MA TESOL Collection   SIT Graduate Institute

1983

The Development of Self-Confidence in a Novice ESL Teacher

Helene Phyllis Kendler
SIT Graduate Institute

Recommended Citation

The Development of Self-Confidence in a Novice ESL Teacher

Helene Phyllis Kendler

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for
International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

July 1983

This project by Helene Phyllis Kendler is accepted in its
present form.

Date _____ 8/3/83 _____   Principal Advisor _Patrick Moran_
                                                         (M.J.)

Project Adviser/Reader:

C.H.Shackina

Abstract:

     This is a personal paper in which I address the issue of
teacher security in the classroom, specifically, the novice
ESL teacher's development of self-confidence in his/her role
and skill mastery. The paper is based on my second intern-
ship as a teacher of English as a Second Language to Haitian
refugees. The paper begins with a discussion of basic assump-
tions about student security and how teacher security is related
to it. It goes on to discuss the process of growth of self-
confidence from the first teaching internship to the second,
comparing skill mastery in the specific areas of developing a
student-centered classroom and working creatively without
having a required text to fall back on. The discussion of
the creation of a student-centered classroom focuses on the
use of: 1) paired activities, 2)role play, 3) group activities,
4) student self-correction, and 5) student feedback.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Every year the School for International Training confers
the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree upon a class of
graduates who subsequently scatter across the country and
around the world, supposedly armed and ready to function as
effective teachers of English (or French or Spanish) to speakers
of other languages. Of the graduates in my particular class
(MAT XIII), the majority had entered the program with some --
and, in a number of cases, with substantial -- language teaching
experience already under their belts. Of these experienced
graduates, most leave the program with their teaching skills
not merely intact but refreshed, strengthened, expanded by
the innovative approaches and philosophical underpinnings to
the art and science of teaching to which SIT exposed them. But
there are other graduates like myself, who hadn't any teaching
experience to begin with and who, even after completing the
program, feel scantily armed and far from ready to charge into
the fray of the ESL classroom.

This paper, then, which is based upon my second English
as a Second Language internship for the MAT degree, will attempt
to describe the issues and processes involved in a novice
teacher's growth in professional self-confidence. Although it
will be a highly subjective view arising out of one individual's
background and experience, it is to be assumed that certain
steps in the process are not unique to this writer. Equally
it is to be hoped that the reflections contained herein may be

of use to others who, whether or not they are experienced teachers before entering the MAT program, nevertheless emerge with the necessity of facing the same crisis of self-confidence in their ability to teach, as do many (I dare not claim all) novice teachers.

This paper will begin by discussing basic assumptions about student security and how teacher security is related to it. It will then go on to discuss the process of growth of self-confidence from the first teaching internship to the second, comparing skill mastery in the specific areas of developing a student-centered classroom and working creatively without a required text. Discussion of creating a student-centered classroom will focus on the use of paired activities, role play, group activities, student self-correction, and student feedback.

Though part of this paper will be drawn from a journal kept during the internship, I would like to quote at this point another source; namely, a dictionary which defines "self-confidence" as "confidence in oneself and in one's own unaided powers, judgments, etc."[1] "Confidence" is defined as "1. Trust in or reliance upon...; belief in...; 2. Assurance; presumption."[2] This elementary exercise of looking at the

[1] Frank H. Vizetelly, ed., The Practical Standard Dictionary of the English Language (New York and London: Funk & Wagnall's Company, 1937), p. 1030.

[2] Ibid., p. 254.

definitions of two fairly common words provides a useful spring-
board for considering what sort of process leads to such a thing
as (to meld the definitions) "belief in or reliance upon one's
own unaided powers and judgments," specifically one's powers
and judgments in the realm of teaching English as a Second
Language.

For me these powers and judgments translate into such
concrete matters as: the ability to assess the students' level
of proficiency in all four skill areas of listening, speaking,
reading, and writing, and awareness of real progress as it occurs;
awareness of factors that both hinder and stimulate student
motivation to learn; the ability to plan lessons that get the
students talking and listening, reading and writing, lessons
that build upon each other and that include a reasonable variety
of activities; and the ability to create a secure classroom
atmosphere in which students are alert yet relaxed, and able
to take risks without feeling overly pressured to do so. These
are some of the areas of pedagogical competency in ESL that
concerned me during the internship. Self-confidence as an
ESL teacher must accrue from growing proficiency in the perfor-
mance of specific skills. This, and only this, can lead to
something not often discussed in the various MAT classes I
attended: teacher security.

A great deal of attention was given to the issue of student
security and how that is an essential element in facilitating
learning. By student security I mean the fostering of a
classroom atmosphere in which the student feels accepted and

respected by the teacher, knows the teacher will not unduly
criticize her or place her in unreasonable or direct competition
with the other students nor make comparisons between her indi-
vidual pace and style of learning and those of the other stu-
dents. Furthermore, it means trusting that the teacher knows
her subject matter, knows how to convey it, and will provide
an effective structure or framework within which the student can
learn and express.

Crucial as student security is to the learning process, we
can see by this last remark -- i.e. that the student must
put some trust in the teacher's authority and knowledge -- that
the student's security is encouraged by, and to a certain
extent, engendered by the teacher's own sense of security. A
teacher lacking in confidence in her mastery of the subject
matter, and/or in her ability to structure a lesson, to manage
a classroom, to handle group dynamics, to assess her students'
needs, and to convey the material in a variety of useful ways
that lead to real learning -- a teacher lacking confidence in
these areas will convey fear or anxiety, and not English, to
her students. Her own unwillingness or inability to take risks,
to try new approaches, to capitalize on spontaneous classroom
developments, will breed a similar incapacity in her students,
and thus their rate of learning will be slower -- much slower,
I believe -- than it might have been otherwise.

CHAPTER I: THE INTERNSHIPS

To shift now from the general to the particular, I will discuss the problems of teacher security which I faced in my two internships. Since I wish eventually to discuss progress made in the growth of self-confidence, it is useful and necessary to speak of my first internship in addition to the second one. Similarities and contrasts may be demonstrated thereby.

For both of my internships, the students were Haitian adults. Both internships focused on survival skills and situational topics. Both involved evening classes, both were administered under the name of the Haitian English Language Project (HELP) and both were coordinated by the Experiment in International Living (EIL) and ACCESS, Inc. Undoubtedly, the fact that EIL endorses the teaching approaches to which I'd been introduced at SIT led me to feel at ease in that regard: I knew I wouldn't be fighting an administration that insisted on purely traditional methods, and wouldn't have to defend some of my choices. In addition, my familiarity with HELP after the first internship -- familiarity with the aims of its refugee program, with its curriculum concerns, and with (by then) Haitian culture -- contributed a great deal toward whatever confidence I brought with me to the second internship. But the similarities between the two programs ended there. Differences in setting and, more important, differences in the profile of the student body, made the ground I walked on less steady than

I'd presumed it would be in some respects, and more solid
and supportive than I'd hoped it would be in others.

The first internship took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts,
and my students were trying to acclimate themselves to the
disruptions of severely cold and icy weather conditions totally
unlike any they'd known in tropical Haiti. They were living
in city tenements and becoming acculturated to the frantic
pace and high crime rate of a typical large American metropolis.
These are some of the things they talked about in class -- and
some of the very factors that kept them homebound at times,
unable or unwilling to attend class. In general most of my
students in Cambridge had already received a secondary level
education in Haiti and had been living in Port-au-Prince, its
capital, before coming to the United States. In most cases
they were doing janitorial, laundry, or factory work when
they were able to find work at all.

By contrast, the second internship with HELP took place
in Winchester, Virginia, a small southern rural city with few
cultural outlets, a relatively docile atmosphere, warm weather
(for about two-thirds of the duration of the program), and
a low crime rate (as far as I could tell -- at least, we never
felt the need to lock our doors at home). The students were not
permanent residents of Winchester. They were migrant farmworkers
and lived in the small cinderblock rooms of the labor camp
run by the county fruitgrowers' association. Fatigue after
a day's heavy physical labor in the fields, injury, or illness
were their most frequent reasons for spotty attendance. They

seldom ventured out of the camp when they weren't working or
attending our evening ESL classes, and although many of them
live and do the same type of work in Florida most of the rest
of the year, they were, in the Winchester context, living a
somewhat institutional sort of life rather than dealing on a
daily basis with the American street culture, landlords (although
crew leaders and growers provided a reasonable facsimile of
same), and crime rate faced by my Cambridge students.

Fewer of the students in Winchester had been to secondary
school in Haiti and most had come from Haiti's rural, more
poverty-stricken areas (which is not to minimize the degree of
poverty which exists in Port-au-Prince as well). Unlike the
students in Cambridge, the Haitians in Winchester worked
together and lived together in the same confined area of the
labor camp. In short, they saw each other all day and every
day, lived a rough and rough-edged life performing grueling
physical labor with scant let-up -- a situation which led to
a sense of camaraderie and shared hardship, as well as a sense
of competition with each other, and both of these things had
repercussions in the classroom that didn't occur in Cambridge.
In other words, the group dynamic was considerably different
and certainly had an influence on what I did and didn't do with
my Winchester class as opposed to what I did and didn't do in
Cambridge.

In both internships I faced two particular problems
that would disturb many teachers but that are especially diffi-
cult for the novice teacher. They are, first, the lack of a

structured, detailed curriculum; and, second, a constantly
shifting student attendance pattern (which, in turn, results
in a constantly shifting classroom dynamic) due to the nature
of a refugee program (i.e. all the factors involved in spotty
attendance mentioned above).

The focus at each HELP program was on survival skills.
The students were to learn English through the functions and
competencies associated with situational topics such as medical
care, employment, postal service, housing, shopping, money and
banking needs, etc. There were no texts or materials that
were either comprehensive or required, and no particular
sequence of lessons or topics indicated. During the second
internship, however, the Master Teacher met with the teaching
staff on a bi-weekly basis to discuss and decide which topics
should be covered in the ensuing two weeks, and this did, indeed,
aid me in focusing my lessons. But it was still up to me to
pick and choose the particular functions, competencies, and
grammar points that, according to my own assessment, needed to
be tackled by my class; and it was still up to me to decide
how to weave them all together into lesson plans.

CHAPTER II: DRAWING UPON ESTABLISHED SKILLS

With no text or detailed syllabus before me, and with
a classroom whose population waxed and waned frequently, with
new students entering unexpectedly and new personalities added
to the already fluctuating mix, I found that my performance
anxiety rose immensely, and the lack of a stable classroom
taxed my powers of improvisation considerably. Here my other
skills came to the aid of the as-yet-unrefined pedagogical skills.

Every new teacher must have something to draw upon from her
past, something from her personal life or previous profession that
will stand her in good stead in the ESL classroom. What helped me
the most in overcoming the particular problems of my internship
were 1) my work as a poet, specifically my public performances
when giving poetry readings, and 2) my interpersonal skills.

Skills that relate to my work as a poet concern the presentation
of material, which demands mastery of material as well as sensitivity
and responsiveness to the audience. Although I still feel anxiety
before giving a poetry reading, it is nothing now compared to the
severe stage I felt at my very first reading some ten or
eleven years ago. What has changed over the years, through
having given quite a few readings both live and on the radio,
is my sense of mastery of the material, material here referring
to the content and format of the reading. Since I read work
that I have written myself, mastery of content is nearly
automatic, of course; but in "rehearsal" I pay close attention
to how I read the poems, what my voice is doing, how well I know
them so that I can make eye contact with the audience rather
than have to refer to the page, and to what order the poems
should be read in order to create variation instead of monotony

in the range of emotional responses I wish to evoke in the
audience. Confidence in all of these areas, I realize, has
been developed out of sheer experience, just as confidence
in one's teaching may be.

However, the added ingredient that experience, simply
doing a thing many times over, will <u>not</u> bring is the one I
must bring to the experience: attention to the audience, to
the nonverbal reaction, to what the eyes are saying, to how
the bodies rest upon the chairs, to whatever sounds -- be they
gasps or laughter -- are emitted. While a reading may be more
or less spontaneous or improvised depending on who the poet is
and what type of poetry is being presented; and while a reading
can be either more or less rehearsed than is an "appearance"
before one's ESL students, and either more or less spontaneous
than that as well, the one factor that unites the two is this
necessity of paying attention to the cues and clues contained
in the audience's/students' behavior. <u>Those</u> responses will
prove to be valuable signposts letting you know whether or
not, and how, you are coming across; and whether or not you
have to "change the act." This feels like risk-taking each
and every time.

Before coming to SIT I hadn't been inclined to use the
term "skills" for the following: the ability to relate to
other people, the capacity to listen objectively, the power
to empathize with another, the feeling of compassion for another's
plight. Yet I have come to see them all as definable attributes
and concrete skills that allow a teacher to function effectively

and serve her students well.

Such interpersonal skills are especially called for in
the ESL classroom, for a new language and culture raise all
sorts of emotional issues for learners, and they don't yet
possess enough of the target language to fully express or
describe their problems and conflicts. Also, language itself
being the topic or subject of instruction, the ESL teacher must
be aware of all sorts of other, nonverbal cues and behaviors
to let her know just what is going on with her students at
any given time. Even students who speak at an advanced level
of proficiency may be reluctant to express their problems or
negative feelings in their second language. One of the most
important strides I made as a result of my first internship was
the ability to begin the second internship with more spontaneity
and less fear of getting to know my students as individuals.
This allowed them, fairly early on, to begin to convey what
was really on their minds.

On the first night of the first internship, I entered the
classroom armed to the teeth with a rigid lesson plan designed
to get the students to get to know each other immediately, and
then to involve them in a paired activity before (as I later
realized) I'd had any opportunity to really know them and to
assess their various levels and figure out who would be better
paired off with whom, etc. It was a stiff, formal, mechanical
lesson plan designed, I now see, more as a defense against
really beginning to explore who my students were. My fear on
that first night of teaching was so great that I was barely

able to focus on anything else. Needless to say, hardly anything went satisfactorily and the fear subsided only after the class was over, when I realized that the worst had happened -- lightning had struck at least twice, the roof had collapsed, and so on -- and yet there I was, still alive and breathing, having survived to tell the tale. At the time, that seemed like a minor miracle.

What occurred on the first night of the second internship was quite different. Of course I came prepared with a lesson plan, but my need to get to know the students was more genuine this time and my interest in their lives was less obstructed by fear. Part of this more natural attitude had to do with the knowledge that, when all was said and done, my former students in Cambridge and I had gotten along rather well with each other. Part of it, in addition, was influenced by a very real desire to know more about the migrant farmworker's way of life, an existence that is not only radically different from anything I've known, but one that is also generally unnoticed by, and deliberately hidden from, the American public at large. Without getting on a soapbox, suffice it to say that my political and humanitarian beliefs are aligned with those who seek to expose and to fight the exploitation of migrant farmworkers in this country. But it wasn't until this teaching internship that I had the opportunity to be directly involved with, and be of direct use to, any segment of the migrant labor force. Such an interest obviated much of the fear I might normally have felt on the first night of a new class, and I was much more able

to work within a more easygoing structure which would enable

me to establish an atmosphere of security for us all, students

and teacher alike. A brief excerpt from my internship journal

will serve to illustrate what happened:

> August 31, 1982: Last night I taught my first class.
> I've been assigned the upper level, which I've taken
> over from a teacher who, though skilled in other subjects,
> has no ESL experience. Frankly, my own ESL experience
> is rather minimal as yet, and the whole issue of
> confidence, teacher security, performance anxiety and,
> not least, the sheer responsibility I incur in my role
> as teacher -- all of these things continue to plague my
> thoughts and to influence my entire demeanor.
>
> The classroom is tiny, ill-lit, the walls a joyless
> dull brown. I decided to try a CLL (community language
> learning) lesson for the first half, using the tape
> recorder, and go into parts of the body, illness, and
> doctor/patient role plays in the second half. (This
> week's topic is health.) I felt that the fact that the
> students already knew each other, even though they
> didn't yet know me, would serve to alleviate whatever
> hestiations they may have had at speaking into the
> tape recorder. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been inclined
> to introduce it on the first night of my "tenure."
>
> Naturally, very little went as planned. One, then
> another, then a third student trickled in after the labor
> camp bus arrived, and I'd hoped for a larger group for a
> CLL lesson. Then a fourth student walked in, well after
> we'd already plunged into identifying the parts of the
> body in a less than dynamic way -- through pictures I
> handed out for them to label -- until I finally decided
> to use our own bodies as the models instead. Then we
> did some prepared doctor/patient dialogues and, all in
> all, I wasn't feeling great about how things were going.
> So I put my plan aside and in the second half of class
> I simply asked them about themselves, about what they feel
> they need or want to get out of this English class, where
> their families are now, etc. -- and the floodgates opened.
> They talked on and on about Haiti, about wanting to go
> home, about Duvalier (Haiti's "President-for-Life"): "He
> gives me a problem," said one, who misses "my babies" --
> he has seven of them back in Haiti and sends money home
> for them. Another said of Duvalier, "He don't give me
> problem because I no give him problem!" They talked
> about revolution in other countries, about making a
> living, about the cost of education. One of them said,

"I don't like America. There are problems every-
where. America has many problems; Nicaragua, they kill
many people for revolution; and El Salvador. Haiti has
problems. If there are problems everywhere, I may as
well go back to Haiti." Not all of them spoke English
with such fluency, but clearly they all understood what
he was saying.

I made a pitch for them to return to class the
next night.(I'd been informed that enrollment could be
higher than it was), and to bring more students with
them. Later, I was told by Kathleen Quinby, the Master
Teacher, that for the first time in four weeks (since
the program began) she heard laughter coming from this
particular classroom. And Marian Aldred, another teacher
in the program, told me that for the past four weeks during
the class break in the middle of the evening, Elifait
(one of my students) consistently approached her each
night to ask if he could join her class instead, the
nonliterate class which is way below his level. Marian
told me that last night, for the first time in four weeks,
Elifait didn't ask to join her class. So: I don't know
if they learned much English last night, but I think I
succeeded in creating an atmosphere that might draw them
back. I think they sensed I was truly interested in what
they had to say.

Rereading this journal entry, I feel compelled to distinguish

between having confidence that one is a competent, skillful

teacher as opposed to feeling secure in one's standing as a

well-liked teacher. The latter has to do with the teacher's

ego only, and is a rather narcissistic concern in which the

needs of the students are secondary to the teacher's need for

approval. It is important to note once again that the sort of

self-confidence and security of which I speak revolves around

the former: the possession of competencies and skills that

serve the students effectively, and lead them on to greater

expression and greater learning and acquisition of language.

This is where real interpersonal skills, as opposed to the

superficial desire for acceptance, come into play. Not so

paradoxically, by focusing on the students, the teacher -- if her interest is genuine -- cannot fail to improve her pedagogical skills.

That being stated, however, I would like to consider briefly the proper place for the second condition, i.e. the security and gratification felt by the teacher when it becomes evident that she is well-liked by her students. It seems obvious that if we keep this aspect of security in its proper perspective, we needn't dismiss it as solely emanating from a narcissistic orientation. If we think of the building of positive inter-personal relations as a skill, then we may safely add it to the repertoire of skills which a teacher needs in order to foster an atmosphere in which students will learn. You, the teacher, may be exquisitely confident in your ability to plan logical, coherent lessons; you may be an expert practitioner of the Silent Way; you may have a million dazzling techniques at your disposal. But if your students do not feel your basic humanity behind these tools, emanating through the way in which you use them, then their learning will be obstructed (though not, of course, entirely blocked) to one degree or another. If there is not an exchange of affect, a sense that teacher and students like, or at least respect, each other and find it attractive to be in each other's presence, then learning will be impaired, interest will be lowered, and less language will be retained the student once he leaves the classroom.

Why will less be retained? Because if his experience in the classroom is one of coldness and lack of a positive relationship

to the teacher (and to the other students, of course), then
he will have less motivation to internalize that classroom and
carry it with him into the world outside -- to, figuratively
speaking, transport the classroom and, by extension, what
he has learned in that classroom, to the situations outside
its doors where what he has learned must be applied. If the
teacher with whom he has learned the proper use of modals made
that experience cold, dry, or otherwise distasteful, he has
less reason to feel at home with the proper use of modals than
he did before he ever walked into that classroom.

So: is it important for the teacher to be well-liked by
her students? Yes, it is -- but more so for the students' sakes
than for her own. If she feels a human bond with her students,
she will be able to take more risks in departing from "safe"
techniques and uncreative approaches. If she feels the students
are with her all or most of the way, she can push them farther
and help them stretch their limits. She can take risks which,
in turn, will allow them to take risks. At the bottom of all
learning and growth is the ability -- and the willingness -- to
take risks. In a classroom where the students actually like
their teacher, risks can and will be taken more readily, by
teacher and students alike.

To make this more concrete, two simple examples will suffice.
In Cambridge, one student whose proficiency was substantially
lower than that of the rest of the class, but who had been
switched from another class to mine, attended sporadically
until he came to realize that I was a non-threatening teacher

who would not lose patience with him, and who would encourage

the class to abandon the impatient attitude it displayed

toward him. As he began to trust me and to trust that I would

not allow the class to cut him off as they had been wont to do,

he attended class more frequently until one night he burst

out with a long -- and coherent -- story about a problem he

was having with his landlady. Though the story did get to be

rather long, I did not limit his time: I decided to risk the

possibility that some of the other students might direct their

impatience toward me for this. The rewards were more than ample,

because Pedro finally had given me enough language to work with,

enough to assess some of the problem areas he needed to focus

on, and enough to point out to him so that he could (and did)

begin to improve his speaking skills.

A similar case came up in the Winchester class and when

it did, I had this first experience with Pedro to draw upon.

I felt confident in Winchester that the class would not lose

interest as I allowed Paul to express himself as best he could.

Only this time I was able to enlist the aid of the rest of the

class as they began to help him -- too much so at first, until

I demonstrated that he should be given a sufficient amount of

time in which to correct himself, and then they could indicate

where he might be going wrong before any of us actually corrected

him. I must point out that all of this occurred quickly enough

and that Paul was not left stammering for any uncomfortable

length of time. Therefore, he felt able to risk saying -- and

learning -- more and more as the days wore on.

CHAPTER III: ESTABLISHING NEW SKILLS

In this chapter, I'll highlight some successes and failures in developing a student-centered classroom during the first, Cambridge internship, and then I'll talk about the growth in skills and confidence realized in terms of the same goal during the second internship.

1. Paired Activities and Role Plays

As I've already mentioned, on my first night in Cambridge I prematurely forced a paired activity, before the students really knew each other and before I really knew their various strengths and weaknesses in order to pair them effectively. Throughout that internship, in fact, they resisted my attempts to pair them up -- save for the lesson on asking for and giving directions, when each pair had a map of the vicinity to work with. I am now convinced, after looking back on that particular lesson, that the paired activity was not resisted (and, in fact, was quite successful) because I was being more directive with the students. My tone of voice carried a sense of certainty and finality in that I myself was convinced of the value of the activity and the necessity of having the students master the giving and receiving of directions. So that one factor I can point to as being primary in one's growing confidence as an ESL teacher is one's belief that the material and the techniques employed are important for the students and relevant to their needs. This, once again, takes attention away from the teacher's own nervousness over how she's doing "up there" and concentrates

it on the progress and well-being of the students.

During the second internship, in Winchester, paired activities were kept to a minimum for other reasons. The tiny size of the classroom, the cramped tables everyone had to squeeze themselves around, the classroom dynamic -- all mitigated the effectiveness of paired activities. However, I was able to adapt and get around this by introducing activities and role plays that used pairs of students while the whole group looked on; and activities that involved the whole group at once. For example, using a telephone set the school had gotten hold of, pairs of students took turns calling and answering, playing the roles of receptionist in the doctor's office and patient making the call, describing symptoms, and making an appointment. Each student in each pair got to play both roles. Because I was able to be directive, and because there was a sense of fun and cooperation in the classroom, it all went pretty smoothly (even when the telephone failed to ring and I inadvertently "fixed" it by making it permanently unable to ring...).

It may sound strange, but I was not able to do this sort of thing -- simple and standard though it may be -- with my Cambridge class. I had not yet learned how to be directive enough in setting up a role play situation. In Winchester, I was more organized and relaxed at the same time, in control of the format while allowing spontaneity. I learned how to set up a role play more effectively by introducing at the outset enough dialogue and structure to later on allow students to improvise. In Cambridge, by contrast, I had been so nervous

about initiating a role play activity that I practically threw
the students into the situation with little preparation and of
course nothing much came of it.

2. Group Activities

Group activities were even more effective, and here I find
still more contrasts between the first and second internships.
In general, the use of picture cards to generate vocabulary,
dialogue, structure practice, and writing activities were much
more successful in Cambridge. The students in that class became
animated at the sight of the pictures and had little problem in
writing their own dialogue -- words they'd put into the mouths
of the characters in the pictures. In Winchester, the same
materials did not go over very well. I was, therefore, forced to
realize that I'd become dependent upon picture cards in Cambridge,
because the students there had responded so well to them. In
Winchester the time had come, obviously, to risk doing something
new, something that would better suit this particular class.

So I learned then and there how to have them do a "strip
story," in which I write a story -- a continuous narrative --
containing as many sentences as there are students in the class,
write each sentence on its own strip of paper, and have each
student blindly choose one sentence strip to memorize. I then
collect the strips and the students have to work the story out
aloud together, each student reciting his sentence clearly so
that the others all understand him, until as a group they have
placed themselves and their sentences in the proper order.
Several of the students had done a strip story only once before,

some hadn't ever done it at all, and it was definitely a first

for me. It went beautifully -- again, because I had faith in

the utility and sense of the activity. I had written a story

that was about the students, about why they came to Winchester

and what they were doing there, so the story itself was identi-

fiable and relevant to their lives. And I knew how valuable it

would be for them to have to pronounce each word clearly enough

for each other, and not only for me, to understand -- for I

was to give them no help in coming up with the proper story,

and they did it all by themselves.

The use of the tape recorder was something else I approached

gingerly during the first internship. At that, I wasn't using

it for a CLL lesson; I employed it only for taped dialogues I'd

written and that, when played back for the class, provided a good

listening comprehension activity. But in Winchester, I found

the courage to do CLL lessons -- and they were very successful.

By "successful" I mean that not only was student interest high,

but also a great deal of fruitful work took place on structure,

pronunciation, and writing skills. Basically, I chose the topic

(although they didn't have to stick to it once they got going)

so as to decrease student anxiety at speaking into the recorder.

The topic of health care in Haiti led to all sorts of stories

that were used to generate other activities after the initial

lesson (during which student eyes were riveted to the CLL

transcript), not least of which was the spin-off conversation

that arose spontaneously about other contrasts between Haiti

and the United States. This provided a rich, exciting, and

important source of material for speaking and writing activities
leading to greater practice of structures and pronunciation, and
greater mastery of conversational skills.

4. Student Self-Correction

Since my Cambridge experience had already familiarized me
with the more typical structure and pronunciation problems faced
by Haitians when speaking English, in Winchester I was more
successful in engendering student self-correction. I could
see my skill improve in Cambridge, but at the time I was still
hesitant as to how directive or non-directive to be. At times,
therefore, it wasn't clear to the students when I was asking them
to correct themselves and when I was indicating that students
should correct each other; and also, at first, I myself provided
too much correction too quickly. Slowly I became more comfortable
with a Silent Way approach to correction, indicating word slots
either with my fingers or with lines chalked on the blackboard.
By the time I got to Winchester, I was much more confident
and practiced at this method, and it took no time at all for
the students to catch on. It took a bit more time, however,
to get them to refrain from shouting out corrections to a
fellow student before he had a chance to correct himself. Little
by little this subsided and a comfortable level of student
self=correction was reached and maintained. Referring back
to my mention of Paul, by the time he joined the class late in
the term, they knew how to respond to his frequent lack of
clarity by allowing him to correct himself when he could (by
observing my own patience with and encouragementof him), and

by jumping in to help him (if I hadn't yet done so) when it
became obvious that he didn't have the correction somewhere
inside of himself already.

Patience seems to be the thread that runs throughout these
remarks: patience with the students, patience with silence,
patience with the process of preparing structured activities
for the classroom. This is an indispensable trait for any
teacher to have -- whether one is a novice or about to retire
after many decades!

4. Student Feedback

Student feedback, the last element I'd like to discuss
vis-à-vis the creation of a student-centered classroom, can
be a tricky business for a teacher lacking confidence. Although
I had been advised, as a new teacher, not to ask for feedback for
a while, I couldn't help but do so. In Cambridge the students
were reluctant to offer feedback when I asked for it directly,
saying instead, "You're the teacher -- you make the decisions."

But feedback sometimes arose spontaneously, sometimes
unasked for as on the night when I was out of the room during
a class break and a student inscribed an imploring message on
the blackboard to the effect that WE WOULD LIKE TO HAVE MORE
GRAMMAR, PLEASE. Talk about feedback! It took me a while before
I felt this was a positive event and not a criticism to be
taken personally. It was, after all, good that the student
(who was caught in the act as I returned to class, so that we
could all have a good laugh about it together) wanted more grammar,
and that he got it across to me somehow rather than keeping it

to himself or, worse yet, not returning to class. It turned

out that the entire class felt as he did, and so I did, indeed,

concentrate on a rather straight, old-fashioned grammar lesson

during the second half of the class, and that pleased them.

I found, in fact, that at times some of the more innovative

approaches taught at SIT were too much for some students -- and

sometimes they were more than I was ready to handle, as well --

and so I acquiesced to the situation, and accepted my own

limitations as well, whenever it seemed appropriate. Allowing

myself and the students the comfort of some old familiar ways

turned out to lay a solid ground on which newer approaches

could be introduced at reasonable intervals of time. First,

they felt secure in the way the class was going, and then I,

too, felt comfortable enough to branch out and tackle new ways

of presenting material and getting them involved.

In Winchester the students were more direct with their

feedback, and I was more prepared to receive it professionally

rather than personally. They, too, were hungry for old-

fashioned grammar lessons, and though I gave them as much,

more of the grammar was handled through CLL transcripts and

other student-generated material.

I've indicated growth in self-confidence in the area of

creating a student-centered classroom; and I've shown how,

through the use of CLL transcripts, picture cards, strip

stories, role play, taped dialogues (and also dialogues I

wrote and had them learn, in Winchester -- to which they

responded with great enthusiasm), and other materials not

mentioned (such as jazz chants, etc.), I was eventually able

to work creatively without a required text to fall back on. But

at this point I would like to say that during my second intern-

ship there was one other factor that was crucial to my being

able to work with more confidence, mastery, and spontaneity

in the classroom. Because of the particular situation involved,

I was privileged with a closer glimpse of my students' lives

apart from the classroom. I saw where and how they were forced

to live, watched them at work picking apples in the orchard,

visited them when they were sick or in the hospital, played with

their children, and sometimes had to hold a baby in my arms even

as I taught a class. I don't mean to sound like a politician

trying to ingratiate himself into the hearts of his constituency!

I merely want to stress that in Winchester I was more directly

immersed in my students' lives. Living closer to them in

this small city, getting to know them in a more "at home" manner,

made the act of teaching itself more real and accessible to me;

and this greater familiarity with my students also made me less

a victim of performance anxiety -- not that it ever vanished

totally, by any means, but it was considerably reduced (assuaged,

if you will) by the humanizing link that arose with a closer

look at and involvement in the lives of the students and their

plight -- as refugees, as migrant laborers, as those who are

kept low on America's totem pole.

CHAPTER IV: DEVELOPING SELF-CONFIDENCE

The process of developing self-confidence as an ESL teacher has been not only personal and subjective, but also organic and not necessarily always concrete. There are no absolute conclusions, no sure-fire steps to follow. But perhaps it would be useful to highlight some of the factors presented in this paper.

The most crucial of these, I now realize, is the lessening of emphasis on the performance aspect of teaching -- at least, "performance" in the way I was defining it. In trying to create a student-centered classroom, I gradually learned that teaching is a cooperative activity -- you certainly can't teach your students anything if they aren't willing to learn, to cooperate, to take responsibility for their learning. During the first internship I was much too conscious of "performing" the role of teacher, just as I had had to perform when giving a poetry reading to an audience. Though some of the skills, as I've already pointed out, used as a public reader of poetry were transferable to teaching an ESL class, the two activities are essentially different. They take place for different reasons. They don't share all of the same goals. Becoming less of a performer and more of a person interested in what my students had to say was an important step toward mastering the skills of teaching ESL.

Skill mastery was allowed to occur when I looked more closely and sincerely at my students' needs to learn English than at my own need for approval. Then, and only then, was I really able to objectively assess the worth and relevance of an activity or a set of materials. It was the shift in focus of attention

away from myself and toward those two aspects of teaching -- the
particular situational needs of my students and the particular
materials that would meet those needs -- it was that shift in
focus that put my energies where a teacher's energies and efforts
should go.

If that is followed through on clearly, then all the other
factors begin to fall into place: lesson planning, organizing
material, directing a class activity in a clear manner, and,
eventually, taking certain risks that allow you and your students
to stretch.

In a classroom which is student-centered and not teacher-
centered, some of the decisions about what takes place can be
shared by teacher and students. It was realizing this, realizing
that I was not alone but was part of a group effort toward the
same goal, that allowed me to concentrate more on ways of
bringing out the students, and less on how I looked "up there"
in front of the classroom.

Becoming involved in your students' lives outside of the
classroom may not be an indispensable step in this process.
Certainly there are boundaries and limits that should be observed.
But because of the nature of teaching ESL in particular, as opposed
to other kinds of subject matter, I found it impossible to separate
my students' needs in class from their need to adapt to the
culture at large (in many ways, that is the subject matter), to
find a place for themselves in this country, to get along, to
not be cheated in business transactions or deprived of proper
medical attention, etc. Their progress in learning English was

necessary to the quality of their lives. Therefore, my visits to their "homes" at the labor camp in Virginia, or visits to the hospital, or even planning a party with them, were all crucial to my development as a teacher of ESL.

Self-confidence as an ESL teacher has grown not only because I can maintain discipline and be more directive, can take more risks in using different materials and approaches, but also because I have grown more patient -- with silence, with the learning process, with myself. I have allowed myself both the privilege of knowing my students better, and the beauty of watching a student emerge from a shell of bewilderment -- to speak, to laugh more easily, rather than glare fearfully at the blackboard. In his growth and mine, we mirror each other.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Stevick, Earl W. Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways. Rowley,

    Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1980. (For my

    mention of the Silent Way and Community Language Learning

    approaches.)

Vizetelly, Frank H., ed. The Practical Standard Dictionary of

    the English Language. New York and London: Funk & Wagnall's

    Company, 1937.