

FACILITATING LANGUAGE, FACILITATING LEARNING

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1 Introduction

Working in an environment where language teaching and learning is exam-oriented, it is easy for the educator to forget some of the basic human elements of the teaching profession. Moreover, if we take a close look at the fairly high rate of failure in the exams, then it is obvious that there is room for the educator to make some changes and to improve the situation. This workshop shows how the changing role of the teacher can help the language learner in a practical way to fulfil his/her potential. It also shows the teacher how to develop his/her 'new' role.

Before going any further, I would like you to ask yourselves one question: 'How does the way I teach affect the language learner?' I hope that by the end of the workshop there will be some changes in the way you answer this question.

2 The Educator

There are three important factors that educators need to be aware of before setting foot inside the classroom:

1.1 The educator is a member of a caring profession. Teaching is service-oriented and, therefore, the quality of the service provided is of utmost importance. Is the product (the English language) of the right quality for the customer (the learner)?

1.2 The educator is the one who understands the subject being taught. We are the ones who have the knowledge and so our main role as educators is to share this knowledge. Do I share my knowledge with my students, or do I force them to learn just for the sake of a goal (the exam)?

1.3 The word 'facilitate' when translated into Greek (d'e?????) means to make something easy. As a facilitator in my classroom am I making learning easy for my students or do I make their lives difficult?

3 Traditional Teaching Methods

Traditionally, the educator's role was manifested through conductive teaching methods, where transactions in the classroom were teacher-centred. It was a case of "I am the teacher, so I know best". In terms of language teaching, this often meant teaching lots of grammar and vocabulary as well as doing a lot of drills and exercises. No regard was given to the real needs of the student.

As further developments in education evolved, the shift from teacher to student became more apparent. Using a more deductive approach, students were given some responsibility and encouraged to work things out for themselves. However, although students were motivated to come to their own conclusions, they were still very much moulded to particular ways of thinking and doing to suit the convenience of the educator, the institution or the requirements of examinations. Many of the books we are using at school today use the deductive approach, which is not bad in itself, but it remains limited and does not necessarily help students learn effectively or without 'pain'.

Following on from this, an inductive approach was deemed more appropriate in that it enabled students to fulfil their potential by way of a process of self discovery. In following this method, it was assumed that the educator had the capacity to accept the student's strengths and weaknesses and to allow the student freedom to build upon these. Unfortunately, because this type of approach requires a lot more flexibility on the part of the educator, it has not always been welcomed with open arms.

With these changes in approach, it has been seen that the role of the educator has become more one of facilitator than teacher, which requires a completely different set of tactics in the classroom. The facilitator's first step is to initiate and to create the right atmosphere for the child to learn in. Next the facilitator needs to observe the child's response to its learning environment and then respond to the child in an appropriate manner. This in turn requires that the educator works through the process that is needed with the child as a partner. In order for such a change in role to take place, the educator needs to have clear focus and a specific set of attitudes and values.

4 Understanding Learning

How do we normally plan our lessons? Most teachers will agree that the lesson has three main stages: presentation, practise and reinforcement. Let's look at these in more detail.

4.1 Presentation

We take a point of grammar that we want the student to learn, we find a lively and relevant way to present it to the student and we expect instant understanding. The presentation part of the lesson is the part that works with the conceptual or rational aspect of the mind. I will call this the 'head'.

4.2 Practise

Once we feel the learner has understood the point we are trying to teach, then we get them to practise in a variety of ways. The practice part of the lesson works with the emotional aspect of the learner. Let us call this the 'heart'.

4.3 Reinforcement

Having understood and practised the grammar and vocabulary, we expect the student to have assimilated all this ready to put it into everyday use. We will call this 'direct experience'.

What I have just described might be called an ideal (or text book) lesson plan. Of course, most of the books we are using follow such a plan so teachers nowadays don't even have to plan their lessons. If they have a good teacher's book to go with the course books or skills books, then there really isn't too much to think about, is there?

So why do students fail? Why are teachers and learners frustrated? I believe it's because we are not addressing the real needs of the learner and we are definitely not making life easy for anyone in the classroom.

5 The Educator's New Role

If things are not working as they should be, then there must be room for change. In fact, the modern educator needs to understand that his/her role has changed. As mentioned at the beginning, the new role comprises three main factors: initiation, observation and response. Let us look at these in some detail.

5.1 Initiate

The educator's first step is to create a positive learning atmosphere. At this point, we are not just talking about having a pleasant physical space where the lesson takes place. Rather, we need to understand two specific skills that the educator needs in order to become a successful facilitator. By understanding these, the educator will be able to initiate the learning process. What are these two skills? First is the ability to listen accurately and the second is to have an attitude of availability.

Activity 1

Give each participant a sheet of paper and ask them to draw a picture of a child in the middle of it and then to draw or write around the outside of the paper what

environment they would like to provide for the child. Then work in pairs to discuss the question: What part do I play in the learner's environment?

Activity 2

We will use a process of visualisation to answer the question: Do I understand the learner's needs?

Imagine that the room I am in is empty ... nobody is around ... Now I see myself as a small child ... as innocent as a rose that is just beginning to bloom ... I am curious, but a little shy ... I am mischievous, but I am looking for approval ... I am looking for people, for things, to experiment with ... I see myself as a child ... walking into this room, this classroom ... It is an empty room ... I stand for a while, waiting, holding onto my bag ... I hold my lunch box close to my heart ... I look around, wide-eyed and lost ... and then I hear a voice asking "What do you need, child?" ... and I sit in the middle of the room and make a list of what I really need, feeling comforted that somebody wants to know what I want

These two activities show how accurate listening means understanding what position I come from and what position the learner comes from.

5.2 Observe

The next step for the educator is to observe how learners respond to their 'new' learning environment. To observe the learner means to recognise the potential within the student and to accept the learner's response, whatever it may be. For example, if you are doing oral work in a group and one student remains silent, how often do you tell students "If you don't speak, you won't learn" or "If you don't speak, the examiner won't be able to give you a mark"? These are, in fact, subtle threats that do not promote learning, neither do they encourage the student. Let me, as the educator, understand why sometimes a student is quiet and accept the situation as it is. I can encourage, but I don't need to force.

Activity 3

Individually, think about any aspects that you don't like in the students you are teaching and what changes you would like to bring about in them. Then work in threes to think about WAYS in which to bring about the desired changes. Bear in mind two questions:

What is the learner's potential?

How flexible is my attitude?

5.3 Respond

The final, and most important, step is for the educator to develop a method of working with the student as a partner in his/her learning process. Often, teachers are the ones to wield power in the classroom: they are the ones who have accumulated knowledge, they control the teaching situation, they are the authority in all senses of the word and they donate that knowledge to the learner. However,

there are other ways of doing things. In fact, there are two main responses to a learner: the direct response and the indirect response.

Activity 4

Work in pairs to answer the questions:

Do I give advice or instructions?

Do I make suggestions or ask questions?

When you have done this, think of a lesson you are planning to teach tomorrow and devise a completely new way of giving this lesson (eg Will you consult the learner first? What cooperation will you generate in the classroom?). Share your practical examples with one other pair.

6 Facilitation Skills

To be a good facilitator we need three skills: balance, silence and the willingness to change. There has to be a balance between rules (the head) and creativity (the heart) and learning, especially language learning, needs a period of silence in which to absorb the newly learnt material. This silence is not necessarily physical silence, but it can be in the form of allowing time for new facts to be absorbed before rushing on to another grammar point just because it's the next unit in the book, or because an exam is looming on the horizon. Change is necessary, but it takes effort - isn't it easier to carry on doing things the way you have always done them? However, the results will also remain the same. Change also requires give and take - let me learn from my students, too.

7 Conclusions

While educators are under pressure to fulfil the needs of their syllabus and requirements for examination courses, they are also in a position to bring about change and a positive learning experience for their students. By working on the role of facilitator they will make life easier for themselves and for their students and, in such an atmosphere, the learners will make more progress.

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taught in France, the UK and Greece and has published several course books and skills books for Pre-FCE and FCE levels. She has trained teachers in the UK, France, Greece, Turkey and India. She has also taught computing and typewriting skills to adults on a Back-to-Work programme and teaches English to adult refugees on a voluntary basis. Sue is coordinator for Greece for the *Living Values: an Educational Programme* (LVEP) and is the Editor for New Editions publishing house.