

TESL

REPORTER

Published by

Communication and Language Arts Division
Eastern Young University—Hawaii Campus

Teaching English as a Second Language

Vol. 10 No. 4

Laie, Hawaii

Summer 1977

PROVIDING PRACTICE TEACHING THROUGH PEER TEACHING: A REALISTIC APPROACH

by **Ted Plaister**

Providing student language teachers with opportunities for meaningful practice teaching is a recurring problem for teacher trainers. Schools are understandably reluctant to let beginning teachers experiment or practice-teach on their students. In addition,

there frequently are logistical problems connected with practice teaching; that is, the teacher trainees are in Location X, whereas the schools with available students are in Location Y with transportation from X to Y infrequent and expensive. All these obstacles are undoubtedly painfully familiar to the reader who has the responsibility for arranging practice teaching for neophyte language teachers.

The purposes of practice teaching may be summarized briefly as follows. First, it provides fledgling teachers with an opportunity to undergo the experience of "standing on the other side of the desk." Second, it lets prospective teachers discover for themselves whether or not they really like teaching. (It is a worthwhile idea to introduce practice teaching fairly early in teacher training programs so that individuals who realize that teaching is not what they want to follow as a career have an opportunity to change to another field before having invested too much time.) Third, it gives the practice teachers a means by which they can gain insights into how theory and practice are meshed. Related to this aspect of practice teaching is the chance for the beginning teacher to use instructional materials which may only have been objects of study. Finally, it provides a cumulative

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experience tying together all elements of the teaching act, especially if the practice teaching is of sufficient duration. Most teacher trainers would agree that one or two sessions of practice teaching, while admittedly better than none, are insufficient to give an individual a feeling for what it is like to teach on a day-to-day basis over a protracted period. How long is necessary for someone to teach in order to discover whether a career in teaching is one's ultimate vocation will vary from individual to individual.

One of the more common solutions to the problem of providing practice teaching is the use of peer teaching. In my experience, as well as in that of others, this approach has not been very successful. For example, in a teacher training program where all the teacher trainees are native speakers of English aspiring to become teachers of English as a second or foreign language, one common procedure is for the students to pretend that they don't know English while their peers go through the motions of "teaching" them English. This technique has been used rather extensively in a variety of programs. One instance of widespread use was in Peace Corps training programs of a few years back. Similarly, if all of the students are native speakers of a language other than English, the chances are that the level of English proficiency will be approximately the same for all. Consequently, the situation is somewhat analagous to that sketched above for native speakers of English. One of the main reasons for failure of this kind of peer teaching is that the teaching is fraudulent simply because it does not qualify as real teaching. The "students" know this; the "teacher" knows this; and the teacher trainer knows this. As a result, the entire experience becomes an academic exercise with little of real value resulting.

What is desired by teacher and teacher trainees alike is a valid teaching situation. Perhaps, over the years, we have been in error by insisting that the content of the practice teaching lesson, at least where peers are involved, be a regular English lesson involving grammar teaching, pronunciation teaching, vocabulary teaching, or the teaching of some other aspect of

English. It is conceivable that one could construct a genuine vocabulary lesson using obscure vocabulary, but this approach is, at best, contrived.

I would like to propose that when using peers we abandon the notion of teaching English *per se* and in its stead teach something else. The rationale behind this suggested change is my conviction that some of the most fruitful language learning takes place when subject matter is taught in the language rather than the language itself being taught. Strong evidence for this comes from the results of well-planned bilingual education programs. Further evidence may be seen in the work of Richard A. Via in his use of drama as a vehicle for teaching English in Japan. Via, a professional theater man with no language teaching training or experience, worked with Japanese university students putting on a play. Hence, his focus is on the play and not on the direct teaching of language; consequently, he pays little or no attention to pronunciation in the beginning stages of work on the play, nor does he permit the memorization of dialogs in the usual sense. This procedure may come as something of a surprise to the reader, especially if the reader has used drama in what could be called a conventional way and is not familiar with Via's writings. (1976). Via's approach to language teaching requires that the students be involved in doing something. The results, which the present author has observed first-hand, are extremely good not only in terms of the amount of language learned, but perhaps more importantly, in terms of attitudes which the individuals develop about themselves.

In light of the above, I am arguing that practice teaching using peers should take a different form than that which has been traditionally followed. An example will clarify my proposal. Let us suppose that one has a class of twenty-five native speakers of English in an ESL/EFL teacher training program. Let us further assume that for them to "teach" English to each other is basically a sham; still we want them to experience meaningful practice teaching. Now, it is a reasonable assumption that each of these twenty-five

students knows something that the others don't know. This knowledge could either be something about a subject or expertise in performing some task. Even if the students all share a pool of mutual knowledge on a subject, certain individuals will undoubtedly know a particular body of knowledge in greater depth than others. Basically, my suggestion is that that "something" which each knows is perfectly adequate and appropriate material to use as a basis for peer teaching. My argument is that teaching is teaching and the content of the subject matter is of little consequence.

My own view of teaching is that it is a type of selling. I have come to believe that the differences between a shoe salesperson and a language teacher are not very profound in that both the shoe salesperson and the language teacher have something to sell. In the one case it is shoes; in the other, language. A successful shoe salesperson has to believe in the product being sold or the selling arguments he uses will not be convincing to his customers and not very many shoes will get sold. I submit that the qualities which go up to make a good shoe salesperson are, by and large, the same ones which are found in a good teacher. (Possibly the only substantial difference between a shoe salesperson and an English teacher is that really good shoe salespersons are probably more financially successful than are English teachers!)

There are differences between the language learner and the shoe buyer. Presumably the buyer of shoes knows something about shoes, but not in any comprehensive way. It is the salesperson's job to draw to the buyer's attention unknown qualities and advantages to a particular kind of shoe. Does the language learner know something about learning language? The obvious answer is yes. However, the language learner sometimes finds it difficult to express what his feelings and knowledges are. Just as the expert shoe salesperson can point out unknown features of shoes, so can language teachers show language learners things about language. A very simple example of this would be the use of the dictionary. Another would be an explanation of abbreviations.

I was reinforced in my belief that teaching is teaching, no matter what the content of the subject matter is, while taking a course in needlepoint some time ago. While taking this course I recall clearly being exasperated at the teacher's presentation. The teacher had a small, portable blackboard which was used exclusively to illustrate the various stitches used in needlepoint. While we sat waiting, more or less patiently, the teacher would take a good ten minutes to sketch a representation of a piece of needlepoint canvas on the blackboard, which was then followed by a demonstration of whatever stitch it was we were to learn. The teacher was a very neat person in everything he did, therefore it took him considerable time to draw the lines up and down forming a grid representing the canvas. I recall thinking to myself, "Why doesn't he paint those lines on the blackboard so as to save time and then devote valuable classtime to showing us how the stitches are made?" In another example, I thought the instructor could have used colored chalk which in this instance would have cleared up a lot of misunderstanding on how the various stitches were to be made. There were other instances of poor teaching, all of which, I might add, interfered with my learning of needlepoint. I liked the instructor as an individual and admired his own needlepoint, but I found his teaching methods aggravating. In fact, I became so upset and annoyed by his teaching that it distracted my learning processes. (I was the slowest student in the class!) I'm sure that students everywhere feel similar frustrations because of poor teaching.

Returning to the discussion of our class of twenty-five students, let's imagine that one of them knows how to make a particularly good potato salad. In the kind of practice teaching approach I advocate, this student's task would be to teach the peer class how to prepare potato salad. Further, all the elements of good teaching can be looked for in the presentation. One has only to use one's imagination a little to visualize a well-organized and well-taught lesson on the preparation of potato salad. In fact, one might even want to go so far as to get the students into a laboratory situation and have them prepare the salad and serve

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it to each other.

Conceivably a situation might occur where a student professes not to have any special knowledge or skill from which to prepare a lesson or lessons. If such a case arose, the student in consultation with the teacher trainer could select a suitable subject, do the necessary research on it, learn the subject matter, and subsequently teach it to his peers.

Practice teaching, no matter what the mode, is a stressful situation. It follows that giving individuals the opportunity of doing what they know best is one means of reducing tension and instilling confidence in them so that they can handle a teaching situation. Teaching may be viewed as a sharing experience in that the teacher shares knowledge with his students. As stated earlier, it is my view that perhaps there is more than sharing involved and that something else is "selling." Thus, if the practice teacher is dealing with a subject ("product") which he knows well, the outcomes of the teaching should have a reasonable chance of success.

If the teacher trainees are not native speakers of English, the approach to peer teaching advocated in this paper has certain advantages over one where the students speak English natively. In a very real sense, a lesson on the preparation of potato salad, constitutes a legitimate English lesson in that new structures and new vocabulary along with the pronunciation of all linguistic forms, will automatically appear. Consequently, in the peer teaching situation the students would be learning some English from the person doing the practice teaching. This is an added reason why this approach to practice teaching is beneficial.

What might be termed "artificial" practice teaching, that is, the type mentioned in the first part of this paper, is very difficult to evaluate in a meaningful way because it is not real. How can the evaluation be real?

In contrast to this, the kind of practice teaching which I have suggested can be evaluated meaningfully because the situation is real. Indeed, a three-way evaluation is possible: one by the teacher-trainer, one by the trainees, and one by the practice teacher. Where native speakers of English are doing the peer teaching, evaluation would necessarily be somewhat different from that where non-native speakers of English are involved. For the non-native speakers of English, one would want to evaluate not only the overall teaching, but also the way in which the language component was handled.

Professor Charles Blatchford has pilot-tested this approach to practice teaching in his ESOL methods class at the University of Hawaii with promising results. The subject matter taught ranged all the way from art (teaching the class how to draw a face) to zoology (a lesson on the aquatic creatures in the waters of Hawaii). The teaching skills demonstrated by the students also reflected a considerable range. Thus, we have some, admittedly limited, evidence that the technique is practical and works.

The provision of practice teaching is an example of a complex problem in language teaching education. As with most problems in education, there are no simple answers. The responsibility of the teacher trainer is to search for ways of coping with complex problems in as reasonable a way as possible. What I have suggested does not qualify as a complete and totally satisfactory answer, but I do feel it has merit and at least provides a partial solution to the placement of beginning teachers in bona fide teaching circumstances.

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