

Destroying the Teacher: The Need for Learner-Centered Teaching

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“He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.” —Walt Whitman

“Most children in school are scared most of the time.”
—John Holt

“Much of what we say and do in school only makes children feel that they do not know things that, in fact, they knew perfectly well before we began to talk about them.” —John Holt

“If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher.” —Basil Bernstein

“Schools are designed on the assumption that there is a secret to everything in life; that the quality of life depends on knowing that secret; that secrets can be known only in orderly succession; and that only teachers can properly reveal these secrets.” —Ivan Illich

“Who needs the most practice talking in school? Who gets the most?” —John Holt

“In the average classroom someone is talking for two-thirds of the time, two-thirds of the talk is teacher-talk, and two-thirds of the teacher-talk is direct influence.” —N.A. Flanders

“Language complexity increases when the child writes or speaks about events in which the child has participated in a goal-seeking process.” —J.S. Bruner

“Information is rarely, if ever, stored in the human nervous system without affective coding.” —Earl W. Stevick

“We must not fool ourselves...into thinking that guiding children to answers by carefully chosen leading questions is in any important respect different from just telling them the answers in the first place....The only answer that really sticks in a child’s mind is the answer to a question that he asked or might ask of himself.” —John Holt

“True knowledge, Plato argues, must be within us all, and learning consists solely of discovering what we already know.”
—Colin Blakemore

“If a teacher is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.” —Kahlil Gibran

The title of this article comes from a poem by Walt Whitman: “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.” I chose this epigraph because I wish to plead for a less dominant classroom role for the language teacher, in accord with the importance of classroom interaction in the language-learning process.

First, I would like to encourage a lessening of attention to the linguistic content of language teaching, and suggest that such content, and the theoretical basis on which we choose it, are not as crucial for language learning as are aspects of classroom behavior. Too often, in discussing the teaching of English, we behave as if language were the most important factor in the classroom. I think this is seldom the case.

We need to see English as essentially an educative subject, linked to the cognitive development of learners, rather than as something isolated from the rest of the curriculum. Unfortunately, in many classrooms throughout the world, little true education takes place. Instead, there is rote learning of material irrelevant to the learners’ interests. We need to be aware of the educational potential of English in such circumstances.

To fully realize this potential we need to look outside the confines of English language teaching itself. There is now a considerable body of work that focuses on the conditions under which children learn most effectively. This work relates both to the internal processes involved in apprehending and storing information and to the most favorable conditions for the operation of these processes. I would like to consider here the relevance of this work to the teaching of English. I will deal with it under five main headings:

reduction of coercion, active learner involvement, experience before interpretation, avoidance of oversimplification, and the value of silence.

Reduction of coercion

Several of the quotations accompanying this article come from the American educationist John Holt. One of Holt's major beliefs is that for most pupils school is a place of fear. Children are coerced by various means to produce answers that are acceptable to their teacher rather than to engage in practical thinking. Coercion can be nonviolent, of course. The threat of withdrawal of love or approval is, in fact, often much more powerful than the threat of physical punishment. Whatever its form, we need to end unnecessary coercion in class and thus minimize defensive learning.

The fear that many children experience arises most often out of bewilderment, which itself frequently results from the clash between the culture of the learner and that of the teacher. Holt puts it well: "Much of what we say and do in school only makes children feel that they do not know things that, in fact, they knew perfectly well before we began to talk about them." As Bernstein shows, the clash between learner and teacher, which may involve any of a number of factors—age, class, or nationality, for example—can inhibit true learning insofar as the teacher does not have access to the learner's world. There is a clear need for the teacher to endeavor to get into the learner's consciousness much more than he usually does at present.

Unfortunately, in many countries the typical teaching style is authoritarian. The teacher is, in Illich's phrase, the "custodian of the secret": he is the source from which all wisdom flows, and he is always correct. This position is very threatening to most learners. It is vital for the teacher to show that he is not superhuman, that he can make mistakes, and that there are many things of which he is ignorant. Only when the teacher's authority recedes can the learner be thrown back on his own resources. There is clear evidence that the learner has a marked ability to correct mistakes that he has made; furthermore, mistakes so corrected will seldom be repeated, whereas mistakes corrected by the teacher often will be made again. But this self-correcting mechanism can operate only when the teacher gives up playing God.

Active learner involvement

Teachers talk too much. And too much of this talk is directive. Many of us are wryly familiar with Flanders' "two-thirds" rule, which, in my experience, holds true even in the most "progressive" classrooms. The only solution is for the teacher consciously to become more silent, so that the learner may become more vocal.

Learning is most effective when the learner is the initiator of the learning process. (Bruner notes that this holds true even for children a few weeks old.) With regard to language, it has been found that syntactic complexity and sentence length both increase when the topic is one in which the learner has been actively involved. This surely argues for the kind of withdrawal of control on the teacher's part that I have recommended above.

Related to the above fact is evidence that the emotion associated with learning an item is important in storing it. In a recent article, Brown has described affective factors as "the keys to language-learning success." Even hostility, it appears, stores items better than a total lack of emotional involvement—though perhaps this is a path we should not follow too far!

There is thus a clear need for the content of language teaching materials to involve the learner—to relate to his needs, interests, and moral concerns. It seems to me that too much of our material is empty of such involvement. Characters and situations in English-teaching course books are frequently vapid stereotypes. Although some writers might argue that materials, for the widest distribution, must be morally value-free, I would say that being morally neutral is itself to make a decision about values.

Another important finding is that learning improves when goals are set before tasks are begun: the learner should be aware of the learning objectives. Relating this to reading, for example, we may consider it more useful to ask questions about a text *before* the students read it than afterward. In this way, the learner will approach the text with a set purpose, as adults normally do. After all, we seldom read anything without a reason; yet that is what we ask our learners to do time and time again.

Experience before interpretation

Psychologists such as Bruner and Piaget have stressed the need for an initial tactile stage of learning. Bruner calls it the "enactive" stage and Piaget the "sensorimotor" stage, but the principle is the same, namely, that the learner needs time to "mess around" with target material before he is asked to give proof that he has learned it. We may have noticed this process while watching our own children beginning to read. There is a good deal of handling of printed material, or playing with it, of changing the words of the text before real reading starts. And this period of *experiencing* the material seems to be a necessary precondition for *interpreting* it. Yet we often ask language learners to dispense with this stage when they are dealing with a particular piece of learning.

Avoidance of oversimplification

It may seem paradoxical to follow the above plea for giving the learner more time to *experience* target material by asking the teacher not to oversimplify it. In reality, however, this is another aspect of the same principle: that learning is something only the learner can do. The teacher cannot learn *for* the pupil; he can only provide good conditions within which learning may take place. If things are made too easy for the learner, he will not be inclined to use his own learning resources.

What I am specifically questioning is the idea that a step-by-step approach is the only way to learn. Holt says: “If we taught children to speak, they would never learn.” What he means is that as teachers we would want to break up the learning process into a series of gradeable steps and prevent movement from one step to another until the first step had been mastered. We would ensure that the learner was not exposed to tasks that were, we felt, beyond his abilities. It is doubtful if learners always benefit from such a piecemeal approach. The indications are that the excessive suppression of irregularities in language does not make the learning task easier—it makes it more difficult. If, for example, irregularities in spelling are systematically suppressed, and we offer the learner only a predigested, simplified variety of language, we make the transfer to real language more difficult. Teaching the notion of irregularity from the beginning gives the learner a more accurate picture of what is involved in learning the language.

Again, let us relate this question of oversimplifying to the problem of reading. New words and structures in a reading passage are commonly practiced and drilled before the passage is read, so that the learner does not have to cope with anything that he hasn’t seen before. In some cultures it is regarded as improper, in fact, to ignore any word that appears in the text, the printed text itself being accorded an almost religious respect. Yet if we drill all the new language in the reading passage before it is read, we are preventing the learner from developing a crucial reading skill: the need to guess, to make hypotheses, to play hunches about the nature of the text—specifically, to predict what is likely to come next. The ability to pick up context cues within a text is vital to the successful decoding of it. Merritt has described the act of reading as “one of prediction and model making rather than word-recognition.” And Goodman defines the process as follows: “Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available language cues....

As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made, to be confirmed, rejected, or refined as

reading progresses.” If we oversimplify texts or prepare the learner for them too fully, we are preventing him from attaining a skill which is a vital part of a mature reading ability.

The value of silence

A key psychological process underlying all learning is the transfer of learning items from the short-term memory to the long-term memory. Research by Luria (among others) suggests that a period of silence during the short-term memory span (calculated to be approximately twenty seconds) encourages this transfer. In examining the mental processes of a professional mnemonist, Luria found that such a period of silence between items was necessary for their effective storage.

Protagonists of the Silent Way have emphasized the value of silence in the teaching process. Anyone who has undergone Silent Way teaching will, I think, confirm how *active* the learner is forced to be during the period of silence.

Silence is also fundamental to Curran’s Community Language Learning. Each period of learning is followed by a period of reflection, the first part of which is conducted in silence. La Forge describes the value of this silence as follows: “The silence cannot be underestimated in any way for its value and impact on progress in language learning. Far from being a vacuous period of time after the experience part of the class, the silence of the reflection period is characterized by intensive activity.”

I believe that these findings should make us reconsider the value of teacher talk in our classrooms. For example, are we always justified in engaging in immediate repetition of items? Perhaps a more effective method would be for the initial presentation of an item to be followed by a short period of silence, in which the item is available for short-term memory review and long-term memory transfer by the learner. This would also fit in better with the idea of the teacher as facilitator (to use Rogers’s term), advocated earlier in this article.

Finally, I would like to stress the need for all of us to consider learners as whole and integrated human beings and respond to them as such. We should see English as a means of education, relating closely to the development of the learner’s cognitive ability, rather than as simply the inculcation of a specific series of linguistic skills.

Let me end by drawing your attention to the two final quotations, by neurologist Colin Blakemore and philosopher Kahlil Gibran. Both serve to emphasize something we often tend to forget: namely, that teaching is not so much a process of cramming outside knowledge into the learner’s mind as of drawing out the knowledge that each of our students has within him.

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