

## **EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

What makes for effective teaching? Effective teaching and effective learning takes place when a number of efficient and effective teaching strategies are used. The paper will discuss a range of strategies that make for effective teaching and learning in the language classroom.

### **Aim of Paper**

In this paper I shall discuss 3 main issues, which in my opinion, make for effective teaching and learning. These views are based on years of teaching.

### **View of Teaching**

In order to understand and appreciate the first issue i.e. the importance of feedback in the classroom let me first discuss my perception of teaching. Teaching must be seen in the same light as communicating. This is because the teacher has to disseminate some information to the receiver, in this case the students or learners. The message that is transmitted to the receiver must be understood by the receiver. The receiver of messages in the classroom context generally is the learner. My view is that the communication circle is not complete until the message receiver, through some feedback channels, informs either verbally or non verbally, the message transmitter i.e. the teacher that the message understood has been the message sent. At the heart of effective teaching there should be an ongoing process of ensuring that what the teacher has said is what learners have understood.

### **Importance of Ongoing Feedback**

The teacher, based on this feedback is then in a position to transmit new bits of information. On the other hand, if the feedback from the student advises the teacher that the message sent has been misunderstood the onus is then on the teacher to retransmit the information. This time the message

must be transmitted in such a way that the message sent equates with the message understood. Communication i.e. learning takes place only when messages sent or information disseminated are on par with the information received. Teaching is effective when learning takes place.

### **Learning from Students and Adjusting Information Accordingly**

Teachers can and should also learn from students. Communication is after all a two way process. The message giver at times becomes the message receiver and vice versa. When students inform the teacher of what they have understood from her/him the effective teacher should make use of the information. With the help of this feedback information, the teacher should determine what is going right or wrong with the ways, methods and procedures he has used or uses to transfer information. He can consequently improve on his teaching techniques.

All too often what goes on in the mind of the learner remains an enigma to those who teach. Thus feedback from the learner opens to the teacher the mind of the learner. The teacher, to some extent, gets to know how the learner responds to information that the teacher had earlier disseminated. With such knowledge from the learner the teacher can then retransmit the message that was sent earlier in such a way that the learner easily understands it. In short, the feedback responses enable the teacher to assess what students have actually learned (which may not necessarily be what had been taught). The effective teacher should make use of this knowledge to respond appropriately.

In a paper presented at a UUM conference in Langkawi I discussed many different strategies used by teachers to obtain feedback from learners in relation to the information that had been communicated. (David, 1996a) Continuous feedback must be the teacher's goal in every lesson and within a lesson in everything that is disseminated. Teachers and students build on each other's responses. A secondary objective of the paper was to determine the techniques and strategies used by the teacher to retransmit her earlier message, if the feedback techniques show that what was earlier communicated has been misunderstood. I cannot stress too strongly that the communication cycle in the language classroom is only complete when there is equivalence between the message transmitted and the message received. An effective teacher should always ensure that what is being taught is the same as what is being understood.

### **Non-verbal Feedback**

An effective teacher should also watch attentively for signs of comprehension in the facial expressions of the students, Such feedback can be seen in nods or shakes of the head, eye contact, smiles (of confidence or hesitancy), silence etc. In order to obtain such non-verbal feedback, which is expressed not through language but by facial expressions and body language, it is imperative that the teacher should be able to see all the students. (See David, 1995a).

### **Seating Arrangements**

In order to see all the students and obtain such non-verbal feedback the normal sitting arrangements in classrooms i.e. rows upon rows of students is not conducive. Students should sit in a circle with the teacher also making up part of this circle. This will enable the teacher to constantly monitor the

facial expressions and body language of students in order to determine whether they have understood the information disseminated. (David, 1996a). Non-verbal feedback is especially important in the Malaysian context, as many students tend to fight shy of openly admitting they have not understood the teacher.

### **Sensitivity to Noise**

Teachers must be perceptive and aware of the noise level in the classroom. When a teacher says something and some students start chatting as if they were asking questions from each other this should alert the teacher that some problem in understanding her message has arisen. As earlier mentioned Malaysian students tend to be a bit inhibited when it comes to asking or requesting a rephrase or a repetition from the teacher or even to ask her what she meant. Teachers must therefore be alert to other feedback signals such as noise and other non-verbal signals.

### **Checking on Understanding**

To check or confirm understanding the teacher, can through both spoken or written output, obtain feedback on whether what has been taught has been understood. Communicative activities, both spoken and written should alert the teacher whether the teaching point made has been understood. Such exercises and activities alert the teacher as to whether what is taught is on par with what has been learnt.

Spoken strategies by the teacher to elicit feedback include redirects, teacher directed questioning strategies, and conununicative tasks. Redirects are a procedure in which a teacher redirects her communication. She asks one student to report to her peer what the teacher had said. This is an informative way of determining whether students have understood the teacher's message.

### **Importance of Questions**

There are many different kinds of questions teachers might use to review their own classroom practices. By asking students questions and analyzing students' responses the teachers can measure and evaluate the progress of learners.

### **Sensitivity to Students' Questions and Responses**

Students, by providing examples in their responses to information disseminated, check on their understanding of something that had been earlier taught. Students make inquiries to clarify doubts and teachers should never dismiss these queries. A sensitivity to the ways Malaysian students expressed disagreement for instance led to an inquiry and research on how LI norms affected L2 behavior. (See Jariah and David, 1996)

## **Readjusting Information**

The teacher should, based on the content of the feedback received, adjust his communication accordingly. The teacher, as a result of the responses of the students, can readjust instruction in response to student behavior, relate new knowledge to previous knowledge, monitor the effects of a particular teaching methodology consistently, identify the bits of information which have been misunderstood, and make decisions on how to represent the information.

## **Peer Learning**

Incidentally, the teacher does not need to be the sole retransmitter of information. Peer learning appears to have acted as a strong motivational tool for those who felt they were lacking in some ways as compared to their peers. If, through the feedback of some students, the teacher is given to understand that there has been a communication breakdown, she can turn to students who appear to have understood, (as noted in their body language) and use them as secondary informants to retransmit the information to the student/s who appear not to have understood the teacher.

## **Facilitating Learning**

Apart from this first issue of the perception of teaching as communication and the importance of feedback I now want to move on to the second issue which, in my view, makes for effective learning. "As a teacher it is our job not only to disseminate information but to do this in a way that is easily understood by the learner." (David, 1993: 74) Teachers should make use of any means to facilitate learning and boost learners' self-esteem. One important way of boosting learners' self-esteem is by linking new input to familiar or old knowledge. By linking the students' known knowledge of familiar lexical or grammatical items to new knowledge or information being disseminated the effective teacher can not only facilitate understanding but also retention of meaning of new information. The schema theory postulates that in order to facilitate reading and comprehension on the part of learners the language teacher should carefully select texts which are familiar. In this way links can be made with known knowledge or existing schemas. Such links facilitate understanding and learning. (See David, 1994a),

Language teaching involves not only passing on new knowledge but also making learners conscious of their innate abilities and known knowledge. For instance, every learner is capable of executing communicative strategies but they may not be able to use the appropriate strategy spontaneously. In an exploratory research paper entitled "Consciousness Raising of Communicative Strategies: A Springboard to Language Proficiency?" (David, 1992a) I argue that if, through a consciousness-awareness phase, learners are made aware of the strategies already available to them, this could be a springboard to self esteem and language proficiency. Incidentally, teacher-trainees' self-esteem can also be boosted by a similar strategy. (See Lini and David, 1995). In another paper "Capitalizing on Language Contact and Borrowing" (David, 1993) I argue that the language teacher can take advantage of the learners Li (in this case Malay) which has borrowed fairly extensively from English so as to extend the learners confidence in extending his/her knowledge of English lexical items.

## Action Research

The effective teacher is continually carrying on some action research in order to improve teaching and learning. Action research simply means being vigilant and aware of one's teaching and learning in the language classroom. For instance, if English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is to play a vital role in equipping the present and future workforce with relevant communicative skills to ensure effective communication, then it is vital that grassroots or downstream research in the dynamics of interactional discourse at the work place precedes language instruction in the academic setting. For information on other kinds of action research please refer to David, 1991 a and for an example of research conducted to facilitate reading see "Are parents and teachers walking the same path?" (David, 1992b). The professional should constantly be thinking of ways of improving his/her teaching and students' learning. One way is perhaps even to suggest changes in syllabi (see David and Taib, 1996) although I do realize that in some institutions more leeway is given than in others to make such changes.

## Summary

In this paper I have described three main issues that are vital to effective learning and teaching. First the view of teaching as communication and the importance of feedback. The teaching feedback model is a process that combines systematic and continuous observation of student and teacher's behavior and examines congruence of teaching objectives, classroom behavior and student learning. The advantage of insisting on continuous feedback is that one improves on one's teaching as one is constantly judging one's own performance. The teacher obtains the feedback through sensitivity to both verbal and non-verbal cues. To check on understanding the teacher elicits and questions the students. The teacher's response to miscommunication on the part of students is to clarify, exemplify and re-explain. The teacher may have to use both verbal and non-verbal language to correct a wrong perception. She might have to resort to body language and visual illustrations in order to get her message across. The result of such continuous and intense monitoring of student understanding is that students are provided with sequential, consistent and formative feedback to clarify doubts and misunderstandings.

The importance of scaffolding to facilitate learning is another important factor. By linking new knowledge to the knowledge students already possess the effective teacher not only makes the job easier for herself/himself but also for the students. This is because scaffolding facilitates not only understanding but also retention. It also boosts students' self-esteem.

Finally an effective teacher is constantly thinking of new ways to improve on her/his teaching. One way of doing this is by action research.

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