Making Student-centered Teaching Work

W. I. Griffith, Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin[1]
Hye-Yeon Lim, Ph.D., Defense Language Institute, Foreign Language Center[2]

As teachers, we are all interested in creating an environment where our students can learn and where the learning environment is engaging, motivating, and exciting. In short, we like to see our students succeed. In reality, however, we often experience quite the opposite. Our students are neither motivated nor engaged. They are rarely excited about learning. They often forget more than they remember.

The reality of teaching English/ESL for many is that classes are large (35-50 students), last for 45-50 minutes, and follow a prescribed syllabus. Interactions in classrooms occur through simulations, readings, audiotapes or CDs. There is little, if any, chance for interaction with people outside the classroom, so learning the language becomes disconnected from use outside of the classroom.

Students are assessed based on how well they perform on written tests (usually grammar-based), and on the basis of these tests receive an evaluation of passing or failing with the requisite awards or penalties. Teachers, in turn, are evaluated on the basis of how well their students perform on these tests and are labeled as good or bad teachers.

No wonder both students and teachers become complacent or unmotivated under such circumstances. It is no surprise that such an environment does little to capture the imagination, nurture the creativity, or foster the success of either student or teacher (Dörnyei, 2005; Hansen and Stephens, 2000; Pintrich and Schunk, 1996). Research shows what teachers have long known: that students learn if they are able to put to work the knowledge and skills they have, if they put to work their creativity and their own inventiveness, and if they can work together to gain new knowledge and skills (Dieu, 2005; Nation and Newton, 2009).

Teachers work best when they have students who are motivated and who challenge the teacher. Teachers are excited when they see positive results for their students, when teacher efforts are recognized by the administration and the staff, and when teachers are allowed to use their own professional skills and knowledge in creating classrooms that work.

If data, intuition and experience all support the fact that traditional lecture or teacher-centered classrooms are not the most effective, then what alternatives are available? One solution is to create student-centered classrooms. As English teachers, this translates into one thing: giving the students the opportunity to practice the language in situations where they will actually use it (cf. Izumi 2002;

[1] wgriffith@austin.utexas.edu

[2] hylimca@gmail.com

Swain, 2000). By creating classrooms that achieve this objective, we challenge ourselves as teachers, develop our own professionalism, motivate students, and give them a chance to meet their educational and personal goals. Such classrooms are generally thought to produce better students and more effective learning ("Communicative language teaching", 1991; Brown, 2003; Norman and Spohrer, 1996; Nation, 1993; Nunan, 1991; Richards and Rogers, 1986).

Communicative Language Teaching

Much has been written about communicative pedagogies and approaches (cf. Littlewood, 1981; Roberts, 2004). There is some disagreement on exactly what these terms mean and whether or not they are now an old style which is being replaced by other newer approaches (Bax, 2003; Thompson, 1996). However, recycling that discussion is not useful in this context. It is necessary to understand what "communicative classroom" means in the current context.

A communicative classroom (Brown, 2003; Nation, 1993) is one in which the student has a chance to learn authentic language. Authentic language is that which is actually used in the real world to negotiate meaning and to accomplish tasks. It also means students are able to learn how to extend the language beyond the classroom and to enjoy opportunities to practice the language.

The classroom environment places emphasis on interaction, conversation, and language use, rather than on learning about the language. There is a focus on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language. Authentic texts are introduced (Nunan, 1991).

 Communicative classes focus on communication rather than on grammar, although grammar is an essential element in the communicative classroom.   The functional use of language in different social situations or contexts is emphasized and classroom activities relate language form and function as well as meaning (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

Typical activities in less communicative classrooms tend to focus on accuracy and reflect classroom use of the language. Such activities focus on how to form correct examples of language, have students practice the language out of context, practice using small samples of the language, and often control the choice of the language to be used. These types of activities are grammar-based and do not focus on the functional use of the language in real situations.

Some examples of such traditional accuracy-based activities include completing a drill in small groups, writing several sentences using the pattern just completed and having students read them to a partner or to the class, and doing substitution drills. These are the kinds of activities often used in classrooms because they are thought to allow repeated practice in the use of a pattern. Through such repetition, it is believed that students retain and "learn" the language.

One major issue with these kinds of activities is that they are often created without any context and most certainly without a relevant context for students. Often tasks are a series of isolated sentences where the student has to fill in the

correct form of the verb, the correct article, or the correct pronoun. Vocabulary in such sentences may be unfamiliar to the students.

Further, these kinds of drills or activities provide little opportunity for the creativity and inventiveness of students (or even for teachers). While they are easy to grade, it keeps the focus of the class on the teacher, on the presentation of the materials, and on the completion of relatively rote tasks.

More communicative classrooms involve more fluency-oriented activities, which reflect the natural use of language, focus on achieving communication, require the use of communication strategies, link language to context, and use or produce unpredictable language (cf. Richards, 2004). One example of such proficiency-oriented activities includes student-created role-plays where it is necessary to resolve a problem (e.g. describing an accident or making a purchase at a department store). Another is creating a map of a neighborhood or city and giving directions to a specific place. Other ideas include information gap activities or jigsaw activities where students must communicate to solve a task.

In the student-centered classroom the teacher is a facilitator who guides students in their language acquisition (Brown, 2003; Hong, 2008). The role of the student is to perform, describe, and relate. The role of the teacher is to guide, facilitate, assist, and evaluate. Such classes focus on the needs and abilities of the students and center on topics that are relevant to the students' lives, needs, and interests (Richards, 2004).

Student-centered Classrooms

Student-centered classrooms generally take some kind of communicative approach to language learning. This means shifting the focus from grammar-based competence to more communicative competencies. The focus of learning is to make real communication; to provide opportunities to experiment and try to use the language; to provide opportunities to develop both accuracy and fluency; and to link the different skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking).

This description is a good place to start thinking about student-centered classrooms, but as teachers we need to be practical and actually create such environments. How can we create such classrooms?

Creating Student-centered Classrooms

However, an important question remains. What exactly do I, as a teacher, need to do to make my classroom more student-centered? There are a nearly infinite number of ways to do this. Below are some ideas which have proven successful, particularly in Mexico, for creating effective student-centered classrooms. These suggestions have been implemented by a number of Mexican teachers in a variety of schools (elementary, secondary, technical colleges, and universities). These teachers have reported a lot of success in their classes and improved learning on the part of their students (Griffith and Lim, 2007; 2008).

1. <u>Have an explicit learning goal for each and every class</u>. Tell the students what that goal is so that they know what they are doing and why they are doing it. This means that teachers need to focus each day on a small and manageable

chunk of language. Too often we have one grammar issue, one functional objective, some vocabulary, and even more--all to be accomplished in a single day's lesson. Try to remember that 45 minutes is not a long time and we must be sure that each objective fits within the time frame that we have.

What is an explicit learning goal? It is simply the things that we want the students to be able to do at the end of the lesson. These may include language goals such as "talk about rules and obligations." This language function could be discussed in a variety of contexts including, for example, whether or not it is appropriate to bring a cell phone to class. Other examples of language goals might include asking for and giving information about someone or stating likes and dislikes.

Goals could also be grammar-based, such as "using the simple present tense to express daily routines" or "simple future versus simple present tense." However, in the case of these, make sure that they are specific enough to be attainable objectives in a single lesson. Making goals that are too general will lead to a loss of focus. It is difficult to assess the success or failure of such lessons if there is no specific task or ability to be judged.

Good learning objectives express a specific target. It is possible to determine whether or not students have met that objective by witnessing their performance. Examples of good objectives would be such things as "being able to order a meal at a restaurant", "describing what one did last weekend", or "being able to identify 10 types of foods." These are good because students know exactly what they have to be able to do at the end of the class. At the end of the class, it is possible to determine whether or not the student is able to do these tasks. Further, these are small enough chunks of language that they will not overwhelm the student.

2.   Move away from practice activities that focus on accuracy (i.e. grammar-based mechanical lessons; cf. Richards, 2004). Such lessons might be those found in student workbooks which require students to select the correct verb form or article and fill the blank to complete the sentence. Rather, use activities that focus on fluency. In this case, what we mean is that we require the students to use the language accurately in more authentic situations. We need to shift to activities that measure grammatical proficiency by the ability to apply the grammar in the student's own speech or writing. This will lead to a higher probability that students will be able to function in the language outside the classroom.

3.   Be sure that the aims of the activity are clear to the students. Tell or show them how such activities will help them to meet the stated objectives of the day. If students understand why they are doing a given task and if they understand how it helps to meet the day's objectives, it may lead to enhanced learning.

4.   Make explanations and instructions clear. It is probably best to model the activity with a student. Showing is always better than explaining, especially in classes with beginning level students. Students will not perform well if they do not know what they are supposed to do or how they are supposed to do it.

5. Include a variety of activities. Conversations with teachers in Mexico suggest that it is better to try not to have more than two practice activities of the same type in a day or more than four in a week (Griffith and Lim, 2007). Try to mix such things as fill-in-the-blank, dictation, find the differences, talk to a partner, describe something and so on. Too much of a single type of activity diminishes classroom effectiveness for several reasons. First, not all students are good at a single type of task. By varying your tasks, you meet the needs of learners with a variety of learning styles as well as provide a chance for all students to do well (Reid, 1995). Second, boredom can set in when students do the same thing repeatedly. Boredom diminishes motivation and learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Third, practicing in a variety of contexts allows the students to extend their range of skills to a variety of situations (Joe, 1998).

6.   Link new material with old experiences. Use the student's background knowledge and link it to the current material being taught. Strategies include brainstorming, quick reviews, discussions (class or group), and using Venn Diagrams to show students where the overlap is.

Suppose that the objective of the day is to express future plans with "be going to." Instead of opening a text and having students look at the vocabulary, read the pattern, listen to an explanation of the grammar point, and then fill in the blanks, a better approach might be to link it to the student's actual lives. Here, the language is personalized and the student has more reason to learn. A good strategy would be to ask students what kinds of things they like to do during vacations or on the weekends. Then you could use this as a base for expressing specific plans that the students are going to do. Notice that they are not being asked to use a pattern they have not yet learned. We are simply asking the students to brainstorm a list of things they like to do or typically do on weekends or in the summer or for a holiday.

This type of brainstorming allows all students to participate in the class. It also allows students to be able to use a variety of vocabulary they already have in English. If students do not know the English vocabulary, it is fine to allow them to express it in Spanish (or their native language) and you can teach that vocabulary later. This is vocabulary that they are more likely to remember because it is relevant to them and to their lives. You can then use these ideas generated by the students to teach the objective.

7. Use production activities. Think about a common activity for students where student A has one picture and student B has another. Students are asked to work in groups to find as many differences as they can.   Is this activity a communicative production activity?

The answer to this question has to do with how many language patterns the students are given and if they just read questions in a box or in a set pattern. In such cases, this would not be a truly communicative activity even though it might be meaningful. We would probably need to go beyond this type of practice to get a student-centered classroom because we need to make this activity really relate to the students' lives. How does finding differences in pictures of a family at a beach, for example, relate to the students' actual lives? How could you as a

teacher structure or create an activity that would be meaningful to the students and motivate them to use this language outside of class?

A potentially more effective version of this task would be to put students in pairs or groups and ask them to describe their rooms or homes to their partners. They then work to determine the number of similarities (e.g. we each have a bed) and the differences (e.g. my room is red but yours is blue). The results can be reported to the class. In this way, students are talking about things they know, about things in their real lives, and about things that matter to them. Further, the language is more likely to be produced rather than read because the nature of the task requires some unpredictable use of the language.

8. Use the students as a resource. Let the students provide examples and illustrations. This accomplishes several objectives. First, the examples come from the students' interests and, therefore, activate student background knowledge. Such examples are likely to be more relevant, understandable, and useful than randomly-generated materials that may have little, if any, relationship to the students. It also makes the students participants in the creation of their own learning. Rather than giving them all of the information and examples they can use, they must create their own while being scaffolded by the teacher. This makes it more likely that students will remember. Additionally, we have the advantage that the higher-order thinking skills will be activated because in order to provide a relevant example, students must understand and apply the principles.

9. Extend the language learning beyond the classroom. Try to create materials and assignments that make the students work and use English outside of class. Though some may teach in areas where native English speakers are in short supply, this does not mean that such a strategy is unworkable. Indeed, in this highly technological age, it is possible to access the world and native speakers using the Internet. Students can talk, email, or research materials in English and use the information to complete assignments or create more activities.

10. Try to create activities that employ higher-order thinking skills. Simply having students read, recognize, and remember is not likely to result in successful learning. Students learn when they have a need and when they have to use the material to accomplish some task. Simply being exposed to information, repeating it a couple of times, especially in random or irrelevant contexts, is likely to result in forgetting. Higher-order thinking skills require students to be more engaged in the task in order to accomplish it (Bloom, 1956; Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia, 1973).

These higher-order thinking skills include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Tasks might include such things as deciding which activities to do for a class presentation for parents' night, creating a city map with the most important tourist destinations in your city with directions and descriptions, or planning a party or event for a class. All of these require discussion, thinking, planning, evaluating, and participation.

Conclusion

The question for teachers is how to create classrooms where students will be motivated and engaged, where they can communicate using English with others, and where they become more independent and interdependent in their learning. Creating student-centered classrooms can significantly increase the probability of accomplishing this task. Students are provided with an opportunity to expand their knowledge beyond the original context and beyond the classroom. These classrooms focus on more than what Hall (1989) refers to as simple classroom situational language and allow for more cultural and contextual knowledge which makes for more accurate use of the language in context.

It is important for teachers to keep in mind the following. First, not all speaking or writing is truly communicative. Students reading a dialogue in front of a class or performing a role-play or describing a picture in a textbook is not necessarily a communicative production. Effective communicative tasks need to have a problem that needs to be resolved or a task that needs to be completed using students' critical thinking skills. The task should have some consequence or relevance to the students working on it and preferably this relevance should be beyond the "grade" for completing the exercise. These are the types of tasks that produce the most learning (cf. Pica and Doughty, 1985).

Further, students should be engaged in the tasks through the use of higher-order thinking skills. Going beyond the "read, recognize, and remember" aspects of language suggests that students will be able to retain language and structures longer and will be able to generate useful language in unfamiliar situations. This happens because a need is created when students move into the stages of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Such tasks cannot normally be done with "canned" speech. These provide the opportunity and necessity for all students to participate and learn.

Remember to choose an objective that can actually be accomplished in a day. Present small chunks of material each session making sure that students have enough time to practice and reflect on that material. Give students a variety of tasks to perform and make sure that the tasks are specifically related to the objective, contain little if any new material beyond that presented in the lesson, employ a variety of activity types, and include at least one production activity. You may not be able to have true production activities every day but there should be at least one for every unit.

Try to find ways for students to use their language outside of the classroom. This could be through homework. It could be through email or pen pals or other person-to-person strategies (i.e. P2P) (cf. Dieu, 2005; Dieu, Campbell, and Ammann, 2006). This will make the language seem more real and motivate students more.

These strategies have been reported by many Mexican teachers of English to result in more effective and engaging classes, and hence more motivated students. Making these changes and employing these strategies are likely to create better results for teachers and students.

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