

The TEFL Pendulum and The Teachers' Unrest: How Can We Find a Balance? ¹

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Looking back over the past forty years it becomes clear that some remarkable and dramatic changes have taken place in educational strategies and didactic approaches in general and in EFL teaching and learning in particular. Most changes have been for the better but there have also been some excesses. The latter may be the reason why some people have felt the need to go back to basics.

The TEFL pendulum has made quite a swing from constraint to creativity and seems to be about to swing back. However, some major achievements should be secured at any cost. They include a holistic and pragmatic learner-centered approach, adaptability, diversity and a link with the real world. This obviously implies reflective teaching and learning to enhance EFL skills as well as to aid personality formation.

In the 1950s, constraint was the word, which to a large extent, summed up the general attitude towards life and the educational adventure in Mexico, in those days. Gradually we have witnessed in the classroom the appearance of some new and far more pragmatic approaches which to a great extent have led us to more creativity and also to some unrest.

In the 1950s due to the spirit of the times--specially the sacrosanctity of the prevailing institutions: church and state on the macrolevel, family and school on the micro level--the educational approach was permeated with a desire for correctness and order.

Correctness in the language class then meant the pursuit of accuracy, which though in itself is no sin, led to "over attention" to details and rules. Therefore, a memorizing process using repetition, often without full attention or comprehension of the learning materials and the art of mechanical reproduction were highly valued.

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Order meant unquestioning respect for authority and doctrine and the rigidity of discipline in schools, which also implied restraint in the language class: a lot of teacher talk, hardly any pupil talk, let alone conversing or discussion.

The intellectual and socio-political movements of the late 1960s helped to break down the isolation of a lot of public and private schools. Increasingly they began to join in with what was happening in the community and the world at large. Slowly in the 1970s, and much faster in the 1980s, we saw some striking changes in the EFL classroom.

For the past 15 years, everybody has been talking about usage and use, signification and value, cohesion and coherence, forms and functions (in short, about “communication”): theoreticians, curriculum developers, textbook writers, teachers, etc. “Communication” implies more importance being attached to experimental language use and fluency than to correctness. It also requires a holistic approach to language teaching and learning, confidence building and enthusiasm on the part of the teacher and the learner.

Since the 1980s educational and EFL teaching orientation to the real world outside the classroom has been in vogue and therefore adaptability has become a prerequisite. The communicative and the notional-functional approach have become widely accepted and the teaching and acquisition of relevant lexis should enable us to appropriately express not only our thoughts and wishes but also our emotions and feelings.

Furthermore, we have to link “Pragmatism” to the notional-functional use of language by the learners so as to stimulate both their productive skills and self-discipline. We have learned to look beyond our national borders and to recognize that cosmopolitanism and intercultural awareness are essential parts of EFL teaching and learning.

It has been widely accepted that “language is more than simply a system of rules.” Language is now generally seen as a dynamic resource for the creation and negotiation of meaning. And there is a big difference between “learning about” the language and “knowing how” to communicate. That is, we need to distinguish between knowing various grammatical rules and being able to use these rules effectively and appropriately when found in a real communicative situation. This is what Hymes calls “communicative competence”: simply the ability to communicate.

We should try to achieve reflective learning so that learners can be able to deduce the functioning rules of the language, that is, let learners discover the rules by themselves. Let them experiment with the language they already know, elaborate their own hypothesis, try it out, restructure it, and learn. English should not be the only aim of learning; instead, it should be the means through which learners can get to know other ways of looking at things, of broadening their theory of the world. In addition, we need to contrast and explain the Anglo-Saxon and Latin cross-cultural differences, since teaching a foreign language does not only mean transmitting the linguistic and the communicative systems, but also, telling learners about the culture, the social status, the degrees, the roles, etc. of the people who speak that language natively.

This is an illustration of the shift from what Michael Lewis calls the Present-Practice-Produce paradigm to the Observe-Hypothesize-Experiment paradigm (in *The Lexical Approach*, 1993). Some time ago, some linguists supported the idea that it was not necessary to teach grammar, that the ability to use a second language (the knowing “how”) would develop automatically if the learner were required to focus on meaning in the process of using the language to communicate. Subsequently, a lot of materials on the subject appeared on the market, including textbooks which only taught notions and communicative functions. However, in recent years, this view has been seriously challenged, and it now seems to be widely accepted that there is value in classroom tasks which require the learner to focus on form. It is also accepted that grammar is an essential resource in using language communicatively, since we use different grammatical forms to signal differences of meaning.

At the last massive national MEXTESOL conference in Zacatecas we had the opportunity to listen to some inspiring talks and workshops, and we even heard about the need to develop a fifth skill: “grammaring.” On the other hand, we could still hear some voices saying that grammar is not important in the acquisition of the language; that there are some new techniques and alterations of old techniques which provide interesting aural and written input, that we should concentrate primarily on “reading”.

As with any other paradigm, these two opposite points of view can only lead to unrest in the language teaching field. Louis Kelly said some twenty years ago: “Nobody really knows what is new or what is old in present-day language teaching procedures. There has been a vague feeling that

modern experts have spent their time in discovering what other men have forgotten ...”

Certainly, for the lazybones-English-teachers (who are simply not interested in updating their classroom practice and who are a source of constant complaint for the parents who see the intellectual appetite and academic prospects of their children undermined) these paradigms cause no perturbation at all; but it is definitely disturbing for the very dynamic and often young teachers who want to experiment with some new, often learner-centered, teaching techniques. These young and young-at-heart teachers often cause discomfort/inconvenience to the management as well as to some rusty fellow colleagues, not to mention some anxiety among tradition-loving parents. These teachers are the Socrates or Juan Bosco type educators who swim in the opposite direction, away from constraints of all sorts so as to be able to enjoy the fruits of creativity to the benefit of their pupils and themselves. However, fanatic excesses always harm a good cause.

Quite often the need is felt to strike a balance between concepts, methods, approaches and strategies. Thus, what we need is an Eclectic Balanced Activities Approach recognizing that communicative ends are not only achieved through communicative means.

What we need is “commitment” on the part of the teacher and the learner. Didactically it presupposes an eclectic approach as well because of the abundance of teaching and learning methods and strategies that have come to the fore of late. Teamwork among teachers as a form of in-service training can be a great help in overviewing and evaluating the latest trends.

But how can the concepts of “commitment” and “eclecticism” be introduced in the English classroom and what are the implications for teachers meeting these ideas for the first time? Traditionally, the role of the teacher in the English class is to provide correct models, to give learners specific exercises as classwork or homework and to provide explicit instruction and corrective feedback.

The role of the learner is the rather passive one of coming up with the correct language forms, repeating the models chorally, copying, not doing the homework and trying to obtain the minimum passing grade. What has the result been? Teacher’s overload and students’ underinvolvement.

However, in the majority of the cases, the existence of such paradigms has resulted in the development of a sharper consciousness towards what we are doing. We need to redefine learner and teachers roles, now that we have decided to apply the principles of humanistic education to language teaching and learning. Teachers have to accept that learners have a right to have their views incorporated into the selection of content and learning experiences, and need to provide learners with the appropriate opportunities for them to make choices. Learners, for their part, need to develop a range of skills related not only to language, but also to learning and learning-how-to-learn. Let us, at any rate, keep windows and minds open for fresh air and new ideas and learner-centered methods that may enhance the personalities, intellect and skills of our students as human beings and citizens of the world.

Without inspiring and committed parents, friends and teachers, many students may increasingly become intoxicated by the addictive lure and glamour and glitter of today's sacred cows: idols, drugs, advertising, the dream world of eternal youth, TV, the information superhighway of Internet, virtual reality, speed, passion for power and money, extreme nationalism and xenophobia, fundamentalism, permissiveness, egoism. Teachers cannot only rely on ideas, methods, tenets and remedies from the past and the present to cope with the challenges of tomorrow. All of this needs to be under constant reappraisal. Anthony de Mello in "Wellsprings" said: "On the day you cease to change you cease to live".