

The Teacher Trainer – Back Articles

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At the IATEFL Conference, Edinburgh 1988, I had the chance to talk to two trainers from afar. **Ephraim Weinbraub** told me of his work with teacher memories and **Jane Revell** about her work on video materials for teaching English through other subjects such as Maths and Biology.

Trainer Talks

▪ A talk with Ephraim Weintraub, Teacher Trainer at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem

After Ephraim's workshop "The ghosts behind the blackboard" we had a chat over coffee. These are some of the things Ephraim said:

"I see the teacher as rather a lonely person, stranded on the island of the classroom, cut off from colleagues by walls and corridors and from the students by desks and blackboards. The teacher is subject to pressures and demands of all sorts.... To finish the syllabus, to get exam successes, to keep the classroom orderly, to help pupils gain jobs, to be both controlling and understanding. I have an image of the teacher as a tight-rope walker or a juggler.

Teachers are other-person oriented and tend to forget themselves. They are often under stress, burnt out. There is a great necessity for teachers to face themselves. If they don't, they can't face others. They have to have a dialogue with themselves before they can converse with their pupils. But there is a great reluctance in teachers to do this, to face the stress.

In my work in Jerusalem, I take 3rd year B.A. Postgraduate students on a TEFL teacher training programme, and teach English 8 hours a week in a High School. I train teachers at the Hebrew University too and I'm a 'teacher-counsellor' for teachers and students in any subject area. So I see most sides!

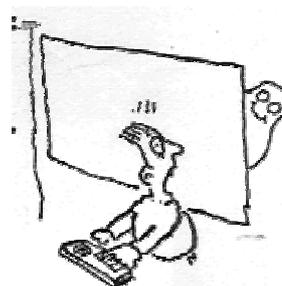
Sometimes I ask people how many teachers they have had in their lives. The answers range from "I can't remember" to "75" to "one too many". I ask people to write down their memories of positive experiences and negative experiences as students and to share them in groups. Most people have strong residual memories and if you classify the memories they share, you find that the clusters of characteristics around good teachers are:-

1. The teacher as expert who dazzles the pupils with knowledge.
2. The teacher as "parent", warm and accepting.
3. The teacher as a peer or fellow adult.

These characteristics reflect our underlying desires as teachers.

The characteristics clustering around the "black ghosts" or bad teachers memories are:-

1. The teacher as attacker, punisher, aggressor, or even.....
2. The teacher as sadist.
3. The teacher as incompetent or just "no good"!



Once teachers or students have shared their memories and discussed them, they realise that there is both a good and bad teacher in all of us, and that it's okay to feel anger inside but how we channel it is a matter of moral responsibility.

What is essential is that we integrate our memories, our experiences into our initial or pre-service training so that the "ghosts" of teachers past are acknowledged and faced. Teaching technique is not unimportant but it is empty unless the ghosts have been dealt with. Once each individual's good and bad ghosts have been identified they can then be referred to by peers or the trainer throughout the course. Let's suppose someone has a bad ghost called Mr. Barnaby and a good one called Miss Martin. As the teacher with these ghosts goes through the course, the group can say "That sounds like something your Mr. Barnaby would say/do!" – or "How would Miss Martin have dealt with that?" – or "That reminds me of Miss Martin!" In this way, the past can be referred to in a non-threatening way, in an evolutionary way. People can move on."

▪ A Talk with Jane Revell, Author and Teacher Trainer in the Canary Islands (at the time of interview)

I asked Jane about her recent work in teaching English through another subject, i.e. teaching, say, photography or crafts or geography in English to non-native speakers wanting to learn English.

"I've recently been involved in compiling a video made up of authentic TV sequences. It's for 11-14 year olds learning English. It's not a normal scripted EFL video, although I did work to a structural syllabus. Rather I've found educational programmes on Science, Geography and other subjects. These programmes were made for native English speakers. They are good quality TV, with good content in English.

I've then screened it for linguistic constraints. So, for example, I've found some footage for the Present Simple in sequences such as "Why do elephants have trunks?" and "How do you cool a cuppa in the quickest way?" Once I'd sorted through the TV programmes to find good films with interesting content within the linguistic constraints I had, I took it to some native speaker teachers to see how they felt they could use it.



The teachers came up with two main questions:-

1. How can I use the video when the pupils don't know the subject content, let alone the English?
2. How can I use the video when I don't know the subject content myself?

I would answer the first question by saying that pupils often know more than teachers about elephants or tea or whatever so they can be the "knowers" for a change. Secondly, it's quite okay for people not to know the content. If you watch the video, then you'll know. It's a good reason for both teachers and students to watch the video! You can learn things!

It's interesting that native English speakers reacted this way. Perhaps it is the case that native-speaking language teachers go into E.F.L. because it's "content-secure". They have a natural competence in the language that gives them security. If asked to branch out into new content areas like Maths or Geography or Science, they may feel insecure in the subject. On the other hand maybe some native-speaking teachers will feel the need for more content, for something more to get their teeth into since the language itself need not present them with challenge. These teachers may welcome English through content subjects warmly.

Either way, I see some possible solutions for teachers who are native speakers:-

- Teachers can do "research" themselves into the new content.

- Teachers can be trained in the new content.
- Teachers and students can join together in joint discovery via the material

But for non-native teachers, already struggling with the language they are trying to teach, and often working with large classes of unmotivated students, we can't really ask more of them. Perhaps the solution here is to have inter-disciplinary, cross-curriculum contact. One foreign language teacher could team-teach with one content teacher and they can teach the language and the subject together. Alternatively, the foreign language teacher could teach some of the content subject but then have a chance to ask questions to the subject teacher later. Of course this is not a new idea in itself. Primary School teachers (such as the ones shown in the Old British Council "Teaching Observed" videos) have been doing this for years. It does raise some very interesting issues however, such as, can the publishers provide suitable material for this sort of venture, for example?

We can't train EFL teachers to know 20 different other subjects so our choices are to

- a) help them accept their own insecurity in the other subject areas
- b) help them to team-teach with subject teachers
- c) run cross-curricular teacher training courses. Ideas would be given out and then everyone would work out the ramifications of the ideas for their subject area. Discussion would follow on both the content and language details implied.
- d) run teacher training courses where the higher order cognitive skills that cut across language and subject skills, are taught."