

REFERENCE:

LEFFA, Vilson J. Making ends meet in the classroom: The attributes of the good language teacher. *Cadernos do IL*. Porto Alegre, UFRGS, n. 12, p. 107-116, Dezembro de 1994.

MAKING ENDS MEET IN THE CLASSROOM: THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE GOOD LANGUAGE TEACHER

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There is a long tradition in our profession that we teach students something and they learn something else. Two examples confirm this tradition. One is related to the historical assumption that students should always learn the four basic skills of a foreign language — listening, speaking, reading, and writing — even if, under some circumstances, they needed proficiency in just one skill. The other example is related to the learning-versus-acquisition debate, where the teacher consciously teaches one thing and

the student unconsciously acquires another.

In terms of the four-skills approach, the idea that teachers could concentrate on reading instead of speaking created a theoretical dilemma, because language was defined as speech, not as writing. *At best*, writing was seen as a poor representation of language, just a fuzzy, incomplete, obscure picture of the real thing — *at best* because a picture usually shows some resemblance with the real thing, which was argued not to be the case with writing. The pictorial quality of writing was so poor that the resemblance, the likeness with speech was lost. So when we read a word we have never heard before, specially in a language where there is a poor match between letters and sounds such as English, we can't pronounce the word, that is, we don't know what the written form stands for, we don't know what it represents. Consequently learning a language through its writing system is a vicarious experience,

like watching videos instead of traveling.

There is still another problem. If you see a picture of your mother, for example, you immediately recognize your mother in the picture. You can remember her voice, nice things that happened between you and her, the color of her eyes, even if it is a black and white picture. But if you see a picture of a person you have never met before, you know very little about that person. Just by looking at the picture you don't really know what the person is like, and you can be easily deceived even by what you think you see in the picture. The person may be older or younger than he looks. And what about personality traits? Is the person enthusiastic? Creative? Intelligent? Ambitious? Generous? Selfish? I don't think I could get all that information just by looking at a picture, even if I were Sherlock Holmes.

So there is a big difference between seeing a picture of somebody you already know and a picture of

somebody you have never met before. Now, the argument goes, if you read a word you are familiar with, a word you have already heard and spoken, you can recognize it immediately, and build all the associations between that poor representation of the printed word on the page and the rich experience of life beyond it. On the other hand, if it is a word you have never heard you cannot know what the word is really like. You have an artificial, vicarious experience of language.

All this led to the pedagogical principle that in language learning the four skills should *not* be presented at the same time, but in a sequence, the so-called *learning order*. First you hear the language, then you speak it, then you read it, and finally you write it. Under no circumstances, no matter what your objectives were in learning or teaching the language, should you ever break this order. “The principle [speech before writing] applies even when

the goal is only to read” (Lado, 1964, p. 50).

The idea that secondary school students should acquire a reading knowledge of the foreign language had a long tradition in the United States though, and the hypothesis of aural comprehension as a necessary first step towards reading comprehension had been tested over and over.

The first large investigation (Coleman, 1929) was conducted more than 60 years ago, in the late twenties, involving thousands of schools and hundreds of universities, both in the United States and Canada. The conclusion of this study, concerning the topic we are discussing here, was that students read better in a foreign language if reading skill is emphasized in the classroom. The second study was conducted in the late forties (Agard and Dunkel, 1948). Conclusion: Students read better in a foreign language if reading skill is emphasized in the classroom. The third study,

traditionally referred to as The Pennsylvania Foreign

Language Project (Smith, 1970), was conducted in mid sixties. The conclusion of this study: students read better in a foreign language if reading skill is emphasized in the classroom.

These were the findings: teach your students reading, and they will learn reading; teach them speaking, and they will learn speaking.

Of course this is history now. The learning order debate belongs to the past, to the time we made a distinction only between *teaching* and *learning* and were very happy about it, thinking we had reached the last frontier of pedagogical wisdom. Today things are more complicated. The distinction now is not only between teaching and learning — we have gone beyond that. We have introduced a further distinction, this time between *learning* and *acquisition*. Theorists may now agree, after all, that there is a relationship between what we teach and what the students learn, but what the students learn

is not important any longer. What *is* important is what they acquire, and what they *acquire* is different from what they *learn*.

Investigators in second language acquisition claim that people acquire a second language in a certain order. For example, the -ING form, the irregular past and the third person singular are always acquired in this order, no matter where the subjects come from, no matter which first language they speak. It seems that this so-called natural order of acquisition is impervious, unaffected by classroom instruction; that is, if you teach your student first the third person and then the -ING form, the students will not acquire these two morphemes in the sequence you taught them, but in the opposite sequence, according to the natural order. In other words, teaching does not affect acquisition. At best, it may speed up the rate of acquisition and maybe improve students' performance in terms of

grammatical correctness, but these are regarded as marginal things, the crucial aspect of the natural order of acquisition is *untouched* by teaching.

The old claim that we had to teach speaking for the students to learn reading is now replaced by a more complex mismatch. We are told by specialists that learning and teaching are conscious activities and that language acquisition is unconscious. We have a black box inside us, called *language acquisition device*, which is activated automatically, without our conscious control; that is, we get a language incidentally, paying attention to something else. In other words, we consciously teach our students something, but they will unconsciously acquire something else. The students seem to be immune to what the teacher consciously does in the classroom. The purpose of this paper is to propose an approach that reduces this polarity between what the teacher teaches and what the students learn. The

assumption is that although many of the activities

done by the teacher are hidden from consciousness they can be brought to the open arena. Along with the idea that language acquisition is unconscious, there is a opposite movement of consciousness raising — including metacognitive studies, with their emphasis on learning strategies; the idea that consciousness plays a much more important role in language acquisition than was originally accepted (Schmidt, 1990); the role of *awareness* in foreign language methodology; and the notion of the teacher as a reflective practitioner (Wallace, 1991).

What follows is a brief inventory of attributes that constitute good teaching, defined here as the ability to bridge the gap between teaching and learning.

The basis for this inventory are years of classroom observation, involving different teachers in different teaching situations.

The first attribute goes by the name of *creativity*.

Language teaching is viewed as an art where the

teacher creates in the classroom, sometimes with very little resources. An artist does not need much to create a masterpiece — sometimes nothing more than a chisel, a hammer and a piece of stone.

Creativity is then this ability to use the little resources we have to create the necessary conditions to teach good classes.

A piece of stone has millions of possibilities for the sculptor. A room filled with students also has millions of possibilities in the hands of the teacher as artist.

As a teacher trainer I have observed hundreds of classes and I have found some that were real works of art, a real thing of beauty — just like a picture, a musical piece or a dramatic performance. Sitting in the class, I would often see, in front of my eyes, a teacher creating beauty with the students.

This could happen in many ways. I remember one teacher who was able to create rhythm in his class.

He was rather traditional in some ways, in fact all the classroom activities emanated from him, but he did not act like a drill sergeant; he was more like an orchestra conductor. He was developing a theme in his class, and questions from the students were handled swiftly and incorporated into the theme. He was able to make students work at their best. He gave them his best, and nothing but the best seemed to be accepted there. But I saw no signs of distress among the students, no anxiety. The activities flowed smoothly, like musical notes in a symphony. At the end, just a sense of fulfillment.

Fiction? No, I think this is art in the hands of an experienced teacher. He knew all the tricks, had everything at his fingertips, and used them to create his class, as a musician uses his knowledge of instruments to create a piece of music, as a sculptor uses his ability to handle the chisel to make a statue. Teaching as an art, however, should not be exclusive

of experienced teachers. I have seen many

beginning teachers using a great deal of creativity in their classes. Let me just give you a simple example.

Sixth grade, about 35 students, hot afternoon. The class is a little more than half through and working on a dialogue about likes and dislikes, having a grammar focus on pronouns. The teacher, almost the same age as the students, opens her folder and produces a picture of a famous pop singer.

Immediate reaction from the classroom, with signs of both approval and disapproval. Another picture of another singer is presented, with a similar reaction, only reversed this time; those who liked the first picture disliked the second one and vice-versa.

This was exactly what the teacher wanted because then she divided the class into two groups, according to their preferences, using those who were undecided to balance the groups.

Each student in each group should then write two connected sentences about likes and dislikes in their

families, using the vocabulary from the unit they were working on. The teacher gave some examples:

My mother likes Roberto Carlos.
I can't stand him.
My sister likes the Ramones. She thinks they are terrific.
My favorite program is *You decide*. I really like it.

With some supervision from the teacher, the students were then asked to create their own sentences and copy them on pieces of paper, which were collected, folded and put in a small box. The teacher then explained they were going to have a TV game show and demonstrated the rules. One student would come from one group to the front of the class, pick up a piece of paper from the box, read it silently and then would try to interpret the sentence to the members of his group, using only gestures. The members in his group would try to guess what was written by trying out aloud different sentences and words. They had one minute to do that. If they succeeded their group would get a point. Then one student from the other group would come to the

front and repeat the procedure, to the members of his group. And so on, using each time a different student. The group with the highest score would be the winner.

For about twenty minutes we had the students talking in that class, enjoying what they were doing, and probably learning many things, including pronouns.

I would like to finish this part on creativity, paraphrasing Emily Dickinson, the famous American poet, from last century:

To be creative in the classroom
you need a blackboard and
students, but if you don't have the
blackboard the students will be
enough.

Let's turn now to the second of our desirable attributes. I am going to call it *insight*.

Insight is the ability to make connections. The more connections we can make, the more insightful we are. Insight implies the ability to rebuild the outside

world inside us, so that we can maximize our relations with this world. Ability to adapt to circumstances, to perceive the relation between theoretical points and what happens in the classroom, to identify in a complex set of variables the one factor that may have an influence on the acquisition of a certain linguistic feature are, in my view, signs of insight.

Once upon a time we thought that language was made up of words. Later, we were told that language was made up of sounds. With Chomsky, we were assured that language was made up of sentences, that were generated and transformed from the deep structure by the application of certain rules. With the advent of notions and functions, we were informed that language was made up of communicative events. Now we seem to suspect that language is made up of lexical phrases. We don't acquire a language by creating rules but by

absorbing these pre-fabricated chunks of language.

How will it be in the future?

It seems that we need insight not only to understand the past and relate it to the present, but mainly to predict the future. In terms of the subject we teach, what will the world be like in the next millennium, which is just six years away? Will our students want or need what we can offer them?

It seems that language teaching is always affected by the technology that is available. Up to now, the arrival of every new technology — radio, television, airplanes, tape recorders, video cassette recorders, computers, electronic mail, FAX machines, CD ROMs — has, not only changed the way we teach the language, but also, relentlessly, increased the need to learn a foreign language.

More and more students, every year, feel an increasing need to set some time apart from their regular courses, to study a foreign language, specially English. Most of them, I feel, do that, not

because they like it, but because they have to.

How will it be in the future? Will we have more of it? Will English become so pervasive, so omnipresent that everybody will speak it as a universal lingua franca, or will the arrival of a new technology, like inexpensive and instantaneous automatic translation, make it totally unnecessary to acquire a new language? I don't know. What I know is that some activities, related to our field, will be done by machines, not in a very distant future, including many translation tasks, such as business letters and weather reports.

Other activities, more closely related to our field, will also be affected by the emerging technologies.

Up to now, real personal interaction was only possible with the activity of the teacher. Available technologies, in the recent past, could only present things to the students, sometimes with the help of sound and animation, but these technologies by

themselves would not react and change to students needs. Now this is also changing. Things like interactive video and computer programs, which are becoming very inexpensive, can be made to adapt to the student's learning style, and simulate many of the teacher's activities. So, probably we have to adapt to this new world. Some of the things we still do may become unnecessary, which may be very good, leaving us time to do other things. I wouldn't mind having a machine that would grade my students' assignments, whenever I wanted, and give me a report summarizing the main problems found in the group. It would make my job even more interesting.

I think all these things are related to insight because you can arrive at them by connecting one point to another and then make projections on the future.

Things may look confused, chaotic, but they have a pattern — and insight may help us finding it.

We are now going to define the third and last

attribute of good teaching. It took me a while to find the word to define the third attribute. I wanted something very intensive like “cosmic energy” or “enthusiasm,” which, I think, means something like “having God inside.” But I couldn’t find the right word for it. Then one day I was reading an article by Mark Lowe (1983), and there it was — the word I was looking for, ambiguous, polysemous, pregnant with meanings like love, fantasy, extravagance, exaggeration, passion, *mainly passion* — the word with all these meanings, and others, in English is *romance*.

Romance is a state of mind, or a condition of the heart. It is not something that comes from the outside. It’s something we have inside. We can have it at eight o’clock on a Monday morning or at two o’clock on a hot afternoon.

I think that if we have romance, we can more easily change things around us, than be changed by them.

This is so because are not affected by things that are meaningless to us. Failure and defeat may be around us, but if we don't see them, they don't exist for us. In the end, of course, we will be changed by the world around us but only after the world has been changed to look more like ourselves. This is one of the principles of psychology. We cannot be affected, we cannot not interact with something that is totally strange to us.

I admit that this is idealistic, maybe impractical. In fact, it may be dangerous because we can be destroyed by the world we don't accept. I don't go as far as Hemingway who said that a man can be destroyed but not defeated. I see no point in being destroyed, even if you argue that the ideas you left behind will grow and bear fruit. But I don't think we will be in danger of being destroyed if we combine romance with the two other attributes.

The secret behind romance is that it deals with

people's feelings and it involves them. People don't learn if they are not involved. I think it was Benjamin Franklin, more than 200 years ago, who said that. I can't remember the exact words, but it was something like

Tell me and I forget.
Teach me and I remember.
Involve me and I learn.

I have argued in this paper that we can bridge the gap between what we teach and what the students learn if we have what I regard the three basic attributes of our profession: creativity, insight and romance.

Things don't come ready-made to our specific circumstances, so we have to create the right conditions for learning to occur, using what we have at a given moment in a given classroom.

We have also to predict the future. We should prepare our students for the world *they* are going to live in, not the world *we* live in today. I think this point has to be stressed because it has been

neglected in teacher training courses.

And finally, we have to involve our students. The affective domain is very important, and we take care of that by putting romance in our classes. I don't know if romance can be taught. I suspect we have only to be reminded to use it, to be persuaded. If we are convinced that it is important we know how to use it.

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