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Learning to Teach—The Place of Self Evaluation

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Few would dispute the place of self-evaluation in the process of learning to teach. Acquiring the skills of self-criticism, however, is not an easy task. As a teacher trainer, I find that developing this skill in prospective teachers is one of the most challenging and frustrating, yet also rewarding areas of my work.

Self-Evaluation Skills Don't Come Easy

There are a number of factors in the 'learning to teach" conundrum that inhibit or militate against an easy acquiring of the skills of self-scrutiny. The most obvious is the simple fact that it takes beginning teachers quite some time to grasp the fundamental principles of lesson design and delivery. Without such criteria firmly in place, it is almost impossible to evaluate one's own teaching objectively and effectively.

Another factor relates to the affective domain: student teachers are often too anxious about the exigencies of practical teaching to be able to "let go" sufficiently so as to observe themselves and the effects of their actions and decisions in the classroom. (This ability to relax enough to allow oneself to deal fully with one's environment reminds me of the "ego permeability" factor of which we speak in relation to some language learners.**1**)

Thirdly, there is the more nebulous but very formidable factor of "learner resistance"—the brick wall that some teachers trainees (like learners of anything) erect between themselves and their learning experiences, such that effectively blocks much of the impact of these experiences and so inhibits (or even prevents) self-awareness and growth.

These, then, are some of the reasons that account for the difficulty experienced in acquiring the skills of self-evaluation. The rest of this article will be devoted to a description and analysis of a workshop session I recently conducted with a group of teacher trainees following their last "bout" of "practicals"—the practical teaching sessions that trainees go through.**2** I was pleased with the session, and emerged from it feeling that they had gone some of the way towards developing the type of self-awareness that competent and effective teachers have.

Practical Teaching Follow-Up: An Account of a Workshop

The Context:

Twenty-five trainees have just finished their last session of practicals. They are quite drained because of the amount of energy they have invested in the practical (including preparation time and "stress" involvement). Those who feel things went well are elated and fulfilled by the experience; others are disappointed; some are merely relieved; still others are hostile, angry, resentful. They have each discussed their lessons with their trainer-assessor and have each read that person's report on the lesson. In addition, each has completed a self-evaluation report on their teaching experience which requires comprehensive detail about every aspect of the lesson and their performance.

The Need:

Now that all the trainees have finished their lessons and reports, there is a need to round off this period of the course which has expended such a lot of psychic and physical energy. There is a need for a neat and tidy end to a significant component of their formal training program. It is not enough that trainees may have learned something; they need to know and be able to talk about what it is they have learned. This, as I see it, is essential to the process of becoming a self-conscious (in the sense of self-aware) teacher.

The Problem:

A number of potential problems may arise. Firstly, as already implied, not all the trainees are content with their recent experiences. Some are dissatisfied with themselves, others with their assessors, or with their marks, or with "the system." Secondly, everyone is different: all the trainees' experiences are individual ones, and so it is difficult to cater effectively to everyone at the same time. Thirdly, there is my wish to avoid "imposing from above"—as I did this time last year when I rounded off the practicum by delivering a summary of all the lowest common denominators of the assessors' reports and then followed this up with a summary of the "golden rules" pertaining to the common areas of weakness! That didn't work, or at least, I emerged with a queasy feeling about the value it had and the implications it generated, not least about learning and training. I now feel a very strong urge to act as a facilitator and monitor in such contexts, and not to assume responsibility for the content of the session nor the interactions that develop. More and more, both as a language teacher and as a teacher trainer, I have become convinced that learners must assume responsibility for their own learning.

The Workshop:

I will describe the workshop in the three phases into which it fell:

1. The trainees were divided into five groups of five people each, and their seats were drawn around to form a closed circle. They were then asked to reflect on their

recent practical teaching experience and to try to compile a list of about five points of significance common to the group. These were to be problem areas that emerged from their teaching experience. They were then to rank the five points in order of importance. Consensus was to be encouraged, and it was pointed out that there would be opportunity for a more individual orientation later in the session.

2. In the second phase, the five closed circles opened up and the seating assumed an arc shape facing the board and trainer at the front. The lists of five points were then "pooled" onto a blackboard grid (see Fig. 1). Once this was done and was visible to all, I elicited from the trainees what they then deduced were the eight most problematic areas ("problematic" being measured by the times a point was featured on the grid). These emerged as the following (in random order): lesson preparation, choosing materials, language awareness, teacher-talking-time, classroom technique, creating an adequate production stage, drilling language, and dealing with mixed levels.**3**

	A	B	C	D	E
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					

A-E= Groups of trainee teachers

1-5=Areas in need of improvement

Figure 1. Second phase of the workshop

3. I then sub-divided the classroom into zones and labelled each accordingly, using large cardboard signs. So the room had a place marked "teacher-talking-time: and another marked "mixed levels" and so on. The trainees were then asked to go to

places where they personally felt they had room for improvement. Once there, they were encouraged to talk with the others they met, discussing the problem area and possibly devising some "golden rules" in the form of strategies or guidelines. They were encouraged to move on to another zone rather than spending all their time in the one.

The Outcome:

The session worked! Certainly it was far more enjoyable, relevant, effective, productive, and humane than my previous wind-up session where the focus had rested almost exclusively on the assessors' reports rather than, as this time, on the process of trainees' self-evaluation.

Evaluating the Success

It is worthwhile considering for a moment why this session worked so well. There are quite a few reasons, I think. Some of these overlap; others are quite disparate.

As already suggested, it worked because it was in fact self-directed, not imposed from without or above. By this I mean the responsibility for content, interaction and momentum rested with the trainees themselves.

It worked also because it blended the analytical/objective with the anecdotal/subjective, incorporating and giving value to both elements as fundamental to the process of professional self-awareness.

It worked because it generated the sense that learning was a process-oriented rather than product-orientated activity. This in turn helped to take the focus off "marks" and put it onto "areas in need of improvement." I grant that this does not totally remove the evaluative climate but it does ease it considerably.

It worked too because it re-structured the learning environment: it "carved up" and reoriented the physical context (into labeled zones), compelling people to think in terms of these zones, and then it necessitated physical movement to link the zones together.

It worked, as well, because it was personalized: you went to your areas of need, not anyone else's, and you decided what they were, as well as when to move on.

Paradoxically too, it worked because even while catering for individual differences, it still highlighted the "in-commoness" of trainee teachers' experiences and hence heightened the "solidarity" of the learning community. As one trainee put it, the session helped her to feel she was "not such a lonely pebble on the beach."

Notes

1. Ego permeability relates to the concept of language ego, which is a person's sense of his "language boundaries." Acquisition of a new language requires that the boundaries to a learner's language ego become less rigid so as to accommodate the characteristics of the new language. Second language learning has been seen by some writers as a process of taking on, at least temporarily, a new personality or identity or, at least, allowing one's identity to be sufficiently flexible or "permeable" that it can accommodate a different form of expression (using different sounds, words, syntax, suprasegmentals, and paralinguistics).

For interested readers, some references to ego permeability:

Ingram, D. (1980). Aspects of personality development for bilingualism. In Afendras (ed.) *Patterns of Bilingualism. Anthology Series 8*. Singapore: RELC.

Guiora A. and W. Acton. (1979). Personality and language: A restatement. *Language Learning 29* .

Guiora A. et al. (1972). Empathy and second language learning. *Language Learning 22*.

Schumann, J. (1978). *The Pidginization Process: A Model for Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

2. Each trainee has to pass a minimum of two practicals in the course. In each practical the trainee teaches a 45-50 minute lesson on a specific topic. The classes are composed of adult language learners, usually about fifteen to a class, either migrants to Australia or overseas students on temporary visas. Classes are organized according to level: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. A trainer-assessor is present during the lesson and conducts a half-hour "feedback" session with the trainee after it is over. Subsequently, a written report of the lesson is given to the trainee, who must also submit a self-evaluation of the lesson.

3. A brief explanation of each of the "problematic areas" follows:

Lesson preparation refers to the quality of the lesson plan and its design (as opposed to its delivery or execution). Good lesson preparation entails adequate provision for the three main phases of the lesson: presentation, practice and production, as well as adequate allowance for the level of the class and predictable problems.

Choosing materials refers to the relevance and appropriateness of the teaching materials that the trainee chooses to accompany the lesson.

Language awareness is a broad term used to refer to the trainee's understanding of how the particular language structure or function that he/she is teaching actually operates in the language. For example, without sufficient research into the workings of "the future," trainees sometimes, in their ignorance, teach *going*

to and *will* as interchangeable forms. Language awareness also refers to the trainee's understanding of the complexities and nuances of meaning that pertain to the structure being taught.

Teacher-talking time (TTT) refers to the amount of time the teacher spends talking. Our aim is to encourage teachers to do less talking, and have them encourage their students to do more talking. We look at different techniques by which trainee teachers can reduce their TTT in the classroom.

Classroom technique is an umbrella term which embraces such factors as the ability to use hardware (e.g., cassette recorder, video recorder, overhead projector), management of learners in groups or pairs, lesson pace, smooth movement from one phase of the lesson to the next, giving clear and effective instructions, etc.

Creating an adequate production stage addresses one of the common mistakes of beginning teachers-to over-present (TTT) and under-produce. That is, they fail to allow adequate time for the students to produce (in a free and uncorrective context) the language that has been presented and practised. We feel that unless learners have the opportunity to use language for a communicative purpose, the value of what they have learned will be minimal.

Drilling refers to the actual teaching skill of leading a classroom drill. The teacher's role at this point is rather like a conductor and, to be effective, the drill has to be well-led, brisk, and democratic (that is, all learners have to be "drilled"). Because the drill requires the teacher to be up-front and very much in control, novice teachers often fear this skill and shy away from it.

Dealing with mixed levels refers to the teacher's ability to cater to a range of different levels in the class. This is determined in such areas as the selection of materials, organization of pair and group work, correction techniques, etc.

About the Author

Ruth Wajnryb is the head of teacher training in TESOL at the Institute of Languages, University of New South Wales, Australia. She has an M.A. in applied linguistics, with a research emphasis in the area of error analysis. Most of her TESOL experience has involved teaching adults in Australia, Europe, the Middle East, and South America. She has written a number of articles dealing primarily with ELT methodology and teacher training. Her publications include Grammar Workout, *and* Grammar Workout 2.