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Self reflection on the teaching practice of english as a second language: becoming the critically reflective teacher

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Abstract

This article proposes a framework for developing as a critically reflective teacher. The author highlights the importance of personal beliefs and experiences which contribute to critical reflection as the distinguishing attribute of reflective practitioners. The term 'self reflection' as developed here, merges beliefs and values creating state of the art theories of learning via conscious consideration. The consequences of teaching practice, with self-reflection on the methodological constraints of teaching context are presented with some examples of teaching practices. Assumptions about human potential and learning, which challenge language learners, are briefly discussed in terms of the application of the model of communication with those learning. As a final action to be taken approaching teaching as a reflective practitioner by self-generating humanistic approaches are recommended in order to infuse values into a professional identity, resulting in developing a deliberate code of conduct. In the final analysis, it is suggested that to approach teaching as a reflective practitioner, a self generating humanistic approach should be taken. This emphasizes personal values being integrated into one's professional identity, which in turn will produce a personal code of contact © 2012 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Selection and/or peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Hüseyin Uzunboylu

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1. Introduction

The notion of language learning and teaching has had a long history which has been criticized by many skeptics. Brown (2005) traces this movement from pre-occupation with methods, to a focus on methodology. Some linguists and methodologists defend the effectiveness of the audio-lingual method which is based on behaviorist theory, while some starting from the 1980s have turned ELT methodology emphasize the communicative aspects, taking the advantage of constructivist and cognitive approaches.

As Widdowson (1977) states that when we acquire a language, we not only compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units of random occurrence; we also learn how to use sentences appropriately to achieve communicative purposes. We are not just walking grammar Robots. That is why the premises of my teaching are based on the communicative aspects of language in which my aim is to help students comprehend and learn to apply new information and language forms inductively, with little focus in prescriptive methods but on the contrary focus more on descriptive methods. I believe therefore that methods such as silent way suggestopedia or Audio-lingual methods may not work out well in language courses where the goal is to teach students how to communicate in a target language. Audio-lingual or grammar translation methods do not tolerate mistakes, and the teacher is simply regarded as an orchestra leader. My aim in ELT is to guide the students and lead them, but do not

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direct them in an authoritarian manner. But yet I believe that I should determine the limits and rules very carefully. Taking a humanistic approach could provide too much tolerance whereby the teachers themselves could be abused by students as a humanistic manner involving a great deal of tolerance can turn into dimensions in which teachers themselves may be abused by the students.

2. The premises of teaching practices: Beliefs and values regarding the state of the art of theories of learning

My experience in ELT helped me to lay the fundamentals of my teaching practices. So far, I have taught in different institutions, my first experience being as a teacher during my trainee courses in prep class of an Anatolian high school. Being directed by ELT methodologists, I preferred to apply PPP (Present practice and produce), and so starting from my early experience, I realized that PPP, when applied together with drills during practice, works out well; nevertheless my experience at university exam preparation courses broadened my horizons in terms of teaching students how to think analytically. That is why I realized, that teaching via grammar translation and direct method increased the success level of students since their time was limited. This also resulted from the objectives of the course which did not include speaking skills but rather grammar and reading skills.

In my further experience in government primary schools, I realized how important it was to arrange the curriculum according to students' progress; therefore my first week in school made me aware that I had to be sensitive and observant enough to adopt the curriculum. In all of my class preparation I realized the importance of planning the lessons. In the MA TEFL program through my readings I learned about the difference between novice and an experienced teacher, and I can now deduce that almost all teachers go through this process.

Language is not a set of rules: learners can communicate via referring to their 'black box', in other words, language acquisition device (LAD). Teaching inductively, in fact, conceals the authority of the grammar, and it rather triggers students' mental chunks. That is why it should be taken into consideration as one of the fundamental premises in ELT. In this respect, a language teacher's main focus should be on applying her/his own insights and intuition during teaching, by firstly analyzing and observing the students' needs and progress. Students are unique identities and they have their own black box like a gift in their hands. Unfortunately, no teacher can see what is inside the LAD, but there are clues as to what might be inside, and where and how to start teaching. That is why a teacher should be sensitive enough like a detector or sensor which can perceive how to refer to LAD. In teaching English as a Second Language, it is important that the needs and behavior of each student be observed and adjustments made for their individual learning style.

Teaching needs to find ways of enhancing learning and making achievement possible for those students who might not have responded to uniform and conventional forms of teaching and learning. Learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984: 38). Individuals differ in their ways of learning and this calls for different ways of teaching that take account of these individual differences. An experienced teacher can perceive via her or his perceptual learning style, her students' learning styles and develop strategies by referring to her or his own cognitive learning style.

3. The methodological Constraints of teaching contexts

A variety of methods such as silent way, suggestopedia, direct method, grammar-translation, community language learning, communicative approach, etc. can be used as methodological applications in different teaching contexts, yet there often arises some potential and sometimes unexpected constraints during the application of methodological teaching practices. As a result, the value of some of the methods declines which is a recognized syndrome in the ELT world: methods cannot always work anywhere and for anyone with the same expected outcome.

Brown (2005) discusses a number of reasons for the decline of the methods syndrome in contemporary discussions of language teaching practices. As he and others commented, the notion of all-purpose 'designer methods' that will work anywhere and for everyone raises a number of issues. Methods are typically top-down

impositions of expert's views of teaching. The role of the individual teacher is minimized. His or her role is to apply the method and adapt his or her teaching style to make it conform to the method. Methods are hence prescriptive.

Methods fail to address the broader contexts of teaching and learning and focus on only one complex part or small part of more complex elements. Brown (2005) describes what may be called a 'curriculum development, approach to teaching, which begins with diagnosis (i.e. needs analysis, syllabus, and materials development), then moves to treatment (i.e. instruction and pedagogy), and involves issues of assessment (i.e. testing and evaluation). A good example of this which is stated by Brown, is the application of TBL in prep classes where English is taught as a foreign language. TBL can achieve better results when a needs analysis is clearly and analytically determined, and curriculum is adopted accordingly; it is especially so in settings and environments where English is spoken as second language. One of the main reasons for this is that students should be more aware of why they have been performing the task right in the beginning of the lesson after enough input is given. If these students feel that they will perform well and apply it right after the lesson, their awareness will be aroused more effectively; moreover their mental processes will be constructed and triggered in harmony with their needs. Teaching TBL, in prep classes did not work out well as students had exam anxiety and academic writing difficulties. Students who learn a foreign language in a country where English is spoken as foreign language do not compare well with the students who learn English in target language community such as America or England. Therefore a language course which applies TBL in New York can really be more successful than a foreign country.

One of the other aspects which can be regarded as a constraint is the syllabus and its effectiveness and application in language classrooms. As a foreign language teacher, I have witnessed some scenarios where students felt like negotiating the syllabus itself. Yet it is mentioned in methodology books that only relatively rarely are teachers expected to negotiate with their students the content and nature of a syllabus; nevertheless the syllabus we have been teaching in advanced (B2) level, is in some instances overloaded, therefore I had to stop making what are usually safe assumptions, that the students in my classes would readily accept the courses I planned to teach. I sometimes find myself facing classes of reluctant and rebellious students who cannot respond to the standards of B2 level. In such situations I asked the question to myself, what such a student profile would like to do and I try to find a way of working together.

In conclusion, these methodological constraints should be taken into consideration by language teachers to be more reflective in their teaching contexts.

4. Reflections on the model of communication with the learners

Trying to communicate in an unfamiliar language and trying to use unfamiliar language is by no means easy. In fact, in order to encourage the students in my classes to practice communicating with each other freely in the target language, I try to make my students believe that making errors is inevitable. Therefore in some of my lessons I try to model this unexpected behavior. Whenever I make some mistakes, I acknowledge that I have made a mistake. In this way, I routinely invite my students to spot my errors and reward them for doing so. Whenever a student points out that I made an error on the whiteboard, he speaks it out loud and the rest of the class realizes that it is very natural to make errors. Senior (2006) states that teachers should be friendly and supportive and should ensure that others don't tease the one who made an error.

It is an undeniable fact that experiencing ESL has an ego-threatening feature, therefore I try to convey the impression to my students, that they can learn language in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Students especially in ESP classes may feel that they cannot keep up with the pace and keep on track no matter how knowledgeable they are in their field of study. Indeed the majority of students in adult classes may feel a threat to their egos since this kind of learning is really something new for them. From my observations and the questionnaires I have distributed to my students, I have concluded that students feel as vulnerable as babies when exposed to their first language. That is why we cannot make a sharp distinction between L1 acquisition and L2 learning since they are gained mostly in

behaviorist styles and naturally. ESL teachers should therefore have a friendly manner and correct the mistakes of students when there is a possibility of fossilization, like mothers do for their babies during L1 acquisition.

Another important aspect of my model of communication, is establishing rapport with the class. As a language teacher I have found out at times that the relationship I have with my classes is extremely complex. It begins right from the beginning of the module when I and my class meet for the first time and continues for the duration of the course. I try to provide my classes with selected information about myself for a number of reasons. 1). It is a way of establishing professional credibility. 2). In time I have sensed and observed that it may be important for my classes to know at what stage I am in my life. For instance, I have experienced my students' asking about my valued experience as a teacher, whether I have been abroad or not, or my marital status, family etc. 3). I have realized that when I share knowledge about myself, my students are encouraged to follow the lessons and take part in activities since I am not an untouchable unique identity for them anymore but a human being like them who feels, senses, reacts and responds to given stimuli or messages. Therefore I can reflect on my interactions with my students by accepting that I should reveal some additional aspects of myself such as my beliefs about language learning. I have aimed at doing so because I sense that students find it helpful to understand why I teach in such ways.

All these aspects should be taken into consideration and students should be observed very carefully during this interactional phase. There might be several reasons why students take part in lessons and interact with their classmates and the teacher such as sociolinguistic factors, given discourse since misunderstandings may lead to intolerable behaviors of students.

5. Reflections on my application of humanistic approaches in my teaching practices

Having delved into my own reflections in my application of humanistic approaches in my teaching practices, as an English teacher, I would like to emphasize and mention about my reflections on humanistic approaches such as demonstrating approachability, establishing rapport with the class, functioning as a facilitator, caring manner and other psycholinguistics aspects of language learning. Noddings (2001) suggest that "language teachers of adults are humanistic in their classroom management approaches" (p.99). Williams and Burden (1997) provide "a useful overview of psychological bases of humanistic approaches in education, explaining the considerable influence that humanistic approaches have had on English language teaching and methodology" (p.30-38).

One of the most important fundamentals of my reflections on the application of humanistic approaches is demonstrating approachability. I believe that I can show that I have an approachable personality by closely relating my desire to establish rapport with my class; in other words, I try to show my desire to impress my students by treating them in a friendly manner. I try to do my best at all times to help them in their efforts to develop proficiency in the target language. I try to understand my students in a sympathetic rather than dismissive way whenever any of them has difficulty in comprehending new information. For example; I share my past errors as an anecdote as I wish to convey the impression to my students that I have a support role rather than a position of power and domination.

Another essential reflection of my humanistic approach is that I have been viewing myself as a facilitator in my classrooms and in general, I can say that I regard myself as a caring teacher as I am aware of the fact that language teachers can have a negative effect on learning since they can create anxiety, and this is also supported by research findings. Arnold (1999) states that anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor pervasively obstructing the learning process. It is associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension. That is why I have been trying to diminish the negative feelings of students right from the beginning of each module. For instance, I feel the sense that students can pick up much from the way I walk into the classroom at the start of the very first lesson. I have always asked the questions to myself 'Do I survey the class as a whole in a smiling, welcoming way looking relaxed and confident? I feel that an informal classroom atmosphere is necessary but not a sufficient condition for successful language practice. Therefore, beginning each module with a learning activity that my students see as something purposeful, interesting and relevant to their needs, is very important. In the first week of each module, I prefer to do whole-class information gathering activity in the first lesson, mostly

ice-breakers. Hence, I create a sense of feeling that they are members of a family, which are the most significant fundamentals of humanistic approaches in my teaching practices.

6. Conclusion

Reflecting on my teaching practice, I realize just how much I much input I have received from my students and taken action accordingly and so that to a great extent it now affects my own classroom management. This study, which is an analysis of my reflections as an ESL teacher, has also revealed that the teachers' cognitive process is also a vital factor which affects the communication and interactional phase in the classroom.

Taking all these aspects into consideration, I would like to add that I put all my prejudice aside and try to be lenient as there might be many unexpected perlocutionary effects of illocutionary acts of teachers during classroom interaction, which can violate the rules of felicity, politeness, thus may result in even classroom management. This study gives a brief description of the premises of teaching practices in teaching English as a second language in relation to beliefs and values regarding the state of the art of theories of learning. Some methodological constraints which may arise in teaching contexts of ESL teachers are also mentioned. As a final solution, reflections on the model of communication with the learners and application of humanistic approaches in teaching practices have also been given.

As an English language instructor, I have had several classroom experiences where my personal principles served to guide my choices regarding theory and practice. Outside of the classroom, my personal beliefs influence my choices just as pervasively, if less tacitly, than my choices of theory or pedagogy. From my interactions with colleagues in the halls, to my friendships, from my graduate experiences to my volunteer work, everything I participate in is founded on my teaching reflections that motivate and inform my practices. As I grow in my identity as a teacher, I have come to the conclusion that my personal beliefs and reflections on my professional development inform my pedagogical choices.

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