

# Lessons from the Other Side of the Teacher's Desk: Discovering Insights to Help Language Learners

In my experience, most language teachers become teachers because they are fascinated by language. We like the way languages work, we are intrigued by differences between our native tongues and other languages, and we enjoy the process of helping our students learn. And I believe that most language teachers have had positive experiences as language students themselves somewhere along the paths to their own classrooms. Positive experiences learning a foreign language certainly contribute greatly to the attraction of teaching one. Most language teachers have learned a language in a classroom setting (and many of us have also learned a second language in more nontraditional settings, such as immersion in a new language either because of travel or while living in foreign countries).

I am an English language teacher who fits most of the categories above. I have been teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for many years. However, until recently, it had

been many years since I had learned a foreign language in a *classroom setting*. And that is what I did for six focused months. As a requirement for a job, I studied in an intensive language training program. It was a fascinating and often difficult experience that gave me a renewed understanding of language learning: there will always be a distance, however subtle, between teacher and student, even in the most student-centered classroom.

That experience of once again being a student in a language classroom caused me to reexamine my beliefs about classroom practice. Some of my beliefs were confirmed, and some were challenged. In this article I examine those beliefs. The language that I studied was Russian, but I believe that my experience as a language learner can be generalized across most language learning experiences.

## **L1 versus L2 use in the classroom**

One of my most strongly held beliefs has been that the use of the

---

students' native language (L1) in the classroom should be avoided. My reasoning has been that although the use of the students' L1 can be a useful tool at times, it can quickly become a crutch for the students and the teacher.

In my language-learning classroom, I saw this belief both confirmed, and in some instances, challenged. The Russian language has a complicated grammar structure that is significantly different from that of my native language, English. At times my Russian teacher explained the grammar very clearly in English; that was especially helpful for constructions that are nearly impossible for the student to decipher without help because of how much Russian grammar differs from English grammar. However, at times I was more successful in understanding grammatical forms when I was given many examples in Russian and had the opportunity to generalize the rules on my own.

My classmates, who were not language teachers and perhaps had never studied a foreign language before, were sometimes frustrated by the use of only the target language in this context. Despite their frustration, I observed that they grasped grammatical structures introduced in Russian, not in English, more quickly than when a structure was explained in English.

Not only does using the target language to teach grammar help students develop their own analytical skills in identifying structure; it can also keep students from translating everything word-for-word back into English, which can be troublesome. As teachers, we know that direct translation into English (or any other language) can be confusing for students. I myself got into trouble by trying to use English to decipher a complicated Russian grammatical structure. For example, conditional sentences are constructed very differently in English than they are in Russian. I tried to apply the English rules when writing a conditional sentence in Russian, and the result was a sentence that would be incomprehensible to most Russians. I caught myself doing this and had to take a step back and try to think only in terms of the target language.

Like most teachers, I see the communicative benefit of using only the target language in the classroom. For one thing, it can help students to develop creative communication

strategies. As a beginning student, my Russian vocabulary was limited, as were the grammatical structures that I could use comfortably. I found myself really reaching and using what I did know to express my ideas. Often my results were inaccurate, especially at first, but I could usually make myself understood using simple vocabulary ungrammatically. This sense of being able to communicate is quite thrilling to students; it bolsters students' confidence in using the language and can lead students to continue to take risks when speaking—an important attitude in learning to communicate in a new language.

Using students' L1 in the English language classroom can be a conscious choice on the part of the teacher and can at times be appropriate. For example, with students just beginning to learn English, the use of L1 can be helpful in clarifying instructions. And one benefit of the use of L1 in the classroom may be that in some instances, the use of L1 early on in the classroom cycle can help form a good relationship between teacher and student (Macaro 2001). Nonetheless teachers may feel conflicted about their use of L1 in the classroom because the Communicative Approach de-emphasizes the use of it quite strongly. However, some research shows that a teacher's limited use of L1 does not necessarily result in less student production in the target language (Macaro 2001).

Of course, using only the target language in the classroom helps mimic the "real life" use of that language. I learned the value of that because I learned Russian in the United States. The moment I left the classroom, I essentially left that language behind and was surrounded by English, so to have my time in the classroom as much as possible devoted to the language I was learning was important.

### **Pronunciation focus**

The use of pronunciation drills or exercises was something I, as an EFL teacher, never stressed. I was more concerned with students being able to communicate in English, and I often felt that pronunciation drills were not an important part of communicative learning. Reflecting on my past teaching, I realize I did not focus on pronunciation issues enough.

Although simple pronunciation drills can be emphasized too much, and they are no substitute for students learning to *use* the lan-

guage, I now believe that focused pronunciation work is an important part of learning to communicate, especially in a foreign language context. Understanding and being able to apply linking, word rhythm, sentence rhythm, melody, and emphasis are all important aspects of communicative competence (Gilbert 1994). The Russian language has different sets of sounds than English, and the intonation is very different. Word stress is important for meaning, and many words are long and difficult for English speakers to pronounce. I found that I absolutely needed specific help with the pronunciation of this language.

In fact, one of the most frustrating aspects of my language learning experience was my seemingly complete lack of ability with Russian pronunciation—which prevented others from comprehending my speech. It was only by practicing full sentences and phrases over and over again that I could train the muscles of my mouth to pronounce the words and phrases correctly; and by correctly I mean that they could be comprehended by a native speaker, not that my pronunciation was by any means perfect. Without the pronunciation practice, I would not have been able to communicate in Russian; I am quite sure of this.

The fact that once I left my foreign language learning classroom I was surrounded by English did not help my Russian pronunciation. My only exposure to Russian was in the classroom or other learning environments (such as the language lab) at my school. Comparing this experience to language learning experiences I've had outside the classroom, I see how difficult it is to learn to speak correctly using letter combinations and intonation different from one's native language without being surrounded by the target language. I have had several experiences of living in a country where initially I did not speak the language. Eventually I was able to pick up the language through necessity, and when I did, my pronunciation and accent were understandable to native speakers. Being immersed in the language gave me the input necessary to pronounce the language successfully. My Russian learning experience highlighted to me the importance of exposing EFL students to as much English as possible in the classroom, through speaking exercises, authentic language in reading, audiovisual methods that expose students to various accents, and

even posters and language charts on the wall to surround the students with English.

Teaching pronunciation in the English language classroom can extend far beyond mere drills. Helping students with the suprasegmentals of the English language, such as syllable stress within a word, or even word stress within a sentence, will lead to increased communicative competence. Using songs or games where students emphasize word or sentence stress through clapping or some other physical movement is helpful with some learners.

Changing the focus from pronunciation drills to linguistic competence then makes the use of pronunciation techniques a natural part of a communicative curriculum. Using a communicative focus when working on the pronunciation of English should become a natural part of activities in the EFL classroom. A communicative focus places emphasis on students using English to communicate in realistic situations that have some relevance to the students. Communicative language teaching supports students using English in the classroom as a way to help them prepare to use English outside of the classroom. Most communicative exercises are practical in nature and (as much as possible) mimic the types of English that students will use in the real world. An integrated approach, using a variety of methods that address issues with both suprasegmentals and discrete word pronunciation issues, can help English language learners not only communicate more effectively, but more confidently as well (Morley 1994). Often we place such emphasis on communicating with the target language that we can forget that comprehensible pronunciation, in whatever form, is an important part of this, and should not be sacrificed (Morin 2007).

### **Acquiring lexicon**

As an English teacher, I was careful to limit the number of new words I introduced to my students to only a few each day. I also always introduced any new vocabulary within a context, indicating how each word or phrase is used—how it helps communication. In my Russian class, my teachers supplied appropriate context for some of the words we were supposed to learn, when there was time. My Russian language learning experience was intensive; due to the fast pace of the course,

we had a great deal of language to learn in a short amount of time. One way this impacted me and my classmates was in vocabulary acquisition. We were left on our own to learn a great deal of vocabulary very quickly. While the textbook we used was rich with texts using the target vocabulary, it covered quite an overwhelming amount of material.

Reading in the target language is also a good way to introduce students to new vocabulary, and the use of reading plus vocabulary enhancement activities has been shown to be effective in helping students to acquire and retain new language (Min 2008). For example, students can use target vocabulary to write a short story or poem. This gives the students an opportunity to interact with new lexis in a different way, and in doing so to personalize the use of that target language. My Russian program did include a lot of reading, but the use of more vocabulary enhancement activities (prohibited by limited time in the classroom) would probably have helped me learn new vocabulary more effectively.

Native speakers also acquire new vocabulary when reading. A native speaker encountering a new word in a text usually has the contextual knowledge to decipher meaning without consulting a dictionary: the reader can use the words around the unknown item to help figure out what the unknown word means. English language learners, especially beginning students, may not have the ability to discover meaning through context clues. This is something that teachers need to overtly teach. In my EFL classroom I taught students to figure out the meaning of an unknown word by identifying information about that word, such as what part of speech it was and what words surrounded it. I also showed students that sometimes they can guess the meaning of an unknown word based on the topic of the text. Those techniques I had taught helped me a great deal when I was reading in Russian. I was often able to figure out the meaning of a new word, without resorting to the dictionary, by using contextual clues.

In my language learning, one challenge was the acquisition of vocabulary, especially moving vocabulary from passive to active knowledge. As a student I found (and I observed this in my classmates as well) that much of the new vocabulary was really only

accessible in passive form. By this I mean that I could recognize many words when they were spoken or in a written text, but I didn't have the ability to use those words in creating my own speech or writing. I found myself asking the teacher to help me prioritize which vocabulary was going to be most helpful for me when communicating, and I focused on those words and phrases. Without the teacher's guidance, the number of lexical items would have been simply too overwhelming.

Thus, my EFL teaching practice of being selective when it comes to introducing new vocabulary has been confirmed. In the future I will pay even closer attention to the amount of new material I introduce to students and to the need to continually review and encourage them to use the new language, a good way of helping students be able to actively use the new vocabulary in other contexts. Having passive knowledge of vocabulary is certainly helpful (we all have a great deal of passive knowledge of our native languages)—it's an important part of being comfortable with a language. But I believe that EFL teachers need to help students develop active vocabulary.

### **Pair and group work**

As an EFL teacher, I used pair and group work regularly, for many reasons. When my classes were large and I couldn't interact directly with students enough, pair and group work gave the students the opportunity to use English with each other. Often students feel more comfortable taking language risks with their classmates than they do with the teacher. The careful pairing and grouping of students can set up a situation where a strong student can help a weaker one (and the stronger student benefits from the opportunity to teach what he or she knows). Using pair and group work allowed me to observe my students more carefully: quietly monitoring the interaction often showed me what language was problematic for students and gave me a noninvasive way to assess how the students were progressing.

My Russian class consisted of only one or two other students. While such a small class gives learners a great deal of individualized attention from the teacher, it does not provide opportunity for group and pair work with different sets of classmates. Much of our language interaction in the classroom was between stu-

dent and teacher. While we did ask and answer questions of our classmates, the teacher gave us few tasks where pair and group work was necessary to accomplish a goal while using the target language. I think that had we been given the opportunity to complete cooperative tasks using Russian, we might have taken more language risks. The teacher might have seen and heard some more varied language production. This is just my hunch. I do know that I enjoyed asking questions of my classmates in the target language, and I wish we had had more opportunity for student to student communication without the teacher's involvement.

The use of pair work, especially, can be helpful when students give each other corrective feedback, as long as such a situation is carefully scaffolded. The usefulness of effective corrective feedback can be influenced by students' language level and learning styles. Students are sometimes more receptive to feedback from their peers—it can be less intimidating to some than correction by the teacher. The use of pair work in student-generated corrective feedback can, however, be an effective way to include less teacher-centered correction in the classroom. Students have yet another opportunity to interact in English when providing each other corrective feedback. The teacher in this case is a facilitator of the students' using English together.

Pair and group work can also be helpful in vocabulary acquisition. Students who work collaboratively to complete a task involving new vocabulary have each other as a resource: working with another can give students an opportunity to interact with a new word more frequently than if they simply complete a task on their own (Kim 2008). An important part of new vocabulary acquisition is repetition, or the opportunity to work with a word more than once. Using pair or group work in a vocabulary enhancement activity gives students the opportunity to hear others use a new word, which in turn may lead to better retention on the part of all students involved in the activity.

### **Emotional quotient**

During the years I was behind the teacher's desk, I had sometimes lost sight of how learning a language can be an emotional experience and how those feelings of students cannot be discounted. Learning a language can be

difficult (especially for older learners) and extremely stressful.

Different emotions are aroused at various stages of the learning process. At first, a new language can be exciting, and the early stages can be quite enjoyable. Then, as the language being introduced becomes more challenging, students can feel frustrated and overwhelmed. I personally hit a stage where I felt my Russian language skills were regressing, not improving. Fortunately, my teachers were wonderfully sensitive to all the human feelings that surround language learning and dealt with our frustration as carefully as possible. They were encouraging and supportive.

The phenomenon of communicative anxiety (CA) has been well-documented in students studying a foreign language. CA can range from mild symptoms, in which a student feels slightly uncomfortable using a foreign language, to severe symptoms, where a student will go to great lengths to avoid using a foreign language. Many factors can influence the level of CA of a particular student, including (but not limited to) a level of self-perceived proficiency in a language, students' previous language learning experiences in the classroom, and the students' ability to interact with speakers of their target language outside the classroom (Dewaele 2008). The age of acquisition of a foreign language also can have an effect on CA: some research has shown that CA levels were higher for students learning a language later in life than those learning a language at a young age (Dewaele 2008). This is an important fact for teachers to keep in mind, especially for teachers of older learners. Being aware that CA is real and that it affects most students is an important step toward helping students work through the instances when they experience it.

Knowing that my frustration and anxiety as a student were normal did not make it any easier to deal with those feelings; however, I think that as a teacher I will now be far more sensitive to student issues at various stages of learning English. The fact that I was learning Russian in an intense way magnified to some degree all the feelings surrounding the learning experience, but I do believe that all language learning contexts have the potential to be stressful.

The relationships between student and teacher and between student and classmates

are particularly charged ones. No matter how we intellectualize our jobs, we teachers are human, and we are often going to react to our students in a human, emotional way—but a good teacher is able to control his or her emotions in the classroom. Students have enough to worry about without a teacher injecting his or her negative emotions into the classroom. As a learner I found myself looking to my teacher for support and encouragement. I looked to my classmates for camaraderie and help when needed. I was lucky to have excellent teachers who were also accessible and friendly. For me, having a friendly atmosphere in the classroom made a big difference, and I believe it helped me be a successful learner.

## Conclusion

Going back to the language classroom as a student was an interesting experience on several levels. Intellectually, I could see my teacher beliefs confirmed or disproven, at least in terms of my own learning. Emotionally, I often felt tense or anxious about my learning, despite professional, kind, and accessible teachers. The experience was a great reminder of what is important in the classroom. Here is a summary of the most significant points I learned as a student that I will carry back into the classroom as an EFL teacher:

- **L1 versus L2 use in the classroom:** Focus on using English as much as possible because it is important for students' language development, especially in a foreign language environment. However, know that limited use of L1 can be useful to make short explanations when students can't understand any other way.
- **Pronunciation focus:** Do not ignore pronunciation work. Some focus on pronunciation, including suprasegmentals, can be effective, and in some cases necessary, for students to develop comprehensible language production.
- **Acquiring lexicon:** Understand that this is a complicated process that takes time. Use various tools such as vocabulary enhancement activities in conjunction with reading to boost students' acquisition.
- **Pair and group work:** Use pair and group work to help students give and receive corrective feedback from some-

one other than the teacher. Use pair and group work in vocabulary learning situations to allow students to interact with new vocabulary both individually and by using the new language with their classmates.

- **Emotional quotient:** Be alert to your students' emotional state of mind. Do what you can to reduce their anxiety by creating a relaxed and safe environment in the classroom. Language learning is emotional, and Communicative Anxiety is real.

My experience on the other side of the teacher's desk, which made me focus on these points, is sure to make me a better and more empathetic language teacher in the future.

## References

- Dewaele, J. 2008. Effects of trait emotional intelligence and sociobiographical variables on communicative anxiety and foreign language anxiety among adult multilinguals: A review and empirical investigation. *Language Learning* 58 (4): 911–60.
- Gilbert, J. B. 1994. Intonation: A navigation guide for the listener (and gadgets to help teach it). In *Pronunciation pedagogy and theory: New views, new directions*, ed. J. Morley, 36–48. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Kim, Y. 2008. The contribution of collaborative and individual tasks to the acquisition of L2 vocabulary. *The Modern Language Journal* 92 (1): 114–30.
- Macaro, E. 2001. Analysing student teachers' codeswitching in foreign language classrooms: Theories and decision making. *The Modern Language Journal* 85 (4): 531–48.
- Min, H. 2008. EFL vocabulary acquisition and retention: Reading plus vocabulary enhancement activities and narrow reading. *Language Learning* 58 (1): 73–115.
- Morin, R. 2007. A neglected aspect of the standards: Preparing foreign language Spanish teachers to teach pronunciation. *Foreign Language Annals* 40 (2): 342–60.
- Morley, J., ed. 1994. *Pronunciation pedagogy and theory: New views, new directions*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

---

FRANCES WESTBROOK is the Regional English Language Officer (RELO) for Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. Prior to assuming her RELO position, Frances taught English in the United States, the Czech Republic, and Thailand and facilitated teacher training programs in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, India, and Sri Lanka.