is learners learning.
- Listen to learners' feedback as this is helpful as a gauge of productive knowledge
- Praise attempts instead of over-correcting
- Link the group work to other skills
- Acknowledge that many of us in Asia Pacific are used to communicating in a market-place atmosphere
- Share the knowledge with colleagues that spoken skills directly link to other language performance.

Motivating the learner resource

Apart from the learning arrangements it becomes important to motivate learners and use them as a source, through enjoyable tasks or activities. The area of topic choices is an important one beyond the scope of this paper, yet all topics benefit from varied learning arrangements which give learners greater output chances. Interestingly a recent C/BT Malaysian needs analysis of 226 teachers perceptions of tasks which motivate students listed speaking activities such as games, role play, drama and music as highly interesting (SPELT, 2002). All of these task types or techniques require that students be the source of speaking and interaction and they find it motivating (Spratt, 2001).

Aside from numerous positive evaluations which CfBT Malaysia's teacher training has garnered, there is the voice of individual experiences. After teaching outside the norm of textbook-based delivery a teacher stated in a recent Methodology course 'I never knew how much the students knew' (Mark Baldwin, DELC Taiping, personal correspondence). It is an important recognition that learning arrangements such as pairs and small group work enable students to explore what they know and want to know. In other words, teachers recognize that oracy, an active part of learning motivates students. There is a strong case for building this intrinsic motivation to venture beyond the textbook and let students be empowered to 'try out' language. Integral to this is a need to acquiesce a little of the monitor role and accept that one only learns by mistakes.

As educators we may explore a wider range of question types, restatements and elaborations to confirm that learner and teachers jointly construct meaning. In everyday practice this does require principals accepting that noise in a classroom does not mean disrespect for the teacher. Rather it means that the active teacher is a respected resource with whom learners explore varieties of language sources.

To conclude with a metaphor, there can be many courses in a meal and many a sauce and to develop delicious delights, the buffet kitchen of language needs many chefs. Lets cook beyond well-measured broth to rich sources with our learners and the facilitators of learning. Oh teacher, oh source, ignore not the learner resource.

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