

Research Issues

From Pygmalion to Piccolo : Transforming failure into success in the foreign language class.

by: Luke Prodromou¹

My subject in this article is transforming failure into success in the context of English as a Foreign Language. There are two areas in English Language Teaching which I would like to look at within the framework of success and failure. They are :

- 1 The Mixed Ability Class and the Myth of the Bad Learner
- 2 The Backwash Effect of Testing on Teaching

These topics involve different kinds of problems and solutions but at the same time they can be seen as different aspects of the same topic - that of success and failure in language learning.

Let me begin with Adrian Underhill's statement of his aims on being appointed to the Chair of IATEFL : :

My aims are...

supporting the development of teachers' ability to promote joy and success in their students' learning.

(Underhill, IATEFL Newsletter, 144/1998 : 8)

As a mission statement this seems to me well-put; but it also serves as a succinct statement of the strategic objectives of the EFL teacher in the classroom : to promote their learners' success in learning English. But here 'success' collocates with 'joy' - and this too is a precondition for defining our own success as teachers. Teaching involves generating pleasure and, if we're lucky, even joy. It is not a question of success at any price - the journey towards successful competence in the language should be a satisfying one in educational terms. We are educators not just technicians of grammar or vocabulary; we are not testers but teachers; we often have to prepare students for success in exams but we should not pursue this goal at any price - and not at the price of our own failure as educators.

For example, we should be interested in corpus-based research into 'real' English and

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learn from such research more about the way language works. But the uses to which we put the fruits of research are questions of pedagogy and will ultimately be determined by all the factors which go towards creating the conditions for successful learning. Put simply : examinations and corpora are not an end in themselves but a means to an end : our aim is successful and enjoyable acquisition of another language.

Numbers in my life

There is a warm-up activity in Penny Ur and Andrew Wright's book *Five Minute Activities*. (1996) called 'Numbers in My Life'. Students jot down important numbers in their life and their partner has to guess what they stand for. Here are some important numbers in my life. They all relate to my experience of failure and success in my attempt to get an education. These numbers will tell the reader 'where I am coming from' in educational terms :

Important numbers in my life :

11 7 4 0 14 84

These numbers mean :

11 : I failed the 11 plus, which was an exam designed to classify students into successes and failures at the tender age of 11; those who passed this exam went on to grammar school and were more or less expected to go to university. Those who failed were shunted off into so-called 'secondary modern' schools. Here the students were treated more or less as factory fodder or were 'destined', at best, to do simple clerical work. A test is designed to discriminate between one student's ability and another's : I and thousands of my generation were well and truly 'discriminated'.

7 : In spite of failing the 11 plus, and just before I plunged into a life-long career in a fish and chip shop, I transferred to a grammar school. This happened because two people, ('significant others', as Herbert Puchta has called them) my elder brother and headmaster, believed I could get to university. (This transfer turned out to be a transformation because before long I left behind my woodwork and metalwork and took up academic subjects like French and Latin. I got seven 'O' Levels and went to Bristol University to study English and Greek. Getting 'O' Level French in a year was something nobody, least of all my French teacher, expected me to achieve, and it got me a special mention in morning assembly. My mother was so happy she bought me a car.

4 : I failed my driving test four times,

0 : I have had no driving accidents.

14 : At University, I failed my ancient Greek in the first year. I got 14% in the end of year of examinations. I had spent most of my first year acting in and directing plays. My mark was so abysmal that my Professor of Greek at first refused to let me re-sit the examination the following September and suggested instead I leave the University. When I explained that getting kicked out of University might mean returning the car to my mother, he reluctantly agreed to let me re-sit the Greek exam in after the summer.

84 : I re-sat the exam two months later and got 84%. (I did not cheat when the invigilator left the room). The professor of Greek beamed a huge smile when he saw me and, arms

open in greeting , said 'Well, done Prodrromou, I knew you could do it'.

Moral : This story of important numbers in my life, taught me that failure is one side of the coin; the other side of the coin is success; the one can be transformed into the other; as Bob Dylan says in 'Love Minus Zero' : 'there's no success like failure'. I now see what he meant.

Collecting Raw Material

When asked why students fail, teachers have said things like the following :

Students fail because....

- they are not interested
- they are lazy
- they don't study enough
- they lack motivation
- the teacher is boring
- they afraid of making mistakes
- they don't have the words to say what they want
- teachers do not believe in their abilities

Here are some of the things teachers have said about how we can help students succeed :

Students succeed when...

- they are motivated
- they participate in the lesson
- they enjoy learning
- they listen to their teacher
- they are not afraid to make mistakes
- they learn from their mistakes
- the topics are of interest to them
- the teacher encourages them and believes in them

These informal surveys into teachers' attitudes towards success and failure in the class-room raise a lot of important issues, but the two issues I would like to focus on in this paper are the role of errors and the importance of teacher expectations in shaping student self-confidence :

'He told me one wonderful thing my dad : 'we all make mistakes - that's why you have a rubber on the end of your pencil' (Connolly, quoted in Margolis, 1994 : 17)

Problems

I will examine the problems referred to above - the so-called 'bad language learner' and the Backwash Effect of Testing on Teaching on three levels :

1 Approach : transforming failure into success.

To transform failure into success we must first of all believe that all learners are capable of success and that failure is only success in disguise.

2 Method : learner input.

If we have 'great expectations' of learners, we must find a method of translating those expectations into an effective and appropriate methodology. In this paper, I suggest an approach which takes what the learners bring to class and makes it a part of regular classroom activities. Learner input can come from the students' ideas, experiences, texts, homework or routine classroom exercises. These are recycled to integrate them into classroom activities and give students a greater sense of self-esteem. Linguistically, Learner Input draws on the students' interlanguage (what they know as well as their errors) to drive their learning forward.

Techniques : I will suggest 3 techniques for implementing Learner Input in the classroom

Problem 1 : The myth of the bad learner.

At one level, the 'bad learner' is constructed by language itself. The words we use to describe learners who are not, at first sight, made of the stuff of which success is made tend to pre-determine the result. The words we use about 'bad' learners affect the way we see such learners; the way we see them affects what we believe about them and our beliefs affect the degree to which we can act to change the performance of the learners. Here are some of the words we use to describe the apparently 'unsuccessful' learner; it is not difficult to see what most of them have in common :

weak bad slow less able sub-normal difficult less competent troublesome troublemaker problem quiet remedial reluctant shy backward poor bottom worst dull maladjusted under-achiever low achiever

The majority of these words form a lexical set describing the learner in a negative way. Only two words are slightly positive in suggesting an unfulfilled potential : under-achiever and low-achiever. The rest compose a picture of deficit; the students to whom these words apply are seen as a problem, a burden; they are, in one way or another, misfits. Other words vaguely suggest an explanation for the students 'failure' (shy, quiet) but on the whole we and the learners are trapped in the language of failure.

We construct the 'bad learner' in other ways, too. What we teach, the topics the language and the way we teach, including body language and voice, can predetermine success or failure. If, like James Joyce, T.S.Eliot had taught English to make ends meet, he might have written the following :

The Love Song of the Bad Language Learner

And I have known the eyes already

Known them all

Eyes and exercises that fix you

In a formulated phrase

And when I am formulated

Sprawling in my desk

When I am pinned

And wriggling in my seat

Then how should I begin

To spit out all the syntax

Of my days and ways

Thus, the problem is in the words we use and the actions we take; it is in our body language and our classroom management techniques.

Problem 2 : The Backwash Effect.

The Backwash Effect is the effect that tests have on teaching. The effect may be positive or negative. Alderson (1993) once asked whether the Backwash Effect exists. My experience, now backed up with some classroom research, confirms the existence of the Backwash Effect and it is mostly negative in educational terms. The chart below summarises two ways of teaching. 'Testing' here does not refer only to formal examinations or what happens when students sit down to take a test. 'Testing' is what we do when we teach in a way that reflects the essential features of tests and examinations. The 'Teaching' column, on the other hand, sums up what teachers seem to do when they are teach well :

TESTING

failure
weakness
error as terror
marks
culture-bound
pain
stressful
teacher control
textbook bound
textbook input
judgement
humiliation
impersonal
fragments
form
mechanical
solemn
monotony
extrinsic motivation
competition
T>whole-class
product
arrival

TEACHING

success
strength
error as step
achievement
culture-sensitive
pleasure
relaxing
learner control
textbook guided
learner input
support
self-esteem
personal
whole texts
content
imaginative
humour
variety
intrinsic motivation
co-operation
variety of interaction
process
the journey

'Teaching' then is what we do when we behave as educators, when we transform failure into success, when we see as errors as an opportunity to further learning; it is what we do when we transform weakness into strength.. Tests, exams and assessment (which

are not the necessarily the same thing) are an essential part of the work we do. They are usually characterised by the features in the first column above (see, however, Allen 1999). Testing has its place. The problems begin when testing occupies the space occupied by teaching.

Approaches - Pygmalion

How do we set about transforming failure into success in the EFL classroom ? The main principle I wish to draw on is the importance of teacher expectations in encouraging or discouraging self-esteem in the learner. Teacher expectations can transform the performance of the learner.

I will illustrate the principles of transformation and teacher expectation through three versions of the myth of Pygmalion.

Great expectations.

Pygmalion - 1

Pygmalion was a Legendary King of Cyprus; he was also a sculptor.

One day, he had a strong desire to make a statue. He took his raw material, ivory, and created a statue of a beautiful woman.. The statue was so beautiful that Pygmalion fell in love with it. This was a problem. Aphrodite took pity on Pygmalion and brought the statue to life. Pygmalion and his true love, Galatea, lived happily ever after.

Moral : If we take the myth of Pygmalion as an allegory of education is all about, we can identify the following essential features of successful teaching : a motivation to create something, a strong desire to bring about something new, to create; the ability to take the raw material (the learners and their errors) and transform it into something rich and beautiful; we need enthusiasm, passion, if not love; and as educators we must connect what we do with life : the life inside the learner, inside the classroom and outside the window, in the world out there. We, like Aphrodite, breathe life into our raw material, the textbooks we use, the black marks on the page.

Pygmalion - 2

Shaw's Pygmalion

The second part of Pygmalion for language teachers comes from Shaw's Pygmalion (1914) . It is particularly appropriate as one of the main characters Professor Higgins is based on the great phonetician and Direct Methodist, Henry Sweet. Higgins tries to transform the cockney flower-seller, Eliza Doolittle, into a middle-class lady. On a superficial level he succeeds, on a deeper level he fails. This is what Eliza tells Higgins and his friend Pickering :

'You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up, the dressing and the proper way of speaking, the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves but how she is treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be lady to you (to Pickering), because you always treat me as a lady, and always will.' (Act V)

Moral : In ELT, we can say the difference between a good student and a bad student is not the way they behave but how they are treated. Some students will always be failures to some teachers because they always treat them like failures; but they can be successful in other classes because they are treated as if they are or could be successful. Positive

expectations have the power to transform the learner and give him or her dignity self-esteem, the engine which makes the fulfilment of students' potential possible.

Pygmalion - 3

There is empirical evidence for the assertions I have made so far in this paper regarding the power of student expectations in shaping success in students. . In the 60s, Rosenthal and Jakobsen (1968, 1992) carried out what has become a classic piece of research into the importance of teacher expectations in education. Here is what they did and what they discovered :

Pygmalion in the classroom

- 1 Twenty percent of children in a certain elementary school were reported to their teachers as showing unusual potential for intellectual growth.
- 2 The names of these children had been chosen at random.
- 3 Eight months later, these 'unusual' children showed greater gains in I.Q. than did the remaining children who had not been singled out for the teachers' attention.
- 4 The change in the teachers' expectations regarding intellectual performance of these 'special' children led to an actual change in the performance of these randomly selected children.
- 5 These children were also described as more interesting, intellectually curious and happier.

Moral : A child's failure can become a self-fulfilling prophecy as a result of a child's reputation or even the reputation of a whole class. If a teacher is told she is to teach a slow or remedial group she is likely to have different expectations than if she is told she is to teach a fast group or children of an upper-middle-class-community

Techniques - Examples

A Collective dictation.

Procedure

The students write a sentence or two on slips of paper. For example :

Drugs are a big problem nowadays.

We can begin to solve the drug problem if..

or :

Tourism has many advantages in my country...

Tourism causes a lot of problems in my country...

The teacher collects the slips, reads them out as a dictation made up of two paragraphs.

As the teacher reads out the sentences she transforms in the following ways 1 she corrects the errors 2 she connects the fragments into a whole 3 she brings the level of the text up to a higher standard by modifying the grammar and vocabulary 4 she supplies any ideas which are needed to enrich the text and facilitate the task.

This process of transformation is based on the students interlanguage; it is driven by the mistakes they make; the mistakes they make are an opportunity for further learning and building the students' self-esteem. Errors can be a wonderful thing :

This approach can be applied with exam classes. Here is an example which I call 'Worth

a Thousand Words'. My Cambridge exam class were using a textbook which gave them a painting to talk about and write about and do their ritualistic exam practice on, gap-filling etc. They didn't like the painting, Kandinsky's *Cossacks*. It, literally, left them speechless. Perhaps it was too abstract for their tastes.

I asked them to choose their own painting and write a text about it. They used this text as a prompt to help them make their oral presentation. I then took the text, recycled it, corrected the errors, made it more cohesive and coherent. I then used the same text as the basis for exam practice for the whole class. Here is an example from one of my so called quietest students who suddenly discovered the gift of speech.

Monet's Venice.

Fill in the blanks with ONE appropriate word.

The first time I set eyes on this painting, I found 1 _____ quite magnificent. I was just looking for a present to buy for a friend of 2_____ when I noticed a poster of this painting. The first thing that 3_____ my eye were the colours and the imaginative way they 4_____ used by the artist. I remember I had no interest 5_____ the subject matter and didn't really care to learn 6_____ it until much later when the poster was hanging on my bedroom wall...'

Method - Learner input.

The Pygmalion principle and the techniques which implement the principle of positive expectations and transform failure into success are based on a methodology that draws on what the learner brings into the classroom. This has been referred to as Learner Input (Tudor, 1996, Deller, 1990; Campbell and Kryszewska, 1992). The advantages of learner input can be summed as follows :

Learner text (interlanguage) > T - transformation > classwork

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Advantages :

- * Students work on their own-material
- * it is of an appropriate level
- * the teacher transforms level, drawing on appropriate models (incl. corpora)
- student language encounters other language
- The learner moves from the Mother tongue to the Other tongue
- The learner moves from the Mother culture to the Other culture
- * the mother tongue is source of strength
- * content is of interest to learners
- * cultural foreground meets cultural background
- * interlanguage is the driving force (error not terror)
- * it raises self-esteem
- * it encourages autonomy

8 Teacher development

What can teachers do to fight failure and generate success and joy in their students learning. ? The first thing tired teachers can do is carry out informal research into the good language teacher; we can engage in formal or informal research, inside or outside the classroom. The mere fact of engaging in classroom research into learner beliefs and behaviour itself suggests a positive attitude on the part of the teacher; research implies a desire to know and potential the desire to act on the knowledge to introduce change. Classroom research not only keeps us alive as teachers but keeps our belief in the learners' ability alive.

To ask questions about what the work we do and to question unexamined attitudes, ritualistic behaviour. One thing I have done over the years is conduct a survey with students into what makes a good teacher. And what makes a bad teacher. The process itself is useful but one must also learn to read the writing on the wall. Here are some of the most memorable things some of my student and teacher informants have said over the years.

The good teacher told jokes made grammar clear made sure everyone understood knew how to treat someone who sits at a desk for six hours believed in me, made me believe in myself

9 Finale Piccolo

In the search for success in teaching, teacher development is an essential process. There are many ways of reflecting on what it is that makes for success in the classroom, and exploring avenues of change. Here I'd like to take up Scott Thornbury's idea of metaphors in language learning and how metaphors can help us see the ELT profession with a fresh eye. (Thornbury, 1998). My own favourite metaphor for the good lesson is classical music and the sonata form (thesis, antithesis, synthesis).

A good lesson can be defined as one in which the teacher transforms failure into success and generates at least a bit of joy in the way. The reader may like to complete and expand the following chart :

Music

A language lesson

conductor

composer

orchestra/instruments

movement section sequence

overture

exposition development

fortissimo pianissimo

rhythm tempo

theme motive variation

key modulation

bridge/ transitional passage

repetition contrast

interlude scherzo

cadence coda

dialogue between instruments

thinning and thickening of texture

climax finale

An example of the musical metaphor in action is Beethoven's 5th as a metaphor for the good lesson; if the good lesson is one where failure is transformed into success, weakness into strength, where the fragments form a coherent, satisfying whole, then Beethoven's Fifth. The reader might like to listen to the first and last movements of the Fifth Symphony and notice how Beethoven transforms

defeat to victory

despair to defiance

the negative to the positive

sadness to celebration

failure to success.

Beethoven's 5th is also metaphor for what we can do with the weak learner. Beethoven's weak learner is the Piccolo, the smallest instrument in the orchestra. Beethoven was the first to use the piccolo in the Symphony. In the last movement, seconds before the finale, the tiny, neglected, piccolo rises above the rest of the orchestra and for a few moments becomes prominent, a protagonist and an integral part of the whole. Beethoven's answer is not only to integrate the learner into the orchestra but even to give him or her a leading

role. As a way of continuing the journey started in this article, get hold of Carlos Kleiber conducting Beethoven's 5th and practise your listening skills.

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