Teacher Dispositions:

Finding a Way to Identify with Struggling Language Learners

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Teacher dispositions, with their emphases on appreciation, respect, and valuing, have been an item of interest for schools of education for the past 15 years. Numerous accrediting bodies have clearly set forth proper teacher attitudes for the universe of school-related variables, including students, their developmental levels, curriculum, parents, other teachers, and pedagogy, in national and state collections of standards. Within the field of English as a Second or New Language (ENL), various sets of standards have detailed numerous dispositions for teachers of English language learners (ELLs). For example, NCATE/TESOL Standard 1.b.4 (2002) states that all (including the teacher) “must take chances and make mistakes” (p. 27); this standard also includes the creation of a “warm and positive environment” by the teacher (ibid.). Standard 4 Disposition 5 of the Indiana Department of Education’s Teachers of English as a New Language Standards (1998, p. 5) calls for the teacher to shape a “context-rich environment,” while Standard 4 Disposition 4 (1998, p. 4) notes that “the teacher values the students’ primary languages…”

How can a teacher who will have ELLs in her class develop this constellation of necessary attitudes? How can schools of education foster these sets of dispositions? The answer may lie in requiring study abroad for all teachers of ELLs.

Studying at an intensive Chinese language center in northern China, working to gain a contract in Mongolia, and researching while on sabbatical in Hong Kong have put me in the

place of the language learner, and revealed many challenges of cross-cultural communication. A few of the most recent incidents are recorded below, with references to the above-mentioned dispositions.

A monolingual meeting

As a non-Cantonese speaker in a Cantonese environment, with no translation, I observed my own actions and thoughts as an anthropologist on site, as an ethnographer might do. How does one feel in a crowd of 300 when nothing is understood and the person is sitting three rows from the front of a meeting? Anger as the “nonsense” syllables wash over the person as others are clapping, laughing, singing, and listening. The Outsider Syndrome. A feeling of separateness, apartness. A feeling of lack of control of the environment. An unfair question forms: Why weren’t provisions made for non-Cantonese speakers? Then the mind begins to create meaning, no matter how false, picking out various nonsense syllables and matching them to the mind’s lectionary. A desire to disturb and use one’s own language, to jump up and crumple the nonsense syllables printed on the handout, stomp on them and stomp out.

Waiting for it to be over to get out of the uncomfortable atmosphere.

The mind tries to match a word, “sik” for sick, but there is no correspondence.

The audience laughs repeatedly, and I hang my head and write this, not wanting others to know that I don’t understand. All the nine tones—how do they correspond? How do they correspond to the four tones in Mandarin? The mind furiously matches and pairs and rejects in the search. Is “fu qi,” fu chin? “Hai mei ga ma”—is that gan shem ma? Jou long? Is that the place Kowloon? The amplifiers are merely ten feet in front of me, one eight feet high and another four or five foot one mounted above it, blasting away. The presenter is telling stories, and I follow the extralinguistic gestures, eye movement, pacing, and voice modulation. He is

very excited. He adds a few English words now and then, "Gravity." And he screams and tells a story of a man jumping off a building. He looks at me? And says in English, "I'm not greatly mood." But the ungrammatical expression carries no context, no meaning. Nine singers suddenly move to the front. The presenter says, "Ma din lu de." Is he saying Martin Luther? The confusion ends as suddenly as it has begun with everyone standing and filing out. I paste a smile on my face and walk out the door, only to be stopped by an English speaker. She introduces herself and then asks, "Did you understand the meeting?" I admit that I did not. "You'd better not come back," she says.

Rather than chastising myself for not learning Cantonese, I have become angry and vow not to return. Suppose this was the school and I the pupil? What a terrible time it would be. All of the Cantonese passion and enthusiasm work poison to further alienate me. Is this linguistic imperialism, my attitude? Or should a few members in an audience have an environment shaped just for them? If so, what is the minimum number? Finally, why didn't I know that the meeting would not include Mandarin or English? Why did I assume that it would? What constitutes a "warm and positive environment?" (NCATE/TESOL Standard 1.b.4) Should it include the learner's first language? How can the primary language be valued? (Indiana, Standard 4, Disposition 4)

Difficulty in conversing

Two Cantonese native speakers, coworkers who are completely fluent in English are riding with me on a private mini-bus. We are having a very casual conversation. It is early afternoon. We are waiting for the bus to depart for Kowloon Tong, a transfer point for the KCR and MTR trains. I assume that the three of us will get off at Festival Walk, a prominent shopping center, and have lunch.

“No, no,” says the first speaker. “She isn’t having lunch there. She’s already eaten.”

“I’m going to /bɛ/,” the second speaker answers.

“Excuse me?” I reply.

“I’m going to /bɛ/,” she repeats.

“I’m sorry I didn’t catch what you said,” I answer. By this time I am thinking that she is making a joke, although she has a straight face. Festival Walk has one or two regular beggars, and I think she is joking by saying she is going to beg, since the prices of designer clothes there can be hefty. So I begin smiling. But I don’t ask her directly if she said she is going to beg because I don’t want to insult her if she’s made a serious remark. So I ask her again, more directly this time, “What
did you say?”

“I said I’m going to /bɛ/,” she repeats.

I lean forward.

“I’m going to /bɛ/,” she repeats again.

“What’s wrong with you?” asks the first speaker.

“There must be something wrong with my ears.” I don’t mention begging.

The first speaker says, stridently, “She told you she was going to the bank. How many times did you have to hear it?”

Why did I misunderstand her remark? Her pronunciation of “bank” attempted to follow British English rather than American English and was difficult for me to hear. And the omission of the final consonants opened up a number of possibilities, such as beg, bet, bat, ban, band, bath, best, and bag. All were improbable given the context. The omission of the was an example of

Cantonese interlanguage; a literal translation from Cantonese would be "I go bank." (Chau, personal conversation). Learning a language or working with language learners requires tolerance for ambiguity and conversation repair. "Must take chances and make mistakes" (NCATE/TESOL, ibid.) may be a daily or hourly occurrence.

Reading the signs

Trains, taxis, and buses speed around Hong Kong with their passengers, with frames of advertisements quickly appearing and disappearing. Hong Kong Chinese characters, written in the older (traditional) form, flash by in all of their complexity. The mainland has been using a simplified script for forty years. The shift from Mandarin to Cantonese requires use of very different pronunciation, a more complex word form, but the same meaning. For example, the Mandarin pinyin romanization for the word university is da xue, and it uses the 4th and 2nd tones. The Cantonese Yale romanization is daai hok, with 6th and 6th tones. The simplified written form for university uses 8 strokes, whereas the traditional writing uses 16. While on the bus I will catch one or two traditional characters out of seven or eight. A sign on a hotel in neon proclaims five bright characters, but I catch only the first and last through the window. The bus zooms past. De…ba (or jiou, or dian?). A virtuous bar? I am the struggling reader. De…ba. Or jiou, or dian? My mind repeats. "Virtuous…bar" I read. Now I know how a struggling reader feels. I recall that "De" is also the character for Germany or German. A German bar seems more likely. Thank God for Dr. Joseph Kuo, who required both complex characters and simplified ones in his Chinese I and II classes. Many years later, remnants from his "context-rich environment" (Indiana, Standard 4, Disposition 5) remain. I ponder the question: Would study abroad be a way to develop ENL teacher dispositions? And perhaps lessen the separateness felt by the non-comprehending learner.

Due to alienation, conversation breakdowns, ambiguity, and the massive number of lexical items, language learning can be a hard, even painful struggle. The classroom teacher's ability to empathize with and ameliorate these struggles is greatly needed. The experience of studying abroad could help teachers develop these necessary dispositions.

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