

TEACHING PRACTICES REVISITED: EFFECTIVE TEACHING VS. REFLECTIVE TEACHING

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Abstract

Departing from the “method era”, language teaching headed towards a new stage, - exploratory teaching -, with a focus on the nature of classroom teaching and learning. This new stage was materialised in two sub-stages: effective teaching and reflective teaching. Effective teachers are plausible enough to control and manage the process of teaching, learning and classroom interaction. On the other hand, reflective teachers ask the “what” and “why” questions, adopt a critical attitude to themselves as individual second language teachers, and challenge their personal beliefs about teaching.

Key words: method, exploratory teaching, effective teaching, reflective teaching, learner autonomy.

After the so-called “method era”, with clear-cut learning theories and teaching approaches, defending their own principles, language teaching drifted towards “exploratory” teaching. Whereas in the method era methods function as the basis for instructional processes in a second language programme, in the exploratory teaching process methodology moves beyond methods and focuses on exploring the nature of effective classroom teaching and learning.

This new stage was realized in two different forms: (a) effective teaching, and (b) reflective teaching. They are distinguished according to who should be held responsible for theorizing. The proponents of effective teaching suggest that applied linguists should theorize, and that teachers should practice those theories. That is, effective language

teaching is the outcome of the cooperation of theorizers and practitioners. The proponents of reflective teaching, on the other hand, suggest that theorizing or, at least, mediation responsibility should be placed upon the shoulder of teachers, rather than applied linguists (Widdowson, 1990; Freeman, 1991).

Effective Teaching

Methods, as defined traditionally, are based on a particular theory of the nature of language and second language learning and thus express a static view of teaching, entailing a set of specifications as to how teaching should be accomplished. However, teachers are seldom slaves of methods. In actual practice teachers do not reflect the underlying philosophies of methods which they claim to be following. In this respect, Dunkin and Biddle (1974), and Swaffar et al. (1982) claim that teaching is a dynamic, interactional process in which the teacher's 'method' results from the process of interaction between the teacher, the learners, and the instructional tasks and activities over time. Such an interaction reveals itself as a quite different approach to teaching, one in which teachers are involved in observing and reflecting upon their teaching as well as the learning behaviours of their students; hence, effective teaching and learning.

Good (1979) has tried to define the term "effective teaching" by describing it as teaching that produces higher-than-predicted gains on standardized achievement tests. Blum (1984) lists twelve effective classroom practices. Doyle (1977) and Good (1979) list several dimensions of teaching that account for differences between effective and ineffective instruction. They specifically mention such factors as classroom management, structuring, tasks, and grouping.

Effective teaching is defined by the idea of structuring. A lesson reflects the idea of structuring when the teacher's intentions are clear, and when instructional activities are sequenced according to a logic that students can perceive. Teachers also assign activities to attain particular learning objectives. These are called tasks or activity structures. Teachers must not only decide on the kind of task but also on the order, pacing, products, learning strategies, and related materials of the task. To this end, they should take 'learner plausibility' and 'language learning strategies' into account (Oxford, 1990). Members of the

effective teaching camp argue that learners show autonomy when they undergo instruction and that they react individually despite the centrality of teaching style. As a result, learners' uptake is highly idiosyncratic despite the general assumption that the effect of instruction is somehow uniform for most learners of the class. This idiosyncrasy may be partly attributed to the various strategies learners adopt in the process of language learning. As Richards (1989) argues, what the teacher does is only half of the picture. The other half has to do with what learners do to achieve successful learning strategies. Learner autonomy, coupled with the use of strategies, implies that learners may succeed despite the teacher's method rather than because of it.

Anyhow, good teaching appears to be highly task-oriented. Tikunoff (1983), in relating effective teaching to bilingual classrooms, suggests that three kinds of competencies are needed for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) learners: (a) Participative competence (needed to respond appropriately to class demands); (b) interactional competence (needed for appropriate classroom discourse); and, (c) academic competence (needed for the acquisition of new skills, assimilation of new information, and construction of new concepts). These competencies help the learners to perform three major functions: (1) to decode and understand task expectations as well as new information; (2) to engage appropriately in completing tasks, with high accuracy; and (3) to obtain accurate feedback with relation to completing tasks accurately. Effective teaching derives its methodological principles from studying the classroom practices and processes employed by effective teachers. Effective teachers are plausible enough to control and manage the process of teaching, learning, and classroom interaction actively. This plausibility results from their understanding of the teaching and learning processes.

It seems reasonable enough to agree with the proponents of effective teaching on the fact that the other side of the coin of effective teaching is what learners do to achieve effective learning, or learner strategies. Learner strategies include the particular cognitive operations, processes, procedures, and heuristics that learners apply to the task of learning a second language. Effective learners seem to be successful because they have a better understanding of and control over their learning than less successful learners.

In an attempt to describe effective learning, Cohen (cited in Oxford, 1985) lists six strategies used by successful learners:

1. Attention enhancing strategies;
2. Use of a variety of background sources;
3. Oral production tricks;
4. Vocabulary learning techniques;
5. Reading or text-processing strategies;
6. Writing techniques.

Another point that deserves attention is that effective teaching does not absolutely contradict the traditional notion of method. In fact, it is not the method that works or fails to work. An effective teacher may find some of the traditional methods, or some parts of methods, useful enough to be incorporated into his/her classroom practices. What most of the proponents of effective teaching suggest is that teachers should refrain from being dogmatic in their understanding of language teaching methodology.

Reflective Teaching

In a discussion of reflective teaching, we can say that the eighties might be called the revolutionary era in the field of language teaching. Since the early eighties new approaches to teacher development have been proposed and implemented in classrooms. From among these approaches, the most prominent ones are (a) teacher-as researcher, (b) clinical supervision, (c) critical pedagogy perspective, and (d) reflective teaching.

Reflective teaching, however, has a special place among these approaches. Cruickshank (1984) defines reflective teaching as the teacher's thinking about what happens in classroom lessons, and thinking about alternative means of achieving goals or aims. As such, reflective teaching is a good means of providing the students with "an opportunity to consider the teaching event thoughtfully, analytically, and objectively" (Cruickshank and Applegate, 1981, p. 4). In other words, the major purpose of reflective teaching is to engender good habits of thought.

Van Manen (1977) outlines three levels of reflectivity of which the first is similar to Cruickshank's conception of reflective teaching. The other two levels have been called the practical and critical levels of reflectivity or orientation to inquiry into teaching. Reflective

teaching is said to be patterned in such a way as to enable teachers to develop the pedagogical habits and skills necessary for self-directed growth and towards preparing them to actively participate, individually or collectively, in their making of educational decisions.

In an attempt to identify what reflective teaching really means, Bartlett (1990) distinguishes between actions and behaviours. He draws on the example of an athlete raising his fist in triumph and a Nazi saluting, and argues that, even though these two persons appear to have behaved in much the same way, their intentions are totally different. Therefore, actions are informed by the intentions they try to fulfill. Reflective teaching, viewed in this context, does not involve some modification of behavior by externally imposed directions or requirements, but requires deliberation and analysis of our ideas about teaching as a form of action based on our own dynamic understanding. In other words, reflective teaching links what we think (or intend) to what we actually do (or act).

Teaching is interaction in the sense that it involves individuals and groups acting upon each other, reciprocally in actions and responses in an infinite variety of relationships (both verbal and non-verbal, conscious and unconscious, or enduring and casual). Interaction is in fact communication in its inclusive sense in that it functions as a continually emerging process.

Therefore, reflective teaching will result in a shared understanding among teachers and learners. The learners will value their practical knowledge and give it priority over scientific knowledge produced by researchers (of teaching). They will also appreciate the strong collegiality inherent in, and stimulated by, reflective teaching. Reflective teaching unfolds in the form of “pedagogy” in the sense that it engages each student wholly—mind, sense of self, range of interests and interactions with other people—in events inside and outside the classroom. Pedagogy addresses both every day experiences and the societal events that influence them. Reflection can be viewed to have two different meanings; on the one hand, reflection involves the relationship between an individual’s thought and action. On the other hand, it involves a relationship between an individual teacher and his membership in a larger collectivity called society. A reflective teacher (also called a researcher of teaching) is a person who transcends the technicalities of teaching and thinks beyond the need to improve his instructional techniques.

Being reflective draws on the need for asking “what” and “why” questions. In reflecting on what and why questions, we begin to exercise control and open up the possibility of transforming our everyday classroom life. The process of control is called critical reflective teaching. By being critical, a teacher will have the ability to see his actions in relation to the historical, social, and cultural context in which his teaching is actually embedded. Such a teacher will develop himself both individually and collectively (in relation to society). The what and why questions asked by reflective teachers should be systematized into a set of procedures to help others to become critically reflective teachers. Drawing on Dewey (1933, *How we think*), researchers of teaching reinforce the need to consider a number of principles that guide and inform the process by which teachers can become reflective. In this way, reflective teaching seems to be in the form of a cycle of activity. Such a cycle would contain the five elements of mapping, informing, contesting, appraising, and acting.

Mapping involves asking questions about what we do as teachers. It involves observation and the collection of evidence about our teaching. What is very important in the mapping phase is that observation must be done by individual teachers (and through the use of personal diaries, learning logs, portfolios, and journals). The teachers approach to the mapping phase should be a descriptive one. The description should delineate teachers’ routine and conscious actions in the classroom. Teachers should, for instance, focus on their specific teaching problems which can be improved.

The next step in the cycle of reflective teaching is informing. In this stage the teacher will ask such questions as (1) “What is the meaning of my teaching?” and (2) “What did I intend?” of himself. In other words, he turns to look for meanings behind the maps. That is, the teacher revisits his first records—his maps—adds to them, and makes sense of them. As such, the informing phase provides the teacher with an understanding of the difference between teaching routine and conscious teaching action, and the ability to unmask the principles behind them. The teacher will, therefore, strive for the best possible solution rather than the correct or most certain solution (on the basis of an informed choice).

The contesting phase begins with a consideration of such questions as “How did I come to be this way?” and “How was it possible for my present view of teaching (with

reasons) to have emerged?” This phase involves contesting our ideas and the structures that hold them in place.

To this end, we, as teachers, can share our understandings of, and reasons for, teaching in particular ways with our colleagues. As we become experienced teachers, we develop our theories of teaching, philosophies of the teaching and learning process, and our histories which contain assumptions about the best ways of teaching. In this phase of contestation, we confront and perhaps begin to dislodge the complex system of reasons (or theory) for our teaching actions—we theorize.

Contestation will unfold to us whether our view of teaching is fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies. Only after a fully-fledged contestation phase shall we proceed to the next phase—appraisal.

In the appraisal phase, we set a value for what we do as teachers by asking such questions as “How might I teach differently?” Appraisal is a quest for alternative courses of action. It guarantees our teaching by linking the thinking dimension of reflection with the search for teaching in ways consistent with our new understanding. According to Bartlett (1990), when we search for more participatory styles of goal-based or domestic assessment procedures, we are appraising possible courses of action.

The last phase in the cycle of reflective teaching process is “acting.” The question the teacher raises in this phase is “What and how shall I teach now?” After mapping, we rearrange our teaching practice, unearth the reasons and assumptions for these actions, subject these reasons to critical scrutiny, appraise alternative courses of action, and then act. As such, becoming reflective forces us to adopt a critical attitude to ourselves as individual second language teachers, and to challenge our personal beliefs about teaching.

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