Let Your Students Teach Their Class

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This paper presents a step-by-step description of a student-centered teaching technique for assisting students to a higher skill level by challenging them to teach their class. First, as a foundation for the technique, four topics of current theoretical interest are introduced: Neo-Vygotskian learning theory; research on the application of cognitive psychology to education; evaluation of communication strategies; and teachers' reports as instruments of assessment. Next, practical explanations for having students teach are covered in the Rationale section. The technique is then given in a prescriptive paradigm with examples. Finally, three students' reports are analyzed to demonstrate how reflection on teaching experiences raises students' consciousness beyond mere memory of communication strategies to self-understanding and empathy with both the teacher and other learners.

Theoretical Basis

Most modern language teachers want their students at the center of communication. As Savignon stated, "communicative competence is acquired through communication" (1983, p. 65) and more recently Brown characterized teaching students to communicate in the second language as "the single greatest challenge in the profession" (1994, p.15). Unfortunately, during the communicative process of instruction, it is the teacher who occupies the central role of imparting information and checking comprehension, releasing his students into student-centered learning exercises when he is certain that his lesson has been understood. Even his most carefully structured exercises, however, may be treated by the students as mere practice rather than a situation where the communication of something real is at stake.

Vygotsky (1962) introduced the concept of a zone of proximal development but did not provide guidance for its use in instruction, although he did claim that the larger this gap between the students' current ability and the problem their teacher assists them to solve the better they learn. Neo-Vygotskian learning theory asserts that effective learning takes place when teachers facilitate solutions for challenges beyond the students' current skill level (Driscoll, 1994) and that a teacher can model the appropriate solution, assist in finding the solution, and monitor the student's progress (Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988). Bearing in mind Brown's challenge to our profession, we are inclined to respond by challenging our students to communicate at the top of their zone of proximal development by replacing us at the center of communication and teaching their class themselves.

After considering applications of cognitive psychology to education, Anderson, Simon, & Reder (1996) conclude that, "Among the processes that have been shown by recent research to have considerable power in speeding the learning process and encouraging the learner to achieve deeper levels of understanding are learning from examples and learning by doing." Thus, according to both the Neo-Vygotskians and Anderson et al., when we provide an appropriate example of teaching and assist the students with suitable communication strategies, they should learn well by doing it themselves.

As defined by Dörnyei and Scott, communication strategies must be problem solving devices exhibiting three aspects of consciousness: "consciousness as awareness of the problem; consciousness as intentionality; and consciousness as awareness of strategic language use" (1997, p. 187). They also recount that there has been a considerable amount of research over the past two decades with practical implications "focusing, in particular, on the teachability of communication strategies" (p. 174.) In our exposition below we have specifically emphasized two strategies from their inventory. The first is their strategy number 19, mime, "describing whole concepts nonverbally, or accompanying a verbal strategy with a visual illustration" (p. 190) and the second is strategy 31, comprehension check, "asking questions to check that the interlocutor can follow you" (p. 192).

Synthesizing the above concepts and keeping to Gattegno's (1976) division of responsibilities (The students' job is the material, the teacher's job is the students.) we first exemplify teaching and analyze our model as communication strategies, then challenge our

students to teach the class. This conforms to Stevick's advice that an adaptor's "most creative contribution will probably lie in suggesting how the learners can make early and convincing use of what they have just learned to manipulate" (1971, p. 63) as he later points out, "in a connected and communicative way" (p. 91). Of course some students might be nervous, but Stevick (1976) demonstrated that students master material best and deeper memories result when they invest more personal effort into learning. Furthermore, Stevick has documented that successful language learners "take an active approach to the learning task" and "are willing to take risks" (1989, p.19).

As a means of monitoring the students progress, having students write a report on their experience afterwards raises their consciousness beyond merely remembering communication strategies to reflecting on the teaching and learning processes (Antonek, et. al., 1997). This window into students' thinking affords their teacher a basis in addition to classroom observations for assessing how students are making sense of what they are learning (Johnson, 1996).

Rationale

Explaining the above theoretical basis to students would neither be easy nor a convincing argument that it is worthwhile for them to teach the class. Of course, a few students, who are interested in teaching careers, see immediate benefits in the experience, but why should all the students in the class learn how to teach? The answer is that the emphasis is not on learning how to teach but on how to communicate with a group.

What they are learning are basic principles of communication which can be applied in any language to many situations, e.g. making a presentation at a company meeting or a speech to a club, as well as to instruction. We give them some very basic principles used in drama and public speaking for communicating with an audience. For example: how to project one's voice to the back of the room without shouting by pushing air from the diaphragm rather than the top of the lungs, how to give your audience two ways to understand you by using a visual as well as a verbal message and how to make sure your audience is following you by comprehension checks.

Won't teaching the class be too difficult for the slower students? Stevick has reminded us that, "any topic may be treated at any degree of linguistic difficulty" (1971, p. 65). In fact, all of our students, even in first-semester, freshman classes, have always succeeded in teaching their classes. Junior college students have about 14 years of experience watching teachers communicate with classes. (Does it seem too far fetched to assume they have learned something about how to communicate with groups from this?) Also, many of them have been studying English since junior high school. Thus, they seem well prepared for a challenge that never comes.

But won't the other students learn wrong pronunciation, grammar and so on from the teacher student's mistakes? A counter-question to this old canard: Where is the research demonstrating that learners are harmed by exposure to other learners' mistakes? Actually, the authors believe that we can learn from others' mistakes as well as from our own.

Even if students can teach the class, is it not more effective to have their real teacher, who has far more training and experience, do the teaching? But this is precisely the point! All the time the "real teacher" has been teaching - providing: rules, illustrations, models, explanations, and so on - he has been using all his teaching skills to communicate with his class. Beyond the content of his lessons, the students are constantly observing and absorbing his on-going example of solving communication problems while teaching. When students follow both of the teacher's examples, that is, what he has been doing as well as what he has been explaining, they succeed in communicating with the class. They then discover how much more they have assimilated unconsciously than they had been aware of learning. It can be most effective to put the students at the center of communication while they are practicing - by having them teach.

Materials

We have been using *New person to person: Communicative speaking and listening skills: Student books one and two* by Richards, Bycina, & Kisslinger (1995) for first and second year junior college women. (The accompanying *Teacher's books one and two* have lesson plans facing each page in the student's book which may help them to prepare.) We are also using *Conversation Strategies* by Kehe & Kehe (1994) for second year junior college women. (The teacher's notes in the appendix may also assist the students.) A colleague used *Let's Speak: Topics for Cross-Cultural Communication* by Kusuya, Ozeki & Bergman (1996) for first year junior college women. Any textbook with lessons following an obvious pattern that students rapidly become familiar with

would be equally suitable.

Technique

After the first few lessons when the students have picked up the textbook's pattern, and the class energy level lags, teachers are tempted to reach for learning games to enliven their classes. The solution to boredom, however, is not diversion but challenge. The teacher announces to his students that each of them will soon have a chance to teach the class. He provides them with a lesson plan, either written on the board or photocopied, making sure the model is simple and general enough to apply to any lesson. For example he tells them, "Teach your lesson in four stages: warm up, presentation, practice and testing." Oversimplification is useful here to give the students a sense of security.

The teacher exemplifies his model by teaching a couple of lessons explaining and demonstrating the communication strategies used at each stage. For instance: For warm up, "Use body language to clarify what you're saying like picking up the book and pointing at the picture while you say, 'Look at the picture on page 27.' to help everyone understand by seeing what you want them to do at the same time they're hearing it." For presentation, "Give the class a visual message as well as a verbal one by writing some key phrases from your explanation on the board to make it easier for them to understand and remember." For practice, "Make sure everyone knows what to practice by asking some students to perform the first few exercises. Their performance will quickly pinpoint any problems." For testing, "Check understanding by calling on various students to give answers, summarize discussions, present role plays, and so on."

Of course the teacher should practice what he is preaching by using body language, outlining the strategies on the board, calling on various students for comprehension checks and finally having the whole class practice teaching one lesson following his model. For this practice lesson he might prepare a lesson plan together with the students, help them to adapt one from a teacher's book or ask the students to brainstorm in small groups and prepare their own.

No one actually teaches this whole practice lesson. Instead, the teacher calls on various students to explain or demonstrate how they would teach one stage, then has other students critique or analyze their answers. If necessary, this may be revised or repeated until he is sure all the students have understood the model and strategies.

Now the teacher is ready to let his students be teachers. It may be better for braver souls to volunteer to teach the first few classes or for him to assign students he knows to be higher in ability or motivation. The rest can sign up on a schedule to give everyone as much choice as possible, but it is wise to stress that anyone who misses an assigned date will automatically be first in line on the next day he attends. Prudence also dictates that lessons assigned to one student should not depend on another student's completing a previous lesson on the same day.

While students are teaching the class, ideally the teacher should sit quietly off to one side as an observer, but some students may require on-the-spot support or advice. Naturally, having each student teacher succeed in communicating his lesson to the class is paramount. Often silent mechanical support like erasing the board will free them. Otherwise, advice such as reminding them to ask information questions to check comprehension suffices.

The students should be encouraged to make notes on their experiences as soon as they have finished teaching. The teacher should have each student turn in his report at the next class after he teaches. Otherwise, some may procrastinate until the experience is no longer fresh. Also, the teacher gains ongoing insights about the students' development.

Students' Reports

Here are the accounts of three representative first-semester, junior-college freshmen for analysis and evaluation (These have been paraphrased into good English and shortened. The uncorrected versions are available by email request from [gene [at] naga saki-noc.or.jp](mailto:).)

Student A:

I experienced the difficulty of being a teacher. I learned that if the students don't hear the teacher's explanation, the teacher can't continue with his lesson. However, I talked with my friends in your class, so I thought that I have behaved

badly towards you although it wasn't for my benefit. Besides, I can't teach well because I can't speak well, but I became very happy when the other students understood my explanations and answered my questions. In the class of many teacher students, I could adsorb that the class depends on the teacher's loud voice and clear explanations. We can learn a lot from experience. I think we had a precious experience.

Student B:

There are similarities and differences in the body language of my Japanese teacher and my North American teacher. For example, my Japanese teacher sometimes makes eye contact, but my North American teacher always makes eye contact. I taught our class, so I know it is important for me to use body language, because the class went off without a hitch even when I didn't know the vocabulary. I thought that it would be difficult for me to teach, but my class went well because all of the others cooperated with me in doing the class.

Student C:

I taught the students about describing locations. First, I made the students repeat the examples after me. Then, I make partners practice the examples. Next, I asked them questions about the practice. Then, I had the students draw a map, for example, of Sumiyoshi, Hamanomachi, etc... . and practice describing locations. I felt it was difficult to teach the students, because I can't speak English very well. I don't know how to describe things. Sometimes I thought, "Listen to me!" But they always listened to me. It was very difficult, but I had fun, and understood a teacher's feeling. Also, I thought, "I want to speak English very well, and I want them to understand my English." That is why I think I have to study English more.

Analysis

Student A's report focuses on communication in a loud voice, B's on the use of body language and eye contact and C's on the content of his lesson, describing locations. Despite the consideration of different topics, however, each of these students shows a heightened awareness of wider communication issues. Having understood from a teacher's perspective that it is necessary for the students to hear the teacher's explanations before the class can continue, student A apologizes for previous disruptive behavior in class and mentions his happiness upon having other students understand his explanations. Student B notes cultural differences in the use of body language as well as its value when words failed him, but the class proceeded without difficulty. Student C shows appreciation for the worth of successful communication and seems to have expressed an increased motivation to study English. All three of these students mention that teaching the class was difficult, but each also says very clearly that the lesson was successful.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the above reports confirms their dual role of both raising the learners' consciousness of communication issues and enabling the teacher to assess their development. Besides mentioning communication strategies such as speaking in a loud voice and using body language or asking questions, these students have become aware of deeper issues like learning style (student A) cooperation (student B) and commitment (student C). The twofold nature of language, to first serve as a focus for expressing thought to oneself and then as a vehicle to express it to others, also makes the students' newfound understandings accessible to their teacher.

Conclusion

Besides the obvious integration of the students' communication skills at a higher level as they rise to meet the challenge their teachers have prepared them for, the students' reports usually show increased empathy for their teachers. Phrases like, "Now I understand why you . . ." and "I was glad for everybody's cooperation . . ." are common. From their teaching experience, the students have become their teachers' colleagues as well.

Another benefit comes in the second semester when we set our students free and ask them to teach the class without having to follow our model lesson plan or the textbook. As much as possible, we make photocopiable activity books, videos and tape recorders available. To avoid tedium, we provides a few guidelines like making lessons interactive rather than merely having the class act as an audience for a speech or a tape. With the self-confidence gained from their previous successes and their natural creativity, the students soar to heights that often astound or inspire us.

While perhaps superfluous, it is gratifying to point out that there may be truth in the notion that we teach best what we ourselves are discovering as learning comes from our students' imitating our example. The implication follows that when we study how to instruct our students to teach each other how to learn, impeccable enlightenment will take place in our classrooms.

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