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Exploring Ways to Understand Learning and Improve Teaching

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As a teacher of English as a second and foreign language, I have been involved in a long-term process of exploring how the language is taught and learned. I am particularly interested in finding out how my students experience their learning and how they perceive my teaching. I believe this effort of exploration brings me some first order knowledge a teacher should have. It helps me build convincing connections between what I want my students to do and their own experiences. That means I can achieve understanding from them as to why they should take what I say seriously. It may also bring to light problems they are facing and mistakes I am making which otherwise I might miss. All this should help me to make better decisions about how and what to teach. In this article, I will describe a classroom inquiry project I conducted when I was teaching two ESL classes at the Adult Learning Center, Lehman College of the City University in New York.

Context, Purpose and Method

Both ESL-3 and ESL-3/4 were the most advanced levels of the Adult Learning Center's ESL classes, meeting 12 and 6 hours a week respectively. Students in these two classes generally had some basic or surviving English competence in carrying out their daily communicative tasks. Some were even working in an English environment, particularly the evening students. Although most students came from Spanish-speaking countries, I did have Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Bangladesh, Russian and Albanian students.

As their teacher, my primary goal was to provide a supportive environment that would promote the most learning. But how would I achieve this goal, or simply, what kind of decisions should I make about how and what to teach? It was this eagerness to improve my teaching that motivated me to conduct a study on my students' learning experience. After a careful review of the related literature (e.g. Auerbach, 1992; Brookfield, 1994; Nunan, 1987, 1988, 1990; Wenden, 1987) and discussions with my colleagues, I decided to build into my curriculum a regular effort to discover how my students were thinking, and to collect data from both learning and reflective activities such as interviews, student journals and responses to a Learning Experience Questionnaire (Appendix A), which is a revision of Brookfield's "Critical Incident Questionnaire" (1994).

Process of Exploration while Teaching

I designed a step by step investigation through a consistent curriculum containing various kinds of learning activities. At the beginning of the semester, I did a mind-map activity with my students to elicit their learning interests and negotiate with them the general curriculum. During the semester, I now and then reminded them of their original ideas on the mind-maps and our general plan. Also, I conducted several reflective activities to capture my students' experiences over time, from which most of my data were collected. Finally, at the end of the semester, I brought back to the classrooms the same mind-maps and asked the students to check on what we had done so far and how much we had learned during the semester. Following that reflection and summary, we discussed our plan for the next cycle.

Considering my students' interests and needs expressed on those mind-maps, I organized and conducted five major projects that overlapped throughout the semester. For the first one, the Magazine Project, my students worked individually and collaboratively to produce a written summary about one of the articles they felt most interesting from People Magazine. For various reasons, some students finished the project earlier than others. For those students I introduced the second project, the Learner Biography Project, turning their attention from people in the magazines to their own classmates. After drawing a picture of their chosen classmate, they interviewed one another and then wrote a short biography of their classmate. After everyone had finished their projects which had been read and edited in groups, I helped them put up a class wallpaper in the corridor of the learning center to demonstrate their work. To celebrate their achievement, I took a class photo in front of the wallpaper. Then I held a reflection period from which I collected students' responses to the questionnaire. (Findings are discussed in the next section.)

After that, I responded to my students' request to learn some study skills by launching the third project, the Learning Strategies Project. I asked students to form groups and to fill out the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1989) and then to discuss the strategies they used. In the next few weeks, students were asked to pick a new strategy each week to practice at home and whole class discussions were held regularly on ways to improve learning. Meanwhile, I distributed small readers and started the Book Report Project, organizing and collecting weekly oral and written reports. The Folder Study Project, adapted from Auerbach's "on-going assessment tools" (1992), was conducted at the middle and at the end of the semester to help students to reflect on their own learning from the written work done during those five learning activities. Again students' voices were heard and responded to, and new decisions about how and what to teach were then made.

Whenever I started a new project or activity, I spent much time discussing with my students the meaning and purpose of what we were going to do and invited their input on how to get the most learning out of it. I always tried to make sure that they understood how important it is for them to take full responsibility for their learning and to cooperate with the class to achieve the best result. As those projects were always open-ended, students were allowed to work at their own speed and to help each other to catch up with or finish the work. One strong sense I tried to build among my students was that it was never too late to learn. Almost every student was involved in at least two projects at any give time in addition to other smaller learning activities such as language lab listening, computer writing for publication, regular grammar review mini-lessons, trips to the library, the art gallery, the new gym, and even the International Dance Show that was on campus that semester.

I spent much time on examining and analyzing all the data collected from those projects and activities. I listened to and transcribed tapes of class and individual interviews. I studied several students' written reflections on different activities over time to see if there was any change in their learning attitude and why. I also paid attention to giving timely feedback to my students after those reflective activities. Whether it was a student's journal or a class reflection period, I usually first read or listened very carefully, then either wrote or reported back to students a summary of the main issues that emerged from their voices. I would explain how I would change something in direct response to their comments, and I would try to clarify any actions, ideas, requirements or exercises that seemed to be causing confusion.

Findings and Discussion

Looking at all the data collected, I found generally three themes based on my students' reflections on their learning beliefs and experiences. In this section, these insights will be explained and illustrated with examples of statements from the sources mentioned above.

Correctness and grammar. It seemed that students laid much stress on the importance of being able to produce correct English both in speaking and writing. For that purpose, many considered learning grammar and vocabulary as the only and best way. Repeated voices were heard about their interest in learning about the language: "I came because I want to improve my grammar and learn more new words." Or "For me, grammar study is the most interesting and helpful." Being adult learners of a second language, the fear of making mistakes also strengthened their belief in grammar learning as the right recipe. They usually attributed their mistakes to lack of grammatical knowledge and their incompetence in joining in English conversations to their limited

vocabulary. One learner complained: "My problem is speaking. I am afraid of making mistakes. I always think in Spanish. I need practice in grammar." Another declared: "What I need most is grammar. I like it because I always make the same mistakes and I want to know why."

While most learners expressed their need for grammar instruction, their views varied on correction of mistakes. Some sincerely and earnestly urged others to correct their mistakes: "I like to have my every mistake pointed out and corrected. This is very important for me." Others would feel resentful if their mistakes were corrected all the time: "I hate to be interrupted by others because this makes me more nervous." Or "To be honest, I hate to see red marks of correction on my writing." These divergent opinions could probably be traced to their different past learning experiences, particularly the influence of their past teachers. As one Cambodian learner said in retrospect: "My first English teacher always started her lessons with a grammar exercise, usually error correction. She always made sure we wrote correctly. I think it's the right way of teaching." But an Ecuadorian student told a different story: "My former English teacher never corrected me in the open. He always encouraged us to speak as much as possible and not care about mistakes. I feel I learned a lot in that program and that's why I'm not afraid of talking in English now."

Hard work and lots of practice. This second theme emphasizes the students' belief in the need of deliberate and conscious effort on the part of themselves as learners. Although they varied on what the result of this conscious effort would be, there is a note of intensity in their belief not present in the preceding theme, e.g., "I feel very motivated to keep trying. I have to try hard and push myself because that's the only way to success."; "I keep telling myself that I should practice more . . . I didn't watch English TV a lot before, but now I try very hard to watch it everyday. I think I can understand better if I try hard like this."; "I know the key is hard work and lots of attention . . . I always listen very carefully to others talking in English. Sometimes I ask questions if I don't understand. I also try hard to speak to my husband and kids in English."

Evidence of achievement. Most learners viewed this as one important reason for their continued effort in learning. Many expressed their care and interest to see evidence of their learning such as better understanding and increasing use of English, e.g., "I felt most excited last Monday because I found I understood better than my first semester here. I got everything right. I realize I'm learning."; "Now I can answer phone calls in English. Before my son helped me. Also I can finish my homework myself and can talk more. This makes me happy and I want to come more." To emphasize her progress, Felicida added: "In my job they are proud of me. I am the only Spanish person working in the office. My manager told me that he now understands my English, but two years ago he couldn't." For

some students, loss of fear also demonstrated their progress: "I've learned a lot in this class. And the most important thing for me is I have lost the SCARE. I've thrown it into the garbage." Or "Before I felt afraid to speak to another person. Now I've lost that fear and I'm trying to do the best things. "

Along with their language development, change of attitude and improved motivation were also seen as evidence of progress. Robert, for example, who showed such strong resistance to the Magazine Project at first finally completed more projects than the others. He even volunteered to attend two extra magazine tutoring programs, for which he chose to take special trips to the learning center just to read more magazine articles. During one taped class reflection period, Robert talked about his experience: "This class is very good. I learned a lot. Before I didn't like reading magazines. There are too many new words. You told us to try and you showed us how. So I tried everyday, at first just some sentences not the whole story. Gradually I found myself understanding more. So I feel very happy and ready to go on."

With the above ideas and standards in mind, students seemed to have their diverse criteria as to what was helpful or not helpful in the classroom. Those who believed that correctness and grammar should be the focus of instruction judged an activity by whether or not it involved some error correction or grammar learning. Thus Boris said: "I like the Learner Biography Project because it helped me learn new words and grammar from a dictionary and from my classmates. I rewrote it three times and I'm happy about my learning." However, those who viewed hard work and practice as the best way to achieve success stressed the opportunity to use the language that a learning activity could offer. They favored those involving practice of all skills: "Some activities are more helpful than others because students can practice more skills in them. Some characteristics of a good activity are that they offer us lots of chances to read and write, listen and speak." They also liked activities that were not too easy but manageable "The Magazine Project, for example," said Francisco.

Learners who considered personal factors important to learning were found to have their affective criteria. They noted the relevance of what they were learning. They also commented on the qualities of a good teacher and classroom environment. Jennifer, for example, found the Book Report Project more helpful than others because "I like reading and I have to read to my kids sometimes, but I don't always understand what I'm reading. Now my classmates read the same book and we talk and I understand more." The groupwork was also viewed as helpful because "My classmates were very supportive and we helped each other all the time." She even had very explicit ideas of a good teacher: "My opinion of a good teacher is not to let students get afraid. She should always listen

to students and explain clearly. She should love her students and have interest in improving her teaching too."

Conclusion

Generally speaking, my data seems to have provided substantial answers to my question of how my students experience their learning and how they perceive my teaching. This knowledge has greatly influenced not only my philosophy of teaching but also my teaching style and my methodology. The data have confirmed my belief that students come into the classroom with their own experiences, expectations and beliefs. They not only have rather fixed ideas about what activities are most suitable for them, but also, how the teacher should go about teaching. These ideas have a great effect on their learning strategies as well as on their learning outcomes, as is reported by the findings of a number of research studies (see, for example, Nunan, 1987, 1988; Wenden, 1987). As far as this classroom inquiry project is concerned, some of the implications on my practice as a teacher are:

1. A good curriculum should come out of the negotiation between the teacher and the students. It should not be under teacher's control alone. Rather, it should be the product out of the cooperative effort of both. Similarly, what is done in the class should bear a clear connection to the needs and interests of the students. However, as Brookfield (1994) put it, negotiation does not mean giving up our aims and convictions as teachers and educators. Sometimes, we still need to challenge our students' learning desires by giving them a little push. It should not be too hard a push but just enough to make them see the long term benefits of whatever we want them to do, and the reality that most significant adult learning involves both joyful and painful elements.

2. An effective teacher should first of all be willing to make efforts to understand the students. The more we know about our students, the easier our teaching will be. In addition to a good curriculum, many other daily practices are important, such as the teacher's consistency between words and actions, responsiveness to students' concerns, and the model he or she provides as a caring person and a human who sometimes makes mistakes. Above all, what makes things work is the trust built between the teacher and students, which can never be there without our understanding effort.

Finally, this research experience has strengthened my own conviction that after all we teachers are also learners. In addition to learning about new approaches and techniques, we should learn about our students and ourselves too. And to a large extent, the latter learning is more important than the former.

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Appendix A

Classroom Experience Questionnaire

1. What was the moment in class today/this week when you were most engaged or interested in what was happening?
2. What was the moment in class today/this week when you were most bored or disconnected from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone in the room (teacher or student) took did you find most helpful or supportive?
4. What action that anyone in the room (teacher or student) took did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What surprised you most about the classes today/this week?

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