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ABSTRACT

The teaching of literacy, primarily to second language learners, in the Vancouver, British Columbia, Municipal Workplace Language Training Program is examined. The program arose out of reports to the city's Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) program about language difficulties among workers who couldn't pass tests required for promotion or permanent appointment or workers who had difficulty conveying written/oral messages, legal documents, or job orders. EEO's leeway for experimentation allowed for the Workplace Language Training program's learner-centered teaching approach and emphasis on open discussion. The teaching is active, based on an understanding of the importance of extended periods of spoken and written language use, and of the interplay of language learning with the experience of immigration. Students are led to useful attitudes and practices and away from self-restrictive ones. Examples of the classroom learner-centered approach are cited, including some from student writing assignments. This program is viewed as a model on collaboration in workplace literacy because the EEO and the Canadian Union of Public Employees have come together as partners with a shared intention to develop a program that can be made available to other employers and employees. Contains 7 references. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

Teaching Literacy to Second Language Learners

Richard Darville

Introduction

Many literacy prrograms work with students who speak English as a second language. These students have learned, in ESL classes and in their communities and workplaces, enough English to deal with many daily requirements. They have returned to study to improve their reading and writing, to learn more about Canada, or to gain schooling credentials.

Like many literacy learners, they often confront the literate world as alien, and frightening or angering. Like all literacy learners, they struggle with gaining fluency in reading and writing, and with learning the conventions of stories, bureaucratic forms, news articles, and the like. Yet their newness to English reading and writing, and to Canada, presents special demands. Their sometimes experience "interference" from patterns of pronunciation and grammar, or from patterns of oral and written language use, in their first languages. They often find that they must learn references to Canadian culture and history at the same time that they work with the skills, conventions and uses of reading and writing.

It is equally true that such students have valuable resources, in their life experience and their knowledge of another language.

This case study examines the teaching of literacy, primarily to second language learners, in the Municipal Workplace Language Training Program, operated under the auspices of the Equal Employment Opportunities program (EEO) of the City of Vancouver. Another case study in this series ("Collaboration in Workplace Literacy") examines the same program's experience with collaboration in workplace programming, in conjunction with questions of workplace literacy needs analysis and recruitment. That case study describes the context for the teaching processes focused on here; the two studies should ideally be read together.

Many practitioners familiar with the program have been struck by the strong learner-centred teaching conducted in it. Some practitioners further note that such learner-centredness is only possible by a program which operates with some autonomy from imaginable management or union pressures to define it in their specific interests. Their observations parallel Añorve's writing of workplace programming, "How to train a functionally illiterate work force has become a popular question for academic researchers, and for managers it is a continuing challenge. For me, it has created a space in which I can

implement a more humane approach to literacy education" (Añorve, 1989, 38).

The description of teaching processes here relies heavily on my extensive conversations with Norma Jean McLaren, the EEO officer most concerned with the program, and with Gary Pharness, the program's chief teacher. I also held discussions with students as I participated in several of the program's classes. Many of the words here are those of organizer, teacher and students, even when that is not advertised with quotation marks.

Background

There are many immigrants and speakers of English as a second language in Vancouver. In the Vancouver population as a whole, 26% are visible minorities. Of the roughly 8000 employees of the City of Vancouver, about 20% speak English as a second language. Within the city government, there is special attention to problems that arise between immigrants and minorities, as well as women, and the dominant groups in Canadian society. The city's Equal Employment Opportunities program has a mandate to find and reduce institutional racism and sexism, and racial and sexual harrassment. This includes, among other matters, people's access to city employment, and to promotions. Because literacy is a crucial determinant of access to employment and promotions, it falls under the EEO mandate.

The EEO has considerable leeway for experimentation in identifying and addressing problems. This arises because of a commitment to equity within the city, and because of the organizational position of the EEO, somewhat apart from both management structures and trade unions. The general philosophy of the EEO is to work with members of cultural and linguistic minorities, and listen to how they identify problems and envision solutions. Both the leeway for experimentation, and the philosophy of co-operating with minorities, are reflected in the the Municipal Workplace Language Training Program.

The workplace language program

The City of Vancouver Workplace Language Program arose out of reports to EEO, about language difficulties. These difficulties (described at much greater length in the case study on collaboration) concerned, for example, workers who couldn't pass tests required for promotion or permanent appointment, workers who had difficulty writing messages or legal documents adequate to their recipients, and errors in oral or written job orders. Earlier efforts to set up language training programs had led to several conclusions: that second-language issues should be included in the treatment of "literacy;" that

effective programming should be "flexible" and "learner-centred;" that computers, if used, should not be the primary means of instruction; and that there should be more emphasis on open discussion than chalk-and-talk instruction.

A needs assessment conducted prior to the beginning of the program was completed in the fall of 1989. It called for classes to meet six hours a week, with teacher-student ratios possibly as low as one to five. Workers could be involved in the program one-half on city time and one-half on their own for one 12-week session; then one-quarter on city time and three-quarters on their own for another session; and thereafter entirely on their own time. Classes would be held in three locations: at the centrally-located City Hall, at the Trout Lake Community Centre in the east end, and at the Manitoba Yards in south Vancouver, the central facility for the city Engineering department. The program would aim to involve 100 students a year.

Within the needs assessment process, there was of course attention to learning what needs and what people the program could serve. There was also attention to promoting the program, especially with managers and supervisors. The program promotion emphasized health and safety issues, supervisory responsibility for errors, and the detrimental effects on the working atmosphere of the isolation of workers in ethnic ghettoes. In the program promotion, it was never said that the program would increase productivity. And the needs analysis was not a simple matter of asking managers what skills they wanted workers to have. Some managers did ask how job tasks would be transposed into a formally defined process of curriculum, instruction and assessment. The response was, "That's not how it works." Managers were urged to accept that, in the long run, it's most important for workers to decide what to study; and that an effective study process involves beginning in open-ended speaking, writing and reading, and brings in specific workplace materials later, when learners decide to bring them.

The program's curricular autonomy has been important in two ways. It is essential for the program's learner-centred teaching. But also, in practice, the autonomy of the program was the necessary basis for collaboration. The unions that organize city employees first responded to the program proposal with uneasiness about what management wanted. After some discussion and reassurance that management was willing not to direct curriculum, and that they would receive no evaluations of individuals, unions "concurred" with and later actively supported the program.

Active learner-centred teaching with second language learners

In the Workplace Language Training Program, literacy is understood as the control of language to explore experience and to act effectively in the social world. The program is always described as involving speaking, writing and reading. Stating the three in that order describes their relative prominence in classroom processes. All are conducted with an understanding of the importance of *extended* periods of language use in the development of language competence. This practice is consistent with Shirley Brice Heath's observation that, "Without extended opportunities to talk through and about what we know and have experienced, we have little hope of writing extended coherent prose" (Heath, 1990, 298).

Some students in the Workplace Language Training Program at first said, "Where's the workbook?" (About half had been through initial ESL for immigrants; others, many of them "family class" immigrants, had been to one or another kind of night school). Some students left, but others were persuaded to stay by teachers, supervisors, and co-workers who said, "Just give it a chance."

The best way to convey the nature of work with speaking, writing and reading is by giving examples. The emphasis on speaking — the least commonly portrayed in descriptions of literacy programs — generally involves people's experiences as immigrants and workers. It lets people see that they are not alone in their problems, and indeed that their situations are the common situations of workers and of immigrants. In the program at the Manitoba Yards, mostly attended by outside workers, students have become familiar with the class and now engage in discussions that are often humorous, powerful or intimate. For example, there has been a lot of discussion of immigration, whether it has met expectations or not, whether dreams have changed. One woman from Hong Kong, told by acquaintances that everybody who came to Canada gained weight, bought shoes and clothes two sizes too big before coming. After arriving, she lost weight. The whole class belly laughed as she related her experience.

The experience of immigration is often deeply involved with the experience of work, and many discussions weave the two together. In one class entirely attended by men, the city policy on sexual harrassment was brought up. At first, nobody understood terms used in the policy like "ogling" and "leering." Once the terms were explained, some men objected that such behaviour was the natural state of affairs. But this developed into talk about what it means when men in a group cat-call women, what it means to one's wife and daughter, what it has to do with one's religious upbringing, and so on.

Many times discussion revolves around seeing life in the home country from the perspective of later experience. A student from Laos described the first

time he came to the city and saw electric lights and cars. In his village, there were only candles and lamps, and only rich people had bicycles or horses (which they used to transport opium). In a piece of writing, this student said, "The teacher was with the students like a king with street people." So the students never talked with one another, and later in life as farmers again they never talked, and they never changed their methods of working.

Often discussions of the experience of immigration touch on how people connect to their children, and there are hopes for the development of a family literacy component in the program.

Much discussion focuses on talking and writing on the job. A janitor described not having enough chance to talk in English, because of isolation at work. A clerical worker described supervisors telling people not to talk at work. A foreman who now does an office job says he spends a lot of his time on the phone, listening to people complain. They usually talk angrily and too fast, and don't make clear what they want. He has learned to use the journalistic five Ws and H to get information, and to make notes before initiating a phone call. A foreman in another discussion says that writing work orders, or time sheets, or forms, where it asks a question and you answer, is ok. But to *start* writing something on a blank sheet of paper makes him very nervous and has been hard to learn.

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Teaching in the program is always described as learner-centred. At the centre of the program are learners who use and develop their own language. This description has puzzled some practitioners who have observed the program and seen that the teaching work within it is often active, directive, and even challenging. The puzzle is resolved on this understanding: that learner-centredness does not imply that teachers are passive in the face of active learners. Rather there is *active* learner-centred teaching. As Gary Pharness explains, "Learner-centred doesn't mean people do their own thing." There are in the program strong conceptions of how learning works, and an understanding that teachers should actively intervene in the learning process. Official program documents describe a "personalized" approach that includes detailed monitoring of progress.

Here is one example of active learner-centred teaching. A woman we can call Lois, who worked as a Library Assistant 1, said on her first day in the program that she had been in the slow class as a child in school; other kids teased her — "you dumb squaw and that sort of thing," she says. In a first piece of writing she calls herself a slow learner. The teacher says, "It was good to express that, but from now on just keep that out of your writing. Every time you write it down it makes it real; it's just firming up an image of yourself as weak." Consider another example of active learner-centred teaching. In one

class there was a discussion of union participation. Several students expressed a sense of distance from union affairs. The most vocal said that whenever he starts to speak in a union meeting, he freezes up, he starts sweating. He has to say he needs a break and can't finish right now. And besides, all they ever do in the union is fight. The teacher talks about the importance of union involvement. He also describes the usefulness of making notes before you speak in a meeting. Later, he leads students to make notes, and give short speeches to one another, about a topic they select — soccer.

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Throughout work on writing, active learner-centred teaching still holds. There is, especially regarding writing, an understanding that there is an "incubation period" for people who have been "linguistically subordinated" — either in school or by virtue of immigration. Sometimes speaking is a long entrée to writing. One man had tried to escape from Czechoslovakia and been caught, then succeeded on a second try. He was fearful, and wouldn't write at all. For three months he and the teacher just talked, over coffee. At first they both leaned back in their chairs as they spoke, not getting too close. As the weeks passed they occasionally leaned forwards. Now the man is writing, and has even had some writing published in a student writing collection.

The teacher works with people to make explicit contrasts between their knowledge and experience in the home country and in Canada, in roughly these terms: People who come to Canada often get limited to "survival English." It's as if their bodies are here but their minds have been left in the home country. To develop a language for relationships and a language for ideas, people need to continually return, and bring the wealth of knowledge and experience from their home countries into their new situation. This broad understanding of the experience of immigration provides the rationale, for both student and teacher, of using the home language for ideas, and for building English vocabulary. Students are encouraged to write even when they don't know English words for what they want to say. They are told to leave blanks, or to use Chinese, Italian, Punjabi or whatever language they know.[1]

Writing is encouraged on the understanding that all people have values, and that these can be clarified in writing. Elaborating this understanding, Gary Pharness quotes the Czechoslovak emigré novelist Milan Kundera, who says that everyone has an existential code, and this code is revealed, and in a sense discovered, through writing. He quotes the English poet T.S. Eliot who says that writing is a raid on the inarticulate. Teachers who would encourage people to write in this way, to clarify values, must sometimes challenge or even provoke people. Standard attitudes to learner-centred writing can get in

the way. For example, when students write tales of hard times, teachers can get a vicarious thrill. But if students are writing the same thing over and over, a teacher shouldn't just give praise for the fact of writing, but say, "Why don't we look at something different?" At times, a teacher even needs to say, "This is boring me; all you're doing is repeating yourself." People do get to a point where they want to "go beyond themselves," go beyond autobiographical writing to write poetry or fiction or essays; and active learner-centred teaching encourages this development.

Keeping a combination of speaking, writing, and reading activity is taken quite seriously. For example, there are plans for a preparatory course for people studying industrial first aid. It will proceed in the usual pattern, working for a few weeks on talking and writing before working with specific first aid terminology. Other specific learning needs that arise will be addressed in the same way.

A teacher who takes an active learner-centred approach, actively challenging students, doesn't stand in some superior position outside of the learning processes. Such a teacher needs to develop and learn him or herself. Teachers must study, to deal with the experiences and difficulties that students present. For example, if an Italian student is having a hard time with spelling, a teacher must look at the Italian vowel system. To understand and promote writing by Italian-Canadian students, it can be helpful to read Italo Calvino or Ignazio Silone. As well, teachers need constantly to reexamine their own literacy, and to express and discover their own values by writing.

Teaching beyond the classroom

Of course much of what people speak, write and read about in classes involves the workplace. But furthermore, workplace situations themselves sometimes become contexts of teaching and learning. Some supervisors understand that "language is a collaborative effort to make meaning," and they are willing to help workers construct meaning, on the job. One supervisor in the Parks Board engages in conversation with a student, corrects pronunciation, helps form English sentences, looks over written work orders and helps out. Another man, working in the Engineering Department, has himself started writing recently. In the process he has made discoveries about the last ten years of his life. He talks keenly with workers involved in the program. There is thus a process in which supervisors or professionals are part of the language program, and monitor and extend what goes on in the language classes.

The program as a model

As more fully described in the study on collaboration in workplace literacy, the EEO and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) have come together as partners, with a shared intention to develop a program that can be made available to other employers and employees. As the program is developed in other settings, new issues will arise, including issues involving the selection and training of teachers.

The program organizers emphasize that certain attributes of teachers in a language development program are matters of personality and attitude — an ability to relate to people, a belief in learners, a willingness to let the group develop a power of its own and become the teacher, and a trust in oneself to do the right thing as a teacher. These attributes are difficult to teach. Furthermore, successful teaching in such a program may require years of experience, seeing students' goals and the difficulties they encounter, acquiring a stockpile of activities to suggest, and developing the instinct for working with disparate groups to encourage coherent conversation. As one group of teachers discussing the "whole language" approach noted, it can take ten years to learn how to do it (Church, Gamberg, Manicom and Rice, 1989). In developing the program in other settings, then, questions of the selection and training of teachers to ensure these attributes and skills will have to be worked through.

A final note

As elaborated in the case study on collaboration, this case study reflects the time constraints of its production. With more time for attending classes, interviewing students and workers who haven't come to the program, a richer description could certainly have been made. But even this brief description shows much of the carefully thought-out practice of one very interesting program. It makes that practice available for discussion by others interested in questions of teaching second-language learners, especially in a workplace context.

In this program, a process that can be called active learner-centred teaching has won the respect of workers, unions and management. This teaching is learner-centred in the sense that students using and developing their own language are always at the centre of program activity. The teaching is also active, based on an understanding of the importance of extended periods of spoken and written language use, and of the interplay of language learning with the experience of immigration. Students are led to useful attitudes and practices, and away from self-restrictive attitudes and practices. They are led to explore the meanings of immigration and of their experience in the

workplace. They are led to use writing to bring the wisdom of their earlier experiences, and even the first languages, into their new environment.

Workplace programs exist in many other forms, of course, sometimes with less experienced teachers, and sometimes with tutors from outside the workplace, or with peer tutoring by workers. And of course second-language learners study in other contexts. This case study should raise questions about how teaching in these other forms can similarly win the respect of workers, unions and management. It should also raise questions about how the difficult balance between learner-centredness and active teaching can be accomplished in programs of all kinds.

Notes

[1] Questions of teaching literacy to second-language learners are treated at more length in Bell and Burnaby, 1984; Wallerstein, 1983; and *Focus on Basics* 1:3-4, 1988. Some of these sources take up the question, not examined here, of differences between working with students literate in their first language, and those without literacy in any language.

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