

THE TEACHING-LEARNING JOURNEY: FINDING THE RIGHT TRACK

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ABSTRACT

The teaching-learning dynamics in the ELT classroom is a journey experience. In an ideal world, the direction this journey takes is towards making the students autonomous learners so that they can be best prepared to face the 'real' and much bigger world outside the classroom. This goal is reached if both teacher and learner understand the roles they should appropriately play in the process. The secret, therefore, is finding the right track. The reality of finding the right track is often much more complex, however. Teachers have their own agenda, informed and sanctioned by syllabuses, textbooks, and lesson plans, and then translated into actual classroom instruction procedures. Students, either by force of habit or by an act of faith, often toe the line. However, at the end of the day, the general feeling one gets is that students do not seem to be learning much. This paper will, thus, explore the nature of the gaps between teaching and learning and how these may be remedied. Data from an ELT project in the Philippines will be used. In so doing, this paper hopes to show the practical responsibilities of the teacher in a learning-centred classroom for effective learner development to take place.

In ELT discussions, the focus on learners and language learning inevitably calls attention to the corollary issue—teachers and language teaching. In this paper, I would like to take these corollary issues together and consider the relationship between them as a journey experience.

I chose the journey image because I want to stress that the teaching-learning situation in the classroom is a dynamic process. We expect it to be a process of change—a process of helping learners actualise their potential; a process of making them progress from one level of awareness to another, and many others. In an ideal world, the direction this journey should take is towards developing learner autonomy,

**I wish to gratefully acknowledge the esteemed support provided by Alan Waters, friend and colleague, through his very thoughtful feedback on the drafts of this paper.*

so that schools will produce graduates who are better prepared to face the 'real,' much bigger and more complex world outside the classroom. In other words, we want to produce learners who have ownership of the learning experience, who are willing to go one mile or two in the journey, not because they *have to* as mandated by educational structures, but because they believe that doing so makes for a meaningful experience. In other words, this means that for real learning to take place, the learners should also take responsibility for their own learning.

If this is the case, where then does the teacher figure in this journey? Teachers would agree perhaps that the teacher's role is to find the right track and lead the learners in that direction. The teacher factor, therefore, is crucial to the success or failure of the learning-teaching journey in a learner-centred classroom. What is he or she to do? To borrow the words of Kahlil Gibran, a famous Lebanese poet (Gibran, 1991: 67),

If he [the teacher] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind.

Why is this so? Gibran continues to explicate thus:

The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding.

The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice that echoes it.

In other words, no one else can do the learning except the learner him/herself. The teacher, then, can only facilitate that learning. We are all familiar, of course, with this concept of teacher as "facilitator" of learning. It has become a byword in modern approaches to ELT. Its implications for teaching methodology have also been reflected in Paulo Freire's (Freire, 1984) definition of true education as problem-posing, that is, one that recognises the learner's potential and capacity for development, one that recognises learning as a result of a constantly dynamic dialogue between teacher and learner in the context of the real world.

It is very inspiring, indeed, to hear these ideals, especially, no doubt, when expressed in poetic language. They mesmerise us and elevate our sense of dignity as teachers. Whether these ideals ring true in practice, however, is another story.

The reality of finding the right track is a much more complex process. For example, it is not uncommon to find lots of cases, where the teacher starts the teaching-learning

journey with introducing the syllabus and ends it with finishing the requirements of the syllabus. In this syllabus-centred approach, it is not uncommon to find learners thrown off the learning path. Instead of discovering and developing their potential, they burn their energies fulfilling the requirements of the syllabus and preparing for exams that often measure simply how much they have retained from the information they received within the coverage of the syllabus. In giving this example, I am not, however, putting down the role of the syllabus in the teaching-learning process. I am simply illustrating how such tools as syllabuses, textbooks, lesson plans and even teachers can become more of a hindrance than a help in advancing the goals of learning in the classroom. This happens when we lose sight, often inadvertently, of the reality that these (and we) are simply tools that should be adapted, modified or changed accordingly in order to promote learning. We are courting tragedy when we allow learners to be forced to adapt, modify and change in order to justify to ourselves and to the system that our tools work. It is no wonder then, that in most cases, although so much teaching has been done, not much learning has actually taken place at the end of the day.

The ultimate concern of this paper, then, is the teacher factor in the learning process. I wish to argue that before teachers can guide learners towards greater autonomy, teachers themselves need to experience this in their own learning. Since this experience of autonomy does not appear to happen very much, this has to be considered first before any sensible discussion can be made about effective learner development in the classroom. The rest of the paper will deal with this topic because finding the right track in the teaching-learning journey is relevant both for the learner and the teacher.

The Current Situation

So far, I've been talking about teaching-learning in general, although assuming all the time that my reference is the ELT classroom. To make the discussion a little bit more concrete, let us now look at the situation in ELT. The data I am going to use are from the Philippines English Language Teaching Project (PELT).¹

¹ For details of information see <http://acelt.faithweb.com/publish/PELT/pelt.htm>
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Project Background.

The PELT Project was a 4-year teacher training project initiated in 1995 through the bilateral cooperation agreement between the British and Philippine Governments for the benefit of public secondary school English teaching in the Philippines. Its main aim was to promote learning in the English language classroom through the training of teachers in specific strategies that answer major concerns in the teaching-learning process. The Project covered seven major regions in the country.²

Baseline data for this Project showed, among other things, that the journey that needed to be undergone at the time in Philippine public secondary schools was from the 'Garden of Eden' of a mainly ESL situation to the largely uncharted territory of an increasingly mainly EFL situation. It was hard to believe that this is so in a country where English is considered one of the two official languages in education, government, and the media. This disbelief could be seen in the way teachers and textbooks presupposed a first language approach to ELT. For example, learners were expected to interact with a reading text often without giving them enough preparation for reading comprehension.

The Garden of Eden for ESL in the Philippines, is, unfortunately, now a thing of the past. Teachers and students alike can no longer rely today on the external linguistic environment to do much of their work for them. The question thus becomes: what path needs to be trod to take the children of Israel, as it were, to the new promised land (or at least in its general direction)?

Like in any journey, we need to know (a) where we are starting from and (b) where we are intending to go. Then the best route between the two can be worked out. How is this to be decided? Not, we would say, by reference to ideology (i.e. adherence to the communicative approach, because it is seen in the abstract or in some other context to be a miracle cure, the best thing since sliced bread etc.); rather, by reference to the realities of the existing situation and its potential for growth. In other words, the journey needs to be planned and thought out in terms of developmental/incremental change, not in terms of change as loss or mere substitution (Marris, 1986).

² The PELT Project is coordinated by the Ateneo Centre for English Language Teaching (ACELT) at Ateneo de Manila University together with its UK partner institution, the Institute for English Language Education (IELE) at Lancaster University

A Way Ahead

Our starting point in the PELT Project was, therefore, determined by an empirical, first-hand study of current classroom teaching behaviour through observation of classes in the Project regions. This revealed teaching as addressing mostly the learner's basic level of affective and cognitive involvement and as such, providing the security and clarity that is necessary (but not sufficient) for learning. As a result, what seemed to appear was an undue emphasis on teaching as an end in itself, that is, it was difficult to see how most of it related to promoting learning.

The destination that needs to be reached or the general direction that needs to be pursued in a situation like this is, thus, logically that of "learning". How can teaching be such that it should also address the learner's higher level of cognitive and affective involvement, thereby providing the opportunities for challenge and creativity that are also necessary for learning?

Still a much bigger question is thus how to help teachers, learners and everyone concerned, make the journey successful from a situation where the main focus is *teaching* to one where the main focus is *learning*. This is often attempted by the educational equivalent of the forced march. However, teachers are not soldiers or shock-troops and the classroom is not (or should not be) a battle-ground or Armageddon. For real development in education to occur, it must be allowed to arise voluntarily from within the hearts and minds of the teachers to the greatest possible extent (Fullan, 1991). Guidance needs to be provided, but primarily in order to support the teacher's own developmental efforts, not to coerce them. The teachers too have a lot of learning to do.

The PELT approach to this reality can be summarised in three steps. First, to try to help the teachers work out where they were starting from; second, to show them some of the sights that lay ahead in the direction of the general potential destination; and third, to help them along the road. This last step was dependent on their interest and/or feelings about their ability to make the journey towards these sights.

In practical terms the three steps were done in the PELT training seminars³ by first of all raising teachers' awareness about the main focus of current practice. This practice can be crudely summarised as follows:

³ Grateful to Alan Waters, IELE Deputy Director and PELT Lead Consultant, for his valuable insights and sustained guidance in the design of all the PELT Project training programmes.

- **Level of thinking within the information given:** exercises that tap only the basic level skill of literal comprehension; communication activities which allow learners to pick out responses from and stick to ideas provided by the material and/or teacher in the lesson.
- **Lessons as macro-skills based:** lessons arranged according to the macro skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; activities, often repetitive, are geared towards the practice of these skills *per se*.
- **Whole class/frontal channels of communication:** class discussion is propelled by the teacher and ends with the teacher—the teacher asks questions, the students in the big group are expected to volunteer answers, which are judged as right or wrong only by the teacher. More often than not, only the intelligent and the brave risk to respond; the insecure and the indifferent (which often comprise 80% of the class) all sink inevitably into oblivion!
- **Presentation/practice as mode of language production:** this usually takes place in a grammar lesson where rules are presented and sentence-level drills follow; or this can also happen in a writing class where models of outlining and paragraph organisation are presented first; then followed-up with a similar exercise.
- **Telling or input-driven:** this often happens in discussion of reading texts where the teacher ends up telling the learners information that they ought to look for, etc. After raising teachers' awareness about the current practice, they were then shown how these behaviours could be refined and developed by the addition of practices such as the following:
 - *Level of thinking beyond the information given:* exercises that challenge the learners' inferential and evaluative abilities; 'extension' questions, i.e. those which ask the learners to consider further implications of information; communication activities which ask the learners to use ideas of their own, etc.
 - *Lessons as task-based:* a lesson that is cohesively structured towards a meaningful task (a problem to solve) which challenges the learners to decide on the appropriate linguistic tool and content knowledge required to fulfill this task; the activities are arranged in gradual progression of complexity, each one leading to another— all in view of preparing the learner to carry out the culminating task as successfully as possible.
 - *Pair and group work as mode of interaction:* discussions are done in small groups where appropriate; learners are challenged to express themselves and work out a problem through collaborative effort; they build confidence in

sharing what they know and asking help for what they do not and finally learning how to make decisions and take responsibility for these.

- *Discourse level production*: in a grammar class, e.g., learners go beyond sentence-level practice through producing a communicative task that is meaningful and where learners use in context the appropriate grammar called for.
- *Learners discovering knowledge*: through meaningful practice and communication tasks, learners discover rules of grammar or reflect on processes of arriving at solutions to problems.

After having gone through these two steps, the teachers were, finally, given the opportunity to choose one of the areas to investigate further back in their teaching. They were supported in this by a follow-up action plan, devised in collaboration with the trainers during the seminar and executed afterwards with the support of the school ELT management. This action plan acted as their personal 'route map' for the journey ahead, and the trainers and ELT managers assist as 'tour guides'.

Clearly, the statement the project team wanted to make in all this is that, for an educational change process in the classroom to occur, a change process in the teacher has first to take place. The teaching-learning gap in the classroom can be bridged if the teacher is willing to be a learner again. That is why, in the PELT model of teacher training, the seminar is considered simply as the trigger to teacher learning. For true learning to occur, it has to be sustained through guided reflection on actual classroom experience as a spin-off from what has been learned in the seminar. We recognise, of course, that since the classroom is part of a bigger educational context, a chain of compatible and synchronised changes needs to occur ultimately in the other areas of the entire system in order to support and sustain the change that we want to happen in the classroom.

Summary and Conclusion

To summarise the journey we have done so far in this paper, there are three points I want to make. First, the goal of teaching is greater learner autonomy. The role of the teacher in this context, therefore, is to guide learners towards this goal. In order to do so, teachers themselves must experience autonomy in their own learning. Unfortunately, current practice seems to show that this experience is found wanting. The second point is that there is a gap between teaching and learning in the ELT classroom. Current practice seems to show that there is more emphasis on teaching than learning. This leads me to my third point, that is, that the remedy for this gap is not necessarily the substitution of what is currently familiar with an innovation which promises to be an all-cure formula to the problem. Instead the secret is to build on

the strengths of what is already there and plan for *evolutionary change*. This involves mapping out the journey in terms of the most suitable starting point (i.e. where people currently actually are), the possible destination, and providing a clear route-map, tourist guides and plenty of chances to pursue individual interests on the way. Only in this way can we find the right track to the teaching-learning journey.

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