

This article exemplifies two important features of many articles in The Teacher Trainer. First, it shows a teacher trainer working hard in prescribed circumstances and experimenting and learning from that work. Secondly, it engages us with the very nitty-gritty of teaching and training. Right down to the nuts and bolts!

A syllabus for the interactive stage?

PART ONE.

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at the time of receipt of this article.

Classroom Pedagogics

Summary

This article describes a procedure used in a Sri Lankan programme to develop and increase the awareness and skills of English teacher trainees in classroom floor decision-making. It attempts to define the kinds of awareness and skills that may be required in the “inter-active” phase of teaching and to evolve procedures for developing them using a combination of lesson transcript study and micro-teaching.

The programme in which these procedures are used is a two year long “weekends-only” course leading to teacher certification for untrained serving teachers. About 1,500 teachers in training follow the course in 6 regional Centres throughout the island.

Introduction: A Neglected Purpose

“Classroom pedagogics? – you mean ‘teaching?’” people ask. Yes, of course, the term means ‘teaching’ but in our work in Sri Lanka, in the context of a two year long week-end teacher training programme, the term ‘classroom pedagogics’, even if pretentious, has come to mean for us something more precise and more relevant to our purposes than the word ‘teaching’ alone would suggest. We are using it to refer to a kind of syllabus for what some have called the “interactive” phase of the teaching process (cf. Jackson 1968; Wallace 1980), the phase when the teacher has to interact on the classroom floor with 20-40 pupils, when the decisions have to be made on the spur of the moment, and a previously formulated plan does not help, and when lots of smaller goals than the grander ‘aims of the lesson’ may press themselves upon her (e.g. how to involve that weaker learner on the right hand side, how to silence but not discourage the over-zealous fellow in the front row who always has an immediate answer to every question, how to get inter-learner discussion going in a last lesson of the day, how to get them to know what ‘I am expecting of them, NOW, AT THIS MOMENT?’). It had become clear to us that this classroom floor decision-making, perhaps THE basic teaching skill (cf. Shavelson 1973) was a neglected area of our teacher training programme and that something needed to be done to deal with it. We needed a ‘syllabus’ of some sort, yet it had to be a rather special kind of syllabus for we could see that this kind of skill was not something that could be transmitted by mouth or the printed word. It depended on the development of an awareness and this could only take place through experience. In other words, our ‘syllabus’ would be referring to skills that are mostly ‘untrainable’ and only a small number that could be classified as ‘trainable’.

The Dilemma of the Micro vs Macro Approach

Richards (1986) draws attention to the ‘Teacher Training Dilemma’ in which there seem to be approaches to teacher training that lead in different directions: the micro-approach (of low-inference skills such as distinguishing between display and referential questions, or using ‘wait-time’) and the macro-approach (of the development of higher level general principles or concepts). We feel that these are not the incompatible approaches that they seem to be. While we do not underestimate the potential trainability, and its value, of the low-inference skills (which trainability, we maintain, should be exploited), we feel inclined to argue that ultimately an awareness of the value of these low inference skills depends on an awareness of higher level principles, or concepts. For example, ‘wait-time’ is

linked to concepts of difficulty, challenge, mind-engagement, 'inferential questions' are linked to concepts of form vs meaning, and so on.

Ends in View: An Attempt to Define Objectives

Reasoning in this way, we thought that if our aim was to raise awareness of concepts and principles then our approach had to be largely a process approach. But we also thought it would be valuable to have some kind of idea of our 'ends-in-view' (Sockett 1976, p.67). By 'ends-in-view' I mean not objective goals to be attained at all costs, but rather a direction, a list of potential goals. In Sockett's words:

'Our 'ends-in-view' are simply pro tem indications of where we want to get. However, social situations being what they are, during the course of proceedings to those ends, things crop up to alter the ends-in-view. As we take means to those ends-in view, so the means affect and alter what we have in mind. There is a constant interaction. For Dewey that is not just a matter of fact: we ought to change our minds, we ought to be flexible and adaptive. We ought not to be under some kind of tyranny of ends as he puts it. So an end-in-view is not a target, for Dewey, but a sign-post.'

(Sockett, op. cit. p.67)

The problem was to find the process and the ends-in-view. Our solution was to return to the study of the set of local lesson transcripts which had first drawn our attention to the need for training of this kind. We had been following Ramani (personal communications, and see Ramani 1986; 1987) in using real lesson data, in our case lesson transcripts, to try to develop the trainee's awareness of points of theoretical generality. In other words we were encouraging teachers in training to read transcripts without any pre-imposed criteria (or check-lists) but using their personal judgement and experience to decide on the effective and ineffective teaching in a particular transcript. And so through a process roughly corresponding to Ramani's Articulation – Confrontation – Examination – Reformulation (Ramani 1986), the trainees over a number of transcripts (four to six) would jointly refine their perceptions and understanding of good teaching. We were satisfied with this approach but felt two needs, one of which has already been expressed:

- 1) a clearer idea for teacher trainers of the ends-in-view. In essence we had to be sure that the teacher trainers jointly agreed on where we were trying to head, a direction which in terms of emphasis was in tune with the materials in use in the classrooms of the country:
- 2) a way of linking this side of the work with an existing micro-teaching programme.

I realize that there is here a certain degree of tension between flexibility and prescriptiveness. Our greatest concern has been in fact to try to avoid prescriptiveness. We had therefore to persuade ourselves and the trainers that not everyone will express things in the same words or perceive them in the same way, and that not everyone will move at the same rate or in the same direction, and also that there may well be other important things not expressed in our ends-in-view. Our ends-in-view had therefore to be no more than a guide: everything that comes out of the lesson transcript discussion would be 'classroom pedagogics'.

The list of 'ends-in-view' eventually arrived at after a period of some ten months of trying various versions is to be found below. They are not, then, ends to be imposed upon the teachers in training, or even made available to them in this form. The aim is to use the trainees' spontaneous reactions, their articulations of their personal theory, to move in the general direction of the features listed.

Classroom Pedagogics

Notes for Teacher Trainers: Ends-in-View, Year 1

- 1) **Asking Questions:** This involves the trainee's skill in asking the RIGHT kind of questions and asking them in an effective way.

The Right Kind of Questions: Questions can be divided into two types, REFERENTIAL and DISPLAY. When a teacher asks a referential question it is a question to which he does not know the answer ("Do you like fish?" "What time did you get up this morning?") On the other hand, a DISPLAY

question is one to which the teacher knows the answer, and the pupils know that he knows the answer ("What is this?" – holding up an exercise book). While display questions have their uses, it seems that teachers seem to use many more of them than they use of referential questions. So the trainees should be encouraged not to DROP display questions but to INCREASE the proportion of referential questions.

Another useful way of classifying questions is to classify them as OPEN or CLOSED questions. OPEN questions have an unlimited number of answers while CLOSED questions have a limited number of possible answers.

Examples of CLOSED questions:

- Are you afraid of snakes?
- Where are you from?

Examples of OPEN questions:

- If you could talk to an elephant, what would you talk about?
- What kind of tricks would you teach a dog?

While one CANNOT say "ask only OPEN questions", it is important that the trainee makes sure that he does not ask ONLY closed questions, but includes OPEN questions also.

Essentially the RIGHT kind of questions are those that make learners think and allow the teacher to extend the interaction by further questioning. For example, instead of just accepting a learner's reply the teacher can ask a further related question and so extend the dialogue e.g.

Teacher: What's your favourite sport, Sunil?
Learner: Cricket, Sir.
T: Have you ever played any other sports?
L: Football.
T: Why do you prefer cricket?

(e.g. instead of immediately after Sunil's first response going on to ask another learner what his favourite sport is.)

The trainer must also bear in mind that while it is NOT wrong to ask YES/NO question, they produce limited responses. WH – questions always produce longer responses (especially WHY and HOW questions). Quite a good strategy is to start with YES/NO questions and extend it using WH-QQ.

T: Have you ever been to Fort Railway Station?
P: Yes
T: When.....?
Why.....?
How.....?
Who.....with?

(Some examples adapted from Long & Crookes, 1986)

Asking questions in the right kind of way: The teacher in training should realize the importance of avoiding "thin air" questions. These are questions that a trainee asks of the whole class but they appear directed to "thin air" because the trainee does not nominate people to reply or does not call on volunteers. Questions must be DIRECTED: that is, they may first be asked of the whole class and then a respondent may be nominated either from among volunteers or from the whole class (it is important not to use ONLY volunteers).

2) Responding to Learner's Responses

Withholding feedback. Not immediately saying that a response is right or wrong. Asking other learners for agreement/disagreement.

2.1 Controlling para-linguistic signs.

Making sure that facial expression, gesture, intonation, body movement etc. do not give away the correct answers. John Holt in HOW CHILDREN FAIL reports the case of a teacher who was

asking her class to classify words in three columns on blackboard as 'nouns', 'verbs' and 'adjectives'. Totally unconsciously, at each word she tended to move slightly closer to the column that the words should be put in. After a few items the learners got all the answers right not through knowledge of grammar BUT BECAUSE THEY HAD ALL SEEN THAT THE TEACHER WAS UNCONCIOUSLY INDICATING THE CORRECT ANSWER. This kind of thing is much more common than many teachers think, and we have found a number of examples of it in our own programmes. We have seen an example of a trainee saying to a class "Which is the left side of the blackboard?" while placing her hand on the very left side of the blackboard. We have also seen a trainee asking YES/NO questions on a text using a particular intonation pattern for the NO-QQ, but quite unconsciously – to the observer, or the learners though, it was very obvious.

2.2 Wait-time. The trainee should give learners time to reply and not press on if there is not an immediate reply. This "time to reply" is called "wait-time" and more use of wait-time appears to produce more complex learner responses (Long et al. 1984). The trainee must therefore avoid (a) immediately and automatically repeating the question, (b) immediately passing the question to another learner, and (c) answering her own question.

2.3 Rephrasing for simplicity.

It happens that the trainee asks a question which receives either a wrong answer or silence because the learners have not understood the question. The trainee must be practiced in simplifying the question by rephrasing it. This is actually a fairly natural, in-built human ability (cf mother-child talk; foreigner talk) but often the trainee may not exploit it to advantage.

2.4 Rephrasing a learner's error.

Instead of overt correction, the trainee gently rephrases the mistake without drawing attention to the learner or putting him down.

3) Repairing Breakdowns. How teachers can get through breakdowns, and states of confusion.

One major reason for breakdowns in communication between learners and the teacher is that the learners may not be clear about the teacher's 'AIMS'. 'Aims' is a possibly fuzzy word. It is useful for us to distinguish three kinds of aims:

- (i) Pedagogic goals: these are the syllabus aims of (a) (in the short term) the immediate unit of work in terms of weeks or semester etc. and (b) the long term aims of the whole course.
- (ii) Language learning aims: these are the reasons why a teacher does some given thing at a given point in time. Why does the teacher ask this question? Why does the teacher want us to do this activity? Somehow or other these "immediate" aims must be clear to the learners.
- (iii) Social aims: these refer to the kind of social climate the teacher aims at developing in the classroom, how he wishes his role and the learners' role to be. Especially when one is introducing more learner participation and pair/group work in a context of traditional teacher-power the social aims must be clear to the learners.

Now while aims (i) above are generally perceived by learners in a way that is acceptable to them, though differently framed by different learners, and while aims (iii) are a "seasonal" business rather than an everyday one, it seems that our major problem is in getting teachers in training to appreciate the importance of making clear the aims (ii): these are constant, everyday occurrences at almost every phase or sub-phase of a lesson.

Another major area for breakdown of communication is when the trainee does not take care to make clear to her learners on what basis she evaluates the learners' responses. In one of our lesson transcripts, for example, the teacher is showing a map of a town to a class of learners. On the map are a number of buildings – school, post-office, hospital, houses etc. – represented pictorially. The teacher wishes to review some vocabulary before doing a listening activity based on the map. One of the words he wishes to review

is “building”. He asks “what have you seen in the map?” and wants the answer “buildings”. When learners reply “post-office, “hospital”, “houses” (all perfectly correct answers to the question) they are not accepted as the required response BUT NO REASON IS GIVEN, so the learners become confused.

- 4) **Varying the Input.** Planning for variety of activity in the lesson. But the trainee must be aware that variety also implies variety of movement and of use of classroom space, and variety of voice, e.g. tone.
- 5) **Setting the Challenge.** Ensuring that the level of difficulty is appropriate. If ALL the learners can do an activity correctly then it must be below their appropriate level of difficulty. The degree of challenge of any given activity can be increased or decreased in two simple ways:
 - a) The trainee can speak faster or more slowly; b) she can use more complex or less complex language (more complex language tending towards natural native speaker talk with no concessions made by way of simplified vocabulary or structure, and less complex language tending towards simpler “foreigner talk”)

Challenge is a GOOD thing in the language classroom; it keeps the learner’s minds alert and occupied. The trainee must be alert to certain indicators of challenge which, if they are present among 1/4 or 1/3 of the class, are a good sign but if they are observable in the majority of the class would indicate that the level of difficulty is too high. These indicators are:

- 1.(i) A learner looking sideways at his neighbour’s work before writing himself (if he quickly writes and then looks at his neighbour’s work it would be an indicator of easiness).
- 2.(ii) Wait-time before response (silence).
- 3.(iii) First respondent does not get correct answer.

- 6) (a) **Establishing Rapport.** How to establish a good atmosphere for work and co-operation at beginning of the lesson.
(b) **Maintaining Rapport.** Keeping this atmosphere going throughout the lesson. Involving all learners. Showing individual interest; taking an interest in the learners as individuals; knowing their names is a first step in this direction. Perceiving the lesson from the learner’s point of view.

- 7) **Providing Feedback or Follow-up.** Feedback is a very important factor in learning. It is very important that the learner should know how good or effective his utterances are, or that he should know that they are lacking in effectiveness. Feedback is not JUST encouragement: in fact, empty and automatic encouragement is pointless (but some teachers appear to indulge in it). Feedback must be GENUINE and PERSONAL: it is an opportunity for the teacher to establish that she is aware of the personal efforts of pupils. It is also an opportunity for the teacher to demonstrate to weaker learners by not discouraging them or criticising them, that she cares also for the efforts they are making. Feedback means listening carefully to what learners say (it causes confusion for the teacher to say “Good” to a wrong answer....). It means allowing learners to experience the effect of what they produce, as a guide to them in their future efforts.

8) Getting Attention:

- (i) beginning of lesson
- (ii) when moving from group to whole-class activity
- (iii) when changing the type of activity in the lesson

Part Two of this article will be available on this site later on.

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