

Language Teaching Viewed Through Learning

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Abstract

Through learning English in the ELC of Tasmania University, I viewed language learning from the standpoint of the learner. And I also learned many useful techniques for teaching language. Firstly, I identified 6 problems that are caused by poor observation of learners by teachers. Secondly, I analyzed and described them in detail. And I had two conclusions. One is that teachers should structure the placement test, the length and the content of the class, self-learning, and class activities, according to learners' data. The other is that teachers should respond to learners' complaints as much as possible when they are not satisfied with the classes.

Keywords: learners' data, learners' complaints, learners' needs and goals, purpose of learning, the first language, placement tests, the length of the class, the content of the class, self-learning, class activities, error correction, general English, academic English

0. Introduction

Do you know the tale of “The Prince and The Beggar”? The “Prince”, who had never understood people's feelings and existing situations, came to understand them through experiencing the “beggar”, and at last became the kind-hearted King who could understand people.

In other words, this tale illustrates *these points*;

- 1) If you'd like to understand something, it is very useful to exchange your standpoint for another's.**
- 2) If the standpoint includes pain and threat, it increases the level of understanding.**

During this past 10 weeks' of learning English, I was able to view language learning from the standpoint of the learner, whereas before I had seen it from that of the teacher. As this standpoint was quite painful, I learned many useful techniques for teaching language in the future.

By outlining these findings and presenting them at this time, I look forward to discussing with you more about language teaching and learning, and I am particularly hoping that the teachers who

teach foreign languages will be able to show me views different to mine.

1. Problems

I think one of the most important things in teaching language is to observe the target learners carefully. Surely you would agree with that, because as you well know, language teaching begins with analyzing data of learners and it relates to all the procedures of teaching. The process of teaching is illustrated briefly as follows.

However, actually, to what degree do you achieve it? For example,

- Haven't you put learners into the framework *after having already decided the curriculum*?
- Haven't you been influenced by the teaching materials that you had *already chosen*?
- Haven't you had *enough time* to analyze needs of learners?

In practice, it is really difficult to grasp data of learners precisely. But if their needs are not analyzed well enough, it often creates a lot of problems for both teachers and learners. It often leads to learners becoming very frustrated. What is worse, it sometimes prevents learners from learning. Above all, it discourages teachers from teaching in the classroom.

I have identified **6 problems** that are caused by poor observation of learners by teachers. I would like to describe them in detail in the next chapter.

- ① How to do placement tests
- ② The length and content of the class/the weight given to self-learning
- ③ Improvement of speaking ability
- ④ Useful activities/Useless activities
- ⑤ Error correction
- ⑥ General English/Academic English

2. Analysis

2.1. How to do placement tests

I found it really difficult to do class activities in the classroom when we, the students, had many differences between each other's speaking and listening abilities. These differences caused many obstacles particularly when we were doing group discussions.

Poor speakers did not want to speak in front of good speakers, so they spoke less and less. On the other hand, good speakers did not want to listen to poor speakers' talk, so they spoke more and

more. As a result, the differences between them increased much more than before.

The reason is really simple. I believe that it is due to the mismanagement of placement tests. Of course teachers know how to do placement tests. Generally they depend on 4 abilities of language. We also took the placement test in the ELC, which consists of grammar (reading), writing, dictation (listening), and an interview (speaking) asking about our purpose for entering the ELC. I think they classified us with an equal value to the scores for 4 abilities of language.

But it was a **MISTAKE!**

Firstly, ELC learners are all intermediate level, so they have already finished learning basic English grammar. Therefore they have already gained knowledge about reading and writing to some degree.

Secondly, their main purpose is to improve their listening and speaking ability, because most of them are from Asian countries, where English is not used as the official language.

Thirdly, almost of all the class activities consist of much student discussion and little teacher talk.

To sum up, the placement test should be based on speaking and listening only. The fact that it is not, has a serious negative influence later on. It makes it hard for teachers to teach and difficult for learners to learn. In addition, it makes learners increasingly dissatisfied with teachers.

2.2. The length and content of the class/the weight given to self-learning

The length and the content of the class gave us a lot of stress. In the ELC there are 2 classes (105 min. per class) in the morning and 1 class (120 min. per class) in the afternoon. The classes begin at 9:00 am and ends at 3:45pm. I felt the length of both the classes and the day were too long. How do you feel about it as language teachers?

Perhaps you will guess that what made us stressed related to the content of the class. But it is fair to say that the discussion between learners occupied almost of it, so we seldom listened to native speech and sometimes got a big headache from listening to each other's conversation. As a result, it was really difficult to improve our listening ability.

At the first option class in the afternoon when we had 2 hours' group discussion in order to produce a short written composition, we were too exhausted, because we had listened to our unintelligible Asian pronunciation and spoken unfamiliar foreign language. I think it is most effective to firstly write a composition individually and then organize them in group. What do you think?

Furthermore, because we were too tired and said nothing, the teacher asked us, "Aren't you happy?" If he could have seen it from the learners' standpoints, he would not have asked a question like this. If you were to have 2 hours' discussion in your poor foreign language at the first class,

how would you feel? Would you be happy, or unhappy? Language teachers need to have imagination.

I think that shorter classes only in the morning are better and more effective than longer ones.

What do you think we should do in the afternoon instead of the class? It would be better to have self-learning time in the afternoon. It would be useful for the learners who have different writing interests and abilities because teachers can give them different topics in writing. Similarly, they can give the learners who are not good at listening, individual tapes. Language learning includes not only the classroom work but also self-learning. Teachers should adopt self-learning time in the afternoon as much as possible, particularly for the adult learners.

Therefore I can suggest the plan of class work and self-learning.

2.3. Improvement of speaking ability

We wanted to improve speaking ability in English, but it was hard to do it. Because teachers always said don't be afraid of making mistakes, but actually when we made mistakes in speaking they always got a frozen expression on their faces. So we spoke less and less. What teachers say is often different from what they do. They are really contradictory. They should be at least poker-faced or have generous attitude to accept learners' broken English. In addition, they need some experience as a **LEARNER** of a second language.

Some teachers seemed to think that learners take a lot of time before they begin to talk because some learners have their own particular, national personality. But it is not necessarily right. Korean or Japanese language is truly different from English in grammatical structure, word order of SVO, and so on. Therefore these students take longer to make sentences and begin to speak. On the other hand, Chinese language is relatively closer to English in word order than Korean and Japanese. Generally Chinese learners take less time to begin to speak, and actually they do. But the reason is not only because of their personality, and teachers are often confused with those things.

Most of ELC learners are from China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and some of them are from Thailand. Though they are from Asian countries, their first languages are different from one another. But how many teachers understand the learners' differences between their first languages and teach accordingly? Because the learners' nationalities are often limited to these listed above, teachers should have the knowledge about these differences and be required to accommodate these specific differences in their teaching. I believe that it would make their teaching more effective.

As a learner, it was hard to respond quickly, however, adult learners are eager to speak as perfectly as possible and moreover teachers often require longer answers from us. Under this pressure our speaking became more desperate.

Because of the usual teaching methods and activities, it was hard for us to improve our speaking ability.

In relation to improving speaking ability, I have an idea of an activity and would like to introduce it. Many ELC learners have as their main purpose, the taking of the IELTS Test. IELTS Test includes a speaking test. Choosing one topic in the IELTS Test, teachers give the students activities. These activities don't require quick responses, and give the students some time to prepare.

Firstly, learners speak in pair work and they are recorded on tape. (They can take the tape home and listen to it.)

Secondly, each student gives a spoken presentation before the whole class, which is recorded on videotape. They can rewind, replay, and watch it together immediately after recording. They can identify their mistakes by themselves. Other learners and the teacher can point out the mistakes to one another. It is an objective and certain way. If you adopt it a couple of times a week, it will be useful for learners to improve their speaking ability. How about it? These days there are lots of high technical educational aids. We should use them frequently.

By the way, in the ELC one teacher introduced a good activity related to improving speaking. I would like to show this in the next item.

2.4. Useful activities/Useless activities

I noticed clearly both useful activities and useless activities.

One of the useful activities is like this. It is to make a short presentation. We choose our favorites from some cards which are representative of Australian animals. The card is made up of some pictures and some explanatory sentences. For example, if you choose kangaroos and wallabies, you can talk about the similarities, differences, comparison with your country, whether to eat it or not, and explanations about technical terms. After you finish it, you can get teachers' opinions and also be satisfied with it.

Useless activities are ones which are not organized after games and story making are done. I think that the games and story making alone are useless. In order to be useful learning activities, they should include organized learning at the end of the activities, for example, error correction and so on. If they don't include organized learning, they are really useless for learning. But some teachers don't realize it. Though they seem to think games and story making are interesting, learners are not deceived by the teacher's apparent interest. Learners get angry when they lose too much learning time and get less effect from it. They are not satisfied until their mistakes and errors are corrected and their fragmentary knowledge is organized.

Another useless activity is to make a sentence beginning with "I wish ~ ." This was one of

the games. When different 3 teachers did this game for 3 days, it was terrible. Why? Because our wish is actually only to improve our English ability, and “I wish ~” is a desire which is hard to realize. So that was a really depressing activity for us and doing it once was quite enough, but the teachers never **PICKED UP ON** the fact that the students were depressed with this activity.

In addition, some teachers seem to think young people prefer games, like children. But their purpose is to gain entry to university, to study for MA, and Ph.D. Teachers should understand that young learners cannot be satisfied with only games for junior high school students.

2.5. Error correction

As a student, I found it difficult to appreciate how teachers corrected errors.

I felt it was really useful for teachers to correct errors in writing. But it is difficult to correct errors in speaking, because there are both trivial errors and not so trivial ones. For example, let's think about an error between “he” and “she”. Maybe if learners are corrected about these errors many times, they must become depressed. Teachers do not need to correct trivial errors, because learners also can identify them easily by themselves.

On the other hand, teachers should correct important grammatical errors, for example, word order, or the ones which learners always make and never notice by themselves. But, when students make these kinds of errors, it is hard for teachers to easily judge whether to correct or not, so they are eager to correct trivial ones only.

But I always wonder why teachers rarely use high technical educational aids such as videotapes and so on. Currently, videotapes are one of the best aids for error correction because they can be rewound and replayed immediately after recording. Teachers should make good use of them.

2.6. General English/Academic English

I do not know that it is appropriate to have the classifications of General English and Academic English. In the ELC system at first, students are placed in General English classes and next, when their scores rise, they can go up to Academic English classes. Maybe in the past, many learners used to aim at General English, but now these classifications are probably not appropriate.

Firstly, students now aim at Academic English from the beginning, because their purposes are to gain entry to university, to study for MA, and Ph.D. For them it is waste of time to be placed in General English classes.

Secondly, it is hard to establish the goals of General English classes, because the definition of General English is ambiguous and the range is too large. It is difficult for students to judge whether their ability improves or not by themselves. Moreover it is hard to compare General English classes,

one with another, because learning materials are not the same. In General English classes, games are often used as teaching aids.

General English classes are not as adequate or appropriate for existing situations, so now new class arrangements should be established. A teacher explained that complicated English is taught in Academic English classes. But is it right? Academic writing is easy to teach, because the format is structured. For learners whose purpose is to gain entry to university teachers should teach Academic English as soon as possible. Now it is time to change the setting up of the classes according to the learners' needs and goals.

3. Conclusion

As I explained at the outset, teachers should structure the placement test, the length and the content of the class, self-learning, and class activities, *according to learners' data* (purpose of learning, the first language, and so on). When the teaching is not based on the learners' needs and goals, it doesn't work well, and it makes learners stressed and makes it difficult for teachers to teach.

Another important thing is to respond to learners' complaints as much as possible when they are not satisfied with the classes. By doing so, the stress of learners decreases. In my case, when one of my writing assignments was returned to me with only a brief, general comment from the teacher, I told the coordinator. She reported it to the teacher and he improved quickly. He added precise error correction later and made sure to be more organized also, in other activities. What made me happier than anything was that the learners' discontent was not ignored.

In the business world, a company improves and increasingly sells more goods by listening to consumers' complaints carefully. Comparatively, language teaching is possibly the most under-developed field, because of the infrequent use of the high technical educational aids which are available.

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