ADULTS TEACHING ADULTS

The Role of Equality
between Teacher and Students in the ESL Classroom
as a Factor in Successful Learning

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If you are a teacher, you are in an inherently unequal relationship with your students in the classroom. This is bound to be so when you are an adult and the student is a child, because the adult-child relationship is in any case unequal. However, it is also true when you teach an adult. You are the subject matter expert, the student is the one seeking to acquire the expertise. You have what the latter wants, therefore, you are dominant. What this article seeks to explore is why this can be detrimental to learning, particularly where English is being taught to adult immigrants. It goes on to address how to change this dynamic.

Imagining a new language, a new culture, a new life

As a teacher myself of English as a Second Language to adults, I have thought about what it must mean to try to find my way in a new country and culture, to be professionally or occupationally competent, but where I cannot immediately use those skills that make for self-confidence and mental well-being. I have wondered further what it must be like to *lack* job skills, perhaps even competence in the grammar of my own language, or the knowledge and ability to access resources. If I add to this that I might have very little knowledge of my host country's language, then I can intuit how vulnerable I might be to feelings of inadequacy. To top it, if I encountered unfriendliness, scorn, or abuse, then I might be embittered to the point of becoming resistant to learning the new language and, in the process, jeopardize my success with it, with my ability to get a job, and with my desire to advance in life.

In varying degrees, insecurity, anxiety, and resistance sit alongside our students in the classroom, facing us. We can either aggravate the feelings or allay them. My contention is that teacher-student inequality reinforces the former of these, acting as it does to enhance our feelings of authority and power, and that we must recognize and guard against this, lest both teacher and students behave in ways that sabotage learning.

How inequality is expressed in the classroom

Let me first propose the ways this inequality in the classroom subverts our efforts. Later, we can look at preventatives. I should perhaps alert the reader that I am going to use "we" throughout in detailing some "inconvenient truths," of which he or she might not even be guilty but, surely, many of my other readers are. How do I know this? Because I have talked to other teachers, observed them in action and, most importantly, been guilty of them myself.

We parade our knowledge.

Knowing English, when you are a native speaker, is an expertise acquired with little effort. And no foreign-born student – except, perhaps, a very advanced one – can argue with the teacher about it. It is not like other subject matter that the teacher has, like the student, labored to master. We rule the classroom not by dint of effort but by virtue of having been born in the country in which we teach. This is a seductive situation, encouraging us to "strut our stuff" by holding forth on grammar or fine points of the language that do not necessarily benefit the student, or simply to talk a lot. We gradually limit the opportunity for students to express themselves and strut *their* stuff. I once observed a teacher with this unfortunate tendency to soliloquize. After the class was over, I noticed an exercise page had been left behind, on which a student had written the word "boring."

We need to bear in mind that students love to show what they know. I have personally experienced attempting to bring student air time to a close after an hour of conversation practice, only to have them continue at some length, completely ignoring me. (This is a good thing.)

Rardin and Tranel take a reasoned approach to dealing with the problem of our co-opting air time by advising teachers to exercise "mature self-discipline" in doling out information.* But I believe in being rather more direct and saying, most especially to myself, just learn to shut up.

We become impatient.

Many writers on acquiring language have commented on the essential mystery of it and how each learner goes through a process that occurs in leaps. Suddenly, the student knows something that up until the "ah-ha" moment was unintelligible to him or her. And because we have not gone through the same process as our students of acquiring the language, we may have failed to recognize the sticking point. Indeed, there is grammar that seems so obvious, we wonder why our students don't "get it" and why they are purposely making it hard for us to teach them! Impatience is the knee-jerk response. (Dig a little and you might discover the power trip it gives to suggest, in an unspoken way, that we are smarter than our charges.)

In one class, I remember being very puzzled by my students' inability to fully comprehend and correctly use the third person singular of the simple present, which always (except for *be* and *have*) adds "s" or "es" to the base verb, e.g., *I want, you want, she wants...I catch, you catch, he catches*. I finally realized that they were confusing this with plurals for nouns, which also add an "s" or "es," namely, *bird/birds, lash/lashes*, etc. It's useful to reflect that sometimes we are the ones who don't "get it."

We encourage confusion and discourage risk-taking.

When I was growing up and studying in school, one of the things that always bothered me was

* Rardin and Tranel, *Education in a New Dimension*, Counseling-Learning Publications, 1988.

"trick questions," those test devils where you had to divine what the teacher was looking for, and if you didn't guess correctly, the teacher experienced a triumph! Some of what we do in the ESL classroom is like that. Much like our own professors in college, we sometimes take pleasure in making it difficult for students, luring them into incorrect answers under the guise of stretching them. The whole point of learning is to create an atmosphere of success and to make every activity one in which the *students* can triumph, but this is far from what happens in the classroom. We seem to operate under the constraints of "the bell curve": There have to be *some* students who don't do well, so we make sure of it...perhaps by putting sentences on the board for correction, without thoroughly examining whether they actually know enough to make the appropriate changes.

Beyond that, pen-and-paper tests that use testing conventions our students are not likely to have encountered are like "trick questions" for our students. As an example, an administrator of a program in which I taught made up the following question: **It / There / They** are waiting for the bus.
(circle one)
My students were confused by this convention and many who actually knew the correct answer got it wrong. At the end of the term, I gave them an entire lesson on how to answer certain kinds of questions. The result was that most of the students got 90s on their final exam. I was bemused by the reactions of some fellow teachers, who seemed to imply I had "cheated" by giving the students a practice test that was similar to the final and teaching them how to take it. *As if we don't do exactly the same thing with GREs and other examinations!* I can't help wondering whether a social bias isn't operating here. Since many immigrant students come from poorer backgrounds, are we making an implicit assumption that they are not entitled to the same privileges we are used to?

There is a flip side to encouraging student mistakes that can be avoided, and that is, dissuading them from mistakes that contribute to learning. Many students express to me their reluctance to speak in class for fear of committing errors. First, it helps to point out to them that this is the only way to really

learn a new language. Secondly, and more importantly, we need to create the environment where students are willing to risk making fools of themselves.* Behaviors that promote this are: *First,* showing respect for them and friendliness. (Equally important is their showing respect and friendliness toward each other, but I will address that separately farther along.) Students are very attuned to our motivations. They know when we're just pulling a paycheck and when we actually attach importance to their learning and their success. *Secondly,* rewarding with an exaggerated attention, if I might call it that, any attempt by a student to speak English. Students crave our mindfulness, and when they see other students getting it, they tend to copy the behavior that stimulated our response. *Thirdly,* banishing words like "right/wrong" from the classroom. More about that later.

We treat our students like children, sometimes even calling them that ("boys and girls").

We maintain a hierarchy, because we think it appropriate to the classroom. Students will, just as often, encourage it. For example, with Spanish-speaking students, if I use the *tú* form to them (informal, used for peers, intimates, and children), they will reply with the *Usted* form (formal, used to address an older person or one meriting greater respect). In general, students will almost certainly not use my first name, instead calling me "teacher." If we can't — or don't wish to — eliminate hierarchy completely, we can at least recognize that student attitudes and language that reinforce inequality can, in turn, influence teacher behavior; in other words, if they see themselves as subordinate, we will likely treat them that way. These traps are often quite subtle, as when our maternal or paternal instincts are triggered. It feels benign, but take it as a red flag.

Other ways we treat students like children: accusing them of laziness for not doing homework, withholding our regard ("If you don't care, I don't care"), scolding them for one or another transgression

** At one point, when I was teaching L1-homogeneous classes, I took the chance of trying out my limited Spanish. I found, surprisingly, that I myself was disinclined to take risks and the students, for their part, took great glee in correcting me. To my chagrin, I realized that I had established an environment in the classroom that thwarted relaxed learning, including mine!*

(such as speaking when you're speaking), and being sparing of praise. (This last has some controversy attached to it.*) Interestingly, for the most part, students will not argue with our infantilizing behavior, especially if their own expectations are low, thus reinforcing our belief that our "tough love" is for their own good. In fact, it is merely condescending. Students do not all arrive in this country with outstanding study habits or even a more than rudimentary understanding of the grammar of their own language — which often helps in learning a new one, if there are parallels — because of limited schooling in their native countries. These lacks beg a whole other set of skills on our part, one that some of us did not count on needing when we started out. But that is a separate topic. The point I am making here is that hand-in-hand with behavior that diminishes our students is the knowledge of our performing a vital task, especially for those who come from poverty; and this artfully reinforces our patronization without our ever being quite aware of it.

Alternatives to the Above

When our behavior is unhelpful, students sometimes present opposition: they insist on speaking in their native language, they talk to each other when you're talking, they don't participate in the lesson. These behaviors cause strong responses in us, because they affect our egos. The fact is, as Rardin and Tranel point out,** we need the students to support our feelings of competence as much as the reverse. This is not to say that negative behavior in the classroom is *always* the teacher's fault, but it is useful to assume it and to reach for an obvious solution: *remove ourselves as the focal point and leave the front of the classroom.* Here are some ways.

** There are differences of opinion over whether to use praise at all in the classroom. Also, some teachers differentiate between praising for attention, effort, and risk-taking and praising for the correct answer. My advice: Find any way that works for you that encourages students and gives them confidence.*

*** Ibid.*

Yield the floor to the students.

As stated previously, we should give the students the chance to parade their knowledge, rather than parading ours. One activity I have used for my intermediate level students is for them to give presentations about their native countries to the class, followed by a question-and-answer period. I model this activity by my own country presentation of a shorter duration. I have not found one student who sloughs off this assignment. National pride seems to come into play here, for the students exert themselves, extolling the virtues of their native land.

I have also asked students to make presentations about a famous painting from their country, to describe its creator, and to explain its significance. This can be done either in front of the entire class or in small groups.

I have asked students to discuss, first in pairs, then in groups, and finally as a class, issues of concern to them. With lower-level classes, I have discussed immigration reform. Naturally, these require more preparation in the way of vocabulary, reading, and other exercises that eventually allow for a conversation. With higher-level classes, I need only acquaint the students with the proper vocabulary in order for us to inquire into credit card, health insurance, and other financial/social practices. These discussions are particularly fruitful in L1-heterogeneous classes, where it is possible to compare a number of different systems and assess as a group the best one — humbling when it is not my own, but at the same time, successful in knocking down the wall between "me" and "them."

The point of all these exercises is the same: Anything that has to do with where the students came from makes them talk freely and at length. That's the bottom line.

For very beginning students, discussions of the kind I've mentioned are obviously not possible, but the aim to get them talking is the same even if the activities aren't. For example, I could start with the students in a big circle, which I am part of. I say, "Maria...My name is Maria...I'm Maria...Maria."

I indicate to the student on my left (or right, makes no difference) to do the same. One will say "Ivan," another "My name is Aleksandr" or "I am Wen Ling." The students start imitating each other (not me, because I gave them a choice). I pay attention to how the preponderance of responses are stated, and I have an immediate assessment of the general level of the class. I simply continue at this level, knowing that if the others don't understand, they soon will, as long as I continue to give them the opportunity to speak at a lower level or to imitate a higher one.

Let the students correct each other.

In my experience, if students are corrected by their peers, they are more likely to risk making mistakes. This will happen naturally, if we let it. Take pronunciation: If I ask every person in the room to say a specific word, the other students will do the correcting for me. Moreover, the student having difficulty will often get it faster by listening to a fellow student than by listening to me. I think the assumption is that they can't do what I can do, but if another student can do it, then by golly, so can they! It's important, too, that the student not take the teacher as the ultimate authority here, because even native speakers pronounce the same word differently, and what you are looking for from the student is a reasonable facsimile, not a perfect imitation. They'll discover their own preferred pronunciation as they progress.

In general, I try to avoid correcting students. I believe what we are looking for is clarity of communication. If that is absent, we don't actually have to say "right" or "wrong," which only reinforces us as authority figures. We can just show what "wrong" looks like. If a student says, "Walk on the table," I show what that actually means. (It helps to be spry.) Or, I ask the students to solve a physical puzzle of some kind, such as going into the hallway and finding places that they will put on a layout. Any task that visually or muscularly reinforces a learning point drives home accuracy a zillion times better than "wrong."

Have the students do the quizzing.

Similar to the students' correcting each other, let them quiz each other. We can turn tests into competitive exercises, a real turn-on for every classroom I've ever taught in. There are wonderful examples in *Grammar Games* and its sequel, *More Grammar Games.*"* One is a game called "Snakes and Ladders," which is played with four students. Each player throws a die to advance on a gameboard, where there are sentences (or any grammatical construction) that the player must identify as correct or incorrect. If there is disagreement as to the grammar, the students argue for their position and mark it for discussion later. The teacher does not intervene but notes those occasions where all four players agree on a construction that is incorrect. This kind of quiz allows the students to articulate the reasons for their answers, a more productive outcome than just having the right answer.

Another way for students to test each other is for them to correct, as a group, another group's work. Or, students can take turns doing a dictation within small groups. At the end of the dictation, the students can self-correct.

A neat method of testing I came across in an article by Tim Murphey** is to have the students decide what they think they've learned at any given point. Say it's expressions, like "an arm and a leg." In groups or as a class, they make a list. The teacher writes it up on one sheet and hands out copies, asking the students to help each other study the ones they don't know and use them with each other. In a few days, the students test each other in pairs (or whatever configuration the teacher prefers).

Let the students work in small groups.

This, for me, is an absolute necessity, and I do it from the beginner level to the highest. Students clearly experience the group environment as a safer way to learn than having to perform in front of the

* Rinvolucri, Mario, *Grammar Games*, Cambridge University Press, 1984 and Rinvolucri and Davis, *More Grammar Games*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

** Murphey, Tim, "Tests: Learning Through Negotiated Interaction," TESOL Journal, Winter 1994/1995.

entire group; they bond much more and hence trust each other more; and they help each other more because they have grown to like each other. I have also found that students can be more understanding of errors with each other (because they are going through the same process) and even come up with better explanations for a grammar or other point than I. Finally, students experience much more autonomy in groups, an outcome to strive for, because the responsibility for learning needs to be transferred to them if it is to succeed outside of the classroom. And, speaking of outside the classroom, working in groups is an important skill to develop for the workplace, which is another reason I think it so important to utilize.

A difficulty common to beginner groups (although not unique to them) is explaining the activity effectively. A good trio of tools to rely on is sign language, pictures, and modeling. Just one example: The students have a crossword puzzle related to a picture of a person with lines extending from various parts, such as the chest, foot, arm. I put the same puzzle on the board. I ask them to do "three across" and then "seven down." By the second one, enough students have gotten the idea so that groups can continue on their own, with me checking for individual comprehension as I visit each group.

I acknowledge that it is infinitely harder getting L1-homogenous groups to work together in English, but it can be done if the activity is structured in such a way as to eliminate the need for L1. That, however, is the subject for an article all its own.

And now, I seem to hear a chorus of voices asking: What is the teacher's role in all of the above, if (s)he is no longer the focal point? Quite simply, it's to create the circumstances under which the student can learn. In my classroom, that translates to making an environment where the students trust each other and work cooperatively. This is an ongoing process. Every teacher has encountered groups that are dysfunctional. There might be a student who has to take a "very important" phone call, only to

disappear for a goodly time, or one who disappears in spirit and lets the other members of the group do all the work. There are students so eager to practice their newly-found skills that they latch onto the air time like terriers and threaten never to let go. (This can be cultural. Some of my students come from highly expressive societies, where they expect to be interrupted by anyone else wishing to talk.) There are students from countries with historic enmities, who can't resist mentioning some unpleasant invasion, or who lay claim to their neighboring country's famous author. And, dare I mention, yes, there is racism among students in the classroom, too (not to mention our own carefully-repressed biases)?

All of these behaviors need to be identified and addressed. Although some of them might tempt us to be judgmental, what students need more than anything else is a calm and friendly impartiality. Students learn to trust us is by observing how fair we are and how concerned for everyone in the room. The same regard that we demonstrate needs to be cultivated in our students as well. The goal for me is not just to have the students leave the class better able to speak, understand, read, and write English, but for them to be able to function better and to feel comfortable and happy in the great melting pot of their newly-adopted land.

In short

An important factor to keep in mind when teaching English as a Second Language to adults is the teacher-student relationship and how its inherent inequality can shipwreck learning. When students become focused on the task of speaking as opposed to their egos or ours, when they encounter no barriers within themselves of insecurity, anxiety, or resistance, when they can work together cooperatively without our being in front of the classroom for a length of time — that is when they learn better and with greater satisfaction. When students tell us that a lesson was "beautiful," we should ask ourselves why. We will likely discover it was because they relaxed into the learning; because they felt

secure with us and with each other; because the atmosphere was one where they could shape the learning, free to discover for themselves the beauty and interest of a new language and a new land. We can make this happen, and when we do, *teaching* becomes "beautiful."

NOT THE END

I will not have exhausted the topic in this article, so any comments, suggestions, detractions the reader might have will be more than welcome.