

Seth Lindstromberg now has a regular column in the Pilgrims web magazine (Humanising Language Teaching) called “Against the Grain” in which he describes TESOL phenomena in a fashion somewhat against the accepted view of things. The article below printed in The Teacher Trainer in 1988 was a prototype of this useful approach.

## **Teacher echoing**

by *Seth Lindstromberg*

### **What is it?**

After some hundreds of hours of observing trainee and experienced teachers, and even teacher trainers, in Britain and abroad, I have come to believe that teacher echoing of learner utterances is too much ignored or taken for granted.

By teacher echoing I mean this:

- T: And what do you think?
- S: He’s coming later.
- T: (With little or no change of intonation)  
He’s coming later.

Just to be clear, I don’t mean this:

- S: He’s coming lately.
- T: He’s coming.....?
- S: Lately?
- T: Later.

And I don’t mean this:

- T: And what do you think?
- S: He’s coming later
- T: He’s coming later?
- S: Yes.

That is, what I call teacher echoing (or parroting when I’m really up on my soapbox). It occurs when a teacher repeats a student contribution to the end – perhaps leaving off the very beginning – without using the rising intonation of yes/no questions. In other words, echoes tend to be dead ends. There is nothing about them strongly calls for a response.

### **Points in Favor**

When the subject of echoing is broached, the same few points are made in favor of regarding it as an effective technique:

- 1) It provides learners with more of the sort of repetition needed for “reinforcement of language”.
- 2) It is a means of amplifying the contributions of learners who have spoken too quietly.
- 3) It can furnish the class as a whole with intelligible versions or poorly pronounced contributions.
- 4) It can be used to provide models of correctness in cases of errors of various kinds.

### **Points Against**

However, a number of reasons for thinking again have occurred to me:

- 1) Many, if not most of the teachers who echo, are either unaware of how much they do it or unaware that they do it at all. If this is so, there may be grounds for wondering whether its origins might better be sought in the teacher's psyche than in any view of good pedagogy. It has seemed to me that teachers were often doing something quite different by their echoing than fostering learning-sending messages, for example. One message of the deadpan echo is, “You're not surprising me”. Another is, “Converse only through me”.
- 2) Repetition by itself is far from a guarantee of learning. Witness the dwindling reliance on non-communicative pattern drilling. The consensus today is that interest in content is a major factor in learning, but hearing yourself echoed is unlikely to be interesting for long.
- 3) If echoing can be used for all these different reasons, how are learners always to know why they are being echoed?
- 4) Even if learners realize that the echoing signals that they have made a mistake, there is nothing obvious about an echo that indicates where the error is. Granted, this uncertainty may put learners in the position of having to think a bit harder about what they have said. But there are less ambiguous ways of achieving this.
- 5) If learners can rely on the teacher to amplify whispered contributions or to improve poorly pronounced ones, there would seem to be less incentive ever to speak up or speak better.
- 6) Echoing could subtly (?) reinforce some learners' belief that the only truly worthwhile model is teacher talk. This would be particularly likely in cases where acceptable contributions are echoed out of habit or anxiety.
- 7) In any case, echoing clearly makes for more teacher talk.
- 8) In no way does it encourage learners to listen to each other. In regard to points 5 and 6 it clearly works against any attempt to get learners listening to each other that a teacher might undertake in line, say, with the Communicative Approach.
- 9) Nor is it clear that it encourages learners to listen to the teacher. Isn't there something like a Law of the Diminishing Returns of Teacher Talk? It might start: Familiarity breeds.....
- 10) Teacher echoing interposes the teacher between a learner and the rest of the class, and might well hinder success in any experimentation with other teacher roles.
- 11) It does not seem a natural sort of response. I am not sure that I have ever noticed it outside a School. Try it with friends some time and see what happens. Actually, they may not realize for a while what it is you are doing that's bothering them, so you may even have enough time to get them thoroughly fed up with you.