

Successful Language Teaching Practices

Mario Alexander PEREZ*

Abstract

The following paper endorses four principles of language teaching and discusses why they are effective. The writer calls on relevant TESOL literature, namely Dörnyei's (2001) work on motivation, as well as his own language teaching experience at the tertiary level, spanning reading, writing, and communication courses, to produce the rationale and anecdotes necessary to support the principles he advocates.

Key words: language principles, motivation, group cohesion, fluency, L2 classroom, language ego

1. Introduction

English is, more than any of its competitors, the language of choice for international business, trade, higher education and research, tourism, medicine, and the internet. In an age of globalization, when the need for English ability is simply a given, it is essential that teachers of English in Japan employ robust language teaching principles in order to effectively educate students, particularly the unmotivated type. The intention of this paper is to present a set of principles I believe to be among some of the more effective ones in EFL education. I will call on relevant TESOL literature and teaching experience to produce rationale and anecdotes in support of the principles discussed herein. While this paper will focus on my experience instructing university students, everything put forward is grade neutral and can be adjusted to fit other L2 classroom environments.

* Instructor of English as a Foreign Language, School of Science and Technology, Kwansei Gakuin University

1.1 Four effective principles

If a student is to consider meeting the reading, writing, speaking, and listening challenges that make-up second language acquisition, he or she must, one, have the desire to do so, and two, have some confidence that success, or acquisition itself, is possible. In his *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*, Dörnyei (2001) writes, it is an “undeniable fact that we do things best if we believe we can succeed,” and, what is more, “we are unlikely to initiate a task, even if we expect to succeed in it, that we do not enjoy” (p.57). As a language teacher, I believe my greatest responsibility is to help students form an enthusiastic relationship with English so much so that they come to believe that acquisition is possible. There are four main practices which I use to help achieve this end: promoting self-confidence, encouraging group cohesion, making language learning enjoyable, and promoting fluency over accuracy.

2. Self-confidence and the “language ego” boost

I can clearly recall my first foreign language course as a freshman in high school. To say the least, it was never easy and seldom enjoyable. I started studying Spanish when I was just beginning what Dörnyei (2001) referred to as “the developmental age when . . . self-image is in an ongoing flux, and doubts and worries about oneself are more common feelings than confidence or pride” (p.87). It is not unreasonable to presume that my first high school Spanish teacher did not read any of Dörnyei’s work. Without providing much instruction on how to employ the materials in our textbook, he expected students to build conversational skills on their own. Our skills, or lack thereof, were often put to the test in a rather unforgiving approach: students were made individually to stand at the front of the classroom while questions were thrown at us. When we were unable to respond, the cost was often a momentary loss of self-esteem. Needless to say, this was torture for kids in the midst of their most self-conscious years. It is difficult to remember feeling a sense of security in the language classroom as my teacher made very little attempt, if any, to put me and my classmates at ease. Never having experienced this feeling of comfort possibly contributed to the reason I still struggle when it comes to using Spanish conversationally. As a young man, then, speaking Spanish was always a test of ability that, if not passed, meant having to swallow an embarrassing, face-threatening moment.

It seems to me that a language teacher has a responsibility to treat his/her students with affective care, thereby instilling the self-confidence the students need to tackle the L2. When teachers create this environment of acceptance in the classroom, students excel. Iancu (2000) calls this learning “through gratification rather

than fear” (pg.11). During my first few years teaching as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) for high schools in the Japanese public school system, I found that time and again I was unable to reach the students. The reason being, I may have not made enough effort to hide my disappointment when the students did not perform to my expectations. I never took into consideration that, in most cases, I was their first foreign teacher and they did not know how to speak to me. Their approach to learning had long been one of rote memorization and tests. That I required that they communicate with me using conversational English was a very tall order indeed. With experience and reflection, I realized that such an approach was mainly unsympathetic. Instead of placing pressure on them, I should have been building their self-confidence, what Brown (2001) refers to as the “language ego”, at every opportunity (p.61-62).

Relevant literature shows there are a number of ways to boost the language ego. I have found one method in particular works exceptionally well. Dörnyei (2001) recommends administering regular moments of success. This method requires that the instructor tailor his/her lesson planning around the students’ ability and regularly assign tasks which they will be able to complete successfully. By taking this approach, the instructor is in effect breeding student confidence and motivation. This will lead to future gains because through such measures the students will have acquired the confidence necessary to tackle the inevitable assignments which will not be so easy to complete. In reference to my current teaching situation, one example highlights this dynamic. Last semester, a number of students in one of my writing courses struggled with devising thesis statements for argumentative essays. Some were unable to grasp the idea of presenting a decisive argument at the beginning of their essay, while some were able to understand the idea with little struggle. Despite schedule demands, I realized this was a moment that could not be ignored. I decided to dedicate two entire lessons to pair writing. I placed students who had grasped the concept of thesis statements and paired them with students who did not. Through the students’ joint efforts, they were able to accomplish the task of defending a simple thesis statement. This moment of success for those who did not understand the process made the eventual full-essay production much easier and a much less excruciating experience. I would like to think it may have given their language egos the boost required to strengthen their self-confidence when it came to writing on their own. Brown (2001) tells us that this kind of method, supplemented with patience, a friendly disposition, and an overtly supportive attitude on the part of the teachers, will help language educators to create an environment for their students that lends itself to successful learning.

3. Group Cohesion

Another way to inspire students to stay the course in their L2 development is to create a strong sense of camaraderie among them, a sense of togetherness (Dörnyei, 2001). If done correctly, a teacher can make the students feel committed to each other and their collective goals. In a classroom where group unity is strong, students support and help each other through the learning process. They do this because they feel a sense of responsibility toward one another. Dörnyei argues that this phenomenon makes “the learning process more enjoyable in general” (p.43). What results is a series of positive moments of engagement with the L2, which may inspire students to continue their studies, not only with the teacher who made the experience possible, but with subsequent ones as well.

In my communication courses, feeling a sense of belonging is vital to the students’ success in the course. With up to 35 students in some of my classes, students sit in groups and must conduct all our activities in those groups. When students feel the minutest degree of isolation or estrangement from the group, they may find it easier to withdraw from the learning process. To avoid this, I have incorporated a number of Dörnyei’s (2001) practical suggestions for creating a “cohesive community” into my teaching approach (p.43).

Dörnyei (2001) suggests that giving students ample opportunity to learn about each other makes them feel closer to one another and generally happier in the classroom. Most of the activities I conduct in communication courses and writing courses ask students to utilize and share information from their lives. From simple show and tell activities at the beginning of a course which require students to share important items that represent their character and or history to their group, to discussions inspired by audiovisual media (such as TED Talks or dramas made for television) which ask students to share their life experiences to unravel a complicated storyline or happening, all the activities I design allow students to show-off their past and or current selves. Having the students report “genuine personal information” in this way permits them to become well acquainted with one another (p.44). This puts students at ease in the classroom and allows for a sense of community to flourish.

Moreover, I promote “cooperation” and conduct activities which foster “intra-group competition”, which Dörnyei (2001) also recommends (p.44). In my classes, groups act as teams which can receive points for things such as winning a competition and lose points for various reasons such as not completing an assignment on time or refusing to use English during a group discussion. Points are tabulated over the lifespan of each group and those with the most points receive a small prize, for purposes of the extrinsic motivational kind. In this way, nearly every sensation each student experiences in the classroom, the ups and downs, the highs and lows, is al-

ways shared with at least three to four other people. The students never really feel alone in the learning process. Also, I make it a point to change groups around two to three times per semester so the students always get to work with someone new. It allows students to create bonds of friendship with more than just a few people in the classroom. Consequently, at least in my experience, the students distinguish L2 learning in a positive light.

“Successful completion of whole group tasks” is another means of creating cohesive communities (Dörnyei, 2001, p.44). In my current reading classes, for example, students are meant to complete two reading circle activities per semester. The material that the students read is science-based and at points quite difficult to consume. After reading through the article, each student is responsible for a particular job in a reading circle. One student acts as the discussion leader, one as the summarizer, one draws connections with real world situations, one is responsible for vocabulary, and one points out important passages that demonstrate the overall meaning of the article. Once all students have prepared their role, they partake in a fifteen to twenty-minute discussion about the reading. Each student is responsible for engaging their classmates on the material they have prepared, all the while the instructor observes the talk and issues a single group score which plays a significant role in each individual’s overall course grade. Because students all share the same grade, in most cases they work hard for one another. Successful completion of this type of activity produces community cohesion in a way that students remember. Language learning becomes less of a solitary act where individual failure can leave a lasting mark, and more of a team effort where people work together to achieve something important.

The kind of classroom approach which encourages group cohesion, then, has done for my classes exactly what Dörnyei (2001) says it would. In most cases, students come to see each other as essential players in a group effort to attain some competence in language production. Dörnyei (2001) argues, “Whether or not a class becomes a cohesive community is not simply a question of luck. There are a number of factors that can positively contribute to the process, and many of these are within the teacher’s control” (p.43). It is important for students to feel a sense of belonging if indeed we as instructors want to produce lifelong language learners. We are less likely to lose the less than motivated students in the process if we emphasize this kind of group unity, the kind where every student’s contribution is necessary to achieve success.

4. Making the language classroom enjoyable

Further, learners are more likely to engage in their studies when they are enjoy-

ing themselves. When thinking about young learners, it is probably not surprising that the average student saddens at the prospect of writing an essay but brightens up when preparing for a gym class. While for some, 90 minutes in the classroom may not be as enticing as a game on the campus pitch, I do think it is possible to make the language classroom a less disagreeable place than often imagined. As L2 instructors, our challenge lay in making the language learning process more enjoyable to sustain learner involvement. As Dörnyei (2001) says,

“If we could somehow make the learning process more stimulating and enjoyable, that would greatly contribute to sustained learner involvement. This is an assumption that most motivational psychologists subscribe to and which also makes a lot of sense to classroom teachers — indeed many practitioners would simply equate the adjective ‘motivating’ with ‘interesting’ (p.72).

As an instructor, I have tried all sorts of things to maintain my students’ attention from course start to finish. Anyone who teaches at the Japanese tertiary level knows this is not the easiest of tasks, particularly when classes last 90 minutes long. Two ways that I try to accomplish this is by “breaking the monotony of learning” and “making the tasks interesting” (Dörnyei, 2001, p.73). While naturally there is a course curriculum we must get through, I do my utmost to use diverse and entertaining means to present that material. For example, in my communication courses, curriculum objectives require that students practice, among other things, listening and discussion skills. As opposed to utilizing dry listening scripts and dialogue prompts made available by numerous textbooks, I have devised a different approach. I use TED Talks and made-for-television series to practice these two skill sets. Via these mediums, students get to listen to issues facing our time and discuss both simplistic to more complicated questions that I tailor to their level. Utilizing these types of media make for an enjoyable classroom experience that students do not dread as much as they do more traditional approaches.

5. Fluency over accuracy

Finally, if our task as language teachers is to guide students toward acquisition and some level of automaticity, we best accomplish that aim when focal attention is given to meaning and message rather than grammar and linguistic form. Brown (2001) urges teachers to equip “our students with tools for generating unrehearsed language performance ‘out there’ when they leave the womb of our classrooms”, that we “facilitate lifelong language learning among our students, not just with the immediate classroom task” at hand (p.42). So, whether the focal point of instruction

is speaking or writing, if a student communicates his/her intended message, I abstain from correcting innocuous errors. A barrage of corrections only blocks avenues to fluency. In my writing classes, while I do focus on form to some extent, I do not grade students on their grammatical accuracy. Again, if they can deliver their idea without a breakdown in communication, I do not push too much for fear of depressing their language ego. There are few things more painful for the university student than when one's professor returns his/her essay covered in red marks. As for my communication classes, in addition to providing students with topics of discussion on which they possess rich schema (lessening their cognitive load and allowing for greater ease of discussion), I also give them time before any discussion to write-down some notes on what they would like to say in order to prepare themselves for speaking on the topic. I emphasize that students not preoccupy themselves with grammar and spelling while writing these notes. And during the discussion itself, students are encouraged to speak without concern for grammatical accuracy. One of the ways in which I encourage this is to explain the directions for the activity in English, then again in my own imperfect attempt at Japanese, to show students that mistakes will be made but should not be regarded if meaning is delivered. As long as meaning is conveyed, students should feel proud of their achievement in making an utterance or two.

6. Conclusion

Just like any other language, English is extremely difficult to master. It is quite possible that those who take on the challenge of studying it will quit somewhere along the way. I believe one of our jobs as English instructors is to keep students from jumping ship. If we can effectively bolster the language ego of our students, make the learning process less monotonous and more enjoyable, promote fluency (not purely at the expense of accuracy but to strengthen our students' affective relationship with the language), and above all create an environment where each student feels welcome as an important and vital member of their group and the entire class, I believe we can successfully nurture a healthy relationship between our students and their L2. In the end, perhaps it could be one or more of these factors that inspire our students to stay on the path of second language acquisition. As indicated in the first sentence of this article, those that do succeed in achieving some level of fluency in English will have an exciting world at their fingertips. It is always my objective to help students begin their journey toward that end.

References

- Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Iancu, M. A. (2000). Implementing fluency first activities in an intermediate-level EAP reading class. *TESOL Journal*, 9(2), 11-16.