"Teacher-Centered" and "Student-Centered" Learning in the EFL Classroom

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What does it mean to be a teacher with an explicit teaching philosophy? What role(s) do teachers encourage students to assume within the practical and ideological frameworks of learning? How do variables including educational background and work experience shape a teacher's self-perception and the interpersonal dynamics of his/her classroom?

These are some questions that have occupied my thinking as a result of changing academic and teaching disciplines within the last year. This explorative paper will function as the complement to an earlier project I completed as part of in-house training for my current position as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructor at Rikkyo University. Whereas the former paper provided an overview of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles and their application within function-based, oral discussion classes, the current study focuses more on insights of a professional and personal nature. My aim is to outline how my recent appointment as an EFL instructor precipitated challenges to my teaching ideals. In so doing, I will explain how I have reimagined my role, responsibilities, and obligations within the EFL classroom. Indeed, my willingness to reconceptualize existing teaching beliefs has worked to alleviate and in some cases, eliminate these challenges.

Same Language, Different Disciplines

University English Literature classes and EFL classes: although both are usually conducted in English, these disciplines diverge significantly in their ideological, practical, and epistemological goals. I quickly came to this realization upon commencing work as an EFL instructor at my present workplace. Prior to this, I was employed as a seminar leader and tutor in an Australian university. The classes that I oversaw were on contemporary American literature and British literature between the Early Modern and early twentieth-century periods.

These seminars and tutorials had a consistent format. Often, I summarized the main tenets of a literary genre or text for the first 5-10 minutes of the class. I then transitioned into a close analysis of the chosen text and requested students to provide their interpretation of such matters. At such times, students discoursed amongst themselves, seeking clarification on their peers' ideas or supplementing existing responses from others within the class. Nonetheless, I ensured that discussions remained on track through direct and indirect means; I directed students to return to the main seminar topics or confirmed their opinions by drawing an explicit connection to the course outcomes. I also found myself acting in the role of an arbiter, settling disputes amongst students if certain comments proved erroneous, anomalous, or unclear. Consequently, my understanding of the teacher's role in the classroom was highly circumscribed. I saw myself as disproportionately responsible for my students' learning, in large part due to my understanding of the teacher as having an authoritative presence within the classroom.

Retrospectively, the methods I employed and the roles I delegated to my students and myself approximate King's (1993) model of the teacher as a "Sage on the Stage". I was unaware of the considerable body of research about the potential shortcomings of this style of pedagogical instruction until I moved to Japan and changed teaching disciplines. As a "Sage on the Stage", the teacher in the traditionally hierarchical classroom often applies a rigid "lecture and test" mode that can negatively impact the development of students' autonomy. Students become passive receivers rather than active co-constructers of knowledge. This formulation assumes that a "student's brain is like an empty container into which the professor pours knowledge" (King, 1993, p. 30). Although this model may at times be necessary and beneficial in the context of literary courses, where textual analysis often requires the teacher to coordinate and/or negotiate a wide range of variables (context, genre, themes, secondary criticism) of which students may be unaware, the "Sage on the Stage" can be an impediment to learning within foreign language classrooms. From my recent experience teaching oral discussion classes, the context for which new expressions are learnt are social interactions that permit to some degree syntactic and/or grammatical errors in favor of communicative competence. Communicative competence, defined by fluency gains and increased speech rate, is often facilitated by activities where content of a familiar nature is repeated under increasing time pressure (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 9). Furthermore, frequent use of group and pair work, where students discuss topics without the active participation of the teacher, means that the "Sage on the Stage" must accept a supporting role away from the spotlight. Put another way, the teacher

is no longer the gravitational center around which her students orbit: the center and periphery are reoriented within the communicative, EFL classroom.

The Curious Dichotomy of "Teacher-Centered" and "Student-Centered" Instruction

A major factor contributing to a revision of my existing teaching beliefs was becoming part of a department with a unified curriculum and teaching philosophy. Professional development sessions provided the theoretical basis for the implementation of CLT methods within my oral discussion classes. The design of the course reflects the general paradigmatic shift away from traditional approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) such as the audiolingual and cognitive code methods within the last thirty years. From a theoretical valence, the course advocates the importance of "student-centered" activities in the development of communicative competence. Unlike "teacher-centered" instruction, "student-centered" instruction shifts the focus away from learning as an evaluative and a results-driven mode of testing into a process that accounts for individual needs and variances in the definition of achievement (Richards, 2006, pp. 24-25). Consequently, within the oral discussion course, collaborative activities and ongoing assessment are utilized to lessen the power differential between the teacher and students. Cliffton (2006) comments that students "have a larger say in who says what to whom and when" (p. 143) in situations where the teacher assumes the role of a "facilitator". Within my department, this methodology is realized through the implementation of uninterrupted student-student discussions as well as peer-directed feedback in the form of checklists and gap-fills.

Personally, the notion of "student-centered" instruction was jarring for theoretical and practical reasons. I initially found the dichotomy of "student-centered" and "teacher-centered" to be unnecessarily antagonistic. Within this paper, my hesitation to accept such a totalizing and discrete boundary separating these categories of instruction is reflected in their typographical enclosure. With respect to the first term, I asked myself, what is teaching if it does not have as its raison d'être the learning needs of students? As for the second term, it struck me as having limited currency apart from elevating its opposing term, since it "somehow implie[d] that the teacher is ignoring the needs of the students" (O'Neill, 1991, p. 301). I found that "teacher-centered" was used as a derogatory term for teachers whose practices reflected a greater interest in their own professional gratification rather than the advancement of their students' learning. Ultimately, I leapt to a defensive position in observing how my former teaching practices were seen as antiquated within the literature of SLA.

Despite my reluctance to accept unquestioningly a methodology of which I had little experience, I soon found that many aspects of "student-centered" instruction are practicable within the EFL classroom. Specifically, gaining teaching experience in my department using "student-centered" techniques helped to erode my initial scepticism. The course integrates a function-based syllabus in order to improve students' communicative competence. Students acquire an inventory of functions that assist them in performing specific tasks common in everyday social exchanges. Examples of these functions include asking for reasons ("How come?"/"Why do you think so?"), and giving opinions ("Personally speaking..."/ "In my opinion..."). The topics around which these functions are organized are commonly found in everyday conversation, including social etiquette and crime. Discussion of these topics does not require expert knowledge or the demanding recall of esoteric or context-specific vocabulary. Given these parameters, the role of the teacher as an "expert authority" on topic-based or linguistic matters becomes untenable. Teachers must limit their intervention in discussions to allow their students to engage freely on topics using anecdotal and experiential knowledge. In moving away from a dominant position within the classroom, teachers within the course can encourage positive attitudinal factors such as active learning, peer collaboration, and autonomy within their students.

Resistance towards CLT: A Sentiment Shared by Teachers and Students?

In principle, the design and implementation of activities in the course made sense to me in their relevance to the goals of CLT. However, breaking away from the model of the teacher as an authoritative voice was a vexing process. I was accustomed to this model on an ideological level; having spent years at university studying literature and teaching at secondary and tertiary levels, I felt that it was my responsibility to impart expert knowledge and skills to my students. Although the oral discussion course differs markedly in structure and aim to my former classes, it was nonetheless difficult for me to step away from such a prominent role, allowing students the time and trust to coordinate activities amongst themselves. I was also uncomfortable with the drastic reduction of teacher-fronted activities to a maximum of 10 minutes per class. Questions circulated in my mind: Is a teacher still a "teacher" if he/she takes a "back seat" and allows students to assume the "driver's position"? Do students want their teacher to display explicitly their knowledge in a given field, or do they feel more comfortable in seeing him/her as a co-learner?

Although I and other teachers in the course organize the number of questions and duration of group discussions, once under way students are encouraged to utilize strategies to maintain discussion fluidity and resolve communication breakdowns independently. During the discussion, I record examples where my students negotiate meaning using clarification requests ("Can you explain?"), explicit correction, and/or elicitation ("How do you say ~ in English?"). Following the discussion, I enlist students to work together or by themselves to identify positive and negative feedback about the discussion. Feedback can relate not only to the (in)correct usage of particular functions but also the quality of the discussion in terms of its content and distribution of speaker and listener roles. Once I have elicited information from students, I supplement their comments by providing concrete examples of function use on the whiteboard and suggest goals to improve subsequent discussions.

The above explanation shows how the teacher within "student-centered" and communicative oral discussion classes plays a different role to what Dupin-Bryant (2004) calls the "formal, controlled, and autocratic" figure (p. 42) that dominates in traditional pedagogic settings. I accepted that the objectives and outcomes of language courses differ dramatically from content courses, and thus that there is a complementary reduction in the amount of teacher talk per lesson. However, in being directed to limit my intervention in discussions to when grammatical errors, questions concerning vocabulary, and dysfluencies surfaced, I began to question the extent of my contribution to my students' learning. Although Grasha (1994) has said that the teacher within CLT classrooms acts as a "resource person" (p. 142) when students have exhausted their ability to solve a problem amongst themselves, I felt that I was more of a prop being used to direct classroom traffic. Like a timed road signal that indicates when vehicles must start and stop, I would inform my students of the beginning and end points of a discussion. The instructions I gave to signal these points were scripted to maximize comprehensibility through carefully chosen vocabulary and grammar. I found that in order to achieve the goal of communicative efficiency, I needed to eliminate certain rhetorical and syntactic aspects of my speech reflective of my personality. Consequently, I experienced many of the concerns that Felder and Brent (1996) see as common amongst faculty members making the transition to more "student-centered" methods in their teaching. In addition to experiencing frustration towards my truncated role in the classroom, I was not convinced that group activities were the optimal way to maximize productive and relevant uses of the L2 with respect to the lesson topic, given the tendency for students to become side-tracked, engage in small talk, or lapse into L1 usage. Equally, I had concerns regarding classroom management (Felder & Brent, 1996, p. 44) and my ability to prevent the fossilization of grammatical errors when needing to observe more than one group at a time.

I also experienced difficulty changing my teaching style and methods because of (imaginary) prejudices my students held towards CLT. Sakui (2004) has observed how certain secondary teachers in Japan resist integrating CLT into their classrooms for fear that such classes will be perceived as a sideshow to "real" learning. According to her, "some teachers are concerned that students only perceive CLT as fun, with few educational benefits, whereas grammar-focused English instruction is serious test-taking preparation" (Sakui, 2004, p. 161). Although Sakui is referring to the pressure for high school English teachers to prepare their students for the university entrance exams using grammar-translation and memorization exercises, this sentiment often lingers when these same students enter tertiary education. Such students may be at best, puzzled by, or at worst, resentful towards, the adoption of CLT. In much the same way as I have needed to accept the upheaval of my existing teaching methods by CLT, students who take part in the oral discussion course must quickly adapt themselves to an environment antithetical to passive learning and monologic instruction. Indeed, in the transition from teacher-fronted to CLT activities, there is a shift in different role expectations, which in turn place "demands on both students and teachers to establish a new set of classroom norms" (Sakui, 2007, p. 49). In the final section of this piece, I will outline how my adjustment to these new classroom norms has had a positive impact on my ability to change my teaching ideals and ultimately, re-envision my role and responsibilities within the EFL classroom.

A Shared Center in the Classroom

Acceptance of changes in classroom dynamics, curricula, and pedagogical instruction all take time. Upon completion of my first semester as an instructor of function-based, oral discussion classes at Rikkyo University, I have observed certain alterations to my perception of "student-centered" instruction and its relation to my existing beliefs about the role and responsibilities of the teacher. Norms of "student-centered" instruction, such as reducing the presence and participation of the teacher within classroom activities, no longer cause me to question my relevance. Partly, I have come to this acceptance based on concrete observation of the variety of socio- and meta- linguistic strategies that my students use to resolve communication breakdowns in class. Often, I scaffold these strategies during post-discussion feedback sessions, thereby retaining some explicit influence over my students' learning. Mainly, however, I have learnt to appreciate how a less hierarchical classroom structure is advantageous in establishing a positive atmosphere, where students achieve the necessary learning outcomes of the course without such a high-handed style of pedagogic instruction.

The last teaching semester also triggered for me a reappraisal of the modes and contexts in which learning takes place. Certainly, the classroom is the traditional setting in which such learning occurs. However, given the prominence of group discussions in my classes, quotidian and ordinary social interactions can also provide sustained opportunities wherein my students can use the L2 in "real-life" contexts. I have come to see learning as a participative process involving equal parts of action and reaction from the teacher and students. Thus, a co-constructive model of learning has supplanted the transmittal model of the "Sage on the Stage".

According to King (1993), the opposing conception to the "Sage on the Stage" is the facilitative and reactive model of the "Guide on the Side". However, I would like to suggest Weston's (2015) notion of the "Impresario with a Scenario" as a model that better reflects my revised understanding of the teacher as both the orchestrator of, and audience to, action amongst students. As an "Impresario", I set the scene, parameters, and roles of my students within group-based activities. In organizing the scene this could mean asking students to change the set-up of the classroom by forming different table arrangements or having them stand face-to-face during fluency activities. Consequently, a degree of control is required in the organization of such elements within a given "scenario". Yet the "Impresario with a Scenario" calls upon students to engage actively in developing different problem-solving methods while taking on the role of a leader or team player. Thus, this model displaces the notion of a stable ideological "center" to classroom instruction: "The 'center' is neither primarily in the teacher nor primarily in the students, but is shared by all, albeit in different ways" (Weston, 2015, p. 100).

Conclusion

The aim of this piece has been twofold: to share my pedagogical experiences with the EFL community, as well as to construct a coherent narrative of my teaching career as a way to reflect on the importance of continued reassessment of one's beliefs and practices. As the fall semester of the new university year approaches, I find such reflection crucial to the ongoing process of creating classroom environments that promote the goals of communicative competence, active learning, and collaboration between the teacher and students. Equally so, such reflection gives me the necessary theoretical space to reimagine what good teachers do and how they do it within an EFL setting.

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