

Teachers as Learners in the ESL Classroom: It's old news, but it's news to me

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In this article, an ESL instructor reflects on her preconceptions of power and control in the classroom. In the community-based program described, learners determined not only when and where classes would take place, but also the aims, curriculum, and content of the program. The challenges of this setting required the instructor to redefine her role in the classroom. After pursuing a more thorough review of the literature, the author began to realize that she had come upon a model that is not new and is part of a well-established tradition of participatory learning.

Cet article porte sur la réflexion d'une enseignante en ALS sur ses idées préconçues relatives au pouvoir et au contrôle dans la salle de classe. Dans le programme communautaire que l'on décrit, ce sont les apprenants qui déterminaient non seulement quand et où les cours allaient se donner, mais aussi les objectifs, le contenu et le programme d'études. Devant le défi que posait ce contexte, l'enseignante a dû repenser son rôle dans la salle de classe. Après s'être penchée davantage sur la recherche portant sur ce sujet, l'auteure s'est rendu compte qu'elle était tombée sur un modèle qui n'était pas nouveau, mais qui, en fait, faisait partie de la tradition bien établie de la pédagogie active.

Introduction

In this article, I examine my journey of self-discovery through a community-based ESL program to a new understanding of power and position in the classroom. The journey began in a community-based literacy program in Edmonton. My students led me to a new place of understanding my role in the classroom and a new collaborative, negotiated model of ESL instruction. At the conclusion of the program, I turned to the literature to reflect on my experiences, which I had recorded every week in a journal format on the reverse of each lesson plan. It turns out that my discovery was old news and part of a rich tradition of collaborative community-based models.

Background to the Program

In early 2003, I began work in a program coordinated by an immigrant-serving agency in response to requests from some ethnocultural groups in the

city for heritage language instruction for their children. The Edmonton Public School Board and Edmonton Catholic School District offer a number of heritage language programs including Ukrainian, German, Spanish, and Mandarin. However, for newer immigrants to Edmonton whose populations may be smaller, programs are not currently available despite strong demand. In addition, parents from these groups wished to learn more about and better understand the Canadian education system, its expectations, and communication with parents. The program, which began in early 2003, comprised a language teacher from the community who would provide heritage language instruction to school-aged children. At the same time, parents, predominantly mothers at the outset, would participate in an ESL class focused on literacy for which I was to be the instructor. The program was to take place in a community setting away from the immigrant-serving agency and was to be entirely run by the community groups who had initiated it.

"Big Ticket Items"

The class that I faced on that first Saturday in March was made up of 14 women with diverse educational and literacy backgrounds all from the Somali-Canadian community. The aims of the program had been described to me as improving communication in families and between families and their children's community. I had determined that given the unique needs expressed by the community about learning about the school system in Canada and the range of literacy levels in the group, I would take a content-based approach, focusing on as many as possible published sources that were available for parents from the school districts in the city. Beyond this decision, the program was entirely led by the students. The community group administered the program and was to determine (in consultation with the students) all aspects of the class. These included the details of a practical nature: where the classes would be held, the day and time of the classes, and how long the classes would be. However, the challenge to my own views of teaching ESL did not come from these surface details. It came from a fundamental shift that took place in this class. I would have to give up control over what Nunan (1999) refers to as the "big ticket items." By this I mean that responsibility for program aims, curriculum, and content were to be almost entirely determined by the community group.

Content and Curriculum

Each week the learners would indicate the content areas about which they were interested in learning. These included talking to your child's teacher, understanding school expectations for behavior, issues facing immigrant and ESL youth, Edmonton Public Libraries' summer reading program, understanding provincial test results, and questions you could ask at your child's school. I would then attempt to find written materials about the

subject area. School boards produce a large quantity of materials that are continually updated. These materials were then in some cases abridged to enable the literacy students to access them. In other cases, as in the case of school newsletters and report cards, the original texts were maintained. The students then participated in activities familiar to many ESL teachers: reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and basic writing exercises. I drew heavily on the *Canadian Language Benchmarks for Literacy* (2000) to provide structure to the skills and to develop materials as the group worked through the content. As the group developed closer bonds, more issues were raised such as bullying, exclusions from school, and special needs classes for us to pursue. In the weeks following the initial discussion of an issue, I brought in materials related to these topics. As the group grew in confidence and determined which questions they wanted answered, the community invited outside speakers. These included principals from the Public and Catholic School Boards, an ESL consultant, and a university academic. The students were not only keen to hear what these experts had to say, but also wanted dialogue. We spent considerable time in class brainstorming questions to which the students wanted answers. Also, the group prepared a statement for each expert about what they expected from the Canadian education system.

The lack of control over the curriculum and content was a new experience for me as an ESL teacher. Previous contexts required teachers to follow a wide range of curricula focusing on various themes, settings, and functions. However, I had ultimately maintained control over the order in which things were completed, what could be comfortably omitted, and what required more time in order to avoid confusion. In this new context, I was continually challenged by the learners to satisfy their interests. I could not rely on carefully preconstructed ESL materials and textbooks and became largely responsible for creating all the materials used in class.

A further adaptation for me was that some of the ideas I proposed were rejected as uninteresting or irrelevant. One example involved looking at the publications from a school in the city that had a large Native enrollment. As an ESL expert, I found the materials highly accessible with straightforward language that avoided educational jargon. There was a firm refusal to consider the materials in the classroom as the students felt that the texts did not directly address the needs of immigrant children. They felt empowered to question the use of these materials. However, if faced with this situation again, I would argue more forcefully for their inclusion. The paradox of the learner-centered classroom was not lost on me. The curriculum should not be designed solely by me, but had to be negotiated to include the most important aspects of my personal "pedagogical agenda" (Nunan, 1999, p. 16). Auerbach (2000) noted that the teacher is at the center of every classroom and that the effort to enable more participatory learning maintains this central

role for the teacher. This follow-up review of the literature continues to clarify this complex issue for me.

The Ultimate Arbiter of Meaning

My perspective on what a learner-centered methodology involved had been a rather vague understanding that learners would have some control over the classroom process. My experience of teaching ESL/EFL in the United Kingdom and Canada has been that despite my genuine efforts to establish learner-centered classrooms, I have comfortably maintained my status as what Nunan (1999) calls the "ultimate arbiter of meaning." The next professional challenge forced on me during this community-based experience was to challenge this preconceived position. Despite my academic mentors' best efforts to introduce the ideas of Willis (1996), Nunan (1999), and the vast educational literature that demands that teachers assume the role of facilitator, guide, and learner among learners, it was this literacy program that forced me to face the need for this reality.

The program had been assigned a coordinator from the community who was responsible for negotiating the demands of the students, relaying them to me, and providing feedback. It was established from the outset that the coordinator would sit in on the classes. In the early days, she helped to communicate the learners' concerns and questions and provide them with support. The conversations in class often switched to the learners' L1, a decision that reflected the learners' response to their need to discuss the real challenges faced by their children every day. Many ESL teachers can relate to the feedback I received when I asked for a summary of the highly animated conversation that had taken place: "Nothing, teacher. We fixed it." There was more to this context than the monolingual teacher in a bilingual classroom. It became apparent early that the coordinator was the person to whom the learners looked for answers to all their questions. I became acutely aware that I would be the facilitator and guide and that although I had expertise that my students expected, I would have equal partners in the classroom. The learners themselves, acutely aware of their own needs, formed a partnership first with the program coordinator, who had a linguistic and educational foot in her community and the broader Canadian experience. As the instructor with access and expertise to develop materials and activities to promote literacy, I formed the third partner.

Building a meaningful relationship with the community coordinator became a priority. This classroom partner was a rich resource who genuinely took responsibility for liaison in the class. As we worked together more closely, we grew to trust each other. She recognized that I was responding to the requests of students, and I understood that I could fulfill my role as facilitator better with her than without her.

Another surprise came toward the end of the program. During the month of Ramadan, the women in the community felt that it would be too demanding to attend school on Saturday while having to prepare the evening meal. I was then informed that this would be the opportunity for the fathers from the community to participate in the program for its remaining six weeks. This switch required a complete change of approach as the literacy needs of these learners were quite different. We had to start building trust again, although thanks to our reputation, we did not start again at zero. The atmosphere in the group was quite different, and once again I had little input into the decision that would radically change the classroom experience.

Building Trust in a New Paradigm

At this point, I realized that although the contexts of teaching ESL earlier in my life had appeared to vary greatly (different institutions, curricula, textbooks, and supervisors), it was in fact a grand illusion. In this new context, I realized that I had shifted to a new role as an ESL instructor, a role in which power was no longer the rightful prerogative of the teacher, but was shared by all participants in the experience we were creating together. The class was based in an urban area where a high density of the ethnocultural community lived, worked, and attended school. The classroom was in a community support home; we worked in the kitchen area. Many of the learners knew one another before the class began; they shared experiences, language, and religion. One of the enduring strengths of community-based endeavors is the commonality of participants and the resulting focus on the requirements of the group (Morgan, 2002). For the first time in my professional career, I was the outsider, the newcomer to the community. It was not clear what would be expected of me. I was unsure of the social rules that would silently govern the classroom interaction. I would rely on the generosity of the learners and their community leader to draw me in. The new roles would require me to become a teacher-student and my students to participate as teachers (Freire, 1973). The process of this classroom setting would be a challenge to what Freire described as the vertical pattern of classroom power. It would require all participants to teach one another.

To date I have enjoyed my career as an ESL teacher. In addition to expertise in my subject area and pedagogical approach, I have relied on rapport with my students that has blossomed into trust and mutual respect in every context in which I have worked. My experiences in the first two months of this new ESL position forced me to question and reflect on all this experience. It was difficult to develop rapport and trust. I was not the center of the classroom. I could not assume that students would look to me to interpret their questions and needs. Often it seemed as if conversations of real interest were taking place in a language in which I was unable to participate. Trust evolved differently. As mutual respect and trust among the

students began to develop, and as the coordinator and I began to communicate and locate our shared interests, a rapport developed that was more substantial and entirely mutual.

Program Successes

I would be remiss to reflect on the profound effect this program had on my own understanding of being a professional ESL teacher if I did not pause to consider the successes of the program for the learners and their community. The program contributed to learners' confidence in handling the vast quantities of written materials that are presented to parents by schools. My preliminary viewing of the post-test assessments revealed an increase in understanding of educational vocabulary and the discourse of teachers and administrators. The learners had experienced the empowerment that comes with sharing their concerns, finding that others share the same concerns, and then working to find collective solutions. My experience confirmed what Auerbach (2000) noted: the strong sense of community control over *turf* and content that had emboldened the learners and enabled them to focus entirely on the issues they had collectively prioritized. Auerbach theorized that teachers and learners may have to become allied activists for change, and this happened when the program coordinator and I attended an education policy standing committee held at the legislative building in which ESL issues were discussed in an open session. In this way, the community established some useful connections to educators and has reached out into the wider community. These links will outlast the program itself and are the beginnings of a network. The success of the program can clearly be attributed to the community, and in the community there has been a flurry of activity to organize and fund other programs.

How is This Context Really Different for an ESL Teacher?

As I developed this article, I considered whether the differences that were apparent in this particular context of ESL teaching were more imagined than real. Many ESL teachers are required to negotiate their power relationships and participate in negotiated curricula. Why had this experience felt so challenging and distinctive? The differences center on how my role as an ESL professional was challenged. This program provided the ideal context for realizing the theoretical model that cast me as the guide and an equal partner in the group. Compounding this was an initial feeling that my expertise was not valued in the program. At the outset of the program, students rejected ideas that I presented and demanded texts that I felt were too challenging. This was not a positive classroom setting for me. What took place over the course of the program was negotiation. As my relationship with the program coordinator grew, I was able to show her that my experience was valuable in structuring the students' demands and maintaining their motivation and

interest. I was acutely aware that these students did not want a repeat of LINC classes and that they were able to define their own goals. Nunan's (1999) caveat that learner-centered instruction "is not a matter of handing over rights and powers to learners in a unilateral way" (p. 12) became an important guidepost for me. My students were motivated and knew their objectives, but I too had an important role in guiding them to achieve these objectives.

The second major challenge to my role as an ESL professional was the seemingly unwieldy nature of managing the curriculum. The curriculum was not predetermined because of its collaborative nature; it was dynamic. The workload was intense due largely to the role of the learners in determining content and objectives. The units of study were constantly changing, and at times it felt impossible to achieve coherence. As the instructor, however, I benefited greatly from the high level of interest and motivation that the students showed for everything we covered. The unity of the group was greatly enhanced as time passed, with a continual overlap of students' interests and the curriculum.

Every challenge in this teaching context enabled me to reorient myself as an ESL professional. The challenges motivated me to try some of the theoretical constructs I had been reading about in my master's program, to manipulate them, and to appraise critically how well they functioned. This program was a perfect fit for a graduate student. I taught only two hours a week, so I had time to reflect on how theory could affect the classroom. Furthermore, I was not subjected to the pressures of a practicum with its observations and artificial classroom relationships, historically viewed as a place to compare theory and practice. Perhaps most important, I was given the opportunity to experience for a few weeks the reality of marginalization. I worked hard for acceptance by the group, and this experience will be part of who I am as an ESL teacher.

Success in this setting demands that teachers understand their role in the classroom and with the community and its leaders. Learning about the community one will be working with, their experiences, and needs, can be a valuable investment of time. Morgan (2002) provides a critical definition of the pedagogy of community-based ESL, which "implies a way of teaching in which social concerns are conceived of as equal to and somewhat prior to linguistic ones" (p. 149). His definition reveals how teachers' expertise and community needs become inextricably linked, giving value to what both parties bring to the process. ESL professionals in this setting are required to be flexible. After the initial shock to my teaching system, I came to embrace the active role my students took in their own learning. I determined that they needed decoding strategies and abridged materials, but they knew that understanding the social discourse of Canadian schools was critical to them.

It is a truly memorable moment for a teacher to facilitate learning in a context independently defined and engaged in by the learner.

In conclusion, the ESL professional in a setting such as that described here must remember to bring expertise to the process. The students in a community-based program are part of a process in which power is shared and curriculum is negotiated, but the teacher must trust his or her instincts. I experienced a fundamental shift during this program in my understanding of what being an ESL professional means. It felt as if the ground had shifted beneath me. After pursuing a more thorough review of the literature, I began to realize that I had found a model that is not new. Participatory education is a widely accepted model (Auerbach, 1996). I had discovered something through my students, and I was able to realize fully the meaning of a learner-centered classroom where learners would contribute the curriculum and language learning activities. I recognize the value of my new responsibility. A professional teacher is first and foremost a learner. It is not only new techniques and language acquisition theories to which I must remain receptive. Challenging my own assumptions about a teacher's role in the ESL classroom continues to be the greatest challenge in my professional development.

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