

Quiet Please: We are Learning a Language

DIANE DIAMOND, CONSULTANT¹

Years ago, when I taught California adolescents, young couples would stand at my classroom doorway locked in their last desperate hug before separating for their respective courses. Prying apart the young pairs and hurrying students into my business skills class, I would turn to my student and say, "How can he miss you when you won't go away?" Now that I am mainly teaching foreign languages, I wonder, "How can students learn to think in another language, when we never quiet down and let them think?" The purpose of this paper is to encourage more thinking and processing time in the foreign language classroom.

Our lives are bombarded with noise and action, and our days are packed with endless chatter. Telephones, televisions, videos, and stereos are ubiquitous. No wonder we can be frightened of silence. However, we need to allow students sufficient time to internalize information and give them time to think—even when the lack of instant answers makes for some discomfort. In the Winter 1997 Issue of the *MEXTESOL Journal*, Manuel Luna writes, "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, re-structure it, and learn." (p. 21)

Reflective learning means that students must make and test hypotheses. Certainly they cannot do that if we give them the answers or talk all the time. Educators are realizing that a key element in foreign language success is the development of learning strategies wherein students become involved with the process of their own learning. For instance, students can analyze their own mistakes and correct their own errors. This way students intuitively apply comparative linguistics and gain understanding of the differences between their first and second language.

In the personal realm, students are found to progress better when they gain perspective on their attitudes toward language learning. Charles Curran developed an entire approach to teaching called "Counsel-Learning" in or-

¹ The author can be reached c/o La Conexión, Aldama #1, San Miguel de Allende, 37700 Guanajuato. E-mail: ddiamond@unisono.net.mx.

der to make student feelings an integral part of the curriculum (Curran 1972). When students have low tolerance for ambiguity and get easily frustrated when they do not immediately achieve their goals, they may be easily discouraged and erect learning barriers. Knowledge is power, and the knowledge of individual learning styles arms students with ammunition to get past their own learning pitfalls.

While students are learning a language, they should be encouraged to communicate their feelings about the process. They need to realize that all language learners find stumbling blocks and hit plateaus. In addition, as students are learning a language, they can be made aware that people learn differently. Some learn by doing; others like to observe before jumping into something new. Then there are those who want to understand the theoretical basis behind what they are studying. However, students need to know that they are expected to make an attempt in activities in all four skills—reading, writing, listening and speaking—even though they may be stronger in some skills than others.

Students encouraged to learn systematically and strategically soon develop strategic competence in the target language. In other words, they form the ability to use gestures and alternate vocabulary to “talk around” problems even when they have limited language proficiency (Oxford 1990, 7). Strategic competence lets students go beyond words to become socio-linguistically competent, to be able to understand what is correct in social situations. Teachers cannot drill students in proper phrases, gestures, and vocabulary for all situations. The role of the classroom is to heighten awareness, thereby sharpening the thinking skills of the student. A teacher is not always going to be around; therefore, self-directed learning gives the student the tools to be a life-long learner (p.10). Language is always changing, but the effective learner can deal with these changes. The skills of observation and prediction let students adapt to new situations. Students can acquire strategic skills when they are given the thinking time and space to process information.

According to Rebecca L. Oxford, “Self-directed students gradually gain greater confidence, involvement, and proficiency” (p.10). For some teachers, it is not easy to give up the traditional role of leader, manager, and expert in order to instill in learners more responsibility for their own learning. In our increasingly “instant” culture, neither teacher nor student may be accustomed to lulls in action or conversation, but language educators recognize that traditional foreign-language teaching formats have led to a huge

degree of failure. Some teachers are organizing their students into teams with rotating roles of spokesperson, recorder and time-keeper to spread learning responsibility.

The most radical advocate of quiet in the language classroom was Caleb Gattegno who developed an approach called "The Silent Way." Students are empowered to take charge of their own learning by trusting their own "inner criteria." (S. Gattegno 1993, 11) The teacher develops activities which get students experimenting with linguistic situations until they can form generalizations.

For instance, a teacher softly says a new sound or word once and then lets students repeatedly imitate it until they can reproduce it. If students are inaccurate, the teacher does not again pronounce the word or sound for them. Instead tips are given and students must analyze where they went wrong. Sometimes the teacher of English as a foreign or second language may merely say, "Make that more English." With this clue, the student quickly analyzes where his/her own language differs and makes the adjustment to a more English sound. As students are practicing a sound, the teacher listens attentively until the best reproduction of that sound is heard. At that point, the teacher will ask the student with accurate pronunciation to repeat the sound, and the other students will try to copy. Throughout this process, students are encouraged to be aware of their own ways of learning. Some students may take longer than others to correctly reproduce language. In a quieter, more student-centered classroom, students must take charge of their own learning styles.

Teachers can leave the student's communicative flow uninterrupted by using signals to help student self-correction. For example, a thumb pointed over the shoulder is a cue to put the verb into past tense; a finger pointed forward silently says, "Make that future." The student can decide to rephrase the sentence or proceed with the discourse. The important principle is that the student is made aware of his or her error and is made responsible for improvement. When students merely hear proper structures and repeat them like parrots, they do not internalize learning and continue along an incorrect path. According to Gattegno, "...teachers of language can stop being record players, can be mostly silent, and can delegate the responsibility of learning to the learners" (Gattegno 1976, 13). Teachers can help students take charge of their learning by grouping them in teams and encouraging them to discuss and correct their errors.

The ideas expressed in this article are not meant for primary school students who are still in a natural language acquisition phase of learning. They are designed for teenagers and adults whose first language is fully developed, coming into play to assist or interfere with the learning of a second language. I have seen quieter, more student-centered approaches successfully used in junior high foreign language programs as well as in courses of English as a second language for immigrants. Adolescents and adults get more emotionally and intellectually involved when they are manipulating objects or playing with their own words than when they are passively listening to a teacher.

Language teachers can find enlightenment in the methods of athletic trainers. After all, successful athletes are trained to react quickly to changing circumstances with all the skill and awareness they can muster. Dan Millman in *The Warrior Athlete* writes, "...awareness of errors is essential to improvement," but he also goes on to state, "...a habitual error must be felt, not merely acknowledged verbally" (Millman 1979, 19). Millman warns us, however, that growing awareness may result in a momentary drop in self-esteem. Learners will feel as if they are doing worse before they realize that they are improving. (p. 20) A consequence of the quieter classroom is that students have more chance to ponder their feelings about learning, and they will be more aware of highs and lows. By letting students express their ideas about what they are learning and how they learn, teachers can encourage them to take more responsibility. Journals, interviews, and feedback circles are ways students can express opinions about the target language and culture.

Another sport trainer, W. Timothy Gallwey believes, "...there is a natural learning process which operates within everyone—if it is allowed to." (Gallwey 1974, 41) It is the role of the teacher to prepare an environment where natural learning can thrive. It is not the educators duty to provide every answer and correct every error. Much of that must rest on the shoulder of the learner. Students can work in pairs or small groups to correct errors, create dialogues, or solve information gaps. The teacher, as mentor, is there to coach and counsel as the students do the learning. Let's hear it for the quieter classroom!

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