

The Talking Stick: An American Indian Tradition in the ESL Classroom

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"...to begin always anew, to make, to reconstruct, and not to spoil, to refuse to bureaucratize the mind, to understand and to live life as a process--live to become..." --Paulo Freire

Introduction

In this paper, I will overview the scholarship which calls for a more democratic teaching practice in the classroom. Secondly, "The Talking Stick", will be introduced as a listening and speaking methodology that is "transformative"¹ and serves as a bridge to cross-cultural understanding in the ESL classroom. Teaching practice is described, in detail, with Asian university students. In the final section, the author offers suggestions to teachers about when to use the talking stick method and how to use this method with students who have different English usage abilities.

Scholarship in Pedagogy

Traditional teaching practice places the professor in the front of the classroom and the students assembled in rows of desks, all facing the chalkboard. The unchallenged assumption underlying this set-up, is that the teacher has knowledge that the students want to get. The students memorize information, provided by the teacher through lectures, and at a later time, reproduce it in some kind of examination. The problem with this traditional pedagogy is that students do not become actively involved in the learning process. They think of themselves as passive consumers of education, where information, not true knowledge, becomes just another thing to buy. Paulo Freire (1976) refers to this as "the banking system of education"² where the students are seen as passive consumers.

In these traditional ways of teaching students feel left out of the process. Students have reported to me that in their other classes, where the traditional style of teaching is used, they feel tired and bored, and, they say they feel like their presence is not needed.

The need to change our teaching style, to incorporate more democratic methods which would reflect the multicultural classroom in ESL teaching, is especially necessary, where the use of English is critical to the learning process. Since the late 1980's much research has been done in language learning, which suggests a move toward a more learner-centered approach. The contributors of the scholarship in this vein, have described it as a more communicative approach to language learning. Nunan (1988) stresses the necessity of the teacher "doing things with language as opposed to learning about language", while Di Pietro (1987) addresses the motivational factors involved in language learning by suggesting students choose their own topics. Some scholarship has also stressed the influence of culture on the interpretation of the meaning of words (Wolfson, 1988), reminding us of the sociolinguistic elements of language, which must also be taken into consideration in the way a teacher approaches the subject. The point being, the teaching style is critical to whether students learn language or not, and this style is influenced by culture, politics, social class and gender issues. In this sense, the "how" of teaching must reflect that multicultural world in which we live. Bell Hooks' transformative teaching is an example of a teaching style which is based on an awareness of the differences which exist in our world, and contains a basic respect for multiculturalism. Hooks describes her teaching practice:

In the classroom setting that I have witnessed the power of transformative pedagogy rooted in a respect for multiculturalism. Working with a critical pedagogy based on my understanding of Freire's teaching, I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build 'community' in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor. Rather than focusing on issues of safety, I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is a shared commitment and common good that binds us. What we all ideally share is the desire to learn--to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world. (Hooks, pg. 40)

The aims of democracy, as a yardstick for evaluating pedagogy, has been acknowledged more recently, especially in the work of Paulo Freire, who led the way, in the late 1970's with his work in education "as the practice of freedom". (Freire, 1976) Education can be a way for people to learn to question, says Freire (Freire, 1989), and, as a result, for people to become more free. Freire advises teachers to learn how to teach by observing student's learning styles, and developing teaching methods based on that. (Freire, 1998). Mark Gerzon, in his "Teaching Democracy by Doing it", suggests an entire curriculum based on a more democratic pedagogical style (Gerzon, 1997). The Talking Stick is a listening and speaking method in language learning, which is democratic and encourages understanding between students from culturally diverse backgrounds. This method incorporates an open style of listening, within a space of silence.

The Talking Stick is based on Native American Tradition

The Talking Stick was a method used by native Americans, to let everyone speak their mind during a council meeting, a type of tribal meeting. According to the indigenous American's tradition, the stick was imbued with spiritual qualities, that called up the spirit of their ancestors to guide them in making good decisions. The stick ensured that all members, who wished to speak, had their ideas heard. All members of the circle were valued equally.

Dr. Locust, at the American Research and Training Center in Tucson, Arizona, describes the talking stick, according to native American tradition:

"The talking stick has been used for centuries by many Indian tribes as a means of just and impartial hearing. The talking stick was commonly used in council circles to decide who had the right to speak. When matters of great concern would come before the council, the leading elder would hold the talking stick, and begin the discussion. When he would finish what he had to say, he would hold out the talking stick, and whoever would speak after him would take it. In this manner, the stick would be passed from one individual to another until all who wanted to speak had done so. The stick was then passed back to the elder for safe keeping." (Locust, 1998)

Talking Stick Rules

There are rules about using the talking stick, which Locust states:

"Whoever holds the talking stick has within his hands the power of words. Only he can speak while he holds the stick, and the other council members must remain silent. The eagle feather tied to the stick gives him the courage and wisdom to speak truthfully and wisely. The rabbit fur on the end of the stick, reminds him that his words must come from his heart. " (Locust, 1998)

We all know that speaking the truth is powerful. The history of AA (Alcoholic Anonymous) and other step programs and the practice of psychotherapy are all based on this awareness: that speaking the truth is healing. But it is healing for the group as a whole because as each individual listens, in silence and reverence, a whole world of understanding opens up.

When to use the Talking Stick

I ask the students to move their chairs into a circle. In my class, I have the students imagine that they are holding a stick. Whoever is holding the stick is asked to speak from his heart on the subject or issue in question. The other students are not to speak but also they are not to think ahead, about what they are going to say. They are supposed to let themselves concentrate on the words of the speaker, seeking to understand. When it is their turn to speak, they can trust that the "right" words will come. This assures that everyone is heard. That is the most important point. First, we must all listen. The setting is non-judgmental. Whatever the student's viewpoint, that is okay. No one is allowed to comment on what another has said. This method, I have observed in many classes, will yield new awareness and insights.

After all the students spoke, and rested over the weekend, and we returned to class the next week, the issue was seen in a much more holistic way.

From my observations, no one had the desire to cling to their former notions on what should be done to stop opium production and the end to drug use in the world. What was achieved was a deeper understanding of the situation, and a mutual respect for each other based on "really listening".

After the passing of The Talking Stick, my students often say that they felt really "heard" by the others, and that they felt the others understood them, within their own cultural framework. Most importantly, they heard themselves. Their experience was affirmed in an academic setting; and they experienced a real transformation in the classroom. In short, the insights they experienced were not only for in the classroom, but could be applied to their everyday lives.

Implications for Teaching

1. Use this method when you want the students to listen to others as part of a learner-centered curriculum. This method takes the focus off the teacher, as the sole purveyor of knowledge. And by using it, students are encouraged to learn from each other.
2. The teacher can provide language materials with simple, everyday dialog and situations, whereby the students can role-play the parts while in possession of the talking stick. (Who decides who is to hold the stick, and when?) Begin with one assigned student, who then chooses another student to pass the talking stick to, and so on. The others listen attentively because they do not know if they will be passed the talking stick next.
3. For more advanced language users, topic or issue-based content material is excellent because it gives them content they can get excited about, and issues they can address with passion. The teacher can start by presenting on the overhead projector, a newspaper article that addresses an important issue, for example, violence in the schools. The teacher should use a real news story which presents a detailed situation. When each student is in possession of the stick, he or she is asked to speak whatever comes to their mind on the topic. The others are to listen with an open mind; and with no self-rehearsal going on in their minds, concerning what they will say. Then the next student speaks and so on.

Conclusion

As language teachers, the way we teach communicates a lot to students; it says who we are and what we believe. Our pedagogical style and teaching methods can build a bridge to a sharing of meaning between people from very different cultural backgrounds. In our multicultural classrooms, there is a lot we can learn from the students as well. We are all victims of our own culturally limited perspectives, if we let ourselves. If we are open to see things from another point-of-view, we can grow. As a world, people from all nations--the developed western countries and the developing countries--need to listen to each other with an open heart, to arrive at a kind of mutual understanding that we so desperately need to solve today's global problems. Teaching methods in today's global environment need to be flexible enough to acknowledge the student's cultural and individual differences, in an accepting and open-hearted atmosphere. The Talking Stick is an example of one of these methods.

Notes

1. "Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy." (Hooks, 1994. pg. 39)
Bell Hooks is available on the web at:
 - o <http://www.dc.peachnet.edu/~mnunes/hooks.html>
2. Paulo Freire was a widely renowned Brazilian educator and intellectual. He coined the term "banking system of education" in his critique of the predominant pedagogical style of education in *Education, the Practice of Freedom* (1976). He described this traditional pedagogy as influencing students to merely ingest information given to them by professors, during the lecture, and then give it back later in examinations. He saw this as an extremely inadequate educational style whereby students are not encouraged to think critically nor are they encouraged to process what they have learned at school and use it in their everyday lives. Freire viewed this mode of pedagogy as reflective of the entire educational system whereby the main purpose is the control of people, not their true liberation. Freire challenges us to see education as a way to grow in understanding and action, not only in educational settings, but taking what we learn, and applying it to our everyday lives.
Paulo Freire on the web is available at:
 - o <http://wwwvms.utexas.edu/~possible/PAULO.html>
 - o <http://www.trubeat.com/excerpts/pedagogy.html>

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